

Responding to the ‘Refugee Crisis’ or Shaping the ‘Refugee Crisis’? Subnational migration policymaking as a cause and effect of turbulence

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Responding to the ‘Refugee Crisis’ or Shaping the ‘Refugee Crisis’? Subnational migration policymaking as a cause and effect of turbulence.

This article sheds light on the cognitive dimension of subnational migration policymaking, showing how policymakers’ subjective understandings of migration dynamics can decisively shape the responses of subnational political systems to migration. It also reveals that these responses, in turn, can play a decisive role in the emergence of policymakers’ understandings of migration dynamics, suggesting that policymaking processes can themselves produce meaning, constructing migration as a social and political problem. The paper illustrates these conceptual points by investigating the ‘heuristic case’ of three Italian regions that produced very different responses to the ‘refugee crisis’, drawing from 71 interviews with subnational policymakers.

Keywords: Policymaking, Asylum, Subnational, Frames, Italy.

Introduction

Following the so-called ‘local turn’ in migration studies (Zapata-Barrero et al. 2017), several academic contributions have focused on subnational migration policymaking. In particular, several scholars have recently analysed the ‘asylum’ or ‘reception’ policies developed by local and regional governments during the so-called 2015 European ‘refugee crisis’ (Glorius & Doornik 2020; Hernes 2017; Lidén & Nyhlén 2015 etc.). In parallel, scholars have also looked at the political and public contestation of migration at the subnational level, focusing on the increasing salience of the issue, polarization of views in subnational political debates, and mobilisations of anti-migrant and pro-migrant groups around asylum-seekers’ reception (Ambrosini 2018; Castelli Gattinara 2017; Hepburn & Zapata-Barrero 2014).

Despite the important insights produced, this literature tends to focus on the ‘outputs’¹ produced by subnational political systems (i.e. policies and levels of politicisation;) while scholars often fail to provide ‘good and acceptable explanations’ about the mechanisms² through which these outputs were brought about (Hedstrom & Wennberg 2017, p.92). In fact, the explanations proposed by scholars tend to be based on assumptions about policymakers’ decision-making processes derived from the outputs produced and from information about the environment in which they operate. In other words, they tend to simply relate macro properties to each other and fail to

¹ See Easton, 1965, p.32.

² Elster (1989) defines mechanisms as ‘continuous and contiguous chains of causal or intentional links between the explanans and the explanandum’. The concept is at the core of the so-called mechanism movement in the social sciences which, as Hedstrom and Wennberg explain (2017, p.92), focuses on explanations, rather than causality, assuming that ‘establishing causal relations often serves an important role in developing explanations, but is rarely sufficient for arriving at an acceptable explanation’.

specify the links by which these are related to each other. The literature on local policymaking, for instance, tends to assume that policymakers are rational and strategic actors who – despite their rationality being ‘bounded’³ (Scholten, 2020) – make decisions based on the (objective) information that they collect from their environment (Lidén & Nyhlén, 2015; Hernes, 2017; see also Boswell & Hampshire, 2017; Triandafyllidou, 2018). In line with these assumptions, these works tend to explain policymakers’ actions referring to objective contextual factors and actors’ ideologies and interests (Baldwin-Edwards et al. 2018; Brady et al. 2020; Lahdelma 2019). Similarly, works that aim to identify the drivers of the politicisation of migration tend to rely on statistical techniques, which ‘when viewed as explanations, remain black-box explanations since the mechanisms linking the causes to the effects remain opaque’ (Hedstrom & Wennberg 2017, p.92).

Providing ‘good explanations’ about the links between policy outputs and the context in which they were produced requires moving beyond macro-level analyses and adopting actor-centred approaches (Brunsson, 2000; Coleman, 1990; Bevir & Rhodes, 2006). More specifically, it requires looking at policymakers’ actions but also at how they frame migration and its effects, how these cognitive frames⁴ are formed, and whether and how they influence actions and decisions.

³ According to the ‘bounded rationality’ argument in the policy science literature policymakers have ‘cognitive limits’, work in ‘an unpredictable policymaking environment’ and have to face constraints on time, information and resources (Cairney, 2016, 10).

⁴ *Cognitive frames or ‘frames in thought’* relate to ‘an individual’s (cognitive) understanding’ or ‘interpretation’ or ‘perception’ of a given situation (Druckman 2001, p.228). In other words, to ‘the set of dimensions’ that guide individuals’ processing of information affecting the inferences they draw from them and their decisions (Entman 1993, p.53), and therefore reveal the aspects of an issue an individual thinks are most important. From an interpretivist position, environments are not assumed to have any causal power independent of how individuals understand it: different actors can interpret the same external events differently (actors’ frames/understandings/interpretations are therefore ‘subjective’). Cognitive frames are

Analyses of these so-far neglected cognitive processes is particularly crucial in the context of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’, for two reasons. First, particularly in crisis situations, characterised by scarce and uncertain information and high pressure for action, actors’ understandings of events and policy problems tend to powerfully influence decision-making processes (Pierre, 2000; Brunsson, 2000). In such situations, understandings are not straightforward assessments of facts. Rather, they tend to be formed through non-linear processes characterised by shortcuts and influenced by the availability and accessibility of information, past experiences and historical analogies (Cohen et al., 1972; Druckman, 2011). Therefore, they can be hardly reconstructed by merely looking at the outputs produced. Second, migration is *per se* a very complex, ambiguous and uncertain issue (Boswell et al. 2011), its causes and effects therefore require interpretation from policymakers, which increases the likelihood of subjective understandings and cognitive processes to influence policymaking and migration-related decisions (Mayblin, 2019; Boswell & Hampshire, 2017).

This article explores these neglected endogenous factors of subnational migration policymaking processes, adopting an interpretative ‘macro-micro-macro’ approach that conceives policymaking as a process in which decision-makers develop understandings of the ‘macro environment’ in which they operate and, based on these understandings, develop policy responses (Coleman 1990; Hedström & Wennberg, 2017). Distinct from most existing works, therefore, it does not merely analyse the ‘outputs’ of subnational political systems and the environment in which these outputs were produced, but rather primarily focuses on policymakers’ understandings, frame emergence and decision-making processes. The article therefore asks three questions. First, *how did*

different from the so-called ‘*frames in communication*’ or ‘*strategic/policy frames*’, used by individuals in public discourses (Druckman, 2011, p.283). They are also distinct from individuals’ *pre-established preferences*, linked to their ideology, identity and past experiences (Bevir & Rhodes, 2006).

key subnational decision-makers understand asylum-seeking migration and its effects during the so-called 'refugee crisis'? Second, did they act upon these understandings and how? Third, how and why did their understandings of migration and its effects emerge?

To investigate these questions, I apply insights from framing and political marketing theories, drawing findings from 71 semi-structured interviews with subnational policymakers. I do so, by focusing on the powerful 'heuristic case' (Eckstein, 1975) of the Italian 'refugee crisis' in three regions (Veneto, Tuscany and Sicily), which illustrates the value of the broader conceptual and methodological claims made.

The analysis conducted leads to three main findings.

First, subnational policymakers, whether ignorant or not of the complexity of migration dynamics, are not mere 'passive recipients of information', but active 'interpreters and rationalizers' (Mutz, 2011, p. 12). They do not merely straightforwardly assess facts when framing policy problems and their understandings are rather the result of cognitive processes, characterised by shortcuts, which lead them to dismiss some aspects of their context and highlight others. In the case analysed, Italian policymakers understood asylum-seeking migration as a phenomenon that had primarily effects on public opinion and their understandings of public opinion were radically disconnected from the evidence that we have from available surveys and opinion polls.

Second, subnational policymakers' subjective understandings can decisively influence their actions and policymaking approaches, at least as much as other factors typically analysed in the existing literature (structures, values, interests, contextual factors etc.). In the case analysed, subnational policymakers' understandings of public reactions to migration shaped their actions and policymaking approaches, which contributed to produce key 'outputs' of subnational political systems (Campomori and Ambrosini, 2020).

Third, policymakers' understandings can be influenced by the very 'outputs' that they contribute to produce. In the case analysed, policymakers' understandings of public reactions to migration were largely influenced by migration-related public mobilisations. These mobilisations were in turn strictly linked to other key outputs produced by subnational political systems that policymakers' understandings of public opinion contributed to produce (e.g. the efficiency/inefficiency of regional reception systems; high/low levels of political contestation). Not only policymakers' agency is strictly dependent on their understandings of the environment where they operate but policymakers also shaped this environment through their actions and by assessing the effects of these actions (Geddes, 2021). Put differently, subnational asylum policymaking processes during the 'crisis' had a powerfully self-referential, circular nature, being both a cause and an effect of 'turbulence' (Ansell et al., 2016). This finding challenges a tendency in the existing literature to see migration only as an external shock to political systems and reveals that subnational political systems can themselves contribute to construct migration as a social and political problem.

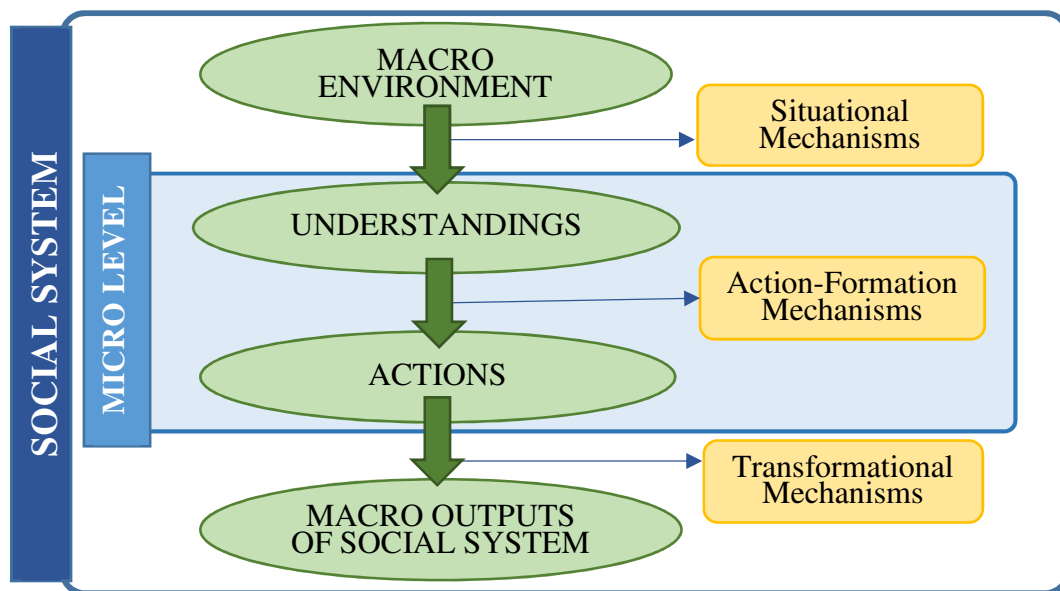
A 'macro-micro-macro' approach to study subnational migration policymaking.

Interpretivist approaches are particularly suited to study responses to issues such as migration, which, being highly complex and ambiguous, require interpretation by policymakers regarding what it might imply, and what should be done in response to it. Through the lens of these perspectives the 'outputs' of political systems are not produced and shaped by exogenous (contextual, environmental or structural) factors but rather by key decision-makers within political systems, through interpretative efforts and responses that are based upon these interpretations (Bevir & Rhodes, 2006; Easton, 1965). In the case of this research, this means that the responses of subnational political systems to the so-called 'refugee crisis' are based upon the construction of meaning about migration flows, related events and their effects (Geddes 2021). To understand how and why

subnational political systems produced specific outputs it is therefore necessary to investigate how subnational policymakers built understandings, made judgements about their environment and made decisions.

Coleman’s ‘macro-micro-macro approach’ (1990, p.11) provides a perspective to look at these inner cognitive and decision-making processes. This approach explains the functioning of social systems by looking at how individuals within them develop understandings of the ‘macro environment’ in which they operate, how they act based on these understandings, and how the interplay of such actions produces the outputs of social systems (Hedström and Wennberg, 2017, p.94). In other words, as shown in Figure 1, this approach assumes that key outputs of political systems are produced by a chain of ‘situational mechanisms’ (through which understandings are formed), ‘action-formation mechanisms’ (related to actors’ decision-making) and ‘transformational’ or mechanisms (related to actors’ interactions).

Figure 1. A ‘Macro-Micro-Macro’ approach.



Before illustrating the ‘macro-micro-macro’ research design of this paper, it is important to clarify which of the key elements and mechanisms identified by Coleman have already been

explored in the existing literature. A review of such literature identifies in depth insights produced by scholars about i) the macro-environment of the ‘refugee crisis’; ii) policymakers’ actions (or ‘policymaking approaches’); iii) the outputs produced by subnational political systems (e.g. reception policies, political contestation and migration-related public mobilisations); and iv) the ‘transformational mechanisms’ through which policymakers’ interactions with other actors produced different types of outputs.

The ‘*macro environment*’ of the ‘*refugee crisis*’ at the subnational level, in Europe and in Italy specifically, has been explored by several scholars who have looked at migrant flows, public attitudes to immigration and the salience of migration, socio-economic factors and the relevance of anti-immigration parties within political systems (for a comprehensive review see Pettrachin, 2020a).

Several scholars have also identified different types of *policymaking approaches and policies* adopted by subnational policymakers (e.g. mayors, members of local and regional governments) during the ‘refugee crisis’. Such approaches have been categorised as ‘inclusionary’ or ‘exclusionary’ (Ambrosini 2018; Kos et al. 2016; Marchetti 2020) – depending on whether these were based on opposition to or acceptance of asylum-seekers – and as ‘proactive’ and ‘passive’ (Sabchev 2020; Schammann et al. 2021). Following Schammann et al. (2021) proactive approaches are characterised by initiatives to exploit the discretion of – or surpass – the existing legal/institutional framework and/or to mobilise additional resources and by proactive strategies towards public opinion. Passive approaches are characterised by lack of initiative, a very strict adherence to the legal and institutional framework and issue avoidance in public discourse.

As to the ‘*outputs*’ of *subnational migration policymaking* during the so-called ‘refugee crisis’, these have been vastly explored in Europe (for a comprehensive review: Caponio and Pettrachin 2021). In Italy, in particular, scholars have identified three main ‘outputs’ at the regional level, resulting from the actions of the different local and regional policymakers involved in the

organization of asylum-seekers' reception. First, largely inefficient regional reception systems (D'Angelo, 2019; Castelli Gattinara, 2017), where 'efficiency' was mainly associated to a balanced dispersal of asylum-seekers across municipalities, the prevalence of small reception structures over big reception facilities, and the quality of services offered to asylum-seekers. Second, high levels of political contestation of asylum-seekers' reception (Ambrosini, 2018). Third, several anti-refugee and pro-refugee public mobilisations (Zamponi, 2018). Despite these general trends, some remarkable variations could be observed across regions, as described in the next section.

'Transformational mechanisms' have been analysed by the scholarship on local migration policymaking that adopted (multi-level) governance perspectives (for a review: Schammann et al. 2021); by the politicisation literature that looked at the actors that produced political contestation of migration (Pettrachin, 2020b); and by the social movement scholarship that looked at the emergence of migration-related mobilisations (Zamponi, 2018). In Italy, in particular, scholars identified two key 'transformational mechanisms' during the 'refugee crisis'. First, Campomori and Ambrosini (2020), defining subnational governance systems as 'battlegrounds', argued that local policymakers and other governance actors had conflicting and competing perspectives on asylum-seekers' reception and that the outputs produced are largely the product of the interaction of these different policy approaches (rather than the product of structural or institutional factors). Following these scholars' argument, subnational political systems characterised by interactions of policymakers (and other actors) with exclusionary and/or passive policymaking approaches tend to produce less efficient reception systems, while higher levels of political contestation of migration are produced in political systems where key policymakers adopt opposite policymaking approaches. Second, Zamponi (2018, p.112) demonstrated that anti-migrant and pro-migrant public mobilisations were largely triggered by inefficient reception policies and high levels of political contestation which resulted from such a battleground (see also: Ambrosini, 2018, p.122).

What is missing in the existing literature is any analysis of policymakers' understandings of the context where they operate (e.g. of migrant flows, public attitudes and the salience of migration), of the situational mechanisms through which these understandings emerge and of the action-formation mechanisms through which these understandings are enacted. This paper, through its three research questions, aims to shed light on these so-far neglected dimensions.

Theoretical Approaches and Methods

To explore policymakers' understandings, situational and action-formation mechanisms I apply insights derived from three different theoretical approaches, methodologically relying on semi-structured interviews with subnational policymakers.

To explore the first research question and identify policy-makers' understandings of their environment, I apply insights derived from framing theories (Druckman 2011; Scheufele, 1999). Unlike existing scholarly works on migration-related frames – which focus on strategic or policy frames, derived from public discourses – I analyse policymakers' cognitive frames, derived from anonymous interviews (Scheufele, 1999, p.106). Methodologically, this entailed asking interviewees how they assessed the effects of asylum-seeking migration and analysing their responses applying quantitative frame analysis. In particular, I adopted a mixed deductive/inductive approach to identify frames, building on established typologies of frames concerning the effects of asylum-seeking migration (Benson & Wood, 2015; Dekker & Scholten, 2017; Helbling, 2014). Findings of the frame analysis were compared with objective data derived from a variety of sources (e.g. on attitudes to immigration, salience etc.).

To explore the second question on action-formation mechanisms I apply insights derived from political marketing theories (Lees-Marshment, 2001). These theories assume that decision-makers can base decisions either on their understandings of the context around them – and

particularly of what the electorate's preferences are – or on pre-established preferences, linked to their ideology, identity and past experiences (Bevir & Rhodes, 2006). Lees-Marshment (2001, pp.28-30) provides a framework to assess the prevalence of interpretations or preferences in decision-making, distinguishing between three decision-making approaches. A 'product-oriented' decision-maker 'argues for what it believes in' and refuses to modify her pre-established preferences even if her understanding of the external context (and particularly perception of the electorate's preferences) would suggest otherwise. A 'sales-oriented' decision-maker retains her pre-established preferences but, having realised that these are not shared by the broader population, makes additional efforts to sell its arguments to voters. A 'market-oriented' decision-maker tries to interpret voters' demands and design its behaviour to suit them, either in the absence of clearly defined pre-established preference or renouncing to pursue such preferences. Product-oriented and sales-oriented strategies are primarily driven by policymakers' pre-established preferences, while market-oriented strategies are primarily driven by understandings (Reeves et al. 2006, p.424). This framework is particularly suited to analyse decision-making processes during the Italian 'refugee crisis', because, as the rest of the paper will show, most of the interviewed policymakers understand migration as a phenomenon that has primarily effects on public opinion. Methodologically, this analysis entailed asking interviewees to identify the rationale or strategy that guided their actions during the 'refugee crisis' and the key factors that shaped it. Interviewees were also asked to reconstruct the decision-making process that preceded key decisions made during the 'refugee crisis'. Responses were analysed using qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2000): I coded core sentences within policymakers' responses and the inductively identified codes were linked to the theoretical framework.

Finally, to address the third research question on situational mechanisms, I apply insights from theories of frame emergence (Druckman, 2011), which describe the psychological mechanisms through which actors form their subjective understandings. These theories assume that,

particularly in situations of ‘crisis’, processes of frame emergence are characterised by shortcuts or ‘judgement heuristics’. For instance, the emergence of actors’ understandings can be linked to the availability and accessibility of certain frames – meaning that individuals can be influenced by information collected from their environment or by the media (‘availability bias’) or by pre-set powerful ideas and narratives (‘accessibility bias’). The emergence of understandings can be also influenced by comparisons with past events or historical analysis, whether or not appropriate (‘representativeness bias’). Particularly in situations of crisis, individuals’ judgements can be remarkably influenced by uncertain data depending on an initial piece of information (‘anchoring bias’). Furthermore, research has shown that individuals tend to devote extra cognitive resources to dismiss evidence that disagrees with pre-established ideas, avoiding the emotional discomfort that arises when questioning prior beliefs (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Methodologically, exploring processes of frame emergence entailed asking interviewees why they identified certain effects of asylum-seeking migration and not others, whether specific events influenced their views and understandings of migration during the ‘refugee crisis’, and through which sources they gained their information. Responses were analysed using qualitative content analysis.

Interviews were conducted between November 2017 and January 2019 in three Italian regions (see next section). Interviewees (Tables 3 and 4 in the Annex) include 71 local and regional policymakers (mayors, deputy mayors, members of regional governments, MPs). While selecting interviewees, I followed the principle of ‘quota sampling’, giving due consideration to the following criteria: actor type, political affiliation (and parties’ strength within regional political systems), geographical area, municipality size. In addition, I also conducted 45 expert interviews with non-party actors – including deputy prefects, and civil servants, representatives of NGOs, service providers, trade unions, and anti-refugee movements – to gather additional insights on the processes analysed.

Case Selection

This article focuses on the so-called Italian ‘refugee crisis’ – a powerful ‘heuristic case’ (Eckstein, 1975) which demonstrates the value of the conceptual and methodological argument made. More specifically, it focuses on three Italian regions (Veneto, Tuscany and Sicily) selected as more specific case studies (Table 1).

Table 1. Case Selection.

		VENETO	TUSCANY	SICILY
Macro Environment (Context)	Macro-region	North	Centre	South
	2017 Population (ISTAT)	5 million	3.7 million	5 million
	2017 GDP per capita (ISTAT)	29,500€	28,100€	16,800€
	Political tradition	Conservative	Left-wing	Conservative
	Most voted coalition in national elections (2013/2018)	Right-wing	Centre-Left	Populist M5S
	Regional government (2017)	Right-wing (Lega and others)	Centre-left (PD)	Centre-left (2015-2017); Centre-right (2017-)
	Political variation (2017)	Moderate (most mayors from either radical right Lega or centre-left PD)	Very low (most mayors from centre-left PD)	Very high (centre-left, centre-right, M5S, independent)
	% of asylum-seekers in Italy hosted (2017)	8%	7%	10%
	Salience - % of voters for whom immigration is the first issue of concern (Source: Eurobarometer 2015, 2018)	40% (2015); 32% (2018)	28% (2015); 21% (2018)	37% (2015); 23% (2018)
	Public Attitudes toward Immigration – average responses to question ‘Do immigrants make Italy better or worse?’ (higher numbers indicate more positive attitudes) (Source: ESS 2016)	3.82	3.25	2.86

Outputs	% of municipalities hosting reception centres (2017)	50%	84%	n.a. (<50%)
	Prevalent type of reception centres	Big regional hubs	Small reception structures distributed across the region	Big regional hubs, medium-sized structures (characterised by inefficient management)
	Levels of political contestation of migration (sources: Tronchin and Di Pasquale, 2017; Bassi 2015)	Very High	Moderate	Very low
	Anti-migrant protests (2016) (Lunaria 2017)	43	11	1

As several sources suggest, these three case studies display variation in terms of the three key ‘outputs’ identified in the previous section (efficient/inefficient reception systems; high/low levels of political contestation of migration; and high/low number of public mobilisations). The Northern region of Veneto – the heartland of the radical right Lega Nord (LN) – is a case of high political contestation of migration and inefficient management of the reception system, due to the prevalence of big emergency centres and a very unequal dispersal of asylum-seekers (Giannetto et al., 2019). In line with the mechanism identified by Zamponi, such inefficiencies and political contestation favoured the emergence of widespread anti-migrant protests (the highest number of the country; Lunaria, 2017). The traditionally left-wing region of Tuscany is a case of efficient management and moderate political contestation (Campomori and Ambrosini, 2020). In line with Zamponi’s argument, the efficient asylum management prevented the emergence of political opportunities for anti-migrant and pro-migrant mobilisations. Sicily, finally, is a case of inefficient management (D’Angelo, 2019) but low political contestation (Bassi, 2014). In line with Zamponi’s argument, the absence of anti-migrant political entrepreneurs is coupled by the absence of anti-migrant protests, but the inefficiencies of the Sicilian reception system pushed the mobilisation of pro-migrant groups who initially responded to the system’s inefficiencies providing basic services to asylum-seekers and then developed wider collective actions (Zamponi, 2018, p.109).

In line with Campomori and Ambrosini's argument, existing sources (as also the expert interviews conducted for this paper) suggest that these diverse regional outputs are largely the result of the interaction of policymakers and other actors who adopted different policymaking approaches. Tuscan local and regional authorities – most of which are affiliated to the centre-left PD – developed inclusionary policymaking approaches. Venetian mayors adopted either exclusionary approaches (the radical right LN, one of the two dominant parties of the region) or passive inclusive approaches (the centre-left PD, the other dominant party) (Ambrosini, 2018; Giannetto et al. 2019). Sicilian mayors, independently of their political affiliation, displayed a tendency to adopt proactive pro-migrant approaches in the main cities and port towns and passive approaches in rural areas (Giglioli 2017; Pettrachin, 2020b).

I argue that these policies and policymaking approaches (and the outputs they contribute to produce) cannot be fully explained by either contextual/structural factors or actors' ideology and interests – which are at the core of the (few) existing explanations of subnational migration-related policymaking processes.

As to the key contextual factors identified in the literature, these regions were similar in many respects, including the number of asylum-seekers hosted, the (high) salience of migration and (predominantly negative) public attitudes to immigration (see Table 1). The legal and institutional framework was the same too: in all regions, competences on asylum-seekers' reception were assigned to local governments – that could voluntarily adhere to the official national reception system (SPRAR system) – and the Prefectures, that managed the parallel emergency system, activated if not enough municipalities volunteered to join the SPRAR system⁵. As to values,

⁵ The Association of Municipalities (ANCI) and regional governments were also involved in asylum-seekers' dispersal.

interests and ideology, again, mayors and members of regional governments affiliated to the same parties adopted very different policymaking approaches in different regions (e.g. centre-left mayors in Veneto and Tuscany; right-wing mayors in Sicily and Veneto).

The three regions also display some important differences in other structural and contextual dimensions (Table 1), but these cannot convincingly explain the different outputs produced and actors' different policymaking approaches. For instance, the regions have different political traditions, but traditionally conservative regions like Sicily and Veneto were characterised by very different levels of politicisation of asylum-seekers' reception. The cases also have different socio-economic contexts and different levels of institutional performance and administrative efficiency (Putnam 1994), but two similarly better-off and efficient regions like Tuscany and Veneto produced very different outputs. There are also significant differences in terms of the liveliness of civil society, but most mobilisations took place in the regions with the traditionally weaker third sector (Sicily and – to a lesser extent – Veneto).

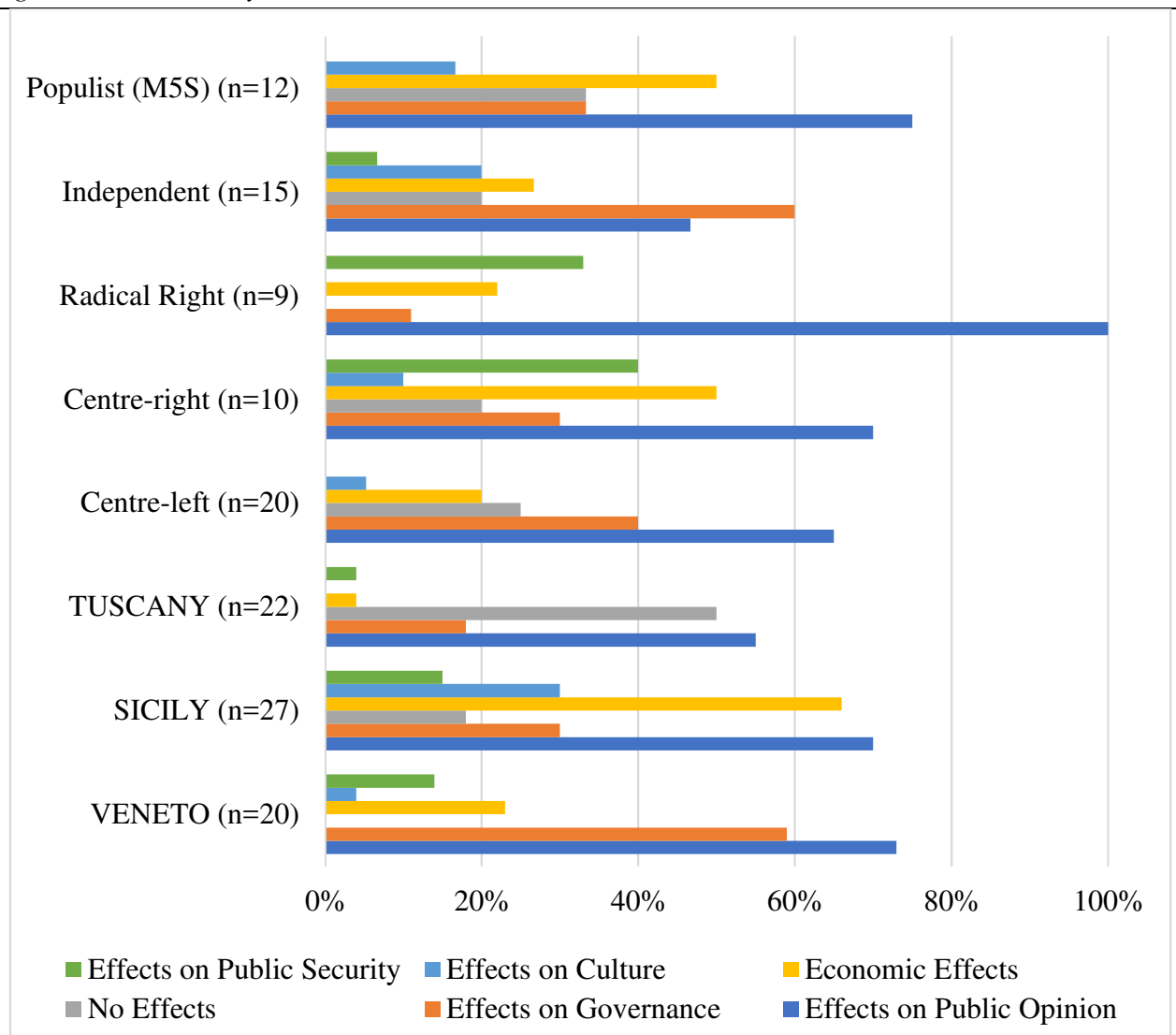
For this reason, I argue that these three regions, together, represent a small set of cases that has the potential to 'disconfirm or at least cast a pall of suspicion on' existing explanations of subnational outputs produced by subnational political systems during the Italian 'refugee crisis' (Gerring & Cojocaru 2016, p.403). At the same time, they serve an illustrative function, demonstrating the plausibility of alternative mechanisms, focused on the role of cognitive processes.

Actors' Understandings

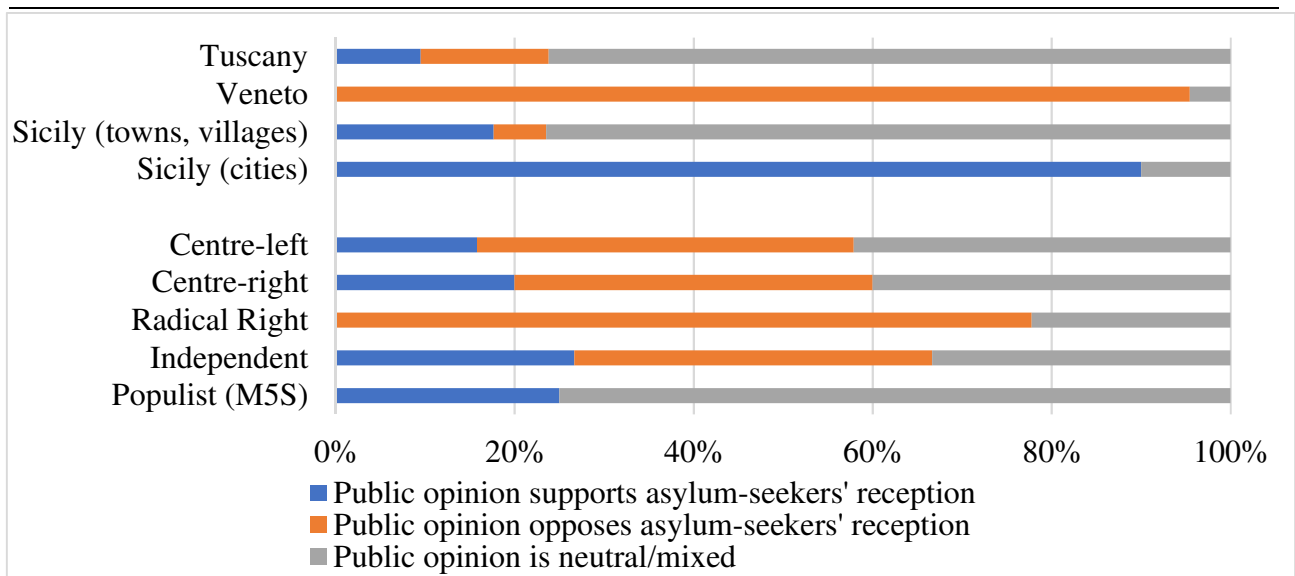
Figure 2 illustrates the findings of the frame analysis of subnational policymakers' responses to the question about their perceptions of the effects of asylum-seekers' reception in their region, showing

that understandings of such effects were subjective and varied across different regional contexts. Besides some evident regional variations, panel a shows that policymakers across all regions and political affiliations widely used frames concerning public reactions. Despite this common focus on public reactions, panel b shows that policymakers' perceptions of public opinion were largely disconnected from the reality described by available surveys and opinion polls, and highly diverse across the three regions, despite such polls suggesting that there was very little within-country variation in public attitudes to immigration.

Figure 2. Frame analysis.



Panel a. Percentage of policymakers that used different frames when responding to the question 'what were the effects of asylum-seeking migration in your region?' (core sentences were the main unit of analysis; each interviewee could be associated to one or more frames).



Panel b. Percentage of policymakers that used different frames when responding to the question ‘how did the public react to asylum-seeking migration in your region?’ (core sentences were the main unit of analysis; each interviewee was associated to the prevalent frame).

In Veneto, policymakers across the whole political spectrum perceived locals as harshly hostile to asylum-seekers. The significant share of the Venetian population that, according to available opinion polls, was not hostile towards asylum-seekers’ reception was not acknowledged by any of the interviewees. While describing the effects of asylum-seekers’ reception, interviewees largely referred to the multiple anti-migrant protests that took place in the region, mostly referred to as organised by ‘the entire community’:

In 2017 the issue was exploding in our hands, because the population in this region was hostile to asylum-seekers and could not be controlled anymore (...).

The entire community was rebelling and organizing demonstrations against asylum seekers (PD MP, Veneto).

In Sicily, most policymakers in the main cities perceived locals to be welcoming and not hostile towards asylum-seekers, despite available evidence suggesting that Sicilians at the time were more hostile to migrants compared to Venetians (Table 1):

Sicilians are the product of migration flows (...). Therefore, they are ready for asylum-seekers' reception, they believe in this, they believe in multiculturalism (Independent Deputy Mayor, City, Sicily).

Outside the main cities, asylum-seeking immigration was perceived, by all interviewees, including those from the radical right, to be a marginal, non-salient issue, which did not influence people's voting behaviour, mainly due to the presence of other more salient issues:

Immigration is not perceived as a relevant issue in Sicily, here the real problems are different (...). In a context where public transports are very inefficient, waste management and access to potable water are big problems, people do not have a house or a job, immigration is necessarily a marginal issue (M5S MP, Village, Sicily).

These perceptions of the salience of migration were also completely disconnected from available Eurobarometer data (Table 1). In Tuscany, the population was perceived to be tolerant towards or supportive of asylum-seekers' reception:

In 2014, I would say 80 percent of the population in this city supported asylum-seekers' reception, and there was a residual, structural, 20 percent that was hostile (Centre-left Mayor, City, Tuscany).

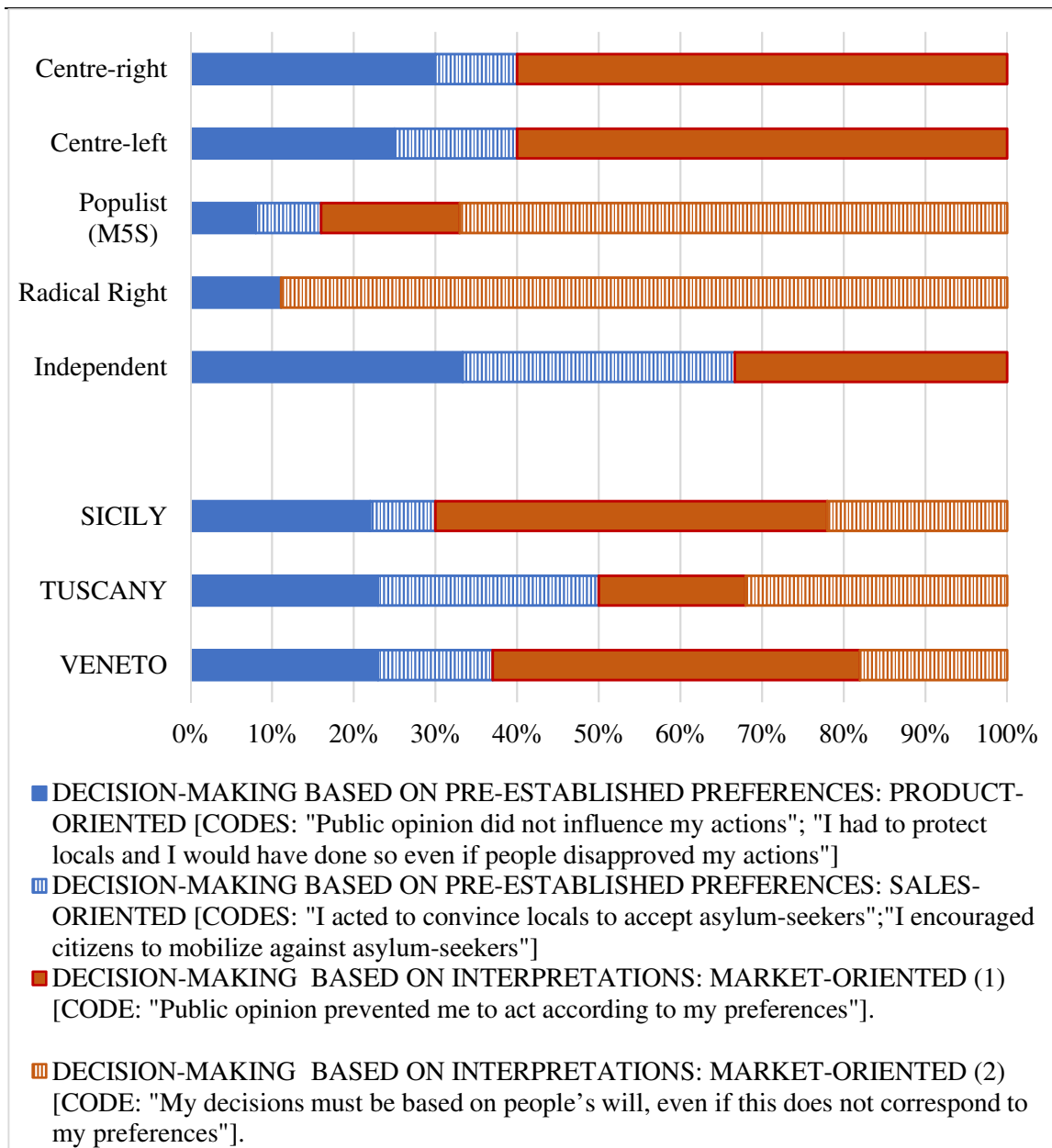
Action-formation mechanisms.

To explore the second hypothesis, I conducted a quantitative content analysis of policymakers' responses to the questions conceived to investigate action-formation mechanisms. As Figure 3

suggests, despite some evident differences depending on actors' political affiliation, policymakers' decision-making processes were strongly influenced by their interpretations of public attitudes to migration and its salience, more than by pre-existing preferences.

The decision-making approaches of centre-left and centre-right policymakers are sometimes influenced by their perceptions of public reactions to migration and sometimes influenced by their pre-established preferences, depending on the perceived salience of asylum-seekers' reception, which acted as a powerful constraint or enabler of actions. These policymakers had clear pre-established preferences about how to respond to the 'crisis': most centre-left policymakers, for instance, were prone to accept asylum-seekers, a preference linked to their progressive ideology. However, they tended to act based on such preferences only in situations or contexts of perceived low salience, especially if pushed by pressures from policy entrepreneurs. In Tuscany and in the main Sicilian cities, where policymakers tend to perceive a low salience of migration, local trade unions and pro-migrant NGOs played a key role in pushing centre-left policymakers to adopt a proactive approach to asylum-seekers' reception. In rural Sicily, pressures were exerted by employers and private actors willing to open reception centres. In situations of perceived high salience of the migration issue, conversely, these policymakers' decisions are rather shaped by their subjective understandings of public reactions to asylum-seekers' reception, which led centre-left and centre-right policymakers to mostly adopt more passive stances (for instance, they did not oppose prefects' decisions but delegated to them any responsibility about asylum-seekers' reception). In Veneto, for instance, all centre-left and centre-right policymakers perceived a very high salience of the migration issue and all acted based on their perceptions of public reactions, despite regional business organizations and Catholic NGOs being active in advocating for more inclusionary immigration policies.

Figure 3. Decision-making approaches adopted by policymakers with different party affiliations and across different regions.



Notes: Analysis of policymakers' responses to the questions: 'what was the strategy that guided your actions during the refugee crisis?', 'which factors crucially influenced it?' and 'could you reconstruct the decision-making process that led to action X?'. Core sentences were the main unit of analysis and could be associated to only one code.

The decisions of most interviewees affiliated to populist radical right parties and the pure populist M5S were instead more consistently guided by their interpretations of public reactions to migration. Most of these policymakers in fact expressed some clear pre-established preferences but

they acted irrespective of or against these preferences, in line with their distinctive ‘populist’ aim to act according to the perceived people’s will. This suggests that their interpretations of public opinion shaped their preferences, rather than acting as constraints or enablers of policy choices.

Only very few policymakers, mostly fringe independent mayors, predominantly adopted ‘sales-oriented’ decision-making styles, meaning that their decisions were not influenced by their perceptions of public opinion.

To sum up, this subsection has shown that perceptions of public reactions to asylum-seekers’ reception and of the salience of the issue crucially influenced (most) policymakers’ actions, enabling or constraining preferred policy options or even shaping their policy preferences.

Frame Emergence and the Recursiveness of Asylum Policymaking.

Having demonstrated that policymakers’ subjected understandings are a neglected, crucial factor that contributes to explain policymaking dynamics and key ‘outputs’ of subnational political systems during the ‘refugee crisis’, I move to move to analyse processes of frame emergence.

Analysis of the interview material suggest that two ‘heuristic biases’ (Druckman, 2011) help us explaining the radical disconnect between public attitudes and policymakers’ perceptions of such attitudes, identified above.

First, policymakers’ understandings were strongly embedded in powerful narratives⁶ entailing different stories or ‘knowledge claims’ about attitudes and behaviours of the local population (‘anchoring’ bias). These rooted narratives worked as ‘anchors’ which kept influencing

⁶ Boswell et al. (2011) define ‘migration policy narratives’ as ‘knowledge claims about the causes, dynamics and impacts of migration’.

policymakers' understandings of 'the public'. Venetians' hostility to asylum-seekers was explained by most interviewees by their strong regional identity:

Venetian are *inherently* hostile towards persons that are different from them
(Mayor, PD, Veneto)

Venetians' intolerance towards migrants is ingrained in the Venetian culture, which pushes on the identity dimension and is built on contrapositions with other groups (Mayor, Independent, Veneto)

In Sicily, the perceived widespread acceptance towards asylum-seekers is largely justified by Sicily's tradition and history:

Sicilians have always been super welcoming, because of their history and culture, they are used to share their land with other populations, and they are open to different cultures. (...) We are and have been migrants ourselves (Regional MP, M5S, Sicily).

This very well-established narrative about Sicilians' tolerance (Cole 1997) was proposed by policymakers from across the whole political spectrum. It seems to be particularly influential because 'morally compelling', with the defining experience of recent Sicilian emigration constituting the moral basis for its enactment (Boswell et al. 2011).

In Tuscany, instead, locals' tolerance was largely grounded on the values of inclusiveness, solidarity and equality (or 'civicness') that characterised Tuscany's 'red political subculture' during the Twentieth century (Florida, 2014). Despite the academic literature having shown that this subculture underwent a creeping change since the 1990s (Ibid.), policymakers from all political affiliations still perceived Tuscans as strongly attached to these values, and, consequently, tolerant towards migrants:

My town is different, people traditionally give great attention to the values of democracy and solidarity, and has a strong presence of associations, it cannot be compared to other areas of this country where racism and fear of immigration are particularly strong (Independent Mayor, Tuscany).

Furthermore, due to the electoral continuity that characterised the Tuscan political system, dominated by left-wing parties since 1945, the ‘public’ was interpreted as loyal to centre-left parties and potentially influenceable by policymakers, as far as they managed to provide efficient policy responses (Caciagli, 2011, p.98).

Strikingly, several policymakers across all regions tended to quickly dismiss as inaccurate the survey data about regional public attitudes to immigration reported to them at end of the interview if these data contradicted their rooted perceptions. This is in line with established findings of the framing literature, according to which individuals tend to devote extra cognitive resources to dismiss evidence that disagrees with pre-established ideas, avoiding the emotional discomfort that arises when questioning prior beliefs (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974).

Second, perceptions of public attitudes towards asylum-seekers were largely influenced by migration-related public mobilisations, which provided policymakers with signals and cues to interpret the situation (‘accessibility/availability bias’). These signals mostly reinforced the above-mentioned narratives. In Veneto, the widespread anti-migrant protests, often organized by marginal extreme-right movements with no popular support (Lunaria, 2017), contributed to reinforce policymakers’ perceptions that locals were very hostile towards migrants. These protest events were mentioned by most interviewees to support their claims that Venetians are highly hostile to asylum-seekers.

In Sicily, pro-migrant groups were particularly active and visible and mobilised in favour of migrants, invoking Sicilian history and culture to make their pro-migrant stances more evocative

(Bassi, 2014). In doing so, they contributed to render policymakers' conviction that locals are very welcoming towards asylum-seekers cognitively plausible, which reinforced the dominant narrative about Sicilians' tolerance (Kingdon, 2014, p.113).

In Tuscany, the absence of anti-migrant protests reinforced policymakers' understandings that locals were tolerant towards asylum-seekers, and that efficient policy responses could prevent negative public reactions to asylum-seekers' reception:

While in other regions the growth of the LN and its anti-immigration propaganda had devastating effects (...) here asylum-seekers were well tolerated by the population, I cannot remember protests or movements that opposed the creation of reception centres (MP, PD, Tuscany).

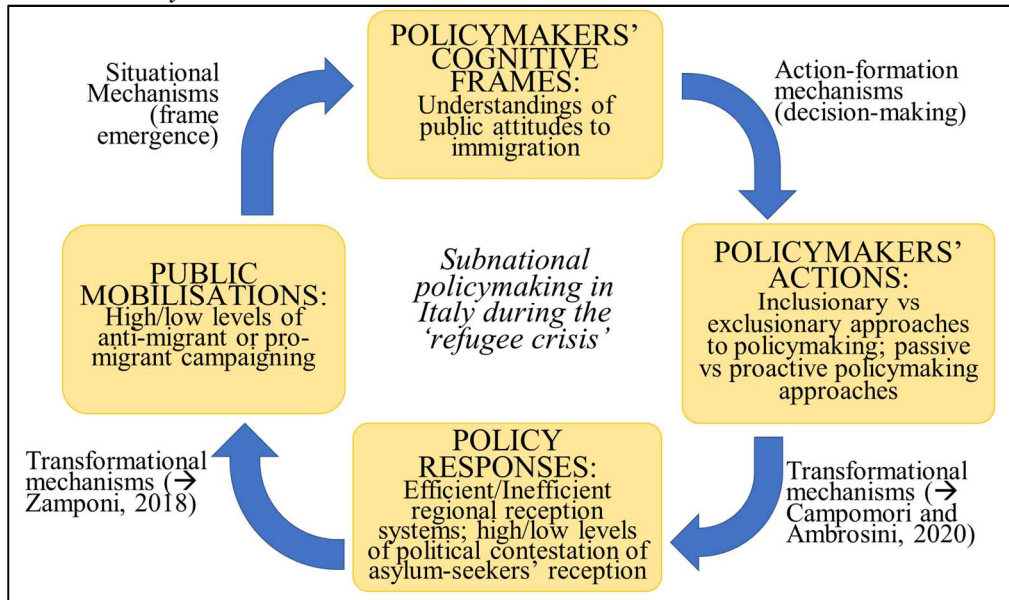
Importantly, when asked about the sources through which they gained information about migration, most interviewees, across all regions and political affiliations, referred to non-specialist sources, and particularly to local media. Local media therefore played a key role in raising or reducing the visibility of migration-related mobilisations. Tronchin and Di Pasquale (2017) analysed frames and narratives promoted by Venetian media in 2017 to conclude that most of the news on immigration produced focused on anti-refugee protests and that anti-migrant positions expressed by politicians and movements were given a disproportionate space compared to neutral information and comments by experts. This suggests that in Veneto local media instrumentally contributed to raising the salience of asylum-seekers' reception. In Sicily, local media were very rarely mentioned during the interviews. As an expert interviewed put it: 'you very rarely find news about immigration in Sicilian media'. Conversely, many interviewees suggested that Sicilian media tend to stigmatise any critical position on migration: one of the few Sicilian interviewees who expressed clear anti-migrant positions explained that 'it is hard to say openly the things I am telling you because, if you do so, you are butchered by local media' (Centre-right MP, Sicily).

Overall, our findings therefore reveal that the mobilisation of civil society actors mediated the relationship between macro-level ‘outputs’ and micro-level understandings. Policymakers’ interpretations of public reactions to asylum-seekers’ reception, embedded in narrative stories linked to local history and identity, played a key role in driving responses to the ‘refugee crisis’, which triggered anti-migrant protests and pro-migrant mobilisations. These public protests, in turn, crucially influenced the emergence of policymakers’ understandings of public reactions, reinforcing available narratives. Regional policymaking processes therefore generated a narrative-reinforcing dynamic that fed on itself (Table 2)⁷.

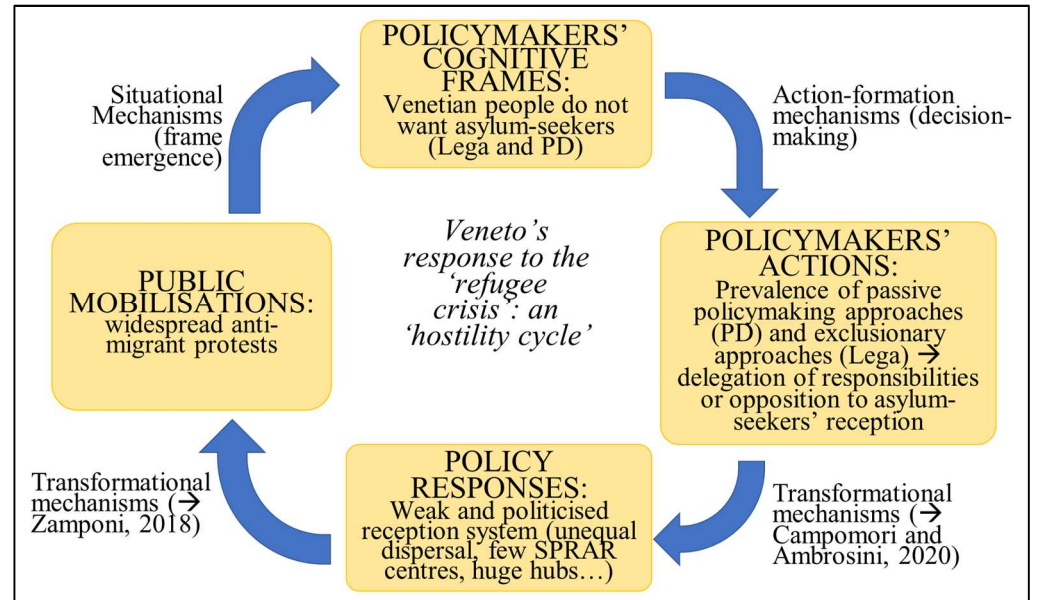
⁷ The analysis conducted reveals the impact of policymakers’ understandings on their actions and the production of outputs and the impact of outputs on the emergence of policymakers’ understandings but cannot provide definitive conclusions on which effect came first. This is not problematic, if one assumes, from an interpretivist perspective, that structure and agency are co-constitutive and cannot be temporally separated (Hay, 2002).

Table 2. The recursive nature of regional asylum policymaking.

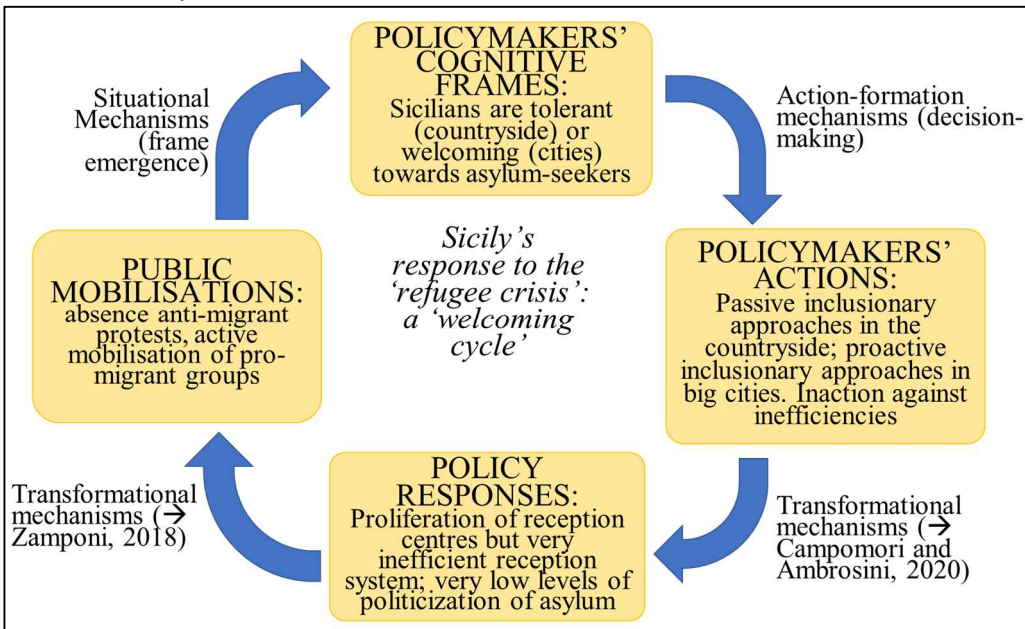
Panel a. Italy.



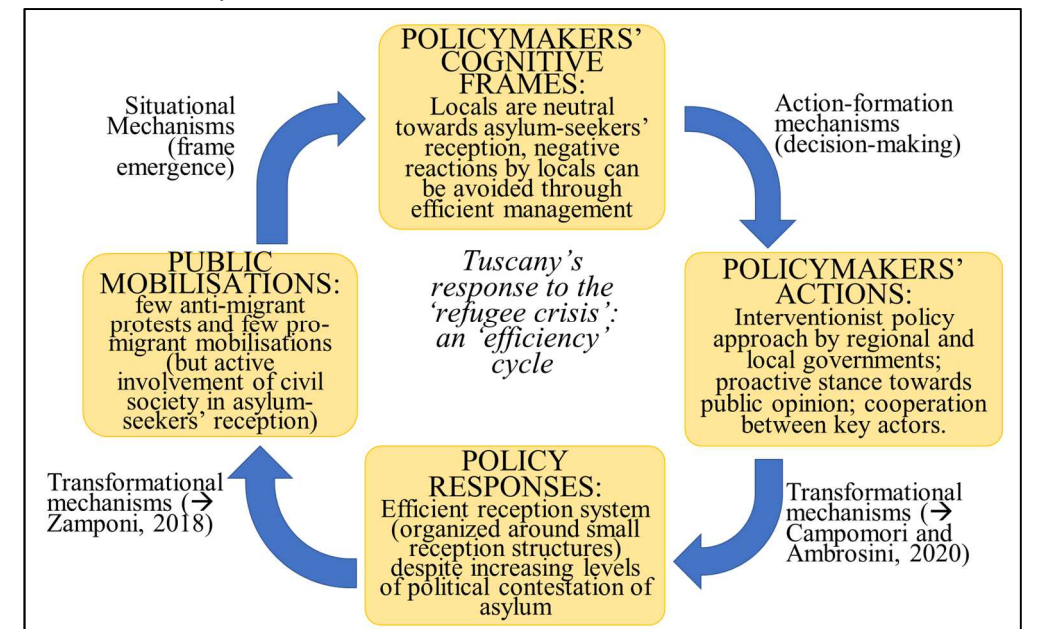
Panel b. Veneto.



Panel c. Sicily.



Panel d. Tuscany.



In Veneto, the widespread anti-migrant protests shaped policymakers' perceptions that Venetians are harshly hostile towards asylum-seekers. Such understandings powerfully shaped policymakers' approaches and, ultimately, produced a very inefficient reception system, characterised by large concentrations of asylum-seekers in emergency centres. These inefficiencies contributed to shape the widespread anti-migrant protests. In Sicily, the active and visible mobilisation of pro-migrant groups invoking Sicilian history and culture to support their pro-migrant claims contributed to reinforce policymakers' perceptions that Sicilians are welcoming towards migrants. These understandings prevented the emergence of anti-migrant political entrepreneurs, which prevented the emergence of anti-migrant campaigning. The absence of anti-migrant mobilisations represented a powerful feedback that reinforced understandings of Sicilians as tolerant or welcoming towards asylum-seekers. In both regions, focusing events, personal experiences, and symbols accompanied and reinforced pre-existing perceptions (Kingdon, 2014, p.113). In Tuscany, finally, the efficiency of the reception system prevented the emergence of anti-migrant and pro-refugee mobilisations. The absence of mobilisations against asylum-seekers – despite the growing support for the radical right in the region – provided reassuring feedbacks to the centre-left policymakers about their capacity to influence public opinion and prevent social tensions through the efficient policies adopted.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has applied (and revealed the potential of) a 'macro-micro-macro' approach to study of policymaking mechanisms during the 'refugee crisis', i.e. an approach which

explains the functioning of political systems by privileging agency and policymakers' understandings. The analysis conducted produces three main findings, which connect to broader debates in the migration policy scholarship on the drivers of migration policymaking and policy failures.

First, the article has shown that subnational policymakers, whether ignorant or aware of the complexity of migration and its effects, are active 'interpreters', not 'passive recipients of information' (Mutz, 2011, p.12). This cognitive dimension of subnational migration policymaking has so far been ignored by the existing literature. Such literature tends to rather conceptualise policymakers as 'rational' actors, subject to constraints on time and resources which 'bound' their rationality, and therefore to explain gaps between objective evidence and policymakers' decisions (or 'evidence-policy gaps'), by pointing to the role of values and interests which can overrule objective evidence. Scholars have therefore identified an estrangement or 'alienation' of migration-related decision-making processes from objective evidence (Cairney, 2016, 13; Scholten, 2020; Baldwin-Edwards et al., 2018). This paper has shown that certainly subnational Italian policymakers during the 'refugee crisis' lacked information and resources and acted under time constraints and pressures for action. However, more importantly, it has also shown that the way they frame problems is not a mere straightforward assessment of facts. Rather, it is the result of cognitive processes, characterised by several shortcuts or judgement heuristics, which lead policymakers to highlight some aspects of the situation and dismiss others, especially evidence that causes emotional discomfort because it challenges prior beliefs or well-established ideas.

Second, this article has systematically shown that subjective understandings can decisively influence policymakers' actions (and therefore the outputs they contributed to produce). In the case analysed, policymakers understood asylum-seeking migration as a phenomenon that had primarily effects on public opinion and their understandings of public reactions to migration shaped their actions, more than their pre-established beliefs or ideologies. Without claiming that subjective understandings alone can fully explain the outputs produced by subnational political systems, the analysis conducted clarifies that these are a so-far neglected and crucially important factor, particularly in a situation of crisis and for a complex and uncertain issue like migration. Subjective understandings need to be duly analysed by future works that aim to explain policymaking processes and the production of policy outputs at the subnational level, together with structural, contextual and strategic factors.

The third key insight produced concerns the powerfully self-referential and recursive nature of subnational policymaking processes during the Italian 'refugee crisis'. While important scholarly works since the 1970s have shown that policymaking processes are not linear, and that decision-making processes can lead to decoupling between 'problems' and 'solutions' (Brunsson, 2000; Cohen et al., 1972; Kingdon, 2014), this paper has shown that policymaking processes during the 'refugee crisis' had important constitutive effects, contributing to produce meaning. Not only policymakers' agency is strictly dependent on their understandings of the environment where they operate but policymakers also shaped this environment through their actions and by assessing the effects of these actions (Geddes, 2021). In other words, following Ansell et al. (2016), subnational policymaking during the 'refugee crisis' was both a cause and an effect of 'turbulence'. Challenging a tendency of the existing literature to see

asylum-seeking migration as a merely external shock to political systems, this article therefore reveals that subnational political systems can themselves contribute to construct migration as a social and political problem.

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Annex.

Table 3. Sample of interviewees.

		VENETO	SICILY	TUSCANY
<i>Policymakers (semi-structured interviews)</i>	Mayors/Deputy Mayors (Villages/Towns)	6	15	9
	Mayors/Deputy Mayors (Provincial Capitals)	6	4	4
	Members of Regional Government	1	1	1
	Regional MPs	1	1	4
	National MPs	6	6	2
	Party Leaders	2	0	2
<i>Non-party actors (expert interviews)</i>	Deputy Prefects	2	2	1
	Civil Servants (ANCI, Regional/Local authorities)	3	1	2
	Advocacy NGOs	3	3	1
	Service Providers	4	4	3
	Experts	4	2	0
	Anti-migrant committees	3	0	0
	Trade Unions	2	2	2
	Journalists	0	0	1
	TOTAL	43	41	32

Table 4. Political affiliation of the policymakers interviewed.

		VENETO	SICILY	TUSCANY
Political Affiliation	RADICAL RIGHT (Lega Nord, Fratelli d'Italia)	4	1	4
	CENTRE-RIGHT (Forza Italia, Nuovo Centrodestra)	3	7	-
	CENTRE-LEFT (Partito Democratico)	7	4	9
	LEFT (Sinistra Italiana, Movimento Democratici e Progressisti)	2	1	2
	POPULIST - MOVIMENTO CINQUE STELLE	-	8	4
	INDEPENDENT (no party affiliation)	6	6	3
TOTAL		22	27	22