

Crisis and coordination in Italian cities: the pivotal role of Third Sector Organisations in Ukrainian refugee responses

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Following the invasion of Ukrainian territory by the Russian Federation in February 2022, the European Union and its Member States adopted the Temporary Protection Directive in response to the massive influx of individuals fleeing the conflict. This directive was explicitly implemented to facilitate Ukrainian citizens' access to essential housing, healthcare, education, and employment services. This approach starkly contrasts the established reception and integration systems typically activated by Member States for third-country nationals. The directive effectively circumvented the bureaucratic procedures that traditionally cause delays in reception processes, such as those for granting refugee status and asylum.

The Italian case is a prime example of the changes brought about by the directive. The directive introduced a new layer of complexity to Italy's reception system, which has been oscillating between routine and emergency responses for the past two decades. As of April 2022, Italy adopted a new parallel reception system, managed independently by the Civil Protection. Third Sector Organisations (TSOs, henceforth) play a pivotal role in this new system, particularly in the 'emergency' system (CAS) organised by the prefectures and municipalities, and in extraordinary reception managed by civil protection. Additionally, an informal system of widespread reception has emerged, wherein citizens offered accommodation to women and children. Furthermore, the Ukrainians holding temporary protection have received financial support to cover expenses in host countries. The highly fragmented configuration has been identified as one of the major structural weaknesses of the Italian reception system (Rossi, 2022).

Within this transformed system, the roles of actors traditionally involved in reception and integration have also evolved. This article aims to elucidate how, at a local level, TSOs have strengthened their role in emergency management. While recent studies have highlighted the centrality of these actors in national policy design (Bassoli and Campomori, 2024), their local roles still need to be explored. Drawing on academic literature underscoring the 'local turn' in migrant reception and integration (Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017), this study analyses three Italian cities (Turin, Milan and Naples) facing the Ukrainian crisis. The selected cities are considered promising examples for identifying factors that explain varying local responses (Filomeno, 2017).

This paper, thus, seeks to explore the extent of this change, mainly focusing on TSOs, who have

historically been central to migration management in Italy. The hypothesis underpinning this study posits that TSOs, during the so-called Ukrainian emergency, have experienced a dual role enhancement. On the one hand, their status as privileged interlocutors with public administrations have been solidified. On the other, they have effectively channelled unprecedented civic engagement into structured generosity and solidarity initiatives. To test this hypothesis, the methodology for this analysis includes a mixed methods research design complementing qualitative and quantitative approaches. Documents analysis, a comprehensive review of literature on local integration and the Third Sector, and in-depth semi-structured interviews with key public and private reception actors are part and parcel of the qualitative design. The quantitative part will follow the results obtained through the qualitative analysis, which will identify the relevant variables explaining the engagement of TSOs at the local level. The results obtained by combining these two methodologies suggest that local-level coordination bodies have been established to manage emergencies, facilitating constant interaction among various local stakeholders. However, differing patterns governing such interaction can be traced among the cities analysed. In Naples, the presence of the Ukrainian organised diaspora before February 2022 seems to have played a crucial role in supporting crisis management. The rich entrepreneurial fabric in Milan has teamed with Foundations' know-how to back public efforts to respond to Ukrainian needs. Finally, in Turin, the coordination of local and regional institutions and the historical Foundations landscape was fragmented, causing a decoupling of interventions. Despite the limited sample size of the research, this pilot study paves the way for further investigations into the role of TSOs in migration governance.