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METROPOLITAN AREAS IN ITALY***

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Abstract

This PhD dissertation presents a comprehensive exploration of international immigration towards non-metropolitan areas in Italy, including Small and Medium-sized Towns, rural and peripheral areas, and “micropolitan systems”. It is based on four interconnected articles addressing different aspects of the issue at stake and using different combinations of methods. The dissertation is also completed by a general introduction, which provides an overview of the relevant literature on non-metropolitan localities, considering their definition, position in globalisation processes and general immigration patterns. As for single articles, the first paper focuses on immigration patterns in micropolitan systems adopting a functionalist approach and using quantitative methods, namely cluster and regression analyses. The second research employs a mixed methods sequential design combining cluster analysis and semi-structured interviews, and takes into account policymaking in the area of socio-economic incorporation within rural municipalities. The mobilisation of the immigration/development nexus in rural and peripheral areas is the topic of the third article, which explores this issue through a triangulation of document analysis and semi-structured interviews. Finally, a sequential mixed methods design is also developed in the last paper, in which the potential connection between localised experiences of diversity and the construction of a welcoming contexts at the local level is explored through semi-structured interviews and regression analysis. The research carried out through each paper, albeit from different entry points, aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on immigration and diversification processes outside metropolises, treating immigration as a structural phenomenon of non-metropolitan localities without disregarding specificities and varieties across such places.

Introduction:

Literature review and theoretical framework

Outline of the dissertation and articles

This PhD dissertation, based on four interconnected but distinct articles, delves into the multifaceted immigration processes characterising contemporary Italy, with a specific focus on non-metropolitan localities, variously identified within each article as Small- and Medium-sized towns (SMSTs), rural and peripheral areas or “micropolitan systems”. Indeed, the diversity of reference spatial units used throughout this thesis reflects that of definitions of non-metropolitan localities, which are frequently identified for the fact of not being cities – or even sometimes for not being so-called “global cities” – and present a large variety of structures and characteristics. Such definitory issues are dealt with in the second section of the introduction, presenting the main strands of literature on the topic, while the third one will focus on the socio-economic characteristics of these localities in Europe in light of the contemporary globalisation processes. Then, a review of immigration towards non-metropolitan areas is presented, followed by an overview of possible future paths of research and take-home messages from the whole research.

Starting from the premises exposed in this introduction, the research offers a nuanced exploration of immigration patterns, socio-economic incorporation policies, and the potential intersections between immigration and local development within the above-mentioned contexts by contributing to the growing body of literature on this topic. The scholarly attention on immigration towards non-metropolitan localities in Europe is not new, since works on this topic have been published at least since the early 2000s, also following the relatively large and older scholarship focused on the United States. However, this research has remained minoritarian in migration studies compared to works focused on large cities until the last decade, when the growing centrality of non-metropolitan areas in migration flows called for more studies about them. Contemporary immigration flows towards non-metropolitan areas within the Italian context is thus the main block of this thesis, but commonalities and differences among the various papers also emerge in reference to methodology.

Indeed, in order to grasp the complexity of such a phenomenon, all articles use a combination of different methodological strategies. These include two works based on sequential mixed-methods designs, in which quantitative and qualitative methods are differently combined, respectively using k-medians cluster analysis and semi-structured interviews in the second paper and semi-structured interviews and logistic regression analysis in the last one. Conversely, the other two papers employ a combination of either quantitative or qualitative methods: while the first one uses two quantitative techniques – namely k-medians cluster analysis and multinomial regression analysis – the third is based on a triangulation of semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The methodological variety of this thesis reflects the need for a comprehensive understanding of the multi-faceted processes at stake, handling immigration in non-metropolitan areas

from different angles, albeit starting from a common theoretical standpoint. More comprehensive accounts about methodological issues are included in each article.

Papers in this thesis are ordered following the width of the focus, starting from the most large-scope and moving down to the most specific ones. The first article takes a closer look at immigration patterns in Italian non-metropolitan areas, adopting a functionalist approach based on Labour Market Areas. Through k-medians cluster analysis, the study identifies and analyses key immigration patterns. These findings are then connected to broader characteristics of non-metropolitan Labour Market Areas – here considered as “micropolitan systems” – through multinomial regression, testing hypotheses related to the relationship between contextual characteristics and immigration patterns. Moving forward, the second article explores socio-economic incorporation policies in Italian rural municipalities. Utilising a mixed-method design, the research combines quantitative k-medians clustering with qualitative semi-structured interviews with local decision-makers. With such an approach, this contribution investigates how local opportunity structures and immigration contexts influence the outcomes of incorporation strategies, also considering the role of different actors involved in the so-called battleground of immigrant policies.

The third article shifts its focus to the potential nexus between immigration and local development in peripheral and rural municipalities. Providing a comprehensive overview of immigration in these localities, the research analyses how policymakers frame local immigrant policies within broader development strategies. This is achieved through a combination of semi-structured interviews and document analysis in 30 selected Italian municipalities. Lastly, the fourth article takes a unique perspective by examining the impact of localised diversity experiences on immigrant policy activism in rural Italy. Through qualitative semi-structured interviews and quantitative logistic regression models, this last article investigates how experiences such as international emigration and historical linguistic minorities contribute to the creation of more welcoming local environments. As for the rest of this introduction, this is dedicated to expose the theoretical foundations common to all papers for what regards the definition of non-metropolitan areas and their role within contemporary globalisation, also offering a review of the main literature on immigration towards these places.

Defining non-metropolitan areas: rural areas and Small- and Medium-sized towns

Research about non-metropolitan areas has existed for a long time, but – in a certain sense – it remains divided into separate and rarely communicating strands. This mainly happens because of the lack of an established definition of these localities and their main characteristics, apart from not being “cities”. However, it is also worth asking whether a unique definition would be suitable for what actually is a variety of different local realities or if it is just necessary to define a clear demarcation line between what is metropolitan and what is not. Going further, even this distinction may also be questionable if it remains limited to trace external and close boundaries between types of ambiguously defined localities, as crucially argued by Gans (2009) in his sociology of settlements. The scalar approach to localities proposed by Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2009, 2015) also goes in this direction, calling for the necessity to overcome traditional concepts of urban studies to

acknowledge that all places are interested by similar global processes, which reshape divisions among localities in terms of scale and power in relation to such dynamics.

The present introduction is thus confronting with a two-fold task, expressed in an apparent contradiction. On the one hand, non-metropolitan areas need to be defined in a way that allows to identify a clear research unit, distinct from the metropolis. On the other hand, this notion should allow to consider the variety of these places and be open enough to include other axes of diversity among them. To address this issue, two main theoretical strands about non-metropolitan areas are identified and combined: the vast scholarship about rural areas and the definition of rurality, and the recent attempt of urban scholars to distinguish between cities and “towns” or – more specifically – Small- and Medium-sized Towns (SMSTs). These strands are not exhaustive of all non-metropolitan areas, since other studies exist on different localities such as mountain or remote ones, but they represent the primary building blocks of the theoretical framework of this dissertation. This section reviews both these approaches and then explains how these are implemented in the papers of this dissertation.

The rural: a (still) evolving concept

When thinking about localities beyond metropolitan areas, the first notion that comes into mind is typically that of rural areas. However, the definition of rurality remains dynamic, subject to ongoing contestation and evolving alongside societal shifts, complicating its application in social research (Gallent, Gkartzios 2019; MacGregor-Fors, Vázquez 2020). As early as 1990, Hoggart advocates abandoning the term “rural”, asserting that labelling places as such often fosters assumptions of homogeneity, whereas rural places are diverse and usually have similarities which do not significantly differentiate them from urban ones (Hoggart 1990). He outlines two criteria for a meaningful research definition of the rural: a) the presence of distinctive structures exclusive to the local level, and b) a clear urban-rural demarcation based on these structures (ibid.). This challenge is embraced by Halfacree (1993), who proposes to conceive the rural as a social representation, highlighting its discursive nature. Indeed, despite social representations of the rural being potentially misplaced, he underscores their capacity to generate tangible effects, both discursive and non-discursive (ibid.).

Works as those by Hoggart and Halfacree emerge in contrast to previously dominant quantitative approaches that centred on defining rurality based on one or multiple variables, and they lay the groundwork for the so-called “cultural turn” in rural studies (Cloke 1997, 2006; Heley, Jones 2012). This novel approach in rural studies not only relates to methodological and conceptual considerations, but also aligns with the social changes experienced by rural areas since the 1980s. For example, Marsden and colleagues (1993) have observed how the former rural order, rooted in traditional family farms and middle-class groups independent of rural spaces for livelihoods, was upheaved in the UK due to various processes, among which the decline of the Atlanticist food order particularly stands out. This significant shift, rapidly spread beyond the British context, prompts rural scholarship to perceive the rural as – at least partly – detached from its traditional functional association with agricultural activities, which have decreased in importance or

deeply changed within many rural areas (Marsden 1995; Oliveira Baptista 1995; Halfacree 1997; Van der Ploeg et al. 2000; Silva, Figueiredo 2013).

These processes – deeply interwoven with neoliberal globalisation dynamics – are also expressed in the concepts of “depeasantisation” and “deagrarianisation”, which respectively denote the displacement of traditional peasant farming by large-scale corporate farming schemes and the gradual diminishing centrality of agriculture in rural lifestyles (Camarero, Oliva 2016; Hebinck 2018). Following the need to define rurality “beyond agriculture,” some scholars have introduced the concept of the “post-productivist countryside” to point out the relative de-emphasis on material production in favour of an increasing focus on the amenity and environmental value of rural areas (Halfacree 1997; Mather, Hill, Nijnik 2006; McCarthy 2008; Silva, Figueiredo 2013). Despite its contentious nature and criticisms for its vagueness and often strict dichotomous vision of productivism/post-productivism (Mather, Hill, Nijnik, 2006; Almstedt et al. 2014), the notion captures a crucial dimension for comprehending the cultural turn in rural studies. This lies in the acknowledgment that, while the functional role of agriculture may be diminishing, the symbolic significance of the rural and countryside is more pivotal than ever (Cloke, 2003; Silva, Figueiredo 2013; de Olde, Oosterlynck 2022).

Undoubtedly, rural areas are commonly linked in media, political, and even academic discourses to places offering a healthy and peaceful lifestyle, marked by strong social cohesion and a static nature that sets them apart from urban environments (Silva, Figueiredo 2013). Cloke (2003) illustrates this phenomenon through the notion of the “rural idyll”, a narrative that not only obscures the diversity and dynamism inherent in rural places but also conceals their potential “dystopic character”. The rural idyll also serves as the foundation for post-productivist strategies in rural development, focusing on counterurbanisation, gentrification, and the commodification of the rural (Soares da Silva et al. 2016; Woods 2019). Yet, this discourse does not fit all rural localities, particularly those situated in remote areas (Silva, Figueiredo 2013). Consequently, alongside the growing recognition of the potential multifunctionality of rural areas where production and consumption objectives intersect, rural scholarship increasingly directs attention to those rural places that are marginalised, introducing issues of mobility and peripheralisation processes (Bell, Osti 2010; Do Carmo, Santos 2012; Silva, Figueiredo 2013; Camarero, Oliva 2016; Bock 2019).

These different strands collectively depict an increasingly diverse rural landscape, encompassing a variety of distinct types of localities. The acknowledgment that the rural space is no longer – if it ever was – an unequivocally identifiable entity is now widely embraced in the scholarly discourse (Marsden et al. 1993; Woods 2007, 2019; Lowe, Ward 2009; Gallent, Gkartzios 2019). For instance, this perspective is embedded in Marsden and colleagues’ (1993) concept of the “differentiated countryside”, from which they derive four archetypal countryside types – preserved, contested, paternalistic, and clientelist – through the analysis of economic, social, political, and cultural parameters. Similarly, Woods’s (2007, 2019) concept of the “global countryside” recognises that the impact of contemporary globalisation processes, characterised by unevenness and hybridity, interacts differently with the diverse local contexts of rural areas, fostering increased differentiation. Following

these studies, Gallent and Gkartzios (2019) assert that there is no ubiquitous rural (p. 25), as the rural category now encompasses various locality types, including lowland agricultural landscapes, peripheral areas blending rural and urban characteristics, near-urban hinterlands, remote places, and so forth.

Hence, this framework clearly presents the challenges associated with defining and operationalising the rural, particularly in large-scale studies encompassing multiple localities simultaneously. Furthermore, the theoretical and methodological shift of the “cultural turn” and the recognition of rural areas as increasingly diverse do not signify the complete abandonment of quantitative-based identification of rural areas. Such methods persist in academic research and, more notably, continue to dominate policy instruments at both national and supra-national levels (Beynon, Crawley, Munday 2016; Cattivelli 2021). For instance this is expressed in the European context by the popularity of Eurostat definition of degrees of urbanisation, which includes mixed rural-urban or intermediate spaces, categorising territories into three groups: cities, towns and semi-dense areas, and rural areas (Dijkstra, Poelman, Veneri 2019; Cattivelli 2021; Eurostat 2021; Perpiña Castillo et al. 2024). Three of the four papers presented in this dissertation adhere to this approach for defining rural areas, albeit with some key caveats included on the basis of accounts proposed by scholars of the “cultural turn” in rural studies.

Towns and non-metropolitan “urban” areas

Compared to literature on rural areas, research on Small and Medium-Sized Towns is still more limited, yet it shares the inherent contentiousness of the concept and the lack of a widely accepted definition (Demazière 2017; Mayer, Lazzeroni 2022). The scholarly genesis of this field can be traced to Bell and Janyne’s (2006, 2009) theorisation of “small cities”, which tries to systematise United States-based studies on urban localities beyond the traditional focus on “global” or large cities. In their work, they contend that the smallness of a city should be considered as a research topic in itself to comprehensively understand urbanisation and urban life. However, they acknowledge that the definition of smallness is far from clear. For instance, in the United States, being a small city typically means having less than 50.000 inhabitants, while in developing countries, the threshold is 20.000 inhabitants, with a minimum of 5.000 inhabitants (ibid.). Previous literature has also introduced further variations, such as Hall’s (1999) “provincial cities” (100.000 to 250.000 inhabitants) or Clancey’s (2004) “remote cities” (less than 500.000 inhabitants).

Against this backdrop, Bell and Janyne (2006, p.5) argue that it is not size, but what one does with it that matters when conceptualising the smallness of a city. These authors also foreshadow two pivotal points for the evolution of this literature in Europe: a) they conceive small urban areas as an intermediate category, mixing urban and rural characteristics (Bell, Jayne 2006, 2009); and b) they implicitly delineate a demarcation between “cityness” and “townness,” asserting that that small towns and villages can stay small, where smallness is quaint, whimsical, old-fashioned; but small cities? What is the point of them? (Bell, Jayne 2006, p.5). Indeed, the European literature on SMSTs has progressively embraced the recognition of a distinction between “towns” and “cities” (Servillo, Atkinson, Hamdouch 2017), with only a few exceptions (Ploeckl 2017; Grossmann, Mallach 2021). This dichotomy also surfaces in policy documents. For

example, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines “small cities” as urban areas with 50.000 to 200.000 inhabitants, aligning directly with the definition of SMSTs by the European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion (ESPON), using 50.000 inhabitants as the maximum threshold (Servillo et al., 2014; OECD, 2022).

Moreover, the town/city distinction revolves around divergent symbolic meanings attributed to cities and towns, where the latter are perceived in contrast to the former as places of tradition and social cohesion (Michel 1977; George 2008; Steinführer, 2022). Despite being also present in the United States scholarship (Clancey 2004), this vision also stems from an alternative theoretical thread, emerged in France due to a longstanding tradition of studies on SMSTs developed through public commissioning (Demazière 2017). Already in the 1970s, Michel (1977) addressed the definition of medium towns, questioning whether they represent a “statistical illusion” due to the relativity in time and space of their conceptions. He also emphasised the symbolic character of these places, which become embodiments of a life in harmony and on a human scale (ibid.). The elusive nature of SMSTs was captured two decades later by Brunet's characterisation of SMSTs as an “unidentified real object” (Brunet 1997, p.188; Demazière 2017). This concept summarises the theoretical ambiguity of SMSTs, which are certainly something that exists in between large cities and sparse settlements but are nonetheless lacking clear boundaries to undoubtedly identify where and how they exist (Brunet 1997; Santamaria 2000; Aubry, Leger 2014; Demazière 2017).

Pumain (1999) addressed this ambiguity proposing a notion based on relative functional and spatial dimensions. Specifically, she advocated examining the geographic position, size, and specialisation of SMSTs in relation to other localities within their urban system (ibid.). Her perspective has become a guiding principle in subsequent ESPON projects attempting to formulate a definition of SMSTs suitable for the European context (ÖIR, Nordregio, Nomisma 2006; Servillo et al. 2014). While the TOWN project's definition now stands as the most comprehensive theoretical effort in this sense, ESPON actually started this trajectory in the preceding project, named SMESTO, which solidified the term “Small- and Medium-Sized Towns” to delineate a new locality type, and reviewed diverse methodological approaches to define them (ÖIR, Nordregio, Nomisma 2006). SMESTO partners acknowledged the considerable variation in how SMSTs are defined across Europe and criticised the exclusive reliance on population thresholds for their identification. They argued that other functional and morphological elements should be considered, proposing three ideal types: a) SMSTs on the fringe of large urban agglomerations; b) SMSTs in a network of towns; c) isolated SMSTs serving as poles for rural areas.

According to this perspective, SMSTs thus need to fulfil specific functional roles, and assume specific characteristics of centrality and urbanity (ibid.). However, the combination of this approach with the non-application of a population threshold results in considering a diverse array of urban areas as their case studies. Their populations vary from 18.000 to 159.000 inhabitants, and they occupy different positions in their respective countries, ranging from provincial or even federal state capitals to small settlements in rural areas (ibid.). Building on this work and its limitation, the ESPON TOWN project has devised a

systematic approach to defining SMSTs, concurrently fostering the development of a more cohesive research field with subsequent publications (Servillo et al. 2014; Servillo, Atkinson, Hamdouch 2017; Russo et al. 2017; Atkinson 2019). Employing a two-step methodology, they initially use a combination of population size and density thresholds to differentiate SMSTs from cities and rural areas. Subsequently, they delve into a more in-depth analysis of the resulting localities based on their functional and regional contexts (ibid.).

The outcome is a two-fold classification: firstly, SMSTs are categorised based on their size and density, and secondly, they are classified according to their relationship with the surrounding context (ibid.). Three main categories with some subdivisions are delineated based on the latter criteria: a) SMSTs in metropolitan regions, characterised as either thriving or declining; b) SMSTs in remote/rural or peripheral regions; c) SMSTs in intermediate regions, divided into those close to urban regions and those adjacent to remote areas (Servillo et al. 2014; Atkinson 2019). The TOWN approach shares with SMESTO the definition of SMSTs as urban spaces and the necessity of considering their functional roles and regional contexts. However, the increased clarity and ease of application in the European context have elevated this definition to one of the most widely employed in studies on SMSTs (Demazière 2017; Meili, Mayer 2017; Bole, Kozina, Tiran 2019; Wolff, Haase, Leibert 2021; Mayer, Lazzeroni 2022; Vázquez-Varela, Martínez-Navarro 2022).

Yet, it is not the sole definition used in academic research and policy documents, and diverse conceptions persist. In this sense, taking a global perspective, Bánski (2022) identifies three groups of approaches to SMSTs classification: a) structural, which pertains to the functions and services provided by the locality; b) location-related, focusing on towns in their regional context; and c) mixed, which combines elements of both previous approaches. Moreover, varying definitions also emerge in different countries, particularly in publicly commissioned research. For instance, Mattioli and Morettini (2014) identify seven categories of towns in the Italian context based on the combination of six indicators. On a similar line, Wales Rural Observatory (2007) combines functional, size and urbanity indicators arriving to a six-fold typology for Wales. Despite distinguishing SMSTs from the surrounding rural areas based on their urbanity, the Wales Rural Observatory's (2007) report introduces a topic that is increasingly crucial in studies on SMSTs, that is the relationship between these localities and rural areas.

The significance of SMSTs as reference poles for surrounding rural areas has been identified since the beginning of the scholarship on this subject (Pumain 1999; ÖIR, Nordregio, Nomisma 2006; Wales Rural Observatory 2007; ARL 2019). However, within the context of the aforementioned blurring rural/urban boundaries, these places may also evolve into mixed environments, or spaces that, as defined by Gkartzios, Remoundou, and Garrod (2017, p.30) are neither rural nor urban. Similarly, a review of research on SMSTs from Germany observes that small towns are mostly regarded as either belonging to rural areas or as miniature depictions of large cities, and are not considered as requiring independent attention (ARL 2019). On this matter, Steinführer (2022) argues that the ambiguity of SMSTs regarding their urban/rural nature is further reinforced by the fact that

SMSTs often occupy spaces that are not small and are heavily ruralised concerning land use and settlement structures. Moreover, scholars have noted that the residents themselves in alleged SMSTs conceive their locality differently as rural or urban, small or medium, town or city, even within the same local context (ARL, 2019; Steinführer, 2022).

Taking back Brunet's (1997) account of SMSTs, it appears accurate that these localities embody a hybrid and hard-to-identify entity, while being key places to understand the space between large urban agglomeration and sparsely populated areas. However, at least three cornerstones can be distilled from the literature: a) SMSTs are a relative object, that must be understood in their functional and regional context; b) SMSTs are a distinct object, separated from cities and, despite some overlapping exists, from rural areas; c) SMSTs are an ideal object, which – as it happens for rural areas – are charged with symbolic and political meanings. Considering these three fixed points, the first article of this dissertation seeks to capture the specificity of SMSTs while maintaining a pragmatic approach to the concept operationalisation. To achieve this, it adopts a functional perspective, integrating the ESPON TOWN definition (Servillo et al. 2014; Atkinson 2019) with the United States definition of micropolitan systems (Brown, Cromartie, Kulcsar 2004; Mulligan 2013). However, it also broadens the scope of the research from SMSTs to non-metropolitan areas, encompassing ruralised localities in the study.

The conception of non-metropolitan areas in this dissertation

This dissertation positions itself at the intersection of the aforementioned bodies of literature, concentrating on the specific phenomenon of international immigration. To keep together the research of individual articles, the dissertation employs the term “non-metropolitan areas”. This is not a novel concept, as it has previously been employed in the literature to conceive rural areas and/or SMSTs in contrast to variously labelled cities and metropolises (Maynard et al. 1997; Hugo, Morén-Alegret 2008; Mulligan 2013; Gkartzios, Remoundou 2018; Demazière 2022). However, even the scholarly discourse using the concept of non-metropolitan areas to unite these localities within an overarching category underscores the inherent heterogeneity of these contexts (Mulligan 2013; Gkartzios, Remoundou 2018). This heterogeneity is not solely confined to the rural/urban spectrum; rather, it extends across various dimensions including functions, specialisation, demographic patterns, economic growth, peripherality, and others (ibid.). Given that the definition still retains a degree of ambiguity, the concept seemingly perpetuates the principal limitations inherent in both notions of rural areas and SMSTs.

Nevertheless, its wider scope allows to at least intervene on two crucial key issues: a) the acknowledgement of these places as an object of study that is distinct from cities and deserves specific attention; b) the overcoming of the problematic distinction between rural areas and mixed rural-urban or small urban areas. The latter element is especially relevant on the basis of what presented above both regarding SMSTs and rural areas and in consideration of both processes of “urbanisation of the rural” and “ruralisation of the urban”, which are blurring the boundaries between these two categories (Oliveira 1995; Cloke 2006; McCarthy 2008). Moreover, albeit different, non-metropolitan localities present commonalities which can satisfy Hoggart's (1990) definitory criteria for the metropolitan/non-metropolitan distinction. Reviewing the above-presented literature on

SMSTs and rural areas, it is in fact possible to trace at least three shared characteristics which may enable the use of the concept of non-metropolitan areas at least in the context of studies on specific social processes, such as globalisation and international immigration.

First, non-metropolitan areas share a common symbolic and political significance, which emerges in lay discourses, policy formulations, and in a portion of the scholarly debate (Michel 1977; Halfacree 1993; Cloke 2003; Clancey 2004; George 2008; Steinführer 2022). As implied by the term “non-metropolitan”, these localities are conceived in contrast to the metropolis, embodying either negative perceptions as bastions of tradition and closure to the outside world, or positive ideals as places where it is possible to live in harmony and with robust social bonds (Michel 1977; Cloke 2003; Steinführer 2022). Drawing parallels to observations by Halfacree (1993) and Michel (1977) concerning rural areas and SMSTs respectively, it is noteworthy that, despite these representations frequently diverging from reality, they wield tangible repercussions, influencing the trajectories of development devised for non-metropolitan areas in supra-local policies and positioning them at the core of certain political myths (Cloke 2006; Kasabov 2020). In this sense, these representations are also strictly political and often serve specific strategies – especially linked to conservative, nationalist or far right discourses – with actual consequences at the local level (Cloke 2006; Mamonova, Franquesa, Brooks 2021).

Second, beyond their internal diversities, non-metropolitan areas usually exhibit shared patterns of collective consumption and mobilities. Despite Halfacree's (1993) assertion that the significance of these aspects is diminishing in rural areas due to the decreasing relevance of the “friction of distance”, a segment of subsequent scholarship has placed them at the forefront of the conceptualisation of rurality (Bell, Osti 2010; Do Carmo, Santos 2012; Silva, Figueiredo 2013; Camarero, Oliva 2016; Gkartzios, Remoundou 2018). Similarly, albeit less explored, peculiarities of mobility patterns within SMSTs have gained increasing recognition in recent scholarly discourse (ARL 2019; Kramarova, Kankovsky 2020; Demazière 2022; Slätmo, Kristensen 2022). In this regard, unlike cities, which typically exhibit a certain degree of self-contained mobility and entering commuting flows, non-metropolitan areas are characterised by a distinctive blend of mobilities and immobilities. This encompasses frequent commuting flows in different directions – entering and exiting, and towards cities or other towns – as well as the immobilisation of certain groups, for instance due to public service retrenchment and high reliance on personal automobility (Do Carmo, Santos 2012; Camarero, Oliva 2016; Gkartzios, Remoundou, Garrod 2017; Kramarova, Kankovsky 2020).

Finally, a last commonality pertains to the specific topic of this dissertation, international immigration. Indeed, these localities show similar general trends in terms of international immigration flows, which have become increasingly diversified and directed towards a variety of destinations (McAreavey 2017; Woods 2018). This is particularly evident in recent immigration patterns, for instance involving secondary movements of people from a migration background attracted by lower housing costs, or the relocation of asylum seekers and refugees' reception centres outside metropolitan areas (Galera et al. 2018; Kordel, Weidinger 2018; McAreavey 2017; Semprebon, Marzorati, Bonizzoni 2023). Furthermore, non-metropolitan areas also share a relative marginalisation within migration studies

scholarship compared to large or global cities, a trend that has been increasingly contested over the past decade (Cancellieri 2014; Barberis, Pavolini 2015; McAreavey 2017; Galera et al. 2018; McAreavey, Argent 2018). With the significant surge in migration flows towards Europe since 2011, European scholars have progressively directed attention to the consequences of such movements outside metropolitan areas, contributing to a growing scholarship that builds upon the relatively few migration studies focused on these localities in previous years (Morén-Alegret, Solana 2004; Kasimis 2006; Corrado 2011).

Recognising the shared characteristics of non-metropolitan areas offers a nuanced understanding going beyond their mere juxtaposition with the metropolis. This acknowledgment, however, does not imply a negation of their inherent heterogeneity. Substantial disparities persist across these localities, encompassing socio-economic, demographic, urban/rural, and peripherality attributes. These characteristics shape the way in which aforementioned processes are declined and experienced by non-metropolitan localities. Furthermore, they contribute to create distinctions of scale and power among them, which, as argued by Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2009, 2015), manifest in the way these places relate to global processes and access resources and networks according to their contextual characteristics. Yet, as noted above, the mechanisms of these manifestations assume peculiar forms that are common across non-metropolitan areas, meaning that the scalar dimension alone cannot account for all local distinctions and the demarcation line between non-metropolitan and metropolitan areas still appear to be meaningful.

Therefore, in order to take into consideration all the elements presented in this section, this dissertation conceptualises the non-metropolitan not as a rigid “type” but as a dynamic “site”, as argued by Clancey’s (2004) theorisation of remote cities. This “site” serves as a gateway for analysing global processes at the local level with consideration for the specificities of each context. This conceptual framework aids in recognising the distinctive features of non-metropolitan areas, viewing them as unique local contexts distinct from the metropolis, while delving into internal variations, manifestations, and differences. These variety extends beyond distinctions between small urban localities and rural areas and encompasses various socio-economic processes within these categories. This comprehensive approach facilitates a thorough examination of the intricate dynamics shaping non-metropolitan landscapes, offering valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of these areas. Thus, in the context of this dissertation, non-metropolitan areas are variously declined among different papers as rural localities, peripheral localities, and micropolitan areas, with each category formulated through distinctive approaches.

Non-metropolitan areas facing globalisation processes

Steger and James (2020, p.5) define globalisation as a ‘system’ of multiple dynamics characterized by the expansion and intensification of social relations and consciousness across world-space as understood in world-time. This implies a multitude of processes that differentially impact various local contexts, particularly in the current highly disjunctive stage (ibid.). Contemporary globalisation is linked to increased connectivity and nearly instantaneous communications, enabling the global exchange of information, commodities, and ideas (Pieterse 2021). Concurrently, from a socio-economic perspective, it has also increasingly taken on the form of neoliberal globalisation, following the needs of the

changing capitalist accumulation regimes (Harvey, 2005; Peck, Brenner, and Theodore, 2018). In this context, global studies have paid attention to the local dimensions of globalisation processes, arguing that local configurations intertwine with global processes originating very different results (Swyngedouw 2004; Massey 2005; Woods 2007; Peck, Brenner, Theodore 2018).

Yet, this scholarship has disproportionately focused on a handful of global cities, influenced by the idea of a fully urbanised society as the inevitable outcome of globalisation, as expressed for instance in the concept of “planetary urbanisation” (Massey 2005; Woods 2019; Kasabov 2020). This urban bias has faced sustained challenges from rural studies (Woods 2007; McCarthy 2008; Woods, McDonagh 2011; Döner, Figueiredo, Rivera 2020) and, more recently, within urban studies focusing on SMSTs (Demazière 2017; Servillo, Atkinson, Hamdouch 2017). Indeed, far from being excluded by globalisation processes, non-metropolitan areas actively engage with them, despite experiencing distinct patterns compared to so-called global cities and large urban agglomerations (Woods 2007; Cid Aguayo 2008; Glick Schiller, Çağlar 2009, 2018; Demazière 2017; Morén-Alegret et al. 2018). Such specific features emerge in particular within the context of the socio-economic restructuring of these places and the consequent cultural transformations, which simultaneously generate conflicts and opportunities (ibid.).

Economic (neoliberal) globalisation in non-metropolitan areas

Contemporary globalisation, while not confined solely to neoliberalism, is intricately entwined with it, generating consequences beyond the mere economic realm (Harvey 2005; Woods, McDonagh 2011; Peck, Theodore, Brenner 2018). Neoliberalism in its core is an ideology rooted in free market and diminished state interventions, but, as Peck and colleagues (2018) noted, “actually existing neoliberalism” often takes different paths from its idealised version, necessitating state interventions to align the market with expectations, discipline non-conforming subjects, and address various externalities. In non-metropolitan contexts, the neoliberal turn – prevalent in Europe and the United States at least since the 1970s – heightened inequalities between localities capable of adaptation and with resource availability and those confronting seemingly unavoidable decline (Woods 2007; Döner, Figueiredo, Rivera 2020; Martin, Martinelli, Clifton 2022; Powe, Connely, Nel 2022). This divergence results from intense global competition and market deregulation reforms that deeply impact on traditional economic sectors in rural, small, or peripheral localities, compelling them to engage in processes of labour market restructuring and repositioning within global economic networks (Sumner 2005; Tonts, Horsley 2019; Powe, Connely, Nel 2022).

As shown in the previous section, several agriculture-centred localities have undergone processes of deagrarianisation, also caused by the transition from a highly centralised agrarian system to the gradual withdrawal of the state from this sector and its exposure to international competition (Marsden et al. 1993; Shucksmith, Rønningen 2011; Hebinck 2018; Tonts, Horsley 2019). Simultaneously, industrial towns struggle with mounting challenges in addressing firm and industry delocalisation to large cities or developing countries, fuelled by lower costs and the benefits of agglomeration economies (Servillo et al. 2014; Lazzeroni 2020; Telford 2022; Pike et al. 2023). These trends are further

compounded by the shift from commodity production to financial profits in the capital accumulation regime, and the consequent the strand of assets and deterioration of territorial resources in these contexts (Sumner 2005; Marsden, Moragues Faus, Sonnino 2019). Similar dynamics ultimately result in a spiral of marginalisation and peripheralisation for non-metropolitan localities lacking sufficient local resources for restructuring (Sumner 2005; Wirth et al. 2016; Tonts, Horsley 2019; Lazzeroni 2020; Powe, Connely, Nel 2022).

The implementation of neoliberal reforms accentuates these processes in another way. Indeed, cutbacks in public expenditure have largely resulted in the relocation of essential services such as healthcare, education, and transport to large urban centres and fostered their privatisation (Wirth et al. 2016; Bock 2019; Tonts, Horsley 2019; Döner, Figueiredo, Rivera 2020; Powe, Connely, Nel 2022). As service providers adhere to profit motives, territorial inequalities may intensify, since maintaining services in peripheral and less populated areas tends to be more expensive and less convenient than investing in more central locations (Osti, 2018; Döner, Figueiredo, Rivera 2020; Cotella, Berisha 2022; Powe, Connely, Nel 2022). The withdrawal of local services also aligns with rising barriers to mobility – manifested in public transport cuts and escalating fuel costs – severely hindering the access to services in contexts where commuting is essential (Camarero, Oliva 2016; Sanz Tolosana, González Fernández 2020). Constrained by a combination of shrinking labour markets and diminishing local services, the population of these localities, particularly the younger cohorts, increasingly out-migrates, resulting in depopulation and ageing processes which further exacerbate the crises of these places (Wirth et al. 2016; Bock 2019; Powe, Connely, Nel 2022).

However, alongside this framework, alternative perspectives have focused on the potential opportunities of economic globalisation for non-metropolitan areas. Some studies challenge the idea that contemporary global processes inevitably lead to the decline of such localities, highlighting instances where firms remain innovative and economically thriving or where small localities show higher resilience to deindustrialisation than some large cities (Bole, Kozina, Tiran 2019; Fritsch, Wyrwich 2020; Mayer, Lazzeroni 2022). Furthermore, when complemented by local resources, non-metropolitan areas can successfully transition from a production-oriented economy to a service-based one, leveraging local cultural heritage and amenities for tourism purposes or establishing a niche in global markets (Cox et al. 2011; Sidali, Kastenholz, Bianchi 2015; Slätmo, Kristensen 2022). In this context, the disruption or transformation of pre-existing structures by globalisation can also act as a catalyst for social innovation within these localities (Halseth et al. 2010; Mayer, Knox 2010). Therefore, confronting these two strands of literature, the actual shape of economic globalisation at the local level appears as highly context-dependent, calling for a more nuanced understanding of how global processes intersect with history, resources, and experiences of non-metropolitan areas (Woods, McDonagh 2011).

Changes and conflicts in the global non-metropolitan space

The local-level manifestation of globalisation in non-metropolitan areas reveals a considerable variability also concerning cultural and political consequences. In terms of the latter, scholarly observations highlight that many rural areas and SMSTs find themselves “left behind” after the increasing concentration of population and economic investments

and interests in global cities (Rodríguez-Pose 2018; Huijsman 2023; Pike et al. 2023). Substantial literature has emerged on this subject in recent years, particularly following the influential work by Rodríguez-Pose (2018). Despite not exclusively focusing on non-metropolitan areas, a significant portion of this scholarship considers these localities as suitable fields for this approach, often featuring examples and case studies from rural, peripheral areas, or small to medium deindustrialising towns (Wuthnow 2019; Borwein, Lucas 2023; Fiorentino et al. 2023; Pike et al. 2023). In a nutshell, according to these studies, such places respond to political and economic marginalisation and peripheralisation by aligning with populist parties – typically right-wing or far-right ones, – and adopting more hostile attitudes towards variously perceived outsiders (Borwein, Lucas 2023; Huijsman 2023).

This phenomenon – also rooted in the idyll discourse outlined earlier (Cloke 2006) – exhibits consistent variations based on locality types, with rural areas showing for instance a higher place-based resentment towards urban dwellers in some contexts (Mamonova, Franquesa, Brooks 2021; Borwein, Lucas 2023). Furthermore, anti-globalisation reactions in non-metropolitan areas are not limited to one form, as movements with diverse political orientations also emerge (Woods 2017). Examples include rural or periphery-focused political platforms addressing territorial inequalities with a more inclusive approach (Mamonova, Franquesa 2019; Mamonova, Franquesa, Brooks 2021), and protests by marginalised groups, as seen in multiple instances with movements of exploited immigrant workers in Southern Europe (Corrado 2011; Olivieri 2012). Finally, it is essential to acknowledge that – as shown above – not all non-metropolitan areas suffer from the adverse effects of globalisation, and some of them not only avoid marginalisation but also prosper economically and socio-culturally, finding themselves on the opposite side of left behind places (Martin, Martinelli, Clifton 2022). The intersection of these dynamics thus contributes to the growing heterogeneity, hybridity, and contentiousness among non-metropolitan localities (Marsden et al. 1993; Woods, McDonagh 2011; Camarero, Oliva 2016).

Understanding the tension between change and conflict in these localities involves highlighting two additional processes triggered by globalisation, that should be added to the aforementioned political marginalisation. Firstly, it is necessary to stress the transformative impact of the tourism industry in non-metropolitan areas, fuelled by post-productivist ideas integrated into economic restructuring plans for such places and the symbolic significance attributed to them (George 2008; Urry, Larsen 2011; Figueiredo 2013; Rabbiosi, Ionides 2022). Many non-metropolitan localities, deprived of traditional production-based activities, increasingly rely on the consumption patterns of an urban middle class, reshaping themselves according to the dominant “tourist gaze”. This involves reclaiming images of townscape and villagescape that often align more with consumers’ perceptions than local history and heritage (George 2008; Urry, Larsen 2011). Despite representing an economic opportunity for declining localities, these processes are also highly contentious, as observed for instance by Figueiredo (2013). Particularly, she introduces the concept of *McRuralisation* to examine how globalisation symbolically reconfigures rural areas,

portraying the countryside as a “single place” designed for the consumption of specific groups and reconstructing a “virtual identity by proxy” for these places (ibid.).

In this context, the influence of new ex-urban residents relocating to non-metropolitan areas – often referred to as lifestyle, amenity, or pro-rural migrants – plays a crucial role in either catalysing gentrification and urbanisation processes or steering towards the preservation of the local socio-cultural fabric (McCarthy 2008; Rivera 2013; Morén-Alegret, Wladyka 2020). This dimension introduces the second pivotal driver of change and conflict in non-metropolitan areas stemming from globalisation processes: the demographic reconfiguration of these localities. While extensively studied especially in rural areas (ibid.), ex-urban migration is merely one element of this reconfiguration. Currently, new migration flows, and particularly international ones, are shaping non-metropolitan areas, intersecting with existing immigration patterns and dynamics of out-migration and ageing to effect substantial changes in the socio-demographic structure of these localities (Barberis, Pavolini 2015; McAreavey 2017; Kordel, Weidinger 2018; Perlik, Membretti 2018). This situation presents challenges and opportunities for non-metropolitan areas, which will be examined more comprehensively in the subsequent section and explored further in individual papers within this dissertation.

Immigration towards non-metropolitan areas

Despite not being something new from a historical perspective and also reflecting asymmetries of global processes and power structures, the movement of people across borders is a fundamental facet of contemporary globalisation, framing immigration as a real global phenomenon (Castles, Miller 2009; Czaika, de Haas 2015). This dynamic has not only contributed to the evolution of an increasingly transnational and global society, but has also led to the proliferation and complexification of borders at national and local levels, which is exacerbated in high-income countries by the framing of international migration – or at least certain manifestations – as a “threat” or a “crisis” (Balibar 2017; Ambrosini, Cinalli, Jacobson 2020). Adding to this complexity, contemporary migration is associated with the emergence of super-diversity, which accounts for the multiplication of axes of diversity beyond the traditional considerations of countries of origin, including legal statuses, gender, generation, labour market experiences and so on (Vertovec 2007, 2019). Super-diversity presents both challenges and opportunities, particularly concerning everyday local interactions and newcomers’ incorporation patterns (Grzymala-Kazłowska, Phillimore 2018). On one hand, increased diversity means more spaces for economic diversification and to build transnational networks, as well as more incentives to create local contacts beyond national or ethnic communities (Eraydin, Tasan-Kok, Vranken 2010; Wessendorf 2014; Grzymala-Kazłowska, Phillimore 2018). On the other hand, it also connects to potentially reduced support from migration networks and higher complexity in the delivery of services, by challenging traditional views on policymaking in immigration and social fields (Grzymala-Kazłowska, Phillimore 2018; Phillimore 2023; Scholten 2023).

This perspective has undergone revisions to better encompass the link between diversification and stratification and consider new dimensions (Hall 2017; Aptekar 2019), while other scholars have also introduced alternative concepts like hyper-diversity, placing greater emphasis on the diversification of lifestyles, attitudes, and activities (Tasan-Kok et

al. 2017). Yet, super-diversity research has predominantly focused on large cities and metropolitan areas, with few exceptions calling for a more nuanced examination of these processes in non-metropolitan spaces (Lundsteen 2017; McAreavey 2017). Indeed, diversification processes are not exclusive to cities and one of its notable feature is the diversification of migrants' destinations, which has transformed several non-metropolitan areas into new immigration destinations (McAreavey 2017, 2018). At the same time, international immigration towards non-metropolitan areas is not an entirely novel phenomenon, as evident in the extensive scholarship on rural migration and, more recently, immigration in SMSTs and other locality types (Morén-Alegret, Solana 2004; Jentsch, Simiard 2009; Corrado 2011; Barberis, Pavolini 2015; Perlik, Membretti 2018).

In this sense, a focus on the local scale is crucial to understand old and new immigration patterns towards non-metropolitan areas. The so-called "local turn" in migration studies exactly identify this need (Zapata-Barrero, Caponio, Scholten 2017), and its accounts are incorporated within the whole research proposed in this dissertation. Within this paradigm, the local scale has gained prominence in migration studies due to the appropriation of policy spaces unclaimed by supra-local actors and to the increased delegation of competences from higher levels of governance to lower ones (Caponio, Borkert 2010; Filomeno 2017; Barberis, Angelucci 2022). This evolving dynamic accentuates a distinctive demarcation between metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas in migration studies. Indeed, the centrality of the local arena in immigrant policymaking and socio-economic incorporation yields divergent outcomes in these locality types, presenting challenges and opportunities for both people from a migration background and the non-metropolitan localities themselves (Simiard, Jentsch 2009; Cancellieri 2014; McAreavey 2018; Martins, Davino 2023; Rossi 2023). These considerations are briefly summarised in the subsequent paragraph following an overview of the main immigration patterns towards non-metropolitan areas in Europe.

Old and new patterns of international migration towards non-metropolitan areas

Non-metropolitan areas are not necessarily new immigration destinations. Enduring immigration patterns to these areas have been evident since at least the 1980s, encompassing diverse groups such as amenity and lifestyle immigrants, remigrants, and labour immigrants (Kasimis 2006; Hugo, Morén-Alegret 2008; Barberis, Pavolini 2015; Kordel, Weidinger 2018). The preceding sections have already shown that amenity and lifestyle migration play a pivotal role in rural gentrification and restructuring processes, acting both as facilitators and outcomes (McCarthy 2008). These flows have traditionally involved not only internal urban to rural migrants but also people moving across borders, attracted by the real or imagined lifestyle of non-metropolitan areas and by lower life costs (Bender, Kanitscheider 2012; Morén-Alegret, Wladyka 2020). Such migrants often possess financial resources that afford them a position of power relative to the local population and they conceive the future of their destination localities as tied to particular lifestyles and uses of the land, potentially generating conflicts in contexts where the commodification and touristification of the local space clash with other local social or economic interests (Gretter et al. 2017; Fonseca, Esteves, Moreno 2021).

The role of international immigrant workers has been especially pointed out for what concerns the agricultural sector within rural areas, noting how the structure of this labour market in many European countries has long been based on both settlement and seasonal labour immigrants (Hoggart, Mendoza 1999; Rogaly 2008; Corrado 2011; Papadopoulos et al. 2021). Yet, this is not the only sector that attracted international immigrants in non-metropolitan areas. Seminal studies as those by Lichter (Crowley, Lichter, Qian 2006; Lichter 2012) and Miraftab (Diaz McConnell, Miraftab 2010; Miraftab 2016) have shown the long-time relevance of immigrant workers for small industrial districts in the USA, and similar results have also emerged in Southern European countries and especially in Italy (Andall 2007; Fonseca 2008; Cancellieri, Marconi, Tonin 2014; Andriopoulou et al. 2023). Furthermore, other important labour niches in non-metropolitan areas, such as tourism in coastal and mountain towns or elder care in remote aging regions, are characterised by a historical presence of immigrants. This trend is particularly pronounced following the precarisation of these sectors and the emigration of youth from these localities (Kasimis 2009; Park, Pellow 2011; Bauer, Österle 2013; Munkejord 2017; Tservenis 2023).

In this sense, it is immediately clear how immigration towards non-metropolitan areas is intricately linked to global processes of economic restructuring and their ensuing social ramifications. Extensive literature in rural sociology shows how the restructuring of agriculture has predominantly relied upon a “cheap” and mobile labour force, predominantly comprised of immigrant workers with precarious statuses (Rogaly 2008; Kasimis 2009; Corrado 2011; Corrado, De Castro, Perrotta 2017). This mechanism, often entailing exploitative practices, has been strategically employed by small agricultural enterprises in Southern Europe to maintain competitiveness and by large agri-food industries to bolster their position in the global market, thereby fostering migration flows towards European rural areas (*ibid.*). Similar dynamics unfold in other sectors, such as manufacturing and service delivery, where the influx of international immigrants has been pivotal for the survival of local industries and compensating for youth out-migration (Andall 2007; Fonseca 2008; Kalb 2020). Finally, domestic and care work – in high demand within ageing and depopulating contexts – additionally links to processes of “feminisation of migration”, driven by the persistent influence of patriarchal structures in bidding these roles to gender and expanding “global care chains” into non-metropolitan areas (Camerero, Sampedro, Oliva 2012).

However, this framework is no more enough to understand international immigration towards non-metropolitan areas. Recent dynamics have expanded the array of destinations for diverse migrant populations, thereby contributing to a heightened diversification of these localities and their inhabitants (McAreevey 2017). Notably, three main patterns have emerged from scholarly discourse: a) secondary internal mobility of people from a migration background, b) the transformation of previously temporary flows into settlement immigration, and c) the relocation of asylum seekers and refugees. The first process is primarily driven by rising housing costs in urban centres, which force many lower-class people from a migration background to move outside metropolitan areas with various outcomes (Membretti, Lucchini 2018; Schyvens et al. 2023; Semprebon, Marzorati, Bonizzoni 2023). On the one hand, potential socio-spatial segregation in remote localities

or the disruption of existing immigrant networks may pose substantial risks in the context of this relocation (Membretti, Lucchini 2018; Schyvens et al. 2023). On the other hand, the surplus of unused properties in non-metropolitan areas facilitates more accessible housing options compared to cities, where the confluence of heightened demand and costs intersects with indirect impediments such as racism or stricter migration control measures (Balbo 2015; Barberis, Pavolini 2015).

The second pattern encompasses various dynamics associated with the transition from temporary to long-term settlement migration, a trend especially observed among immigrant groups with continued ties to destination localities. Notably, the persistence of employment opportunities in non-metropolitan areas, albeit concentrated within distinct labour niches, has facilitated the establishment of transnational networks, which have in turn supported the influx of new immigration and the consolidation of established groups (Bertolani, Ferraris, Perocco 2011; Barberis, Pavolini 2015; Bonizzoni, Marzorati 2015; Morén-Alegret, Wladyka 2020). Similarly, family reunification has played a pivotal role, enabling relatives in the country of origin to join partners or parents in the destination locality, fostering the emergence of second and third generations of people from a migration background (Fonseca 2008; Bertolani, Ferraris, Perocco 2011; Thapan 2019; Morén-Alegret, Wladyka 2020). Yet, despite these processes being relevant and widespread in different non-metropolitan areas, it is arguably the third pattern – namely, the arrival of asylum seekers and refugees and the establishment of new reception centres – that represents a significant break with the past, given the multitude of newly involved localities and the connection with broader supra-local processes (Galera et al. 2018; Kordel, Weidinger 2018; Van Liempt, Miellet 2021).

The growing importance of non-metropolitan areas as receiving localities for asylum seekers and refugees can be traced back to the aftermath of 2011 and 2013 sharp increase in humanitarian flows towards Europe and the subsequent polarisation of the political discourse about reception (Galera et al. 2018; Flamant, Fourot, Healy 2020). In response to this challenge, EU countries have implemented dispersal schemes for reception, involving the relocation of asylum seekers and refugees from major urban centres to peripheral and rural areas (*ibid.*). While such strategies are not novel in European countries (Darling 2016), their frequent application in recent times has been marked by ambiguous aims (Flamant, Fourot, Healy 2020; Semprebon, Pelacani 2020; Caponio, Donatiello, Ponzio 2022). On the one hand, these initiatives are linked to the advantages of dispersed reception, serving as a countermeasure against the campisation and segregation of asylum seekers and refugees in large facilities (Galera et al. 2018; Caponio, Donatiello, Ponzio 2022). On the other hand, scholars have highlighted the forced isolation that receiving people may experience due to these schemes and political reasons behind them, aiming at hiding asylum seekers and refugees' reception in less central places (Van Liempt, Miellet 2021; Kreichauf 2023).

Furthermore, the mechanisms employed in the execution of these strategies take different forms, manifesting as top-down measures imposed by state-level actors or as incentive-based policies that foster the bottom-up engagement of non-metropolitan areas (Galera et al. 2018; Flamant, Fourot, Healy 2020; Rossi 2023). In this context, dispersal schemes give rise to both conflicts and opportunities, positioning refugees and asylum seekers in very

different positions across various non-metropolitan localities (ibid.). This duality, which emerges in different shapes for all types of immigration towards non-metropolitan areas, serves as the focal point of this dissertation, exploring the challenges and opportunities associated with new and old international immigration patterns to these localities. Specifically, this issue is mostly examined through the lens of local policies and policymakers. This viewpoint stems from the scholarship-grounded assumption that the mobilisation of local resources and the disposition and availability of local actors dealing with immigration-related issues is a key factor shaping the outcomes of immigration and diversification processes within non-metropolitan areas (Oomen et al. 2021; Haselbacher, Segarra 2022; Caponio, Donatiello, Ponzio 2022; Semprebon, Marzorati, Bonizzoni 2023).

Challenges and opportunities of immigration in non-metropolitan localities

In light of the above-mentioned issues, international migration patterns towards non-metropolitan localities manifest in diverse manners, that interweave with broader global phenomena and local circumstances, introducing both challenges and opportunities within these places. Indeed, some attributes of non-metropolitan areas have been identified as relevant barriers to the socio-economic incorporation of people from a migration background. First, scholarly observations underscore that these localities may exhibit limited familiarity with diversity, either being new immigration destinations or places where diversity has recently and sharply increased (Simard, Jentsch 2009; Barberis, Pavolini 2015; McAreavey 2017, 2018; Woods 2018). This circumstance has been associated with a propensity towards less inclusive attitudes among the local population, seeing newcomers as potential threats to the perceived homogeneity of their localities (Leitner 2012; Cancellieri 2014; Gargiulo 2017; Glorius 2017). Furthermore, it has also been linked to diminished policy capacity in immigration-related issues, stemming from the lack of local actors dealing with immigration-related issues and limited skills of the municipal staff (McAreavey 2018; Patuzzi, Andriescu, Pietropolli 2020; Pettrachin 2023; PISTE 2024).

The latter also holds significance in light of the intricate nature of immigrants' socio-economic incorporation and other immigration-related subjects. Addressing these issues typically requires a diverse array of skills which are difficult to develop and access in non-metropolitan contexts, including language and cultural mediation, and the knowledge of the complex bureaucratic and legal procedures associated with immigrant statuses (Patuzzi, Andriescu, Pietropolli 2020; Caponio, Donatiello, Ponzio 2022; PISTE 2024). Consequently, a second dimension of fragility is introduced, as economic and human resources, as well as local investments, are typically essential to overcome challenges and seize opportunities inherent to international migration (ibid.). Indeed, as shown in previous sections, several non-metropolitan localities are struggling to maintain local services amidst a growing retreat attributed to privatisation and reductions in public expenditure, which deeply impacts their capacity to invest in immigrant policies (Patuzzi, Andriescu, Pietropolli 2020; Cabral, Swerts 2021).

Within this framework, the rescaling of social policies, which also characterises immigrant policies (Mas Giral, Sarlo 2017; Barberis, Angelucci 2022), may introduce further complications for three main reasons. Firstly, when such strategies are implemented through passive subsidiarisation – that is the delegation of competencies without a

proportional transfer of resources – the rescaling of social policies to local entities may give rise to heightened social and territorial inequalities, leading to the withdrawal of services from the most marginalised areas (Andreotti, Mingione, Polizzi 2012; Martinelli, Anttonen, Mätzke 2017; Kazepov, Barberis 2018). Secondly, the decentralisation of immigrant policies (i.e. measures for socio-economic integration) ties in with the centralisation of immigration policies (i.e., the regulation of access and legal statuses), subjecting local measures to the volatility of national strategies and originating conflicts between local goals of incorporation and supra-local pressures for control (Mas Giralt, Sarlo 2017; Rossi 2023). Lastly, the rescaling of politically charged and polarising issues, such as immigrant policies, has the potential to generate or exacerbate social conflicts at the local level, thereby impeding local policymakers from implementing effective measures (Caponio, Borkert 2010; Filomeno 2017; Barberis, Angelucci 2022; Dimitriadis, Ambrosini 2022).

Other barriers to immigrants' socio-economic incorporation in non-metropolitan areas arise then from the structure of their labour market. Despite not always being the case, several non-metropolitan localities predominantly offer employment opportunities within specific labour niches, notably encompassing agriculture, construction, tourism, care work, or labour-intensive manufacturing (Simiard, Jentsch 2009; Balbo 2015; Barberis, Pavolini 2015). Due to the reduced availability of local resources and technologies coupled with the challenges of maintaining competitiveness in a globalised market, these sectors are frequently characterised by low wages and exploitative labour practices (Corrado 2011; Bock, Osti, Ventura 2016; Miraftab 2016; McAreavey 2018; Cabral, Swerts 2021). This ultimately exacerbates the racialisation and stratification of the immigrant population, rapidly transforming these labour niches into ethnic and gender niches, thus fostering labour segregation (Corrado 2011; Bock, Osti, Ventura 2016; Cabral, Swerts 2021). The limited immigrant networks and the adoption of exclusionary measures at the local level may further complicate these circumstances, particularly when paired with socio-spatial segregation, which may be a particularly serious issue in sparsely populated localities and completely deny spaces for incorporation (Kasimis 2009; Glorius 2017; Kreichauf 2015, 2023).

Nevertheless, against this gloomy framework, recent scholarship has underscored the potential opportunities arising from international immigration towards non-metropolitan areas, both for the receiving localities and the immigrant population. Notably, this literature has challenged the notion that non-metropolitan localities lack experience in dealing with diversity, pointing out how these places have often undergone different diversification processes through emigration and remigration, long-lasting immigration patterns, or the presence of native minorities (Panelli et al. 2009; Hedberg, Haandrikman 2014; Butler 2021). Moreover, the usually small size of these localities is associated with enhanced access to social capital at the local level and increased potential for social interactions, which may lead to the emergence of everyday cosmopolitanism and bolster local socio-economic incorporation (Bevilacqua, Bertaux 2022; Whyte, Romme Larsen, Fog Olwig 2018; Woods 2018). The potential for the development of a welcoming local environment is further reinforced by the emergence of a pragmatic discourse in many non-metropolitan localities,

wherein newcomers are perceived as a means to counter local crises (Sampedro, Camarero 2018; Martins, Davino 2023; Rossi 2023).

Indeed, scholars have noted the substantial contributions that international immigration can make to local development, particularly in crisis-prone non-metropolitan areas and when coupled with the proactive engagement of local policymakers. Benefits primarily involve the repopulation of declining and ageing localities, thereby enhancing their resilience to service deprivation (Fonseca 2008; Collantes et al. 2014; Hedlund et al. 2017; Hudson, Sandberg 2021). Moreover, the influx of new immigrant population into shrinking places not only compensate workforce shortages in aforementioned labour niches but also contribute to revitalise traditional artisanal occupations, leading to improved working conditions and socio-economic inclusion (Kordel, Weidinger 2018; Driel 2020; Rossi 2023). Finally, it is worth mentioning the so-called “economy of asylum-seekers’ reception”, which identifies the labour and consumption markets generated by reception centres especially in small and peripheral localities and concerning the creation of new job opportunities for the local young skilled population and people exiting reception (Galera et al. 2018; Kordel, Weidinger 2018; Driel 2020). The push to seize such opportunities ultimately incentivises non-metropolitan areas to invest in immigrant policies, potentially compensating the lack of local resources with social innovation (Perlik, Membretti 2018; Sampedro, Camarero 2018; Driel 2020). However, potentially problematic situations linked to this utilitarian perspective may still arise, for instance when reception’s economic incentives decline due to new national reforms or when they are connected only to particular categories of migrants, consequently leading to the exclusion of other groups (Rossi 2023).

Such diverging results of immigrants’ socio-economic integration in non-metropolitan areas exhibit considerable variability, which heavily depends on the characteristics of the local context, as well as the political willingness and capability of local policymakers and other stakeholders in immigration-related issues (Oomen et al. 2021; Miellet 2022; Caponio, Pettrachin 2023; Rossi 2023). Despite often being reduced to pragmatism, local politics matters in this field and deeply affects how immigration is framed at the local level and what measures are actually adopted (Schenkel et al. 2023; Semprebon, Marzorati, Bonizzoni 2023; Pettrachin 2023). Confronted with the potential contentious and polarising nature of immigration, local policymakers employ a diverse array of strategies, including the defusing of local integration measures and their adaptation in response to changing national policies (Miellet 2022; Haselbacher, Segarra 2022; Caponio, Pettrachin 2023). All these strategies inherently possess a political dimension, emerging from negotiations and conflicts that extend beyond the local sphere and encompass the entire multi-level governance structure of immigrant policies within European countries (Schiller et al. 2020; Ponzio, Milazzo, De Gregorio 2022; Caponio, Pettrachin 2023).

In this context, mayors and other key figures often occupy a central role, undertaking a mediating function amid diverse local interests, usually facilitated by their strong trust relationships with the local population (Balbo 2015; Morén-Alegret, Wladycka 2020; Haselbacher, Segarra 2022; Andriopoulou et al. 2023). Nevertheless, this centrality does not reduce the significance of other actors. Despite the typically restricted number of civil

society associations and immigrant self-organisations in non-metropolitan areas, they emerge as particularly relevant in small-sized contexts, where they can readily mobilise social capital and leverage their connections with local decision-makers (Cabral, Swerts 2021; Caponio, Donatiello, Ponzio 2022; Semprebon, Marzorati, Bonizzoni 2022; Rossi 2023). Local immigrant policymaking in these places thus takes the form of a battleground, where diverse actors compete and negotiate at the local level to shape immigrant policies, their outcomes, and the overarching framework for socio-economic incorporation (Campomori, Ambrosini 2020; Dimitriadis et al. 2021).

Future paths of research

The present dissertation builds on the scholarship exposed in this introduction, including itself in the same strand and aiming to contribute to its evolution. The academic scholarship about immigration towards non-metropolitan areas is on the rise, after decades in which this has been largely minoritarian compared to migration studies in cities. The resurgence of this field is the consequence of a growing recognition of non-metropolitan localities as valuable fields to study global processes and their increasingly crucial role as destination of immigration flows. This relevance is also witnessed by the several EU-funded projects which have focused on various dimensions of immigration in different types of localities. Examples include MATILDE on immigrants' incorporation and immigration/development nexus in mountain areas, Whole-Comm on incorporation and multi-level governance in SMSTs and rural areas, PISTE on the participation of people from a migration background in SMSTs, and Welcoming Spaces on incorporation and immigration/development nexus in shrinking and remote areas. Further projects have also been carried out at the national level, as it is the case for the Italian PRIN projects "Small Towns and Social Cohesion", concluded in 2014, and the recently started PRISMA, representing the ideal continuation of PISTE in the Italian context.

These policy and academic works have consistently increased the knowledge of immigration patterns and consequences in non-metropolitan areas, making this scholarship emerge as a distinct field of both migration studies and urban and rural studies. Stressing the development potential of immigration in these localities and their strengths for socio-economic incorporation, they have also provided the ground to challenge a predominant approach in previous research on this topic, which overly focused on barriers and limitations, still conceiving in many cases non-metropolitan areas as the negative of cities. Most importantly, the aforementioned studies have started to elaborate new tools for the study of immigration in non-metropolitan localities, which are not a mere re-adaptation of frameworks adopted for cities, and particularly global cities. Yet, this toolbox still needs to be refined and expanded together with our understanding of how spaces and places in non-metropolitan areas interact with immigration processes, generating different opportunity structures and socio-economic consequences in different contexts. This is the point where the research developed through the four papers included in this dissertation step in.

Without claiming to be exhaustive or offering definitive solutions, the articles in this dissertation consider separated but interrelated dimensions of immigration towards non-metropolitan localities. Particularly, these dimensions concern the relation between local contexts, resources, and immigration patterns; the policymaking processes of socio-

economic incorporation measures; the immigration/development nexus, and the role of localised experiences of diversity in building a local welcoming attitude. The papers use different approaches and methodologies, combining quantitative and qualitative methods and proposing various research designs. By deepening the knowledge about these dynamics from various perspectives, this dissertation thus seeks to contribute to the scholarship on the topic by providing new evidences about the Italian case and adding new methodological and theoretical instruments to the toolbox already developed within the previous literature. Two main conclusions, associated with methodological corollaries, emerge as relevant to this aim: a) the acknowledgement of the diversity of non-metropolitan localities and, consequently, of immigration patterns and consequences within them; and b) the consideration of international immigration and diversification processes as a structural component of these places and not merely a transitory phenomenon or a novelty to see through an emergency lens.

Indeed, unlike its presumed opposite – the global city – which is almost by definition similar across the globe, non-metropolitan areas include a large variety of locality types, which are in most cases drawn together by the mere fact of not being cities. The introduction has already dealt with an attempt to more clearly define a common ground for these localities, starting from old and recent notions of places usually conceived in opposition to cities. Yet, this does not mean that non-metropolitan areas are all the same. As stated above, the non-metropolitan should be considered as a site and not a type in itself, an entry point to a set of localities which challenge the application of the traditional theoretical and methodological tools elaborated in large urban centres to study social phenomena. In this sense, international immigration and diversification processes are among the most relevant subjects to address, due to their potential for change within these places and their tight connection with broader global dynamics. Moreover, the account of the non-metropolitan as a site also has methodological implications, calling for comparative research both within and among national contexts to better understand the diversity of these localities.

As for the second conclusion, the findings from articles within this dissertation suggest that, even though immigration is a relatively recent phenomenon in certain non-metropolitan areas, international immigration and diversification processes should now be regarded as structural features of these places rather than exceptions. As shown in the literature review proposed in this introduction, this is certainly not a new claim, but it is important to make it explicit in contexts as the Italian one, where immigration is often still considered in the public debate as something exclusively recent or linked to emergency dynamics. This shift also implies that, while incorporating in non-metropolitan localities and becoming part of the local community, people from a migration background deeply transforms these places, introducing new lifestyles, attitudes and resources, but also contributing to revitalise old ones. Therefore, to grasp the long-lasting and continuing cycles of displacement and emplacement in non-metropolitan localities, which do not involve only the immigrant population, new instruments are needed. In this sense, mixed methods research appears as a valuable strategy, since it allows to simultaneously consider

wide-spanning processes encompassing non-metropolitan localities as a whole, while still considering the specificities of emplacement within individual places.

To conclude, the works proposed throughout the present dissertation aims to be another brick in the construction and consolidation of a coherent research field dealing with immigration and diversification processes across a variety of non-metropolitan areas. It particularly focuses on the Italian case, which, despite being addressed by an increasing number of studies, still needs new evidences for a better understanding of the issues at stake. In doing so, each article leaves some hints and spaces for future paths of research. Three dimensions emerge as relevant in this sense: a) the declination of political discourses within non-metropolitan localities and their impact on local socio-economic incorporation paths and policymaking; b) the relationships between emplaced and emplacing groups presenting various layers of diversity within the context of the hyper-diversification of non-metropolitan localities; and c) the connection between diversification and socio-economic stratification of diverse immigrant groups in these places, taking into consideration dimensions of gender, ethnicity and class. Such research topics are only marginally dealt with in the papers of this dissertation, but they clearly emerge as issues through which the research proposed here can develop in forthcoming studies.

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Immigration patterns in micropolitan areas.

Understanding the diversity of Small and Medium-Sized Towns in Italy

Abstract

The academic literature is increasingly focusing on immigration and diversification processes in a variegated set of non-metropolitan localities, including Small- and Medium-sized Towns and rural areas, highlighting both continuity and divergence with more studied metropolitan contexts. Within this scholarship, Italy represents an emerging field, where more recent patterns related to asylum seekers and refugees' relocation or secondary migration flows merge with the transformation of long-lasting dynamics involving amenity, lifestyle and various forms of labour migration. Yet, despite this growing attention, there are still a few large-scope studies that quantitatively consider peculiar dimensions of immigration towards non-metropolitan areas. Thus, this article aims to contribute to filling this gap by focusing on the main drivers of diverse types of immigration towards Italian non-metropolitan areas, which are here defined through a functionalistic approach based on Labour Market Areas. Particularly, the article uses k-medians cluster analysis to examine the main immigration patterns within these places. Then, clustering results are related to broader characteristics of selected micropolitan LMAs through a multinomial regression model, using clusters as the dependent variable and a typology of socio-demographic structures as the main independent one to test three main hypotheses derived from the main literature: a) higher diversity is expected in more urban industrialised localities and rural agriculture-centred ones; b) asylum seekers' reception should be especially relevant for peripheral and crisis-prone localities; c) lifestyle and amenity migrants are expected to be found in rural areas with landscape and cultural resources. Findings partially confirm these hypotheses, albeit with some relevant exceptions.

Introduction

In the last decades, scholars in migration studies have pointed out how immigration flows towards European countries undergo a deep process of diversification under many aspects, and push for shifting the perspective from specific immigrant national groups to localised forms of diversity (Vertovec 2007; Berg, Sigona 2013; Pardilla, Azevedo, Olmos-Alcaraz 2015; Grzymala-Kazłowska, Phillimore 2018). This entails looking at how various socio-economic and demographic characteristics of immigrant populations intersect at the local level, but it also calls for considering other aspects, such as reasons to move and legal statuses in the country of arrival, as well as the context of destination localities within these countries. Indeed, various localities are now characterised by increasingly diversified immigration flows, introducing new challenges and opportunities for these places and scholars studying them (Barberis, Pavolini 2015; McAreavey 2017, 2018). Most scholarship focusing on localised diversification processes in these contexts investigates these processes

using qualitative case-study analysis, producing in-depth accounts of the impact of diversification on social relations (Miraftab 2016; Glick Schiller & Çağlar 2018; Woods 2018; Erikson 2020). Quantitative studies specifically focusing on these aspects are rarer, although some works about the diversities of differently conceived local contexts have recently emerged (Lichter, Parisi, Taquino 2016; Kalantaryan *et al.* 2021; Pisarevskaya, Scholten, Kaşlı 2021; De Coninck, Solano 2023).

This article tries to expand this literature by focusing on non-metropolitan areas in Italy using quantitative methods. Despite being less studied in migration studies, these places are increasingly receiving scholarly attention in the Italian context, following the growing diversification of immigration flows towards this country, that are now variously consolidated and include a variety of different groups and destinations (Ambrosini 2011; Barberis, Pavolini 2015; Semprebon, Marzorati, Bonizzoni 2022; Ponzo, Carbone, De Gregorio 2023). In this context, more recent aspects of immigration towards non-metropolitan areas in Italy involve for instance the arrival of asylum seekers and refugees (Semprebon, Pelacani 2019; Caponio, Donatiello, Ponzo 2021), or secondary internal movement of international immigrants (Membretti, Lucchini 2018), but there are also long-lasting trends that are transforming or intensifying, such as labour immigration attracted by the demand for workforce in some economic niches or amenity and lifestyle migration (Bender, Kanitscheider 2012; Bonizzoni, Marzorati 2015; Corrado, Iocco, Lo Cascio 2020).

Understanding the spatial patterns of these old and new flows and their relations with local contexts is thus the main aim of this article, which is based on two explorative research questions: a) which are the main patterns of immigration towards non-metropolitan areas in Italy; b) how these patterns relate with socio-demographic characteristics of immigrants-receiving places. To do so, it first proposes a new understanding of how to conceive non-metropolitan contexts, based on the combination of different theoretical strands. This also requires going beyond mere administrative borders of municipalities, that is the reason why this paper considers instead Labour Market Areas (LMAs), which are functional areas identified by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat) based on commuting flows (Franconi, D'Alò, Ichim 2016, 2017). Then, non-metropolitan areas identified through the framework above are clustered using inductive k-medians clustering to distinguish them according to the main immigration and diversification patterns. Finally, local immigration patterns towards non-metropolitan areas are related to the main characteristics of receiving localities by performing a multinomial regression analysis, which uses resulting clusters as the dependent variable and a socio-demographic typology of Italian LMAs as the leading independent variables together with several control variables, selected based on the reference literature and available data.

Thus, the article is structured as follows. The next paragraph will briefly review the relevant academic literature about immigration towards small- and medium-sized towns (SMSTs) and rural areas in Europe. Afterwards, the theoretical foundations of these articles are presented, including the advantages and disadvantages of operationalising localities through LMAs. A detailed description of the chosen clustering and the regression model is further introduced in the methodological note, which also describes the used variables and the reasons for including them. Descriptive statistics about the main considered dimensions are

provided in the following section, specifically looking at micropolitan systems in Italy. Then, the subsequent paragraph presents the results of the cluster analysis and the multinomial regression analysis run starting from it. Finally, the main findings are discussed and conclusions are drawn on their basis, also considering the pros and cons of quantitative methods for analysing non-metropolitan immigration patterns locally.

Immigration in non-metropolitan areas

The increasing diversity in the social composition and directions of international mobility and immigration flows have contributed to making European rural areas and SMSTs increasingly heterogeneous within and among themselves (Hedberg, do Carmo 2012; Barberis, Pavolini 2015; McAreavey 2017; Woods 2018). These processes, which can be entirely new or the result of the evolution of existing flows, involve a wide variety of groups, including labour immigrants, amenity or lifestyle migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. Such diversity further interacts with those of non-metropolitan areas, which variously consist of networks of SMSTs, rural and mountain areas, belt localities around large cities, and peripheral places, and which have varied socio-economic characteristics, including both growing and shrinking areas (Barberis, Pavolini 2015; McAreavey 2017; Perlik, Membretti 2018; Bona *et al.* 2020; Martin, Martinelli, Clifton 2022; Caponio, Pettrachin 2023; Schenkel, Messerschmidt, Grossmann 2023).

A consistent part of recent scholarship focusing on immigration outside metropolitan areas in Europe deals with the reception and incorporation of asylum seekers and refugees (Bock 2018; Patuzzi, Andriescu, Pietropolli 2020; Caponio, Donatiello, Ponzio 2022; Haselbacher, Segarra 2022). The growing protagonism of rural areas and SMSTs is usually connected with dispersal strategies of reception centres, which alternatively take the form of a way to counter segregation in big structures and a strategy to forcedly relocate migrants in remote places (Galera *et al.* 2018; Semprebon, Pelacani 2020; Van Liempt, Millet 2021; Kreichauf 2023). However, non-metropolitan areas also increasingly join reception on a voluntary basis for the opportunities inherent to it, which are summarised in the so-called “economy of asylum seekers” and result in population gains and the opening of new options in the local labour market (Perlik, Membretti 2018; Sampedro, Camarero 2018; Driel 2020; Patuzzi, Andriescu, Pietropolli 2020). Thus, interacting with the variety of localities and conditions of reception, these flows also produce different outcomes at the local level, ranging from situations of strong social or spatial segregation to successful example of reciprocal incorporation between long-time residents and newcomers (Glorius 2017; Perlik, Membretti 2018; Driel 2020; Driel, Verkuyten 2020).

Despite being the most recent one, the arrival of asylum seekers and refugees is not the only immigration dynamic associated with SMSTs and rural areas. Indeed, in addition to amenity and lifestyle migration (McCarthy 2008; Bender, Kanitscheider 2012; Morén-Alegret, Wladyka 2020), labour migration appears particularly relevant in many of these places for various reasons. These include for instance the demand for workforce in economic niches that are particularly relevant in these places, such as agriculture and care work, but also in some localised industrial sectors – including but not limited to the agrifood industry (Fonseca 2008; Corrado 2011; Mirafteb 2016; Munkejord 2017; Corrado,

Iocco, Lo Cascio 2020; Morén-Alegret, Wladyka 2020; Nori, Farinella 2020). Moreover, the supply of cheap housing opportunities further fosters secondary internal migration of several people with immigrant background in these places, who look for jobs there or commute to surrounding metropolitan areas (Bordandini, Cartocci 2009; Bonizzoni, Marzorati 2015; Membretti, Lucchini 2018; Semprebon, Marzorati, Bonizzoni 2022).

All the above-described patterns have been noted in the Italian context of non-metropolitan areas, on which a consistent part of the scholarship on this topic is focused. Interestingly, this case shows that various spatial types have been involved in immigration processes over time. Indeed, labour immigration in agriculture-centred rural areas of Southern Italy and Northern small industrial districts is a long-lasting phenomenon that has been present in many regions at least since the 1980s (Barberis, Pavolini 2015; Corrado, Iocco, Lo Cascio 2020). More recently, this has been combined with the reception of asylum seekers and refugees in peripheral and rural areas, mainly due to top-down or bottom-up relocation strategies, aimed at the dispersal of reception both through the tendency of relocating CAS structures outside the main centres and through the higher incentive of these places to join the SAI network¹, taking advantages of repopulation and occupation opportunities that reception can offer (Galera *et al.* 2018; Fratesi, Percoco, Proietti 2019; Rossi 2023).

A geographical dimension also needs to be considered. Indeed, SMSTs in Central and Northern Italy have been receiving labour immigration for a long time thanks to a scattered industrial fabric, but these flows have started to decrease in the last years following deindustrialisation processes, to the extent that some places can now be considered as former immigration destinations (Bonizzoni, Marzorati 2015; Rossi 2023). On the contrary, most localities in the South started experiencing immigration flows only recently and usually in connection with asylum seekers and refugees' reception (Corrado, Iocco, Lo Cascio 2020; Rossi 2023). Yet, some relevant exceptions to this general trend need to be pointed out. On one hand, important reception areas can be also found beyond Southern Italy, and especially in Northern localities close to international borders (Semprebon, Pelacani 2019). On the other hand, labour immigration still accounts for a non-negligible part of flows towards Southern Italy, particularly in agriculture-centred localities where immigrant workers – either seasonally or permanently – have been present for many decades (Corrado 2011; Semprebon, Marzorati, Garrapa 2017). Finally, amenity migration and counterurbanisation processes regarding the immigrant population, also connected to low housing costs in non-metropolitan areas, further contribute to diversifying the immigrant population in many localities across the whole country (Bender, Kanitscheider 2012; Semprebon, Marzorati, Bonizzoni 2022).

Based on this scholarship, three main hypotheses are formulated to be tested in further step of the research: a) high diversity levels are expected to be found in more urbanised and industrialised localities, as well as in rural agriculture-centred ones, due to the longer history

¹ The SAI (Reception and Integration System) is the voluntary-based reception system, which municipalities can join through an application to the Ministry of the Interior, while the CAS (Extraordinary Reception Centres) are centres directly opened by the local offices of the Ministry of the Interior without necessarily involving other local authorities.

of immigration towards these types of places (Barberis, Pavolini 2015; Bonizzoni, Marzorati 2015; Corrado, Iocco, Lo Cascio 2020); b) reception of asylum seekers is expected to be especially relevant for more peripheral and crisis-prone localities, due to the effect of relocation and dispersal policies carried out both through socio-economic incentives and top-down strategies (Fratesi, Percoco, Proietti 2019; Semprebon. Pelacani 2019; Rossi 2023); finally, c) lifestyle and amenity migrants are expected to be found in primarily rural or peripheral areas with landscape and cultural resources, due to the nature of this type of immigration towards Italy, involving a relatively large share of retired or counter-urbanising migrants (Bender, Kanitscheider 2012; Morén-Alegret, Wladyka 2020).

Conceiving non-metropolitan areas beyond administrative borders

A crucial question when dealing with issues of immigration towards non-metropolitan areas is how to define what is a non-metropolitan area. Up to this point, this article has chiefly referred to SMSTs and rural areas, which are entities variously defined according to their population size or density, but that cannot provide by themselves a sufficiently clear reference unit for the analysis. The point of departure of this research is the concept of “locality” as developed by Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2009), which represents a connecting point between migration studies and spatial studies and identifies the space in which local socio-economic dynamics take place. Such notion has been applied to various city forms, but it encounters some barriers when transferred in the context of SMSTs or rural areas since socio-economic dynamics are usually less contained in a single and clearly identifiable local unit (Mattioli, Morettini 2014; Servillo, Atkinson, Hamdouch 2016; Atkinson 2019).

In order to operationalise the concept of locality while simultaneously taking into account the specificities of non-metropolitan areas and available data, a functional approach has been adopted by choosing Labour Market Areas (LMAs) as reference units. Indeed, in the context of Italian spatial classifications, LMAs are functional areas usually defined around a pole municipality on the basis of daily commuting flows, and they can thus be considered as an approximation of the territory on which a population actually carry on most of its socio-economic life (Coombes *et al.* 2012; Franconi, D’Alò, Ichim 2016, 2017). Such choice allows to conceive localities in a way that can be implemented beyond the standard conceptions of city and urban spaces. Yet, to apply this framework to the present study, non-metropolitan areas still need to be identified in a way that is compatible with it.

In this paper, non-metropolitan areas are primarily considered as localities formed by an agglomeration of small- and medium-sized towns and/or rural areas, which are the two locality types usually presented in opposition to cities in the academic literature. In this sense, being based on small local units is a crucial characteristic of non-metropolitan areas. However, as argued by Mattioli and Morettini (2014), various criteria have been used in the scholarship to define small localities, including the size of the population or particular social groups, the number of physical structures such as houses or other economic indicators. In order to operationalise this task in a simple but theoretically-informed way, this research chooses to adopt a relatively basic definition of smallness for what concerns the basic units of non-metropolitan systems, so as to make it easier to include them in the functionalist approach built from LMAs.

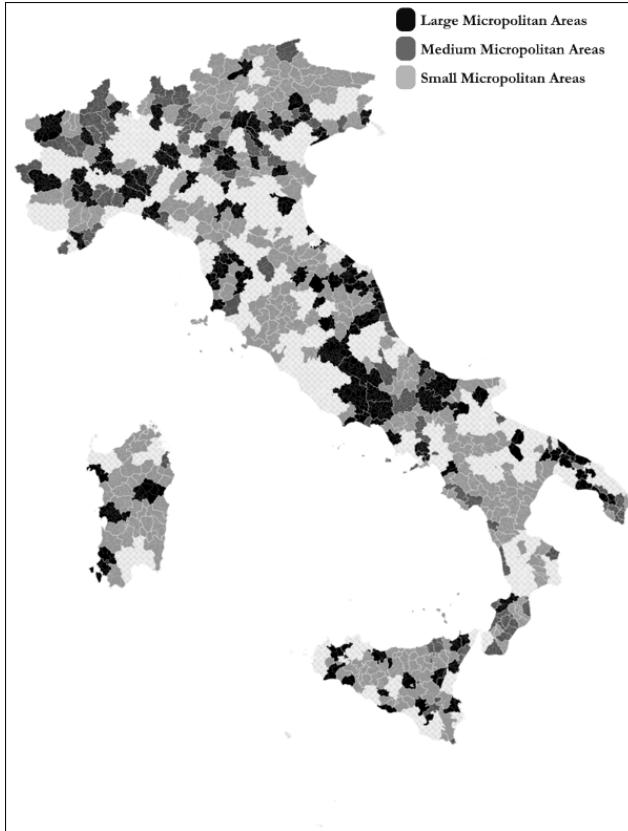
For this purpose, two frameworks have been combined to define non-metropolitan LMAs in Italy. On the one hand, the theoretical effort of the ESPON TOWN project to define SMSTs is considered as a starting point (Servillo *et al.* 2014; Servillo, Atkinson, Hamdouch 2016; Atkinson 2019). On the other hand, the US Office of Management and Budget definition of micropolitan systems is combined with that framework to integrate the functionalist approach of LMAs within it (Brown, Cromartie, Kulcsar 2004; Mulligan, Vias 2006; Lichter, Parisi, Taquino 2016). Indeed, a micropolitan-oriented approach already proved to be helpful in studying diversity outside large gateway cities in the US context, where it has been pioneered by Lichter and colleagues' studies on the residential segregation of the Hispanic population (Lichter *et al.* 2009; Lichter, Parisi, Taquino 2016), but it has already been applied also in the Italian case, as shown by the qualitative case-study of Desio proposed by Bonizzoni and Marzorati (2015).

In US territorial statistics, micropolitan systems are areas centred on a county with a population between 10.000 and 50.000 inhabitants (Brown, Cromartie, Kulcsar 2004; Mulligan, Vias 2006; Lichter, Parisi, Taquino 2016). However, such a framework needs to be adapted in the different contexts of European countries and, more specifically, Italy, where a consistent part of LMAs (32,3%) would remain out of this classification since they are centred on poles with less than 10.000 inhabitants. To fix this issue, a re-adapted version of the framework proposed by the ESPON TOWN project, grounded in the European context, has been used to redefine poles for micropolitan areas in Italy (Servillo, Atkinson, Hamdouch 2016; Atkinson 2019). The US definition of micropolitan systems has thus been combined with that account of European SMSTs to refine this framework for its usage in the Italian context. Compared to the final typology of SMSTs proposed in Atkinson (2019), further adjustments have been necessary to consider all types of towns in the Italian case, including sparsely populated and rural areas (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Structure of non-metropolitan systems and types of poles – Elaboration from Atkinson (2019).

Type of system	No.	Type of pole	Characteristics of the pole
Large micropolitan systems	122	Large and Medium Towns (including sparsely populated ones)	25.000 < Population < 50.000; Population density
Medium micropolitan systems	100	Small Towns	5.000 < Population < 25.000; Population density > 300 inh./km ²
Small micropolitan systems	280	Sparsely populated Small Towns and small rural areas	5.000 < Population < 25.000; Population density < 300 inh./km ²
		Very Small Towns	Population < 5.000

Figure 1. The geographical position of Italian micropolitan LMAs – Visual elaboration through Flourish.



Thus, applying the approach described above, Italian micropolitan LMAs are here considered the entry point to observe immigration patterns, since they can be considered as the actual broader localities in which individual life paths of people living in non-metropolitan areas develop. However, these places cannot be considered as a homogeneous group. The variety of poles represents a first important distinguishing element since medium-sized and small-sized towns often present non-negligible differences, and local specificities also emerge when considering rural or urbanised areas. Moreover, the relation between the pole and the belt area is another critical factor, accounting for the consistency of internal relations within different parts of the territory. In order to catch this complexity, the socio-demographic typology provided by Istat (2015), which is presented in the next section, has been revisited in this paper to be applied to micropolitan LMAs in Italy to put in relation such specificities with different immigration patterns towards these areas.

Methods and data

The present article is based on a combination of two quantitative methods: cluster analysis and regression analysis. This pair is not new in the literature about local immigration patterns, since it has already been applied by De Coninck and Solano (2023), albeit with different techniques, units of reference and research questions. Indeed, focusing this article on micropolitan LMAs, metropolitan areas have been left outside the analysis. Moreover, two alternative selection criteria have been used to exclude non-immigrant-destination LMAs from the clustering and thus limit the influence of non-meaningful outliers. Indeed,

LMAs have been considered in the clustering only if they have an immigration rate higher than 3,5%, that is the first quartile of the total distribution, or if they have a share of asylum seekers per inhabitant higher than 3 asylum seekers per 1000 residents. The latter criterion corresponds to the quota suggested by the 2016 agreement between the Ministry of Interior and the National Association of Italian Municipalities. Since the threshold has been established by signer policymakers as the ideal equilibrium for reception, looking at localities with a higher share of asylum seekers allows for intercepting areas that, despite having a low immigration rate, receive relatively high amounts of asylum seekers. This is necessary since asylum seekers are not necessarily included in official Istat statistics about immigrant residents. LMAs that do not match any of these criteria have been excluded from the subsequent analysis so that only 414 micropolitan LMAs out of a total of 502 have been considered in the final clustering model and in the regression model.

As for clustering, in its most basic definition, it is defined as a way of grouping data through statistical techniques and according to a set of selected variables, usually assuming that data objects in the same cluster should be similar to each other and different from data objects in other clusters (Bailey 1974; Kaufmann, Rousseeuw 2005; Xu, Wunsch II 2009; Hennig, Meila 2016). Various clustering methods have been used in many fields, but its application in spatial studies in general and more specifically in the study of immigration at the local level has only developed in recent times (Mattioli, Morettini 2014; Hedlund 2016; Pisarevskaya, Scholten, Kaşlı 2021; De Coninck, Solano 2023; Rossi 2023). Its potential in this field is particularly acknowledged for classification-building purposes since it allows the simplification of relatively large amounts of data and the identification of the main patterns considering a plurality of variables. Therefore, it appears as a suitable tool to consider the characteristics of immigration at the local level in a context of increasing diversification and complexification.

This article uses a k-medians cluster analysis based on five variables to consider the main immigration patterns within Italian micropolitan systems. K-medians clustering is a variation of k-means clustering, using the median as a reference instead of the mean. Thus, this partitioning algorithm assigns each case to the cluster with the median closest to the observation, stopping when the cluster's median has no more significant changes. In the context of the present research, k-medians clustering has been chosen for its practicality and because it better deals with the presence of outliers in the dataset (Whelan, Harrel, Wang 2015; García-Escudero *et al.* 2016). Moreover, this article chooses to standardise variables using mean absolute deviation instead of standard deviation to limit the effect of outliers while maintaining as much as the form of the distribution (Kaufman, Rousseeuw 2005).

For what concerns clustering variables, these have been selected on the basis of the above-mentioned scholarship and available data and correspond to: 1) the number of resident immigrants in each LMA, measured through the immigration rate; 2) the share of asylum seekers received by LMA's municipalities per 1000 inhabitants; 3) the Diversity Index, measuring the variety of diversity based on the countries of origin of the resident immigrant population in each LMA; 4) the Segregation Index, measuring the segregation of the resident immigrant population among municipalities of each LMA; and 5) the share of

immigrants coming from countries with a GDP per capita higher than the Italian one, which is used as a proxy for the presence of lifestyle and amenity migrants.

The Diversity Index has been calculated using the Simpson Index with data about non-Italian citizens residing in each LMA, so that a higher result equals a higher probability that two people taken at random from a population belong to the same group and thus to lower diversity. Segregation has instead been considered using the Duncan Segregation Index with the distribution of immigrant and non-immigrant population across municipalities of the LMA, so that the result corresponds to the share of immigrants that should move in other municipalities of the LMA to equal the distribution with the non-immigrant population. Therefore higher score in this case corresponds to higher segregation. Of course, these data present at least three relevant limitations that needs to be pointed out. First, only resident immigrants or asylum seekers are computed in official statistics while no information is available about other types of immigrants (e.g., undocumented or temporary). Moreover, the lack of recent sub-municipal data forces to measure segregation using relatively large units. Finally, data limitation has prevented to clearly distinguish between people to whom one of the refugee statuses has been recognised and other immigration types, while amenity and lifestyle migrants could only be identified by an indirect indicator.

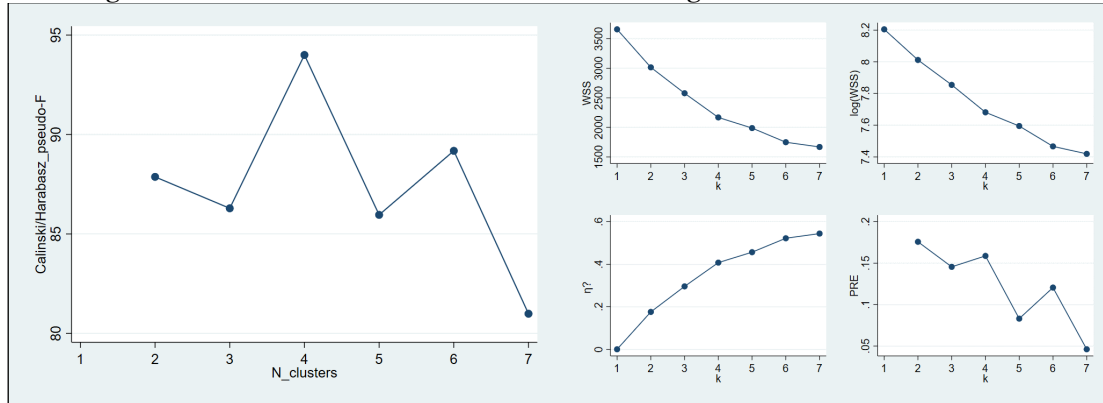
Table 2. Description of clustering variables.

Variable	Definition	Source
Immigration rate	Share of non-citizen population every 100 residents.	Istat (2020)
Share of asylum seekers	Share of asylum seekers every 1000 inhabitants	RETESAI (2020), Centri d'Italia (2020)
Diversity Index	Simpson Index based on countries of origin of the immigrant population	Istat (2020)
Segregation Index	Duncan Segregation Index using municipalities of each LMA as a reference unit	Istat (2020)
Share of amenity and lifestyle migrants	Share of non-citizen population coming from countries with GDP p.c. higher than Italy for every 100 non-citizen residents.	Istat (2020)

Within the cluster analysis, the choice for the value k , that is the number of clusters, has been done inductively by combining two techniques that are easy to apply in Stata 17 – the statistic software used to carry on the whole analysis of this paper. Firstly, the Calinski-Harabasz pseudo-F index has been considered, since it is an indicator suitable for k-medians clustering that Stata directly provides among available stopping rules, and it is frequently identified as one of the best indicators for choosing the optimal number of clusters (Milligan, Cooper 1985; StataCorp 2021). This measure indicates the cohesion of clusters based on the similarity of an object to its cluster compared to others, so that higher values correspond to more compact clusters (Halkidi, Vazirgiannis, Hennig 2016). Secondly, Makles’s (2012) procedure to apply the so-called “elbow method” in Stata has been performed, looking at the variation of four criteria among clustering solutions with different k . In particular, these criteria are the Within Sum of Squares, its logarithm, η^2 coefficient and the Proportional Reduction of Error coefficient. By visually representing these indicators, it is thus possible to identify “elbows” in the distribution among the

different clustering models, pointing out which possibly are the best solutions. Combining the necessity to select a number of clusters as low as possible with these indicators, the final choice has been to set $k = 4$ to have four resulting clusters from the analysis.

Figure 2. Results of Calinski-Harabasz pseudo-F and Makles's (2012) indicators for k-medians clustering models with different k – Visual elaboration through Stata 17.



The 4-clusters solution resulting from the cluster analysis has then been used as the dependent variable in a multinomial logistic regression model, testing the hypothesis that socio-demographic characteristics of different LMAs actually affect the nature of diversification processes and immigration patterns at the local level. Such regression model has been chosen due to the fact that the dependent variable is a categorical polychotomous variable, which is the precondition for multinomial logistic regression, being an extension of logit models to apply in case of a categorical dependent variable with three or more categories (Chatterjee, Simonoff 2012; Hosmer Jr., Lemeshow, Studivant 2013).

The main independent variable used in the model consists of a recoding of Istat's (2015) socio-demographic typology of LMAs, based on a set of different spatial, demographic and economic indicators. The recoding has been done by merging similar categories, and it has been made necessary because only diversified micropolitan LMAs have been considered. Various control variables have also been introduced in the model on the basis of the main determinants of immigration patterns identified in the above-cited academic literature and available data. In particular, these are: 1) economic specialisation of LMAs; 2) attitudes towards immigration, measured using the share of votes for parties in favour of restrictive immigration policies as a proxy 3) occupation rate; 4) public local social expenditure per capita; 5) share of population living in inner areas, defined according to the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI). For all of these variables, a Wald Test, testing the hypothesis that all coefficients associated with the given variables are 0, has been performed and all variables' effects happen to be significant at 0,05 level except for one category of attitudes towards immigration (Long, Freese 2003).

Going deeper into selected independent and control variables, local socio-demographic characteristics consist of a categorical variable distinguishing LMAs between “urban centres”, that is a merging of three original categories (Central and Northern cities; Spread cities; Southern cities), “potentially thriving rural areas”, that unifies two original categories (the Green Heart; the Other South) and “declining areas”, that is a merging of two original categories (the Inner South; Disadvantaged Territories). A more detailed account of these

categories is provided in the next section. Concerning continuous control variables, the occupation rate is used as an indicator of the local labour market, while local social expenditure per capita is used as a proxy of the degree of local welfare offered by local institutions within each LMA. Finally, since inner areas are defined according to their time distance from pole localities where a set of key basic services are located (Barca, Carrosio, Lucatelli 2018), the degree of population living in inner areas within each LMA is used here to operationalise peripherality and access to services. Categorical control variables include economic specialisation and attitudes towards immigration. The first is considered using a simplified version of LMAs' classification according to the prevalent economic activity provided by Istat (2015). In particular, this variable has two categories: "manufacturing-centred systems", merging Made in Italy and Heavy Manufacturing systems, and "non-manufacturing systems", unifying Non-manufacturing and Without Specialisation systems.

Attitudes towards immigration have been operationalised by creating a new categorical variable, based on the average votes for anti-immigration parties at the election for the Deputy Chamber between 2008 and 2022 and the trend of votes for these parties during the same period. Anti-immigration parties have been defined as such if they include in their electoral programme references to the need to control cultural minorities or limit immigration flows. This results in four categories, identifying systems where: a) average votes for anti-immigration parties is in the first quartile of the distribution ("anti-immigration"); b) average votes for anti-immigration parties is between the first and the fourth quartile of the distribution and the trend is increasing ("tightening"); c) average votes for anti-immigration parties is between the first and the fourth quartile of the distribution and the trend is declining ("softening"); d) average votes for anti-immigration parties is in the fourth quartile of the distribution ("non-anti-immigration").

Table 3. Description of independent variables used in the regression model.

Variable	Definition/Categories	Source	Wald Test
Socio-demographic characteristics	Urban centres (<i>n</i> 88)	Istat (2015)	<i>reference category</i>
	Potentially thriving rural areas (<i>n</i> 232)		32,8***
	Declining areas (<i>n</i> 94)		21,1***
Economic specialisation	Manufacturing-centred systems (<i>n</i> 211)	Istat (2015)	<i>reference category</i>
	Non-manufacturing systems (<i>n</i> 203)		19,0***
Attitudes towards immigration	Anti-immigration areas (<i>n</i> 130)	Ministry of Interior (2008, 2013, 2018, 2022)	<i>reference category</i>
	Tightening areas (<i>n</i> 88)		3,4
	Softening areas (<i>n</i> 111)		8,4*
	Non-anti-immigration areas (<i>n</i> 85)		8,6*
Occupation rate	Share of people older than 15 registered as occupied on the total population older than 15.	Istat (2020)	10,3*
Per capita social expenditure	Total expenditure in € for each inhabitant of the LMA made by local public institutions and registered in one of the 7 budget categories of the social expenditure.	Istat (2020)	8,3*
Innerness	Share of the population living in municipalities classified as inner areas within each LMA.	National Strategy for Inner Areas (2020)	20,0***

* $p < 0,05$; ** $p < 0,01$; *** $p < 0,001$

The context of Italian micropolitan systems

As mentioned before, despite sharing a similar structure, micropolitan systems cannot be considered a homogeneous group: great differences can occur in population size, rurality, peripherality and socio-economic contexts. Indeed, being centred on SMSTs, Very Small Towns or rural areas and composed by them, micropolitan systems present a vast range of population sizes, both when considering the pole and the whole system. This also pairs with the variety of spatial patterns at regional and national levels in the Italian context, which contributes to determining very different sets of resources and socio-economic and demographic patterns at the local level. In order to intercept such a complex situation, this paper addresses the socio-demographic characteristics of Italian LMAs through the re-elaboration of Istat's (2015) typology described in the previous section to better understand the diversity of micropolitan systems from various perspectives.

More specifically, the first group consists of mostly urban and densely populated systems, characterised by a younger and larger population compared to the other categories and higher levels of soil consumption and economic performance. These are also often centred on large and medium towns and present a more interconnected structure among municipalities. The second category includes primarily rural areas with a decentralised distribution of the population, older age on average and a relatively large presence of untapped resources in terms of tourism attractiveness, cultural heritage, real estate and economic performance. This constitutes the basis for their rescaling potential, expressed in its good economic indicator and the low level of soil consumption. Moreover, most poles are centred on small rural areas or very small towns, but indicators of internal interconnection among municipalities still point out relatively high values.

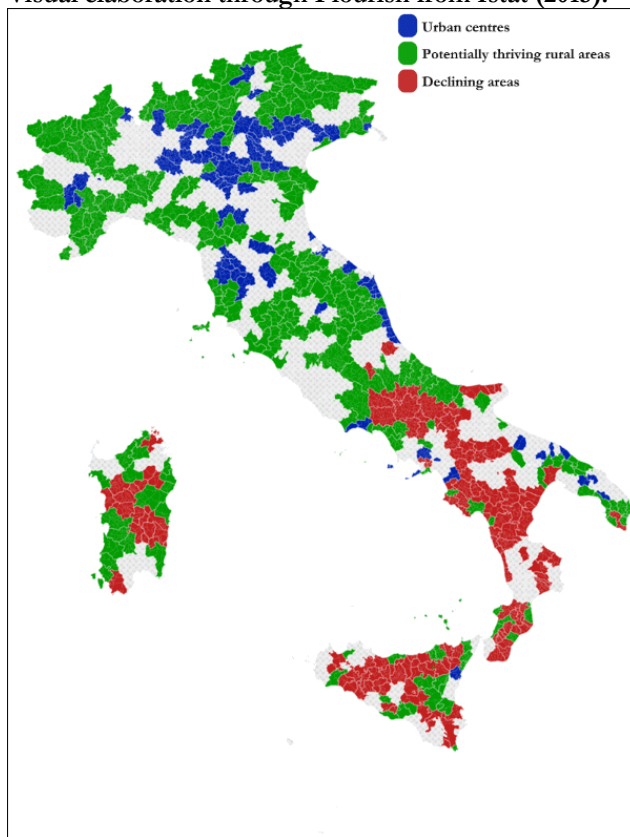
Systems in the last category are essentially united by their low indicators for what concerns socio-economic and demographic patterns, represented by a decreasing and ageing population, scarce economic performance and a general lack of resources and potentialities for rescaling. These are mostly rural areas with the exception of the three LMAs falling into the Disadvantaged Territories category. Similarly to potentially thriving rural areas, the vast majority of these LMAs are also centred on small poles, but they differ for their low interconnection among municipalities to the extent that they result to be much more centralised than other categories. Finally, an additional peculiarity of these systems is also the fact that they are almost exclusively located in Southern Italy (about 99%), overlapping the strong and well-documented Italian North-South divide.

Table 4. Main dimensions of considered socio-demographic types in all Italian micropolitan systems – Elaboration on Istat data.

Dimension	Urban centres	Potentially thriving rural areas	Declining areas	TOTAL
Population – 2020 (mean)	81.945	40.373	27.923	44.660
Population density – 2020 (mean)	323,8	105,1	112,5	148,2
Variation of the population – 2011-2020 (mean)	0,7%	-2,9%	-5,7%	-3,0%
Old age index – 2020 (mean)	170,3	226,9	221,9	214,9
Population living in rural areas – 2020 (mean)	19,4%	52,4%	59,0%	48,1%
Soil consumption – 2015 (%):	<i>Maximum consumption</i>	71,4%	11,8%	9,3%
	<i>High urban consumption</i>	16,9%	10,2%	5,3%

	<i>High extra-urban consumption</i>	5,8%	19,3%	13,2%	14,4%
	<i>Minimum consumption</i>	5,8%	58,7%	72,2%	48,7%
LMA structure (%):	<i>Large micropolitan systems</i>	46,8%	22,8%	12,1%	24,3%
	<i>Medium micropolitan systems</i>	34,0%	19,5%	11,3%	19,9%
	<i>Small micropolitan systems</i>	19,2%	57,7%	76,6%	55,8%
Consistency of internal relations – 2015 (mean)		33,7	27,0	16,0	25,2
Intensity of internal relations – 2015 (mean)		91,3	79,9	84,2	83,2
Municipalities with index of centrality – 2015 (mean) ²		2,7	2,4	1,5	2,2
Income per capita (€) – 2020 (mean)		13.562	12.722	8.825	11.784
Added value per worker (1000€) – 2020 (mean)		44,8	38,0	26,4	36,0

Figure 3. The geographical distribution of socio-demographic types across micropolitan systems – Visual elaboration through Flourish from Istat (2015).



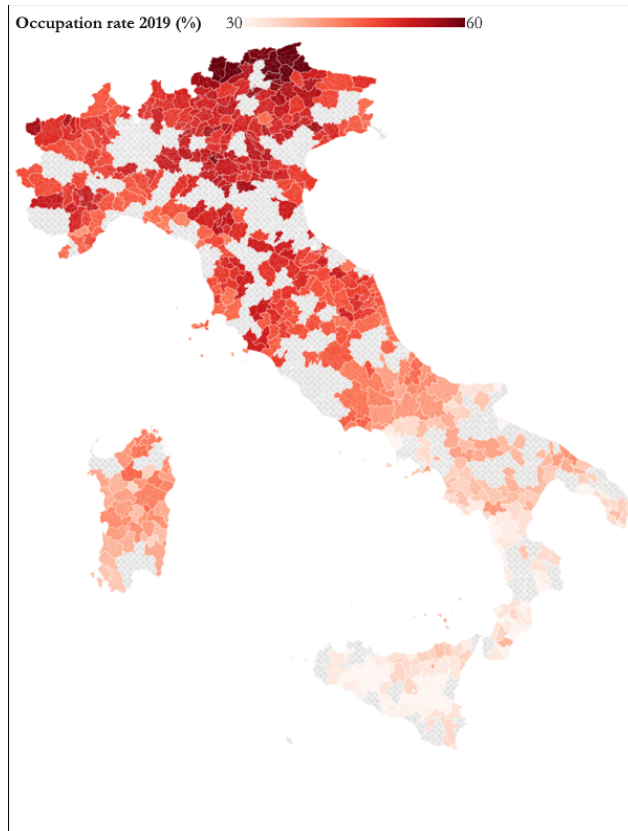
Considering the entirety of LMAs, for what concerns the independent variables chosen in this research, micropolitan systems show a high level of peripherality, which, despite being less pronounced in diversified micropolitan systems, is almost five times higher than in metropolitan systems. Occupation rate and social expenditure do not differ much across different structures of LMAs, but again they show a clear demarcation line between the

² The consistency and intensity of internal relations, as well as the number of municipalities with centrality index are indicators elaborated by Istat (2015) as a way to better understand structures of Italian LMAs. Particularly, the first identifies the share of flows between different municipalities within a LMA on the total flows within a LMA; the second points out the relationship between the number of existing connections between pairs of municipalities within a LMA and the maximum number of possible connections of this kind; finally, the last one identifies the number of municipalities attracting flows towards themselves within a LMA.

Centre-North and the South, where the occupation rate is in some cases almost half compared to similar places in Northern and Central Italy. As concerns the operationalisation of attitudes towards immigration, anti-immigration parties seem to have slightly better results in micropolitan systems compared to metropolitan ones, where they also register a more relevant decrease³.

Finally, some important differences between metropolitan and micropolitan systems emerge in the most prominent economic specialisation. Indeed, while more than half of metropolitan systems appear to have a local economy mostly centred on the service sector or other strictly urban specialisation, the context of micropolitan systems emerges as much more multifaceted, pointing out the relevance of some traditional production and specific economic niches, such as agriculture and tourism. The share of non-specialised systems is also much higher than metropolitan systems, although some differences emerge in this case for diversifying micropolitan LMAs, presenting a lower share of systems without an economic specialisation compared to micropolitan systems as a whole.

Figure 4. Occupation rate across Italian micropolitan systems – Visual elaboration through Flourish on Istat data.



³ The decreasing trend which is experienced in many LMAs is mostly linked to the rise of the Five Star Movement, especially in Southern Italy, which has been categorised for the sake of this analysis as a neutral party concerning immigration policies.

Table 5. Average values of the main selected socio-economic indicators– Elaboration on Istat, Ministry of the Interior data and SNAI data.

Variable	All micropolitan LMAs	Selected micropolitan LMAs	Metropolitan LMAs
Share of the population living in inner areas (2020)	62,0%	57,7%	12,8%
Occupation rate (2019)	43,4%	44,9%	43,7%
Per capita social expenditure in 2020 (€)	152,2	153,5	154,5
Average share of votes for anti-immigration parties 2008-2022	44,0%	44,7%	40,4%
Variation in the share of votes for anti-immigration parties 2008-2022	-3,4	-2,6	-7,2

Table 6. Main economic specialisation and sub-specialisation of micropolitan systems (both as a whole and as concerns selected diversified ones) and metropolitan systems – Elaboration on Istat data.

Economic specialisation	All micropolitan LMAs	Selected micropolitan LMAs	Metropolitan LMAs
Made in Italy	34,7%	35,5%	23,1%
- <i>Textile, leather and clothing</i>	10,6%	11,6%	6,5%
- <i>Agri-food</i>	9,8%	9,4%	3,7%
Heavy manufacturing	13,5%	15,5%	15,7%
Non-manufacturing	31,7%	31,4%	59,3%
- <i>Urban economy-centred</i>	6,6%	6,5%	53,7%
- <i>Tourism-centred</i>	16,5%	18,6%	0,9%
- <i>Agriculture-centred</i>	8,6%	6,3%	4,6%
Without specialisation	22,1%	17,6%	1,8%

A North-South divide among micropolitan systems also emerges when considering immigration trends. Looking at general data about the immigrant population, it is possible to note how Central and Northern non-metropolitan areas have received immigrants for a relatively long period and now present large immigrant communities. However, with the partial exception of some border localities, these are also places where the immigrant population has grown the least in the last decade. This is especially true for some areas in the Marche Region and the North-East, mostly corresponding to the so-called “Third Italy”, where the immigrant population has decreased in the considered period as opposed to the national increasing trend. This tendency is probably connected with the crisis that hit these flexible specialisation areas in the last two decades and the consequent contraction in workplaces (Bortolotti, Giaccone 2006; Hadjimichalis 2006; Kalb 2020). Instead, Southern micropolitan areas mostly present a high growth of the immigrant population, which in some cases has doubled in the last ten years, but also a higher participation in the reception of asylum seekers and refugees in relation to the total population.

Some differences seem to emerge between micropolitan and metropolitan systems, which present a higher level of diversity on average, but also a lower participation in the reception systems and a less relevant share of potential lifestyle or amenity migrants. Nevertheless, these data still present the same above-noted limitations, since only regular residents are considered and asylum seekers are sometimes separated from general statistics about the immigrant population. Moreover, micropolitan systems also present a wide variety of

immigration patterns, which, as noted in the first paragraph, can also differ from metropolitan ones in relevant ways. For these reasons, this paper starts with a cluster analysis to identify the main immigration patterns to subsequently relate them to socio-demographic types through a regression analysis.

Table 7. Average values of main selected immigration and diversification indicators in micropolitan systems (both as a whole and selected diversified ones) and metropolitan systems - Elaboration on Istat and RETESAI data.

Variable	All micropolitan LMAs	Selected micropolitan LMAs	Metropolitan LMAs
Immigration rate (2020)	6,7%	7,7%	8,4%
Share of asylum seekers per 1000 inhabitants (2020)	2,6	2,9	2,4
Index of diversity	16,4	15,6	11,8
Index of segregation	13,8	13,7	13,1
Share of immigrants coming from countries with GDP p.c. higher than Italy (2020)	4,8%	4,5%	2,9%

Figure 5. Immigration rate and share of asylum seekers in micropolitan LMAs – Visual elaboration through Flourish on Istat, RETESAI and Openpolis data.

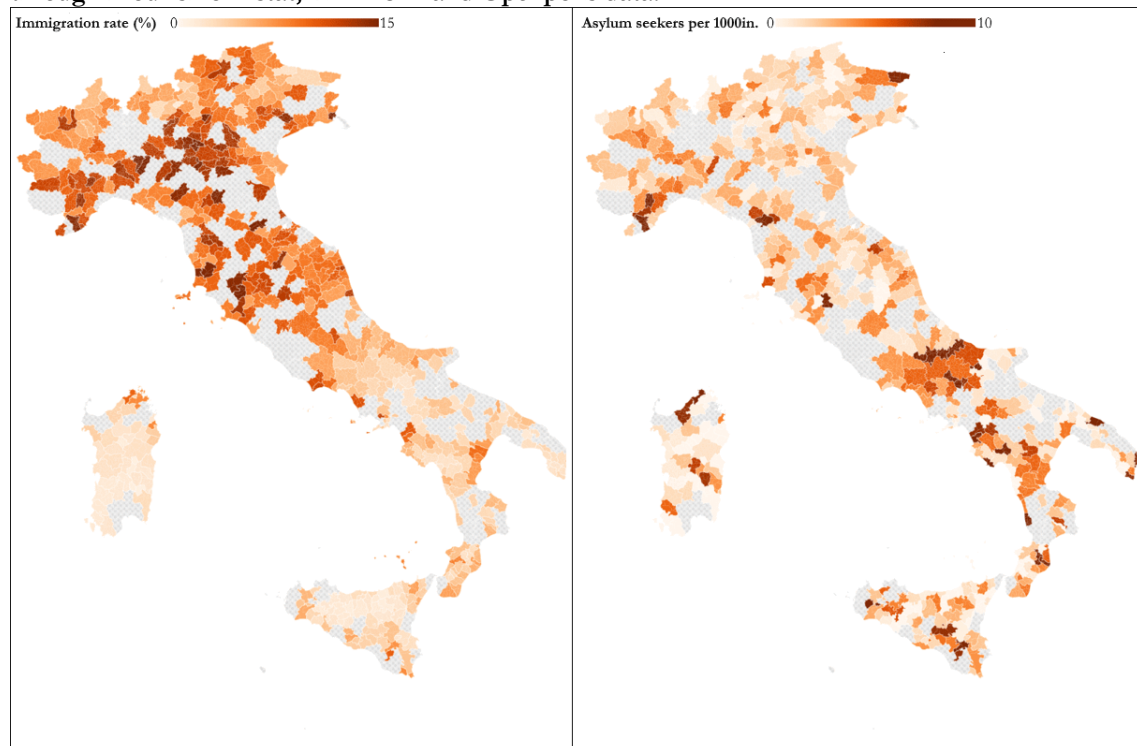
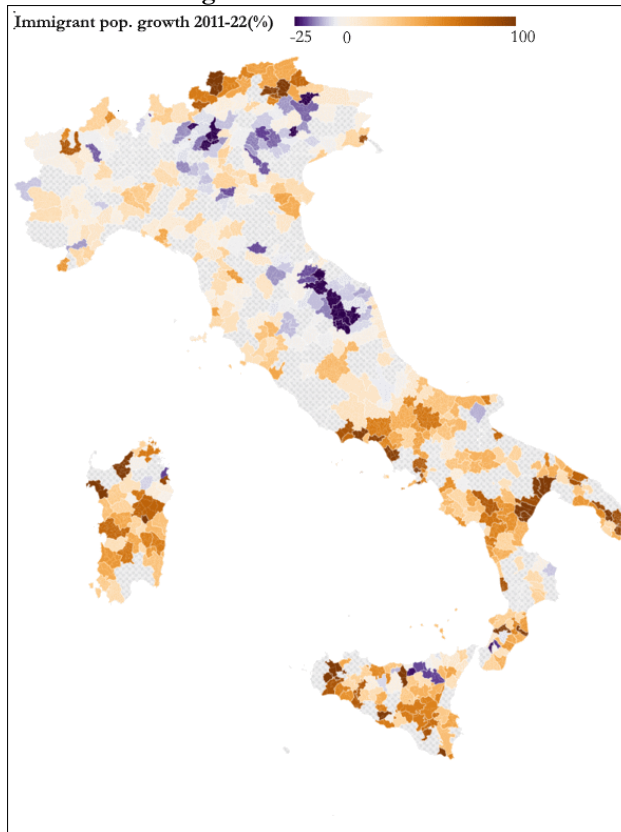


Figure 6. Percent growth of immigrant population in micropolitan LMAs 2011-2021 – Visual elaboration through Flourish on Istat data.



Socio-demographic drivers of immigration patterns towards micropolitan systems

As mentioned in the methodological section, leading indicators for determining the optimal number of clusters point out a 4-clusters solution. Thus, LMAs have been partitioned by the clustering model into four groups, which have then been labelled according to the main characteristics of their immigration patterns. Indeed, the first cluster, which includes 70 LMAs – about 17% of observations – appears to mainly collect *lifestyle migrants-receiving areas* (LMRAs), since it stands out for its very high average share of immigrants from countries with higher per capita GDP than Italy. These are also characterised by a high level of diversity and low segregation and they are mostly located in coastal or mountain areas and in Central and North-Western Italy, which collects respectively 37% and 21% of LMAs within this cluster. Moreover, the higher age on average of the immigrant population in this cluster is a further element reinforcing its identification as lifestyle and amenity migrants-receiving areas.

LMAs falling in the second cluster are labelled as *hypo-diverse areas* (HDAs) because of their low level of diversity in terms of countries of origin. This is the smallest group (about 15%) and they are characterised by an immigrant population mostly coming from Eastern European and Balkan countries, witnessed by the fact that – on average – 66% of the immigrant population is coming from European countries, but the mean share of immigrants coming from countries that were part of the EU before 2004 is only 3%. As for the third cluster, these localities are considered *reception-centred areas* (RCAs), due to the high share of asylum seekers compared to the population, and represent the second largest

clusters resulting from the analysis, including about 28% of total LMAs. From a geographical point of view, it is worth noting that these LMAs seem to be mostly concentrated in the South and Islands (about 67%), as well as in specific areas of Northern Italy not far from the borders. These are also LMAs with the youngest immigrant population and a very high level of segregation on average, suggesting that reception could often be concentrated in a few municipalities within the systems.

Finally, the last and largest cluster – about 40% of clustered LMAs – includes so-called *super-diverse areas* (SDAs), which present the highest immigration rate among all clusters paired with a high level of diversity. These areas are mostly located in Central and Northern Italy and include a large part of the “Third Italy”. Indeed, this macro-area has been traditionally based on widespread micropolitan industrial districts and has consequently relied on a relatively large amount of labour immigration (Bortolotti, Giaccone 2006; Kalb 2020). Therefore, despite some of them being now declining as immigration destinations due to the recent crisis of this economic model, these localities have passed through many different phases of immigration towards Italy, possibly determining their high diversity.

Figure 7. Distribution of clustered LMAs per cluster – Visual elaboration through Flourish.

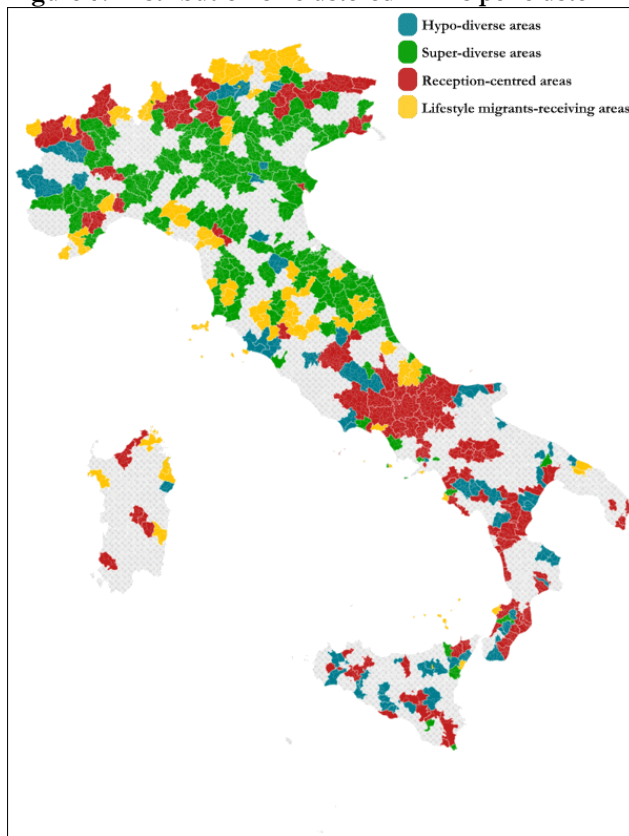


Table 8. Number of observations in each resulting clusters.

Cluster	N	%
<i>Lifestyle migrants-receiving areas</i> (LMRAs)	70	16,9
<i>Hypo-diverse areas</i> (HDAs)	61	14,7
<i>Reception-centred areas</i> (RCAs)	116	28,0
<i>Super-diverse areas</i> (SDAs)	167	40,3

Table 9. Average values of the main clustering variables in each clusters – Elaboration on Istat data.

Cluster	Immigration rate	Asylum seekers per 1000in.	Diversity Index	Segregation Index	Share of potentially lifestyle migrants
LMRAs	8,4%	2,2	12,2	10,7	11,9%
HDAs	6,0%	2,2	30,5	14,9	2,8%
RCAs	4,8%	5,2	13,7	18,5	3,6%
SDAs	10,0%	1,9	12,9	11,3	2,5%
TOTAL	7,7%	2,9	15,6	13,7	4,5%

Table 10. Average value of various demographic dimension of the immigrant population in different clusters - Elaboration on Istat data.

Dimension	LMRAs	HDAs	RCAs	SDAs	TOT
Immigrant population variation 2011-2020	26,0%	37,1%	40,4%	12,8%	26,4%
Immigrant elderly index	61,3	22,5	36,0	31,1	36,3
Share of immigrants under 35y.o.	33,3%	39,8%	40,2%	38,6%	38,3%
Share of immigrants between 35-65y.o.	58,5%	56,5%	54,8%	56,0%	56,2%
Share of immigrants over 65y.o.	8,2%	3,7%	5,0%	5,4%	5,5%
Immigrants coming from Europe	65,6%	65,9%	52,8%	53,0%	57,0%
<i>Immigrants coming from the EU</i>	37,4%	50,6%	34,6%	27,5%	34,6%
<i>Immigrants coming from the EU-2004</i>	11,4%	2,7%	3,5%	2,7%	4,4%
Immigrants coming from Africa	17,7%	21,3%	30,1%	24,3%	24,3%
Immigrants coming from Asia and Oceania	10,5%	9,8%	12,4%	17,9%	13,9%
<i>Immigrants coming from Mashrek and Maghreb</i>	13,0%	15,2%	17,1%	16,0%	15,6%
Immigrants coming from the Americas	6,3%	2,9%	4,8%	4,5%	4,7%
<i>Immigrants coming from Latin America and Caribbeans</i>	5,5%	2,6%	4,3%	4,3%	4,2%

Such partition has been used as the starting point for building the subsequent regression analysis. The aim is to determine the main socio-demographic characteristics of micropolitan areas which are at the roots of the above-identified clusters of immigration patterns, linking them to the Istat typology for classifying Italian LMAs as it has been rebuilt to fit the specific situation of the sole micropolitan localities. Results of the multinomial regression model described in the previous section are thus presented in Table 10 showing both coefficients and relative risk ratio for each variable's effect with robust standard errors in brackets. In this context, super-diverse areas are considered as the reference category for the dependent variable, since this is the largest cluster in terms of observations. As for categoric independent variables, urban centres, manufacturing systems and anti-immigration areas have been respectively used as the reference categories for dummy variables of socio-demographic characteristics, economic specialisation and attitudes towards immigration.

Table 11. Coefficients and RRRs of the multinomial logistic regression model testing the effect of socio-demographic characteristics on immigration patterns towards micropolitan systems.

Independent variable	LMRAs		HDAAs		RCAs	
	β	RRR	β	RRR	β	RRR
Socio-demographic characteristics						
Potentially thriving rural areas	2,109*** [0,534]	8,244*** [4,402]	1,217* [0,593]	3,377* [2,001]	2,984*** [0,716]	19,775*** [14,163]
Declining areas	1,053 [1,015]	2,865 [2,910]	2,121* [0,832]	8,337* [6,938]	4,567*** [1,027]	96,258*** [98,843]
Economic specialisation						
Non-manufacturing systems	1,107** [0,347]	3,025** [1,049]	0,894* [0,429]	2,445* [1,049]	-0,297 [0,394]	0,743 [0,293]
Attitudes towards immigration						
Tightening areas	0,320 [0,471]	1,378 [0,649]	-0,010 [0,538]	0,989 [0,532]	-0,626 [0,448]	0,535 [0,239]
Softening areas	1,541* [0,676]	4,668* [5,157]	1,683* [0,652]	5,381* [3,509]	0,890 [0,595]	2,435 [1,449]
Non-anti-immigration areas	1,029* [0,478]	2,799* [1,338]	0,495 [0,529]	1,640 [0,005]	-0,400 [0,483]	0,670 [0,324]
Continuous independent variables						
Occupation rate	-0,048 [0,471]	0,953 [0,036]	-0,768 [0,044]	0,926 [0,041]	-0,129** [0,042]	0,879** [0,037]
Per capita social expenditure	0,003* [0,001]	1,003* [0,001]	-0,001 [0,002]	0,999 [0,002]	0,004* [0,002]	1,004* [0,002]
Innerness	0,016** [0,005]	1,016** [0,005]	0,017*** [0,005]	1,017*** [0,005]	0,015** [0,004]	1,015** [0,004]
_cons	-2,658 [1,976]	0,070 [0,138]	-0,317 [2,129]	0,728 [1,551]	1,456 [2,217]	4,289 [9,511]
N of observations	414	<i>Super-diverse areas have been chosen as the base outcome.</i>				
Pseudo R2	0,289	<i>Robust standard errors in brackets; * $p < 0,05$; ** $p < 0,01$; *** $p < 0,001$</i>				

Looking at results, significant differences in terms of socio-demographic characteristics seem to emerge between clusters, when controlling for the selected control variables. In particular, lifestyle migrants-receiving areas appear to be more likely to be potentially thriving rural areas rather than urban areas compared to super-diverse areas, while the same relation is not significant for this cluster when considering declining areas. Similarly, both hypo-diverse and reception-centred areas seem to be much more likely to be declining or potentially thriving rural areas rather than urban areas when compared to super-diverse areas, and this is especially relevant for what concerns the likelihood of reception-centred areas being declining areas in relation to that of super-diverse ones. Consequently, super-diverse areas appear more likely to be urban centres rather than one of other socio-demographic types compared to all other three clusters.

As for other independent variables, economic specialisation seems to especially point out the increased likelihood of lifestyle migrants-receiving areas to be non-manufacturing

compared to super-diverse areas, which could be linked to the fact that tourism-centred systems represent a consistent share of non-manufacturing LMAs included in the model (about 37%). Super-diverse areas are more likely than hypo-diverse ones to be manufacturing rather than non-manufacturing. Similarly, when looking at attitudes towards immigration, this variable seems again to contribute to distinguishing lifestyle migrants-receiving areas from super-diverse ones, since the first appears more likely to be systems showing a lower share of votes for anti-immigration parties. Occupation rate is only significant when comparing reception-centred areas to super-diverse ones, showing a reduced likelihood for the first to show up when this variable increases. The opposite is true when considering per capita social expenditure for both reception-centred and lifestyle migrants-receiving areas compared to super-diverse ones, despite its effect being very weak. Finally, the share of the population living in inner areas appears to be significant for all clusters, showing that the likelihood of a LMA being a super-diverse area rather than one of the other clusters decreases when peripherality increases.

The relation between immigration patterns and socio-demographic characteristics is shown more clearly when looking at predictive margins for socio-economic characteristics of micropolitan systems according to clusters of immigration patterns, which are presented in Table 11 and Figure 7. Indeed, predictive margins show that super-diverse areas have a very high probability of being urban centres, while, despite this distinction being weaker, lifestyle migrants-receiving and reception-centred areas appear to have a higher probability to be respectively potentially thriving rural areas and declining areas. The situation is more complex for what concerns hypo-diverse areas, for which it does not seem to emerge an equally evident pattern, although their probability to be potentially thriving rural areas is slightly lower than the one of falling in the other socio-demographic categories.

Figure 8. Predictive margins of socio-demographic types of micropolitan systems according to their immigration patterns with 95% confidence interval – Visual elaboration through Stata 17.

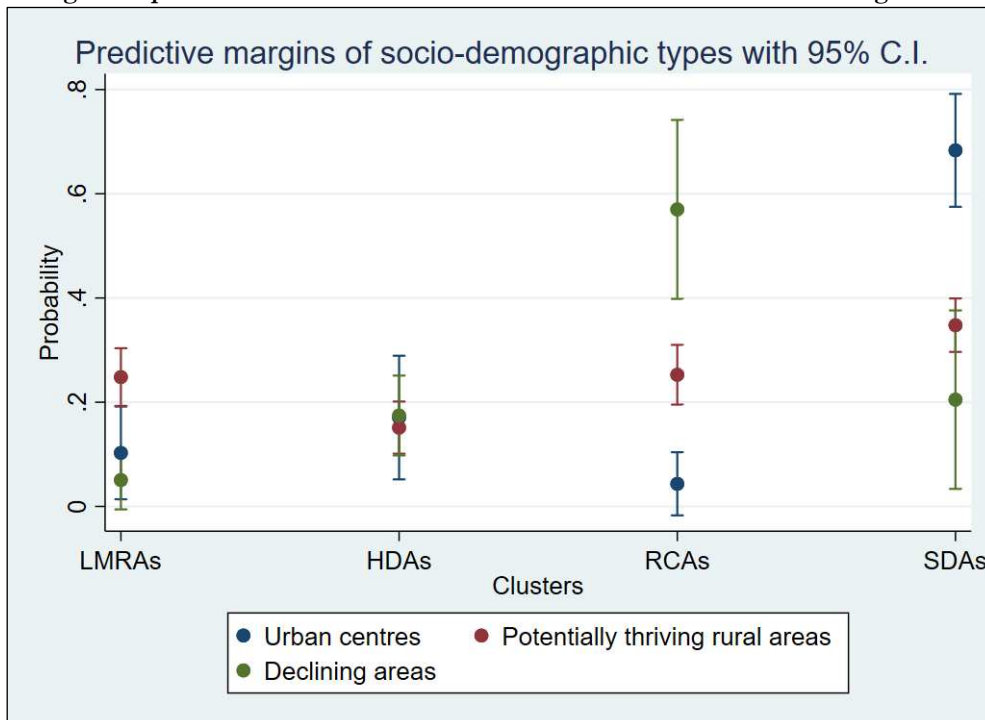


Table 12. Predicted margins for socio-demographic characteristics according to immigration patterns in micropolitan systems.

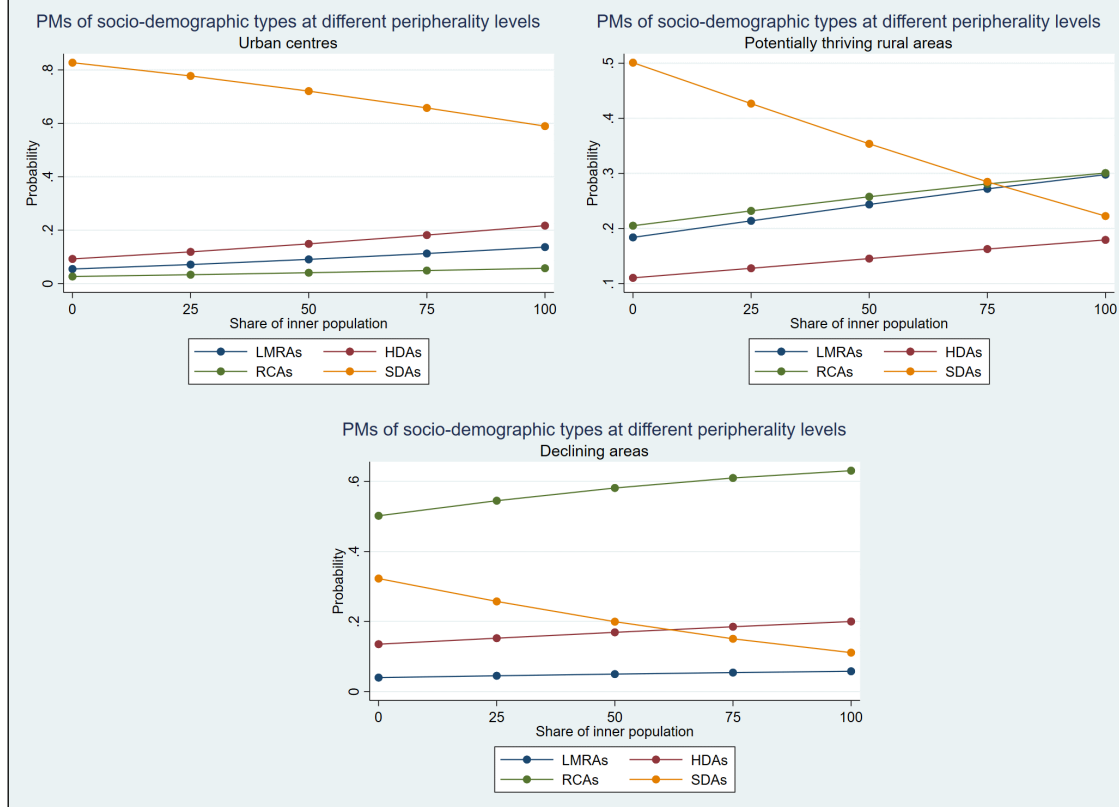
Cluster	Socio-demographic characteristics	Margins	
Lifestyle migrants-receiving areas	Urban centres	0,103*	[0,045]
	Potentially thriving rural areas	0,248***	[0,282]
	Declining areas	0,051	[0,287]
Hypo-diverse areas	Urban centres	0,171**	[0,060]
	Potentially thriving rural areas	0,151***	[0,025]
	Declining areas	0,174***	[0,039]
Reception-centred areas	Urban centres	0,043	[0,031]
	Potentially thriving rural areas	0,253***	[0,292]
	Declining areas	0,570***	[0,088]
Super-diverse areas	Urban centres	0,683***	[0,055]
	Potentially thriving rural areas	0,348***	[0,026]
	Declining areas	0,205*	[0,087]

*Robust standard errors between brackets. * $p < 0,05$; ** $p < 0,01$; *** $p < 0,001$*

Considering predictive margins can also allow to better look at the combined effects of more than one independent variable. In this context, it appears particularly interesting to look at how the effect of socio-demographic characteristics varies within each cluster with the variation of LMAs' peripherality, which is shown in Figure 9. Indeed, the probability of a LMA to be a super-diverse area decreases in each socio-demographic type together with the increase of the peripherality, but this occurs differently within each category. On the one hand, when considering urban centres, super-diverse areas remain by far the most likely at every level of peripherality. On the other hand, the slope of the line when looking at potentially thriving rural areas and declining areas is much more angled downwards than in the first case, to the extent that the predictive margins of super-diverse areas to be potentially thriving rural areas pass from a very high score in case of entirely central systems to a relatively low one in entirely inner systems.

Due to this characteristic, reception-centred and lifestyle migrants-receiving areas become the most likely immigration patterns when considering potentially thriving rural areas that are entirely inner. Reception-centred areas also appear to have the highest probability at every level of peripherality when looking at declining areas and the lowest when looking at urban centres, a characteristic that contributes to further connecting these places with more crisis-prone or isolated localities. Finally, despite results remaining less clear for hypo-diverse areas, it can be noted that this cluster presents the highest probability of showing up at a higher level of peripherality and in declining areas, suggesting the possibility of these localities to be older immigration destinations where current patterns are driven by family reconciliation and similar processes, or destinations of secondary flows.

Figure 9. Predictive margins of socio-demographic types of micropolitan systems according to their immigration patterns controlled by the degree of peripherality – Visual elaboration through Stata 17.



Discussion and conclusion

The present paper has addressed the relation between immigration processes and socio-demographic characteristics of destination localities in Italian non-metropolitan areas, by using a functionalist approach. In this sense, micropolitan areas have been defined by looking at the structure of Labour Market Areas and then used as the unit of reference, firstly performing a k-medians cluster analysis to understand main immigration patterns towards these localities and then relating them to other local characteristics through a multinomial regression analysis. This has been done to better understand which types of immigration and diversification these contexts are experiencing and in order to test a set of hypotheses formulated on the basis of the growing body of literature about immigration towards a different set of localities, mostly consisting of qualitative case-studies. Besides some relevant exceptions potentially connected to data limitation, these hypotheses seem to be confirmed by the analysis carried on in this paper, but findings also suggest some additional elements which have not been initially considered.

Indeed, the reception of asylum seekers emerges as a primary source of diversity in the considered contexts, witnessed by the fact that LMAs with a prevalence of reception immigration are the second largest group. Similarly, lifestyle and amenity migration, despite characterising a minor share of LMAs, still seems to be a non-negligible and specific pattern of micropolitan systems. Different types of labour immigration could not be identified due to the lack of local data about the employment status of the non-citizen population, but, considering other demographic variables – such as age groups and countries of origin, – it appears possible to hypothesise that labour immigration constitutes

a relevant process in micropolitan areas labelled as hypo-diverse and super-diverse, despite these consistently differing in terms of variety and volume of diversity. In particular, super-diverse areas appear as the largest group, suggesting that multi-faceted diversification processes are not exclusively connected to metropolitan contexts. This seems especially true in some areas in Central and Northern Italy, where micropolitan districts have long been at the core of the industrial development model and consequently attract labour immigration, although this situation is possibly changing due to the economic crisis.

Building on clustering results, the multinomial regression analysis has allowed to test the three main hypotheses presented in the first paragraph. Particularly, these are: a) more urbanised and industrialised localities, as well as rural agriculture-centred ones, are expected to be more diverse due to their longer history of immigration; b) more peripheral and crisis-prone localities are expected to mostly receive asylum seekers and refugees, since dispersal and relocation strategies appear to privilege these areas either through higher incentives or taking advantage of their reduced negotiation power; finally, c) primarily rural and peripheral areas with the possibility to mobilise landscape or cultural resources should be the main destination for lifestyle and amenity migrants, which regard a relatively large share of retired, upper-class or counter-urbanising groups.

As for the first one, this is only partially confirmed by the findings of this article. On one hand, it is true that super-diverse areas are much more likely to be urban centres than other categories. This also seems to potentially interact with the centrality degree and industrialisation, since these micropolitan systems also have a higher probability of being central and manufacturing than other areas in almost all cases. On the other hand, these localities appear as more likely to be rural areas only when considering entirely central systems, and they also seem to rarely be non-manufacturing systems, among which agriculture-centred ones are included. Therefore, the second part of the hypothesis cannot be entirely confirmed on the basis of this analysis, but, as mentioned multiple times in the paper, this could also be linked to the lack of local data about undocumented and temporary immigrants, who represent a relatively relevant share of the immigrant population working in Italian agriculture (Corrado 2011; Corrado *et al.* 2018).

Differently from the first, the second hypothesis seems confirmed by this research, showing a very high probability of micropolitan reception-centred areas to be declining LMAs and being the only category for which lower occupation levels contribute to distinguish it from super-diverse areas. This connects to the above-mentioned processes of asylum seekers and refugees' dispersal strategies through incentive-based and top-down coercive measures, which forcibly or voluntarily include many peripheral and crisis-prone areas into the reception system (Fratesi, Percoco, Proietti 2019; Semprebon, Pelacani 2019; Rossi 2023). However, such peculiarities could also be potentially related to North-South imbalances, since spatial socio-economic inequalities largely contribute to distinguishing Northern and Southern LMAs overlapping the different immigration histories of these areas.

The third hypothesis also appears to be confirmed, showing a connection between lifestyle migrants-receiving areas and potentially thriving rural areas, for which the local

potentialities of their territories in terms of cultural heritage and landscape represent a definitory element. This is further reinforced by the increased likelihood of these localities to be non-manufacturing, which is the category of economic specialisation that also includes tourism-centred LMAs as a sub-type. It is worth noting that peripherality also plays a role in increasing the likelihood of a locality to be a lifestyle migrants-receiving area for both urban areas and potentially thriving rural areas, but not in declining areas. This trend could be connected to the construction of the so-called “rural idyll” imaginary, which is a strong driver of lifestyle and amenity migrants towards more isolated localities, but only involves areas that can count on a specific set of local resources (Bender, Kanitscheider 2012; Morén-Alegret, Wladyka 2020).

Finally, no hypotheses were initially formulated for what concerns hypo-diverse areas, which also appear to be the most difficult category to link with specific socio-demographic characteristics. However, the main findings still suggest some possible patterns, by highlighting a potential connection with more declining and peripheral micropolitan systems. Therefore, based on these results, the academic literature and the fact that, despite being mostly characterised by immigration from countries that were prominent in older immigration flows towards Italy, these localities still present relatively high growth in the immigrant population, it is possible that hypo-diverse areas represent destinations of immigrants’ secondary movements, fostered by lower housing prices and network dynamics of established immigrant national groups. However, available data do not allow to test this additional hypothesis, which is deferred to future studies in this field.

To conclude, it is possible to affirm that this paper’s main findings appear to align with the academic literature on the topic, providing a quantitative account of diversification processes outside metropolitan areas, which are usually studied through qualitative tools. Indeed, both the functionalist approach to localities and quantitative tools used in this paper have proved to be helpful in this field, despite presenting some limitations mostly linked to the lack of available data to consider a comprehensive set of dimensions of such a stratified and complex phenomenon. Beyond the above-described results, what emerges from this paper is the necessity to keep studying immigration and diversification outside global and gateway cities, mobilising a set of tools as variegated as possible in order to catch all specificities and common traits of metropolitan and non-metropolitan localities, but also the peculiarities and differences within the latter category.

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The battleground of incorporation policies in rural localities.

Challenges and opportunities in Italian diversifying municipalities¹

Abstract

According to the growing literature on the topic, recent diversification and immigration processes in rural areas entail both the intensification and transformation of traditional patterns (e.g. labour or amenity migrants) and new dynamics (e.g. asylum-seekers and refugees). In localities that often have limited resources and experiences of diversity, these dynamics can originate new challenges and opportunities, making the socio-incorporation of newcomers a central policy issue for local governments which have yet to adopted these measures. Moreover, the limitation of socio-economic resources strongly pushes policy actors to enter the local battleground of immigrant policies, in which these measures are shaped not only through cooperation, but also through conflicts. Therefore, this work investigates socio-economic incorporation policies of Italian rural municipalities through a mixed method design, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. First, k-medians clustering is used to classify Italian rural municipalities according to their main immigration patterns and to better understand their activism in the field of socio-economic incorporation policies. Second, within localities selected based on the previous analysis, 36 semi-structured stakeholders' interviews with key local policymakers are performed to explore actual socio-economic incorporation policies of active rural municipalities. Results show that rural policymakers can develop innovative incorporation strategies, but also that these have different outcomes according to local opportunity structures and immigration contexts. In this context, policymakers rarely act alone: particularly, the role of local civil society and relations with upper level institutions emerge as crucial.

Introduction

In recent decades, European rural areas – and Italian ones, in particular – have experienced significant changes due to international immigration flows, which interact with local contexts in diverse ways (Carrosio 2012). Indeed, despite these areas often sharing common challenges such as limited resources and multiple intertwining crises, research on the subject has revealed that the influx of international immigrants into rural and peripheral areas can lead to varied outcomes (Bock, Osti, Ventura 2016; Glorius 2017; Gretter *et al.* 2017; McAreavey 2018; Sampedro, Camarero 2018). In this scenario, immigration can introduce both new challenges and opportunities for the local development of these regions, with socio-economic incorporation emerging as a central concern for numerous

¹ The present paper is largely based on an article already published by the author on the journal *Mondi Migranti*: Rossi, F. (2023). *Incorporation policies in diversifying rural localities in Italy: challenges and opportunities*. *Mondi Migranti*, 2/2023: 215-236; <https://doi.org/10.3280/MM2023-002011>.

local authorities (Glick Schiller, Çağlar 2018). These authorities play a crucial role in shaping the incorporation of newcomer immigrants, yet simultaneously, they must navigate a network of different actors that influence local policies, either collaborating with or opposing local governments (Caponio 2010; Campomori, Ambrosini 2020).

This article seeks to delve into the role of rural local governments in the socio-economic integration of international immigrants. The focus is particularly on: a) the types of rural municipalities that adopt integration policies and the reasons behind such decisions; b) the actual policies implemented by these localities; and c) the influence of other institutional and non-institutional actors on these policies. The study centres on Italy, offering an interesting case study given the unique characteristics of rural immigration and local policymaking for immigrant measures. Furthermore, despite being aware of the limitation of this approach, throughout this article, the term “immigrant” encompasses various non-citizen categories, including lifestyle, amenity, or labour immigrants, asylum-seekers, and refugees. While acknowledging distinctions among these groups, the quantitative analysis has only been able to separately identify asylum seekers due to data limitations, while nuances of different immigration types have been considered in the qualitative aspect whenever feasible.

Regarding the structure of the article, the first section provides a review of existing scholarship on rural immigration, concentrating on factors that facilitate or hinder incorporation, along with the distinctive features of the Italian context. Subsequently, an examination of local policymaking for immigrants in Italy is conducted using the battleground framework proposed by Campomori and Ambrosini (2020). The subsequent segment unveils quantitative data pertaining to immigration and the activism of Italian rural municipalities in this policy domain, incorporating a cluster analysis to categorise these localities based on their immigration patterns. Lastly, findings from semi-structured interviews with local policymakers are presented, offering a more in-depth exploration of the research questions. This includes a focus on the actual implementation of policies, the political discourse, and the local battlegrounds observed in specific case studies.

Immigration patterns towards rural areas

The increasing diversity in the social composition and directions of migration flows has rendered rural localities progressively heterogeneous within and among themselves (Woods 2007; Carrosio 2012; Balbo 2015; Barberis, Pavolini 2015; McAreavey 2017). Phenomena like amenity or lifestyle immigration and the mobility of seasonal workers have persisted in these areas over the long term. However, in recent decades, these have become intertwined with other processes, including the relocation of asylum-seekers and refugees, secondary internal movements, and the evolution of temporary international workers’ mobility into long-term immigration, driven for instance by family reconciliation (Barberis, Pavolini 2015; McAreavey 2017). According to studies on rural immigration, both old and new rural immigrants encounter highly varied contexts and opportunity structures in these localities.

For instance, such localities may possess limited exposure to diversity and exhibit a more distrustful attitudes towards newcomers, resulting in a less welcoming environment for international immigrants (Barberis, Pavolini 2015; Gargiulo 2017; Glorius 2017). Moreover,

the limited amount of resources of rural municipalities not only limit the potential for social investments but also create challenges in implementing comprehensive social policies and ensuring the accessibility of services, particularly for non-citizens (Patuzzi, Andriescu, Pietropolli 2020; Cabral, Swerts 2021). Additionally, the restructuring of the rural labour markets has diminished job opportunities, confining employment options to specific niches where worker exploitation and racialisation are not uncommon. These issues can be further exacerbated by exclusionary policies, which are often adopted by rural localities stressing discourses about a presumed traditional homogeneity of the population, which does not necessarily correspond to the reality (Corrado 2011; Bock, Osti, Ventura 2016; Miraftab 2016; McAreavey 2018; Cabral, Swerts 2021).

Nevertheless, scholars have also pointed out facilitating characteristics. Firstly, the small-sized context and the close proximity of local authorities can facilitate the gradual development of an inclusive environment through regular interactions among diverse individuals and easiness to access to local governments (Galera et al. 2018; Perlik, Membretti 2018; Woods 2018; Driel 2020; PISTE 2024). Secondly, the absence of substantial funding does not necessarily preclude these localities from discovering alternative methods or innovative solutions to implement incorporation strategies, even with limited investments (Perlik, Membretti 2018; Sampedro, Camarero 2018; Driel 2020; Krasteva 2023). Lastly, various solutions adopted at the local level have been identified for the establishment of effective practices of labour inclusion, albeit still within the few locally available niches. In this sense, immigrants can play a positive role in reshaping local labour markets and revitalising traditional occupations (Miraftab 2016; Kordel, Weidinger 2018; Iocco, Lo Cascio, Perrotta 2019; Membretti, Cutello 2019).

The aforementioned frame is also evident in the Italian context, where rural immigration is a consistent and not entirely new phenomenon, being fostered by labour market segmentation since the 1980s (Barberis, Pavolini 2015). Furthermore, the influx of international immigrants into rural areas in Italy has increased in recent years, with the arrival of international immigrants serving as the sole counterforce to depopulation in many localities (Barberis, Pavolini 2015; Corrado, 2017; Carrosio, Lo Presti 2018). In this scenario, amenity or lifestyle migration and remigration continue to be significant phenomena in certain regions (Bender, Kanitscheider 2012). However, the most crucial current flows involve labour migration and the reception of asylum-seekers and refugees (Barberis, Pavolini 2015). Labour migration is predominantly motivated by two factors: firstly, certain rural areas provide job opportunities in specific niches, particularly in agriculture and care work, where labour demand often remains unmet also due to poor working conditions (Corrado, Osti 2019); secondly, these areas typically offer affordable housing options, which, when combined with local job prospects or the ability to commute to other localities, serve as strong incentives for certain groups (Marzorati, Semprebon, Bonizzoni 2017; Membretti, Lucchini, 2018).

Regarding reception, rural areas in Italy are increasingly participating in both the SAI (System of Reception and Integration) and CAS (Centres of Extraordinary Reception) systems. The former is a voluntary and municipality-driven reception program, while the latter represents a top-down managed emergency reception system. Despite being initially

conceived as a residual solution, CAS has become predominant at the national level. National top-down relocation strategies, facilitated by CAS placement, play a significant role in the proliferation of reception centres in rural areas. Simultaneously, these processes are stimulated by socio-economic opportunities linked to reception, particularly related to repopulation and the creation of new jobs and funding, which may increase the welcomingness of these localities but also foster an utilitarianistic view of immigration (Annunziata 2017; Corrado 2017; Galera *et al.* 2018; Semprebon, Pelacani 2020). All these factors contribute to a wide range of immigration experiences in Italian rural areas, which interact with pre-existing territorial divisions, such as the North-South divide or the distinctions between inner and core areas.

The local immigrant policymaking in Italy as a battleground

Concerning immigrant policymaking in Italy, despite many scholars highlighting the central role of mayors especially in small towns and rural areas (Balbo 2015; Haselbacher, Segarra 2022), this process is significantly influenced by a network of institutional and non-institutional actors operating at various scales, often pursuing distinct objectives. These actors have diverse and sometimes overlapping responsibilities, with the potential for cooperation or conflict among them, collectively contributing to the local design and implementation of measures in this domain. Given these dynamics, immigrant policymaking in Italy has frequently been analysed through the lens of Multi-Level Governance (Caponio 2010; Campomori, Caponio 2017; Gianfreda 2021). However, a more recent framework suggests defining it as a “battleground” to better understand the interplay between horizontal and vertical dimensions, as well as the simultaneous presence of cooperation and conflict within this field (Campomori, Ambrosini 2020; Ambrosini 2021).

As outlined by Campomori and Ambrosini (2020), the contentious and intricate nature of immigrant policymaking has escalated to the point where the involved actors may not only cooperate but also engage in clashes or maintain ambivalent relations. In contrast to Multi-Level Governance, which tends to emphasise negotiation as the central aspect, the concept of a battleground allows for a broader exploration of connections within this field and a consideration of the positions of different stakeholders in relation to each other. Consequently, through this perspective, it becomes possible to comprehend how incorporation policies result from a collection of potentially overlapping and conflicting measures, implemented by different actors at various scales (Campomori, Ambrosini 2020; Ambrosini 2021; Dimitriadis *et al.* 2021).

The complexity of this framework is further heightened by the multifaceted nature of incorporation policies, encompassing diverse dimensions such as labour market inclusion, legal status definition, access to the welfare system, social capital, and the development of interpersonal relations. All these components contribute to making the formulation and execution of local incorporation policies a challenging undertaking, where the crucial coordination among various actors is consistently impeded by the fragmentation of competencies, skills, and resources (Barberis, Angelucci 2022). In this context,

municipalities find themselves at the forefront of local immigrant policymaking, not only as individual entities but also as integral parts of a larger network of institutions.

Indeed, despite not precluding individual municipalities or other local institutions from formulating their own policies in this domain, the planning of territorial social policies, which encompass various incorporation policies, is primarily undertaken – when in existence – by Territorial Social Areas (ATS). These are inter-municipal management bodies established by Regions and formed by local governments, but also typically involving other actors as local health administrations (Previtali, Salvati 2018). Furthermore, local associations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) play a crucial role in filling the gaps left by public social planning, especially as municipalities lack the resources required to expand social protection schemes. Finally, private entities and actors from the third sector are increasingly vital as implementers of social policies at the grassroots level (Andreotti, Mingione 2016; Campomori, Ambrosini 2020; Gianfreda 2021; Semperebon 2021; Semperebon, Marzorati, Bonizzoni 2023).

Other measures, that are relevant for local incorporation policies but not directly tied to social policies, present a similar scenario. For example, these include initiatives aimed at promoting social interactions among diverse local residents, where the collaboration between local authorities and civil society is crucial. Additionally, there are instances of local actors implementing broader projects financed through supranational resources, such as the EU Asylum Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), although the allocation of these funds is often managed at the national level. Furthermore, schools and Provincial Centres for Adult Education (CPIA) – as well as other local or supra-local territorial institutions, as for instance Prefectures – enjoy autonomy in defining specific measures to facilitate the incorporation of immigrants. Finally, the determination of immigrant legal statuses is primarily the responsibility of the State and the EU. Yet, local actors occasionally intervene in this domain. For example, they may offer social services to irregular immigrants or implement national measures with local variations, also including more exclusionary applications (Gargiulo 2011; Ambrosini 2018).

Within this intricate framework, political positions of different actors at the different levels and the polarisation of the immigration discourse at the local level also matter, delineating the contentiousness of immigrant policies and shaping strategies for their adoption (Haselbacher, Segarra 2022; Caponio, Pettrachin 2023). Therefore, in all these instances, the involvement of multiple actors with convergent or conflicting objectives contributes to the creation of not just one but multiple intersecting policy battlegrounds where these measures take shape. To comprehend these dynamics, this article focuses on a specific scale and actor – the local government of municipalities in rural areas – by examining how incorporation policies and strategies are formulated at this level through negotiations, collaborations, or conflicts with other actors.

Methods and data

This paper employs a mixed-methods sequential design, using the quantitative analysis to set the context and define general guidelines and questions to orient the qualitative research. Regarding the quantitative analysis, two sets of variables are proposed to

understand immigration patterns in diverse localities and their activism in immigrant policies. The six variables addressing diversification are selected based on the academic literature, as well as available data and their relevance in the studied contexts. Meanwhile, policy activism is operationalised through two variables linked to participation in reception and social policies explicitly targeting immigrants. The descriptive quantitative analysis encompasses all Italian municipalities, while clustering focuses on 5005 out of 5040 rural municipalities due to missing data. Various localities are categorised according to the Eurostat spatial typology (Eurostat 2021), which distinguishes between cities, towns, semi-dense areas, and rural areas.

Table 1. Description of variables.

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Source</i>
Immigration rate	Non-nationals on the total resident population (2020).	Istat
Immigration growth	Percent growth of non-nationals (2011-2020).	Istat
Variety of immigration	Non-nationals from the two largest groups on the total non-national population (2020).	Istat
Share of asylum seekers	Asylum seekers on the total non-national population (2019).	Centri d'Italia, RETESAI
Share of EU citizens	Non-nationals from other EU countries on the total non-national population (2020).	Istat
Share of elder immigrants	Non-nationals older than 60 years on the total non-national population (2020).	Istat
Social expenditure for immigrant social policies	Expenditure in the budget chapter "Immigrants, Roma and Sinti" (2020).	Istat
Participation in the reception system	Reception centres in the municipal territory (2019).	Centri d'Italia, RETESAI

Despite limitations being noted in the literature, such as the typology's failure to distinguish between low-density areas dedicated to human activities and purely natural ones (Skorupka 2017), the selection of this reference tool is primarily influenced by its easy accessibility and application, having already been tested by scholars in this field at the municipal level (Fertner 2012). Moreover, despite not necessarily corresponding to an unambiguous definition of rural areas, Eurostat identification of rural areas also represents a discursive tool with actual effects on the self-perception of a locality as rural (Halfacree 1993), especially after its establishment as the official method for the definition of rural areas in EU countries (Cattivelli 2021). In this sense, similarly to what noted by Halfacree (1993) for the "academic discourse" about the rural, Eurostat rural/urban typology may also be considered as a social representation, which, albeit potentially misplaced in some contexts, is capable to produce actual effects through the provision of resources and identification mechanisms.

This aspect of the Eurostat typology has not been considered in the quantitative part, but it has been implicitly included in the qualitative case-selection, using the disclosure of the focus on rural localities in the invitations for interviews as a way to make interviewees selecting themselves based on their self-perception. Indeed, as noted by de Olde and

Oosterlynck (2022), perceiving the place as rural may be a key identity building element even in localities where urban and rural characteristics are mixing, shaping the way in which local government positions themselves from a political point of view. Therefore, despite limitations existing, controlling the selection of eligible municipalities for the qualitative analysis is thus considered a way to indirectly narrow the field to places where the rural dimension is potentially influencing within policymaking processes.

To gain a better understanding of immigration patterns across multiple dimensions, the first step of this research has been to perform a cluster analysis of rural municipalities based on selected variables. The goal of clustering is to empirically establish a classification through statistical techniques by grouping elements based on their similarity on a set of previously identified variables (Bailey 1994). The proposed cluster analysis adopts a methodology similar to that of Pisarevskaya, Scholten, and Kaşlı (2021) and has been executed using Stata 17. Makles's (2012) procedure has been employed to empirically determine the number of clusters, and k-medians clustering has been favoured due to its better handling of outliers (Whelan, Harrel, Wang 2015). The objective is to understand the distinct immigration patterns characterising rural localities and, in conjunction with data on immigrant policy activism, to generate hypotheses regarding the types of rural localities that opt to implement immigrant policies.

Finally, 36 semi-structured interviews were conducted in various rural municipalities with policymakers responsible for designing local incorporation policies. In particular, since the responsibility for designing such policies does not always rely on the same figure, three types of actors were included, depending on who was entitled for them in each municipality: mayors, councillors with management responsibilities, and municipal welfare managers. The interviews concentrate on a) the reasons municipalities adopt specific incorporation policies and the political discourses surrounding them, b) the actual policies and their primary outcomes, and c) the involvement of other actors in local incorporation policies. The municipalities involved in this segment were chosen among those that are both rural and active according to gathered data.

A certain degree of variety has also been ensured by integrating in the selection a series of characteristics, which have been tried to keep as balanced as possible. These characteristics are geographical positioning, government political orientation, experience (or non experience) of reception, and immigration patterns resulting from the cluster analysis. However, it has not been possible to have a perfect balance across all aforementioned categories due to the necessity to replace some initially selected municipalities due to unavailability to participate in the research or the dropout after the disclosure of the exclusive focus on rural areas, despite being formally considered as such by the Eurostat typology. Annex 1 provides the main characteristics of each locality, with names withheld for privacy considerations.

The analysis of interviews follows the operationalisation of Timmermans and Tavory's (2012) three-step abductive analysis, as articulated by Vila-Henninger and colleagues (2022), but it also includes results of the previous quantitative analysis in the analysis. Initially, a codebook was developed based on the academic literature presented in the preceding

sections. This codebook was then integrated with two additional codebooks, one derived from the main findings of the clustering and subsequent descriptive analysis based on that, and another from an initial inductive analysis of the interviews. Subsequently, abductive data reduction was executed through code equations, coupled with in-depth qualitative analysis. The MaxQDA software facilitated the analysis of the first part, while a “manual” analysis was employed for the latter.

Acknowledging the diversity of immigration in rural areas

Data regarding immigration in Italy exhibit variations across different spatial types, with cities witnessing the most significant growth, highest immigration rate, and average diversity in terms of countries of origin of the immigrant population. Apparently, rural localities encounter the lowest volume and variety of immigration, but they also exhibit the highest internal variability in nearly all selected variables and other peculiar characteristics, indicating that this overarching framework only captures a portion of the reality. A similar trend is evident in data concerning immigrant policy activism. Approximately 50.1% of municipalities adopt some social immigrant policies, but notable variations exist. While the vast majority of cities appear active (71.4%), only 40.6% of rural municipalities declare budgetary allocations for social immigrant policies. Although this might imply a lower emphasis on this field, the situation is nearly reversed when exclusively focusing on active municipalities. Active rural municipalities, on average, allocate more funds than other spatial types, and – once again – they exhibit the greatest variability².

Table 2. Mean of selected variables – Elaboration on Istat and Centri d'Italia data.

	Immigration rate	Immigration growth	Variety of immigration	Asylum seekers	EU citizens	Elderly immigrants
<i>Cities</i>	7,6% (5,0)	53,8% (48,9)	37,6% (11,6)	3,0% (5,5)	21,9% (9,6)	8,1% (2,8)
<i>Towns and semi-dense areas</i>	7,2% (4,0)	30,1% (61,8)	46,2% (14,2)	2,9% (5,6)	32,0% (15,8)	9,4% (4,0)
<i>Rural areas</i>	6,2% (4,2)	43,6% (164,0)	56,4% (18,4)	4,1% (9,3)	43,4% (22,0)	12,9% (11,3)
TOTAL	6,6% (4,2)	39,5% (136,2)	52,4% (17,8)	3,7% (8,6)	38,9% (20,7)	11,6% (9,5)

² Data only capture earmarked funds – policies categorised by municipalities as directly targeting immigrants – thus overlooking measures not separated in the budget by localities with a more “assimilationist” approach.

Table 3. Mean and standard deviation of immigrant social expense per capita and in relation to total social expense of active municipalities – Elaboration on Istat data.

	Immigrant social expenditure per capita (€)	Share of immigrant social expense on total social expense
<i>Cities</i>	6,3 (10,3)	4,5% (5,9)
<i>Towns and semi-dense areas</i>	4,0 (11,0)	3,5% (7,8)
<i>Rural areas</i>	8,0 (36,1)	5,8% (13,3)
TOTAL	6,1 (27,1)	4,7% (11,0)

Concerning reception, 34.2% of asylum seekers are accommodated in cities compared to 23.5% in rural municipalities (Centri d'Italia 2021). However, the proportion of received individuals relative to the resident population in municipalities that have joined the SAI network is approximately seven times higher in rural areas than the average in cities. A similar pattern emerges from CAS reception, indicating an uneven impact of relocation policies across territories. This is also in line with what has been noted in the academic literature about dispersal strategies of refugees and asylum seekers pursued either through coercive or incentive-based policies at the national level, which disproportionately affect rural and peripheral areas with the ambiguous aims of hiding reception in remote places and avoiding segregation in large centres (Campesi 2018; Galera *et al.* 2018; Membretti, Lucchini 2020).

Table 4. Mean and standard deviation of asylum-seekers per 1000 residents in municipalities with at least one reception centre – Elaboration on Centri d'Italia and RETESAI data.

	SAI network	CAS	TOTAL
<i>Cities</i>	2,6 (1,9)	2,6 (2,8)	2,5 (2,7)
<i>Towns and semi-dense areas</i>	4,3 (4,9)	3,5 (4,3)	3,6 (4,5)
<i>Rural areas</i>	18,2 (22,7)	11,7 (17,2)	12,4 (17,8)
TOTAL	9,5 (16,2)	7,3 (12,8)	7,8 (13,5)

All these factors imply that, despite rural localities seeming less diverse than other spatial types, when they become destinations for forced and/or voluntary immigration flows, these municipalities may experience them with greater intensity. To understand the diversity of these situations, this section suggests a classification of Italian rural localities based on patterns and diversity of their immigrant population. This is achieved through a cluster analysis using the previously described methods and variables. The analysis yields

five clusters, but for analytical purposes, clusters 2 and 5 have been combined, since cluster 5 primarily comprised outliers, and cluster 2 was the closest to it across various dimensions.

Table 5. Number of municipalities in each resulting cluster.

Cluster	N. of municipalities	Per cent
1	1073	21,4%
2	523	10,5%
3	1359	27,2%
4	1879	37,5%
5	171	3,4%
TOT	5005	100,0

Table 6. Mean of selected variables according to ID categories – Elaboration on Istat and Centri d'Italia data.

Custer	Immigration rate	Immigration growth	Variety of immigration	Asylum seekers	EU citizens	Elderly immigrants
Non-ID (1)	5,6%	-4,4%	73,1%	1,1%	68,4%	13,7%
New ID (2, 5)	5,2%	258,4%	52,2%	15,6%	40,2%	11,1%
Lasting ID (3)	6,4%	48,5%	53,8%	4,1%	43,7%	12,1%
Former ID (4)	7,0%	-10,2%	50,8%	1,7%	30,0%	13,7%
TOT	6,3%	44,2%	56,6%	4,1%	43,4%	12,9%

Based on the findings and aforementioned scholarship, localities within the merged clusters 2 and 5 are designated as New Immigration Destinations (McAreavey, 2018). This label reflects their experience of high diversity and substantial growth in their immigrant populations, particularly driven by humanitarian flows of (young) asylum-seekers. In contrast, clusters 3 and 4 are respectively referred to as Lasting Immigration Destinations and Former Immigration Destinations. These clusters include localities with the highest immigration rate and a broad spectrum of immigrant backgrounds. However, they differ in immigration patterns: the former comprises localities where immigration persists, largely due to humanitarian flows, while the immigrant population in the latter is declining and aging. Lastly, the first cluster encompasses localities with a low immigration rate, variety, and diversity, and thus, these Non-Immigration Destinations are not considered eligible for selection in the qualitative analysis. Regarding the activism of municipalities, the majority of active municipalities belong to Lasting and Former Immigration Destinations (44.6% and 49.4%). However, these clusters have the lowest level of social expenditure per capita among active municipalities. In contrast, active New Immigration Destinations appear to allocate higher spending than other classes, but their activism rate is lower (41.6%).

Table 7. Average immigrant social expenditure per capita and in relation to the total social expense of "active" municipalities according to resulting clusters – Elaboration on Istat and RETESAI data.

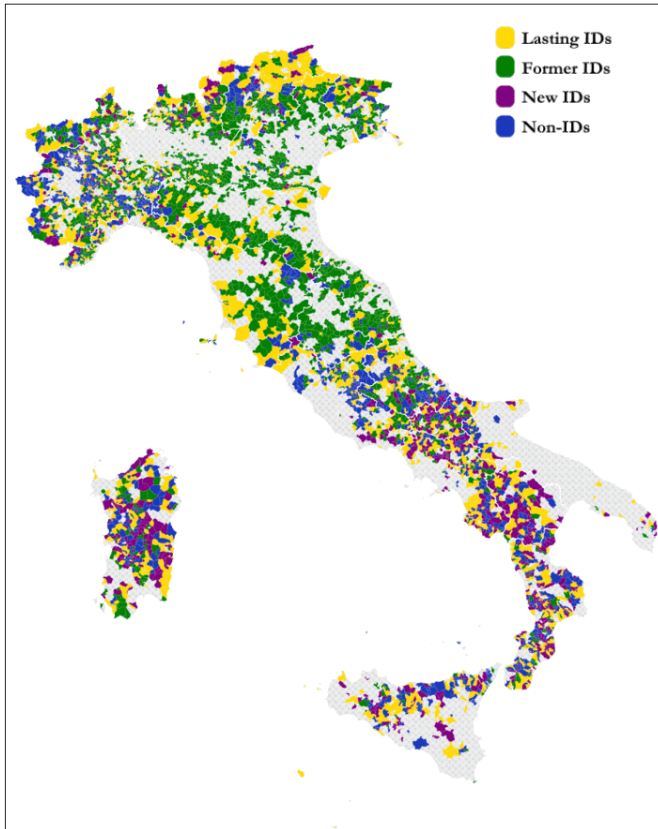
Cluster	Immigrant social expenditure per capita (€)	Immigrant social expenditure on total social expenditure	Localities with SAI
Non-IDs	7,9	8,7%	1,3%
New IDs	23,0	9,8%	20,3%
Lasting IDs	5,7	4,7%	6,1%
Former IDs	3,4	3,2%	1,7%
TOT	7,4	5,4%	5,4%

Another relevant aspect concerns the geographical distribution of clustered rural localities. The South and Islands exhibit a substantial share of New Immigration Destinations, underscoring the significance of reception and recent humanitarian flows - especially from Northern Africa – in these areas. However, this category is also notable in the North-West, particularly in border localities, suggesting the potential relevance of “internal hotspots” in this macro-region, that are those areas placed at border passages which – often unwillingly – become reception localities due to repression and restrictions on the movement of people wanting to leave Italy (Semprebon, Pelacani 2020). Lasting Immigration Destinations are dispersed across all regions, identifying localities where certain economic niches, such as agriculture, woodcutting, or seasonal tourism, play a prominent role. Lastly, the Centre-North is home to numerous Former Immigration Destinations, corresponding to de-industrializing, depopulating, and peripheral rural localities, partly overlapping the area of the so-called “Third Italy”. These are also places where immigration has decreased, and/or long-established immigrants have gradually become citizens.

Table 8. Distribution of clustered localities among Italian macro-areas – Elaboration on Istat data.

Cluster	Islands	South	Centre	North-West	North-East	TOT
Non-ID	27,2%	23,3%	22,0%	23,1%	11,5%	21,4%
New ID	26,6%	28,3%	5,3%	8,3%	4,6%	13,9%
Lasting ID	30,7%	32,3%	25,9%	24,3%	24,8%	27,1%
Former ID	15,5%	16,1%	46,8%	44,3%	59,1%	37,5%

Figure 1. Distribution of clustered localities – Visual elaboration via Flourish.



This initial analysis suggests that when rural municipalities do adopt policies in this field, it becomes a pivotal choice that places newcomers' incorporation at the forefront of the political action of local governments. Additionally, the clusters, along with their geographical distribution, contribute to illustrating the diversity of experiences and conditions of immigration in rural localities, shedding light on potential locally embedded patterns and opportunity structures. Based on the findings of the descriptive analysis filtered through the cluster analysis and the resulting relations between immigration patterns and local activism immigrant policies, some preliminary explorative hypotheses can be exposed to orient the subsequent qualitative analysis.

Firstly, the higher expenditure for immigrant policies in New Immigration Destinations does not necessarily indicate a higher commitment to these measures. Instead, it might suggest the implementation of less effective strategies due to a lack of expertise, experienced actors, and/or emergency situations. Conversely, Former and Lasting Immigration Destinations are expected to have a more developed network of actors dealing with immigration issues, which could potentially enable them to keep carrying out a comprehensive incorporation strategies without investing much. In the case of the latter, there may also be more diverse immigration flows, introducing new resources that could be fruitfully mobilised by localities with some experience in this field, as well as higher support of established immigrant networks supporting policymaking in this field. Starting from these guiding hypotheses, the next section delves more closely into active rural municipalities, employing qualitative tools to focus on a restricted set of case studies. This

aims to understand the dynamics emerging from this analysis within the battleground of immigrant policies.

The battleground of incorporation policies in Italian rural municipalities

Despite the diversity of contexts, interviews reveal two primary reasons for adopting incorporation policies. On one hand, there are proactive localities that explicitly consider immigration as a key element for development strategies. In these places, which often – though not always – are Former and Lasting Immigration Destinations, immigration serves as a means to address the crises they are facing – particularly the demographic one – and it appears as crucial for maintaining basic services, such as schools. On the other hand, there are municipalities where immigration is triggered by external factors, such as a frontier position or national relocation policies. Among selected case-studies, these are all New Immigration Destinations – usually having CAS-based reception, – and their local policymakers adopt incorporation policies mainly as a necessity to avoid potentially negative consequences or the rise of social conflict. Examples illustrating these opposing perspectives are provided in the following quotes, both coming from two New Immigration Destinations:

We started with 15 received people within our centre and now they are 70-80. These families help us with their children attending school: here, newborns are almost zero, so they help us to keep some classes open. [...] Another positive effect is that the occupation of young people increases a lot, because we have many people working in these projects who can contribute to their families with these salaries. (Interview n.3, mayor)

The Prefecture created a CAS, that now receives about 70 persons in view of a resident population of 650. [...] From a bureaucratic viewpoint, relations between the municipality and the centre are absent: we are never called upon. Actually, the Prefecture opened this centre without telling anyone. [...] This does not mean that the municipality has not a role, because it is essential to ensure the centre is not seen as an intruder entity and thus we need to implement integration policies. (Interview n.23, mayor)

These situations arise irrespective of the political context, and both left-wing and right-wing local governments associate the adoption of incorporation policies more with pragmatism than ideology, a perspective supported by scholarship on similar cases (Marzorati, Sempredon, Bonizzoni 2017). Yet, pragmatic approaches are also employed to hide ideological stances and defuse potential contentious elements. In this sense, political attitudes appear to matter when justifying these measures to the local population. Particularly, while left-wing policymakers frequently emphasise humanitarian reasons or the benefits of multiculturalism, interviewed right-wing policymakers adopt a “rhetoric of exceptionalism”, aiming to distinguish local immigrant groups – or at least some of them – from the negative perception of immigration at the national level. This distinction also manifests in a set of expectations that these policymakers project onto immigrants, potentially influencing how they are integrated into the local community, as well as in the continuing perception of immigrants as a separate “they”, often perceived as being “in debt” with the destination locality. For instance, a right-wing mayor declares:

We are working a lot on this [immigrants’ participation in local social activities organised by the municipality] because you cannot just receive benefits; you also need to give something. [...] We have a very welcoming approach: when they ask for something, we give it to them, especially for children in schools and other needs they have, so we are completely available. However, for now, they are only receiving things and do not cooperate in other situations. (Interview n.34, mayor)

Regarding the measures implemented, social incorporation typically forms the central focus of local governments' actions. Interviews reveal that this aspect is deemed crucial due to the smallness of their local contexts and communities, and particularly within New Immigration Destinations, where policymakers invest in social incorporation to mitigate potential conflicts arising from a sudden increase of diversity in localities unaccustomed to it. To address this challenge, municipalities often assume a sponsorship role, introducing incorporation policies and occasionally introducing newcomers to long-time residents through dedicated events.

Social incorporation is also pursued through various policies designed to encourage mutual understanding and social interactions. Cultural festivals, social dinners, or other public gatherings are suggested for this purpose, and sometimes they also serve broader objectives, such as revitalising local tourism. Furthermore, in contexts where personal connections are fundamental to social life and characterised by small, often family-run, firms, this facilitates newcomers' access to social capital and the labour market. The emphasis on the direct relationship between municipalities and the local population, along with the pragmatic approach in presenting new immigration flows at the local level, is evident in these excerpts from interviews:

I do not see any criticalities in the way migrants are received by other residents. For instance, there was this condo where the owner gave us availability for hosting refugees. I was responsible for social policies at that time, apartment and we organised a meeting with the residents. Someone was hesitant at first, but then these people went there to live, and the lady from the upper floor started bringing them soup, they gave them a bike, and so on. (Interview n.26, mayor)

In other localities, they organised conferences or special municipal councils, but when you do these types of assemblies the worst part of the people often emerge. Then, to avoid this, we use a different method, a different strategy. We went house by house to talk with families and we explained what were our motivations to making that choice [to join the SAI system]. [We said that], beyond the humanitarian reasons, that were driven by our awareness and our cultural formation, we could also consider it an opportunity for young people from our municipality. And now there are psychologists, social workers and educators working here, all people who would have moved away to work with these degrees. (Interview n.21, mayor)

Another crucial element for social incorporation is identified in the knowledge of the Italian language. Some interviewed municipalities have employed specific staff for language support. However, in most case studies, they lack the resources to independently implement these measures. Voluntary reception eases the task, as it envisions the presence of a mediator and language courses, with municipalities only needing to ensure their implementation by reception managers. Within Lasting Immigration Destinations, the presence of immigrant self-organisations or established immigrant groups also mitigates language barriers granting easy access to informal mediation. Schools and adult education programmes are other essential actors for this purpose, organising language courses and collaboratively developing specific projects with local authorities. In particular, public schools within the interviewed localities serve as really diverse environments, where reciprocal incorporation can occur. For instance, this is illustrated by the enhancement of foreign language teaching to align with the main local immigrant communities, as described in the quote below.

We mostly focus on the school to be highly inclusive, offering a lot of free services even to facilitate families wanting to bring their children here, to the extent that from the bordering localities many non-Italian families send their children to our school. [...] We have very multicultural classes; in some of them there are 10 foreign children and 5 Italians. [...] The reception project also represents a way to finance things in the school that otherwise we cannot afford: for instance, we offer enhanced second language teaching to foster intercultural communication. (Interview n.12, councillor with management responsibilities)

The attention to countering social segregation is paralleled among interviewees by efforts to avoid spatial segregation, which can be a significant issue in places where distances are often large and difficult to traverse with public transport. The creation of “ghettos” in small towns and rural areas is a recognised problem in the academic literature due to the potentially more serious impact of segregation in sparsely populated localities (Kreichauf 2015), and interviewed policymakers also seem to be aware of it. Therefore, specific policies are implemented for this purpose, including the spreading of public housing, scattered reception facilities, and initiatives to enhance accessible local mobility. However, this is often insufficient, particularly in the case of reactive New Immigration Destinations, where the social needs of newcomers and the spatial concentration of specific groups are often intensified by external factors, such as emergency reception.

As for economic incorporation, the framework resulting from interviews is more ambiguous. Most case studies represent places where the labour market is shrinking or limited to specific economic niches, and newcomers cannot always rely on networks of co-nationals. Nevertheless, interviewed municipalities adopt at least some policies to counter potential situations of labour exploitation, which are usually seen as a source of social conflict. These measures primarily aim to facilitate newcomers’ inclusion in the local labour market with more stable positions, without necessarily creating new opportunities outside labour or ethnic niches. An example of this is tailored training courses to obtain official qualifications in agriculture or care work. This is sometimes facilitated by the collaboration of local firms, particularly in localities where depopulation and ageing have generated labour demand. An example of this approach can be seen, for instance, in the language policy described by an interviewed mayor:

The firm managers told me that there were some problems in employing immigrant women due to language barriers because, if they don't speak Italian, it is difficult to carry on the work that is based on supply chains. I answered them that they were right and I said to [immigrant] women presenting their curriculum to me that they, if they attend the language course I was about to organise for them, they could be employed by this local firm. And this is what happened and I'm proud of this, because they [women] learnt a bit of Italian language and the firm understood that the institutions are here to help. (Interview n.15, mayor)

Civic society associations appear to play a crucial role in various situations. As also highlighted in the literature, rural localities generally have limited civic networks, but these can be more easily mobilised, thanks to their proximity to policymakers and frequent acquaintances (Caponio, Donatiello, Ponzo 2022). Consequently, conflict is less common than negotiation, and these entities often leverage their skills and contacts to shape and enhance the actions of local governments. For example, collaboration with the local network of civic society associations is frequently deemed essential for the aforementioned initiatives focused on social incorporation, enabling the involvement of diverse groups within the local population and providing personnel for their implementation. In New

Immigration Destinations, the mediating role of mayors or other key policymakers is often necessary for this collaboration to occur, helping to alleviate the initial distrust of natives towards newcomers.

However, there are also instances of the opposite, where certain civic society actors – usually of a religious nature in the case studies of this research – act as mediators between newcomer immigrants and the local government, sometimes even assuming direct responsibility for reception. Such dynamics also result in different level of contentiousness and cooperation among actors, with conflict especially originating in New Immigration Destinations where associations are frequently external to the locality or involved by other institutions in emergency reception. The following quotes provide opposite examples of relations between the municipality and civil society actors dealing with immigration-related issues:

We cooperate with local associations much more [than with public institutions]. There is a lot of integration. We have a strong network aiming at the improvement of the liveability of our municipality and we work together, regardless the political positions that are sometimes not coincident. [...] There is an entire world of associations very much in relation with the local administration. (Interview n.25, mayor)

As for the local voluntary sector, including religious institutions and other associations, I repeat what I said before: there was a lot of declarations on newspaper saying that we need to welcome refugees and we must do this and they also attacked me when I said that 60 asylum seekers were too many for us. But in the end, unfortunately, I was right. [...] They never involved them in anything. For instance, they said they would have brought immigrants with them on mountain tracks, but we never saw anyone doing that. (Interview n.19, mayor)

A similar key position is occupied by immigrant self-organisations, which sometimes assume an informally acknowledged role in the design of incorporation policies. Indeed, despite none of the interviewed municipalities adopting explicit measures for non-citizens' political representation, interviewed policymakers indicate that informal representatives of immigrant communities are generally consulted or considered valuable bridging figures between the local government and local immigrant groups. However, this situation is less frequently identified in New Immigration Destinations, which often lack associations of this kind, and it is not without potential problems, since it risks to exclude less organised or vulnerable groups. The following extract represents a consistent example in this sense:

This aspect [the openness of the local administration to the local immigrant population] has been a real strength, because it created very interesting synergies. For instance, there have always been good relationships between the administration and the “chiefs” [*szé; high comma added, ed*] of various cultures. And this is crucial. We have an especially good understanding with the group of Indians and that of Christian Nigerian, which are true points of reference. We address these representatives for very important issues, as it has been the case of the vaccination campaign during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, it is more difficult with some other communities as the Romanian because every individual goes it alone and thus there is more distrust. (Interview n.33, councillor with management responsibilities)

Reception is a critical issue in which relations between local governments and other actors can take various shapes. Municipalities typically do not directly operate reception centres, but instead, they contract out the service to private entities. In cases of SAI reception, all interviewees report fruitful cooperation with trustees, who provide skilled staff and collaborate with the municipality to define reception programs. However, this situation

changes when reception in CAS is considered. Most conflicts arise from the Prefectures' contracting-out procedure, which often circumvents local governments and directly negotiates with private actors. Profit-seeking entities managing emergency reception centres can operate with limited public control, potentially leading to situations of overcrowding or inadequate services for asylum-seekers and refugees. This may contribute to the hostility of long-time residents towards newcomers, which can be channelled by anti-immigrant movements.

Strategies employed by local governments to address these situations vary and span from open conflict to coexistence and negotiation (Barberis, Angelucci 2022). Some selected municipalities strive to provide basic social services, granting asylum-seekers and refugees access to local welfare. Others have negotiated with the Prefecture to entrust the reception to the municipality itself, creating a sort of hybrid voluntary-emergency reception. Lastly, some municipalities opt to join the SAI as a means of avoiding CAS presence in their territories, as also observed by Carrosio and Lo Presti (2018) in other case studies. On this matter, an interviewee elaborates:

The centre was created through private input, because a hotel-keeper proposed it to the Prefecture. It was a situation not safe and logistically inappropriate. It was a hotel struggling to remain open [...]. The municipality told the Prefect that the situation was unsustainable and the Prefect answered that they anyway needed to place those people in a year. Therefore, we offered a building [...] and then, since the municipality could not directly manage it because hirings were needed, we worked with a local cooperative, that provided staff and managed the reception following municipality's guidelines. (Interview n.20, mayor)

Conflicts with the national level also emerge on other fronts. Many interviewees express dissatisfaction with the inadequacy of immigration status definitions and the unpredictability of national reception policies. This instability can render local policies ineffective and undermine ongoing processes of incorporation, although in certain instances, local networks of solidarity or a stance against restrictive national policies partially mitigate these dynamics. Furthermore, the perceived volatility of legislation is intertwined with funding uncertainties, a critical issue for municipalities with limited economic resources. This is often linked to the repercussions of Law-Decree No. 103/2018 (so-called "Salvini Decree"), which led some municipalities among this research's case-studies to withdraw from SAI reception, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

Now, with the norms of new decrees, reception has changed [...]. The SPRAR [previous name of the SAI, ed] has become a sort of CAS, because until people do not get a permit, we can only do the procedures to make them heard by the Territorial Commission and get a permit. [...] Through the last reforms, municipalities that join reception are not rewarded. Before Salvini Decree, there was a path towards the rewarding of receiving municipalities, then, with the arrival of Salvini, it has been a critical period. (Interview n.17, welfare manager)

Despite this ambiguous relationship with national authorities, rural municipalities establish their primary partnerships with other public institutions, notably including schools or the ATS. The ATS, in particular, facilitates not only service complementarity and more comprehensive incorporation policy planning but also local policy learning dynamics, which are particularly vital for New Immigration Destinations. In this context, cooperation among neighbouring municipalities becomes pivotal in determining the success of incorporation policies when individual localities lack the resources to act independently.

When this territorial network functions effectively, municipalities can integrate their policies and develop broader projects, such as the collaborative management of distributed reception programs. The quotes below provide two examples of this dynamic:

We convinced surrounding municipalities and we opened new centres in two municipalities. [...] In this way, we also participate in a tender for 70 additional spots in other localities. We made the welcoming attitude a shared value of these communities. (Interview n.21, mayor)

We are always trying to remain in a network with the neighbouring municipalities [...] because, if we had to provide services by our own within our municipalities, sometimes we could not guarantee them. Then, we get together and create shared services, so that the user can receive it not only in our municipality, but also in the neighbouring one at different hours and for different needs [...]. We need to be in a network with others and share something, because otherwise we cannot do it. (Interview n.9, mayor)

Finally, cooperation with other public institutions and the mobilisation of civic society are crucial when seeking alternative funding channels, such as EU AMIF or its national declination. The understaffed rural municipalities may lack the time and skills to develop proposals for these tenders. However, when teamed up with other localities or associations, they can create projects to access such funds. These funds enable the implementation of more ambitious policies and initiatives, but sustainability remains a challenge. The funding period is typically limited, and it is difficult for these municipalities to continue after it has expired.

Conclusion

Currently, immigration flows are characterising only a part of all Italian rural localities; yet, when they do, immigration appears to have a broader impact on these places compared to what the literature has noted for other spatial types. Furthermore, diversified rural municipalities do not form a homogeneous group. They exhibit a wide variety of experiences, challenging certain preconceptions about rural areas and diversification processes. While New Immigration Destinations are the type that is attracting the majority of scholarly attention on these localities, they represent only a segment of Italian rural immigration destinations. Many of these localities have long-standing and distinctive experiences with immigration, some of which are disconnected from current dynamics and are rooted in past migration flows. This diversity of patterns, classified in this paper through the notions of New, Lasting, and Former Immigration Destinations, is closely tied to the spatial and socio-economic characteristics of the areas where these localities are situated, partially aligning with the North-South divide.

Most importantly, diverse patterns influence how localities approach incorporation policies. This variability arises primarily from the difference among target groups within the immigrant population, which possess distinct needs and are also linked to various policy opportunities for the municipality. For example, the reception of asylum seekers and refugees through SAI typically comes with greater funding availability, although recent reforms have severely cut resources and put at risk many reception programmes in rural localities. Moreover, having established immigrant groups at the local level facilitates the involvement of the immigrant population in the policymaking processes. At the same time, immigration patterns also interact with broader socio-economic dynamics and power relations among different supra-local and local actors, determining some of the motivations

behind the adoption of local incorporation policies. On one hand, reactive municipalities engage in this field due to external and potentially emergency factors. On the other hand, proactive municipalities include measures for immigrants within a broader development scheme, even attempting to attract them locally.

Against this backdrop, this research reveals that rural municipalities implement their own local incorporation policies for a variety of reasons. When they do, this choice often becomes a central decision that places immigration at the forefront of local government agendas, whether voluntarily or out of necessity. While the reception of asylum-seekers and refugees is a focal point in many of these strategies, it is not the sole area in which rural municipalities take action. Moreover, the perceived need to engage local communities and efficiently allocate limited resources may lead to the emergence of social innovations, particularly in contexts crucial for the social life of these small rural places where the immigrant population is more visible, such as schools. For these reasons and due to their limited capacity to intervene in the local labour market, social incorporation takes precedence in local immigrant policies, although these measures also influence economic aspects, for instance by enhancing newcomers' social capital.

Regarding the relationship with other actors, rural municipalities rarely act by themselves in the formulation and execution of incorporation policies. Despite some key figures – and especially the mayor – remaining crucial for the policymaking process to start, a diverse array of actors participates at various levels and in different initiatives, suggesting the existence of multiple and ever-changing battlegrounds of immigrant policies where municipalities position themselves in relation to other stakeholders. Collaboration with specific actors, particularly civic society associations and local public institutions, proves essential for the success and actual implementation of numerous local incorporation strategies. As mentioned earlier, schools emerge as a pivotal actor, not only as recipients of incorporation policies but also as partners in their execution. Other local entities contribute personnel and expertise to municipalities that often lack the human resources to develop comprehensive incorporation policies, concurrently reinforcing the ability to engage the long-resident population in initiatives for immigrants. Similarly, immigrant self-organisations, when present, play a crucial role in bridging local immigrant communities and local governments, frequently becoming directly involved in the formulation or execution of incorporation policies.

However, crucial initiatives can be implemented and resources mobilised even through conflicts, particularly – but not exclusively – in the realm of reception. On one hand, CAS emergency reception often becomes a focal point of contention due to its top-down nature and the involvement of strictly profit-seeking entities within the battleground, frequently acting without consideration for the municipality's goal of minimising social conflict. On the other hand, conflicts are rarer in the case of voluntary reception within the SAI, where close cooperation between the local government and the entrusted service provider is a prerequisite. Yet, conflicts with national policies may still arise even in this context, particularly concerning funding volatility and the tension between the necessities of immigrant policies (i.e. socio-economic incorporation measures) and the pressure of

restrictive immigration policies (i.e. regulation of immigration statuses and entry requirements).

In the interviews of this research, diverging visions about reception especially arise in connection with the then recent Law-Decree No. 103/2018 (so-called “Salvini Decree”), which has pushed some localities involved in the research to withdraw from SAI due to the impossibility to carry out previous programmes with the new regulation and funding availability. Yet, conflicts over the form and mode of reception can catalyse innovative solutions, as evidenced in the case of publicly-run CAS. Similarly, politics continues to play a role even behind the frequently exposed frame of pragmatism, that seemingly guides local actions. Indeed, political conflict – ongoing or potential – crucially shapes the way in which socio-incorporation measures are presented and thus its actual effects during the implementation. The frequent tendency to adopt defusing strategies, which has been noted in the literature about rural areas and small and medium-sized towns (Haselbacher, Segarra 2022), also raises questions about potential bias of this research, which could have even underestimated the role of politics due to the restriction of the focus solely on policy active municipalities. In conclusion, this study posits that rural localities in Italy exhibit highly diverse experiences of immigration and the engagement of various actors in incorporation policies, yielding distinctive situations and potentially innovative practices that deserve further exploration.

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Annex

Table 9. Profiles of selected municipalities.

Case	Macro-Area	Cluster	Population	Immigration rate (%)	Reception centres	P.C. immigrant expenditure (€)	Gov.
1	South	Lasting ID	Less than 1000in.	10-15	-	1-100	Civic
2	South	New ID	1000-5000in.	5-10	SAI	-	Left-wing
3	South	New ID	Less than 1000in.	20-25	SAI	1-100	Civic
4	South	New ID	1000-5000in.	5-10	SAI	-	Left-wing
5	South	New ID	Less than 1000in.	5-10	SAI	>1000	Civic
6	North-East	Former ID	1000-5000in.	20-25	CAS	1-100	Civic
7	North-East	Former ID	1000-5000in.	15-20	-	1-100	Right-wing
8	North-East	Former ID	1000-5000in.	5-10	-	1-100	Right-wing
9	North-East	Lasting ID	1000-5000in.	5-10	CAS	100-500	Right-wing
10	North-East	Former ID	5000-10000in.	5-10	CAS	100-500	Civic
11	North-East	New ID	Less than 1000in.	10-15	Public-run CAS	>1000	Right-wing
12	Centre	Lasting ID	1000-5000in.	5-10	SAI, CAS (until 2020)	>1000	Left-wing
13	Centre	Lasting ID	5000-10000in.	10-15	SAI (until 2020)	100-500	Left-wing
14	North-West	New ID	Less than 1000in.	25-30	CAS	1-100	Civic
15	Centre	Former ID	1000-5000in.	10-15	SAI	-	Civic
16	Centre	Former ID	1000-5000in.	10-15	-	1-100	Left-wing
17	South	New ID	1000-5000in.	5-10	SAI	500-1000	Civic
18	North-West	New ID	Less than 1000in.	5-10	SAI	-	Left-wing
19	North-West	Lasting ID	1000-5000in.	0-5	CAS	1-100	Right-wing
20	North-West	New ID	1000-5000in.	5-10	Public-run CAS	1-100	Left-wing
21	South	New ID	Less than 1000in.	0-5	SAI	1-100	Right-wing
22	South	Lasting ID	1000-5000in.	15-20	-	1-100	Civic
23	Islands	New ID	Less than 1000in.	10-15	CAS, MSNA (until 2020)	1-100	Civic
24	Islands	Lasting ID	1000-5000in.	15-20	-	1-100	Right-wing
25	Centre	Former ID	5000-10000in.	5-10	CAS	100-500	Right-wing
26	Centre	Former ID	5000-	5-10	Public-run	100-500	Left-wing

			10000in.		CAS		
27	Centre	Lasting ID	5000-10000in.	10-15	-	1-100	Left-wing
28	Centre	New ID	1000-5000in.	5-10	CAS	1-100	Right-wing
29	Centre	Lasting ID	10000-15000in.	10-15	CAS	100-500	Left-wing
30	Centre	New ID	Less than 1000in.	10-15	SAI	1-100	Right-wing
31	Centre	Former ID	10000-15000in.	10-15	SAI	1-100	Left-wing
32	Centre	Lasting ID	1000-5000in.	25-30	-	1-100	Civic
33	North-East	New ID	1000-5000in.	25-30	-	1-100	Other
34	Centre	Lasting ID	1000-5000in.	15-20	-	100-500	Right-wing
35	Centre	Former ID	1000-5000in.	10-15	-	1-100	Civic
36	North-East	Lasting ID	1000-5000in.	25-30	CAS (until 2020)	1-100	Left-wing

Mobilising the immigration/development nexus in peripheral localities.

The case of Italian inner areas

Abstract

Rural and peripheral localities in Italy have long been immigration destinations, but they recently experienced a huge diversification of flows, following the transformation of old patterns, such as the settlement of seasonal labour immigration, and the emergence of new dynamics, involving for instance the (re)settlement of asylum seekers and refugees and the transformation of traditional labour and seasonal immigration flows. At the same time, academic scholarship starts to point out that, in the context of the intertwined socio-economic and demographic crises characterising a large part of these localities, such new immigration flows may represent an opportunity to mobilise an immigration/development nexus. Therefore, the present work focuses on whether and how policymakers of peripheral and rural municipalities in Italy plan to mobilise the immigration/development nexus at the local level through specific local immigrant policies or broader strategies involving the immigrant population. In particular, it first offers a general overview of immigration towards these localities in Italy, combining various data sources. Then, the article moves more in-depth in the analysis of if and how local immigrant and reception policies are framed by policymakers into development strategies and what their actual contents are through semi-structured interviews with mayors or councillors with management responsibilities and document analysis of local policy documents in 30 selected Italian municipalities. Findings show that development objectives are frequently in local immigrant policies of these places, which are often the result of complex processes of conflict, negotiation and cooperation with other actors.

Introduction

Rural areas across the world are not excluded from globalisation processes, but these often assume peculiar shapes in such contexts. These peculiarities mostly emerge in relation to two global phenomena: the growth and diversification of immigration flows towards these places (Barberis, Pavolini 2015; McAreavey 2017, 2018; Bona *et al.* 2020), and the restructuring of their local economies following the effects of contemporary economic globalisation (Sumner 2005; Woods 2007; McCarthy 2008; Silva, Figueiredo 2013; Döner, Figueiredo, Jesús Rivera 2020). Rural sociology and migration studies have already studied in depth each of these aspects, as well as the role of economic globalisation in fostering rural diversification (Miraftab 2016; Corrado, de Castro, Perrotta 2017; Döner, Figueiredo, Jesús Rivera 2020). More recently, how immigration can impact local economies of rural and peripheral areas in Europe has increasingly gained attention (Gretter *et al.* 2017; Kordel, Weidinger 2018; McAreavey, 2018), also taking into account the role of local decision-makers in triggering a virtuous cycle (Galera *et al.* 2018; Bona & al., 2020).

This article builds on the above-mentioned scholarship to focus on the context of Italian rural and peripheral areas through qualitative tools. In particular, research questions deal with: a) if and how immigrant policies are framed within local development strategies and an immigration/development nexus is acknowledged by policymakers in peripheral and rural localities; and b) which are the contents of these policies and for which aims they are designed. To answer these questions, the research relies on document-analysis of policy documents regarding immigrant policies and on semi-structured stakeholders' interviews with mayors, councillors with management responsibilities and welfare managers of 30 rural and peripheral municipalities in Italy. Rurality and peripherality are here respectively conceived by referring to Eurostat's (2019) spatial typology and the classification provided by the Italian National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI), defining inner areas based on their distance from a set of key services (Barca, Lucatelli 2014; Barca, Carrosio, Lucatelli 2018). Moreover, the notion of development is here defined by looking at the basic framework for rural and local development proposed by Moseley (2003) and it is thus understood as the effort to deal with a set of crises and pressing issues at the local level, countering the negative consequences and taking advantage of opportunities inherent to them.

As regards the structure of the article, the first section contains a review of the literature about the crises that are affecting rural and peripheral areas and the potential contents of the immigration/development nexus in these places, by particularly focusing on the European and Italian context. A second theoretical section follows, considering the role of local policymakers in shaping immigrant policies within rural and peripheral contexts. Then, data about immigration towards Italian rural and peripheral areas are presented by combining various data sources. The methodology is presented in the following section, pointing out how municipalities to be included in the research have been chosen and which strategies have been used to analyse and code qualitative documents and interviews. Findings are thus shown in the fourth section, by trying to answer the above-mentioned research questions. Finally, some conclusions are drawn by combining the theoretical framework with the main results, also stressing the necessity of further studies in this field and the limits of this research.

Intersecting crises, immigration and development in rural and peripheral areas

In the context of the new rise in regional inequalities connected to recent economic globalisation patterns, rural areas are often experiencing various and intertwined crises (Wood 2007; Silva, Figueiredo 2013; Camarero, Oliva 2016b; Döner, Figueiredo, Jesús Rivera 2020). Despite this is not the case for all, those located in peripheral regions and far from urban cores are among the most involved in processes of rural marginalisation, which affects various socio-economic fields (Bock 2019; Martin, Martinelli, Clifton 2022). A first critical aspect concerns the restructuring of the labour market in these areas and their repositioning within global economic networks (Bonanno, Busch 2015; Marsden, Moragues Faus, Sonnino 2018).

Indeed, the emergence of a competitiveness-centred agenda and the deregulation of markets contribute to triggering a vicious cycle, in which rural and peripheral areas have seen a progressive shrinking of their traditional economic sectors and a reduction of public and private investments (Tonts, Horsley 2019). As a consequence of socio-economic

marginalisation, rural and peripheral areas increasingly experience phenomena of outmigration, depopulation and ageing, which further exacerbate their vulnerability (Shucksmith, Talbot, Lee 2011; Camarero, Sampedro, Oliva 2012; Bock 2019). These dynamics also fuel and are fuelled by basic services' deprivation, fostered by the combination of rising prices and lowering revenues of delivering services in hard-to-reach, lowly populated areas (Bell, Osti 2010; Camarero, Oliva 2016a). Such tendency triggers a vicious cycle of vulnerability, whereas ageing and economic decline make the local population more vulnerable and in need of services, while these are systematically removed from these areas and increasingly less accessible in the surrounding ones (Shucksmith, Talbot, Lee 2011; Döner, Figueiredo, Jesús Rivera 2020).

Within these contexts, a growing scholarship points out that the arrival and settlement of international immigrants, which is often framed as a crisis at the national level, can offer these localities relevant opportunities for local development (Simard, Jentsch 2009; Barberis, Pavolini 2015; McAreavey 2017, 2018; Hudson, Sandberg 2021). Indeed, these patterns differently affect various rural and peripheral areas and involve a variegated set of immigrant groups, including labour immigrants, especially – but not exclusively – towards agriculture-centred or care work demanding places, amenity migrants in touristic or rich-in-amenities localities, and asylum seekers and refugees, often relocated in these places through dispersal strategies (Galera *et al.* 2018; Kordel, Weidinger 2018; Morén-Alegret, Wladyka 2020; Caponio, Donatiello, Ponzio 2022).

The first development opportunity connected to these dynamics is that of repopulation, which cannot be simply reduced to an increase in the number of the local population, but also intervenes in various aspects of the above-described cycle of crises (Fonseca 2008; Pinilla, Ayuda, Sáez 2008; Bayona-i-Carrasco, Gil-Alonso 2012; Corrado, Dematteis 2012; Collantes *et al.* 2014; Hedlund *et al.* 2017; Hudson, Sandberg 2021). In particular, the inclusion of usually young newcomers into ageing communities allows to compensate for the loss of people of working age and to increase the local demand for goods and services, improving the sustainability of their local offer and delivery (Fonseca 2008; Simard, Jentsch 2009; Collantes *et al.* 2014). Moreover, the diversification of these flows can offer other types of opportunities, linked to the use of diversity in itself as an asset. This often allows the creation of new projects to revive local communities and for creating transnational networks and intercultural initiatives that make localities more attractive not only from a touristic point of view, but also from that of potential new residents (McAreavey 2012; Gretter *et al.* 2017; Galera *et al.* 2018; Driel 2020).

As regards the contribution of immigrants to the labour market of such localities, this has been mainly identified with reference to some specific economic niches, in particular care work and agriculture, in which immigrants can effectively intercept the local demand generated by the lack of local workforce and care services (Camarero, Sampedro, Oliva 2012; Munkejord 2016; Corrado, de Castro, Perrotta 2017). At the same time, although some relevant exceptions exist, for instance linked to the revitalisation of traditional occupations (Kordel, Weidinger 2018), this demand mostly concerns flexible, precarious and low-wage labour, which often takes into exploitative forms (Camarero, Sampedro, Oliva 2012; Lucatelli, Luisi, Peta 2012; Corrado, de Castro, Perrotta 2017; Rye, Scott 2018;

Kalantaryan *et al.* 2021). Finally, another indirect impact of new immigration on the labour market that has been only noted in recent times also regards the “economy of asylum seekers’ reception”, connected to the necessity of infrastructures and qualified personnel to run the reception of asylum seekers and refugees at the local level. Indeed, reception generates new demands for workers, services and housing, making it attractive for crisis-prone localities, but also risking to excessively shift the focus from beneficiaries to local benefits (Galera *et al.* 2018; Kordel, Weidinger 2018).

Local immigrant policymaking within rural and peripheral localities

The contents of the immigration/development nexus that have been noted above strictly depend on the willingness and the capacity of local policymakers to mobilise them by designing and implementing adequate local policies (McAreavey 2012, 2018; Martins, Davino 2023). Their role is also crucial in limiting the potential downsides of framing immigrant policies into development strategies and thus merely conceiving newcomer immigrants as carriers of development more than individuals entitled to rights, which can result in the exacerbation of inequalities and segregation (Rossi 2023). Moreover, local immigrant policies are also necessary to strengthen the sustainability of above-described processes, for instance by stabilising repopulation benefits through the creation of a welcoming community and conditions enabling immigrants’ long stay and the fulfilment of their personal aspirations (Bayona-i-Carrasco, Gil-Alonso 2012; Hedlund *et al.* 2017).

In this sense, focusing on policy opportunity structures of local immigrant policymakers in rural and peripheral areas is a fundamental step. The scholarship on local immigrant policies highlights how immigrant policymaking has undergone in the last decade a process of complexification, following both the diversification of immigration flows and the intersection of different levels of governance. At the same time, the local scale has acquired more and more relevance in the implementation of immigrant and reception policies, also generating the so-called “local turn” in migration studies (Zapata-Barrero, Caponio, Scholten 2017; Filomeno 2017). The growing centrality of the local dimension is mainly the result of a twofold process. On one hand, local actors have appropriated competencies in immigrant integration by moving in the empty spaces left by upper level of governance. On the other hand, the local scale has been the destination of decentralised and subsidiarised immigrant policies, also connected to broader processes of rescaling, which also take in this field the form of the delegation of potentially unpopular issues (Caponio, Borkert 2010; Filomeno 2017; Barberis, Angelucci 2022).

Within this framework, rural and peripheral areas are frequently portrayed as a potentially critical context, due to the lack of socio-economic and infrastructural resources, and the reduced experience with diversity, which links to a discursive construction of these localities as culturally homogeneous (Panelli *et al.* 2009; Simard, Jentsch 2009; Glorius 2017; Martins, Davino 2023). These characteristics also pair up with the usual small number of civil society actors, that exacerbate the personalisation of policy-making processes in the hands of a few crucial actors, among which mayors often occupy a central spot. Indeed, in small-sized contexts, this figure assumes a mediating role between various interests at the local level and, differently from larger localities, can usually count on a strong trust relationship with the local native population (Balbo 2015; Morén-Alegret, Wladycka 2020;

Haselbacher, Segarra 2022). However, recent studies have demonstrated that civil society still matters and that the role of crucial immigrant policymakers need to be problematised in relation to complex sets of negotiation and conflict with other actors, both at local and supra-local levels (Cabral, Swerts 2021; Caponio, Donatiello, Ponzio 2022; Semprebon, Marzorati, Bonizzoni 2022).

Finally, the native population's mobilisation against or in favour of immigrants' arrival also plays a relevant role in rural and peripheral areas, crucially shaping the actions of local policymakers due to the strong proximity between them and their electorate. In this context, policymakers of rural and peripheral municipalities are usually seen as being more frequently guided by pragmatic rather than ideological drivers (Caponio, Borkert 2010; Whyte, Larsen, Olwig 2018). However, this idea has also been challenged in more recent scholarship, noting how – rather than being non-political or devoid of paradigms for immigrant policies – these actors conveniently shift from different paradigms to frame the arrival of immigrants in their localities in a way that can be the most acceptable for local communities (Schiller 2015; Caponio, Donatiello, Ponzio 2022; Millet 2022; Rossi 2023).

Socio-economic patterns and immigration to rural and peripheral areas in Italy

When looking at available data at the local level, socio-economic and demographic dynamics that have been described above also seem to affect rural towns in Italian inner areas. The most evident trend concerns the decrease of the population and its ageing, which are deeply affecting rural and peripheral areas in Italy. Such conditions are also exacerbated by an escalating economic crisis, which emerges by looking at the main available economic indicators. Both average annual income per capita and the share of employed people are lower in rural and peripheral localities than in almost all other locality types and the large presence of precarious jobs further reinforces the fragility of the labour market in these places. Finally, rural and peripheral areas have the lowest share of people possessing high school education or higher, which may be related to the old age of the population, but also to the reduced accessibility of higher education, hinted by the low share of these localities having schools of all degrees in their territory.

Table 1. Average values of main demographic characteristics according to locality type – Elaboration on Istat data.

	Population	Population variation (2011-2020)	Old age index (2020)	Old age index variation (2014-2020)
<i>Rural areas</i>	2025	-6,7%	261,9	25,3
<i>Urban areas</i>	17267	8,4%	164,4	18,1
<i>Inner areas</i>	3176	-9,0%	269,4	26,9
<i>Core areas</i>	12153	6,9%	181,5	18,2
<i>Rural and inner areas</i>	1783	-11,5%	288,4	28,3
<i>All municipalities</i>	7547	-1,3%	226,6	22,7

Table 2. Average values of main economic characteristics according to locality type and share of municipalities with all primary, secondary 1st degree and secondary 2nd degree schools – Elaboration on Istat data.

	Per capita income € (2015)	Occupation rate (2015)	Precariously employed rate (2015)	High school graduated rate (2015)	Share of municipalities with all education degrees (2020)
<i>Rural areas</i>	12781	58,6%	17,2%	52,8%	26,0%
<i>Urban areas</i>	13844	59,3%	15,0%	56,3%	69,8%
<i>Inner areas</i>	12052	56,0%	18,6%	52,2%	35,4%
<i>Core areas</i>	14342	61,9%	14,0%	56,1%	48,6%
<i>Rural and inner areas</i>	12074	56,4%	18,6%	51,8%	27,4%
<i>All municipalities</i>	13006	58,2%	16,6%	53,9%	41,8%

In this context, data about immigration seemingly show a different framework. Indeed, despite being the locality type with the lowest share of immigrant residents on average, rural and peripheral areas are also localities where the immigrant population has grown the most in the last decade, showing an opposing trend as compared to the general population. Moreover, although this is not the case everywhere, the growing presence of asylum seekers averagely seems to play in rural and peripheral areas a more prominent role than in other locality types, to the extent that the mean relation between asylum seekers and overall residents is much higher than that of urban and core areas. This is further reinforced by the fact that, when considering only municipalities participating in reception, the share of asylum seekers per 1000 inhabitants grows up to 14,4 in rural and peripheral localities against 3,3 in urban and core ones.

Table 3. Average values of main immigration characteristics according to locality type – Elaboration on Istat, Centri d'Italia and RETESAI data.

	Immigration rate (2020)	Immigrant population variation (2011-2020)	Asylum seekers per 1000in. (2020)	Asylum seekers on immigrant population (2020)
<i>Rural areas</i>	6,2%	43,6%	3,6	4,1%
<i>Urban areas</i>	7,3%	32,2%	1,9	2,9%
<i>Inner areas</i>	5,8%	49,9%	3,4	4,2%
<i>Core areas</i>	7,5%	28,6%	2,6	3,1%
<i>Rural and inner areas</i>	5,6%	51,2%	3,7	4,4%
<i>All municipalities</i>	6,4%	39,5%	3,0	3,7%

Similarly, elaborations on Istat data show that not only the average social expenditure per capita declared in the social budget chapter titled “Immigrants, Rom and Sinti” is higher in these municipalities than in other ones, but, when restricting the analysis to the sole municipalities that declare some sort of expenditure in this policy field, this gap further increase. Active rural and peripheral municipalities averagely spend about 10,1€ per capita for immigrant social expenditure, amounting to about 5,7% of the mean social expenditure total budget, against the 4,5€ of urban and core ones, representing 3,1% of their social budget on average. The share of asylum seekers per inhabitants and the social expenditure for immigrants of municipalities that are active in this policy field thus concur to suggest

that, although immigration and diversification processes may be less spread across rural and peripheral than in other spatial types, these can be more locally impactful in such localities than in others when actually occurring, also pushing them to invest many resources on them.

The type of asylum seekers and refugees' reception can further add some relevant information to this frame, also considering the different coexisting reception systems characterising the Italian model. On the one hand, CAS (Extraordinary Reception Centres) are reception centres directly created by the Prefecture – which is the institution representing the Ministry of the Interior at the local level – without necessarily involving any other actors apart from those entrusted with the reception. On the other hand, at the opposite spectre of this top-down system, the SAI (System of Reception and Integration, formerly known as SPRAR and SIPROIMI) is a bottom-up form of reception, to which single municipalities or groups of them voluntarily apply to create one or more reception centres on their territory. Despite being conceived as an extraordinary measure, CAS have historically been always prevalent, due to the low level of municipalities' participation to the SAI.

This also emerges from Table 4, showing how CAS are at least three times more widespread than SAI in all considered locality types. However, when considering reception in rural and inner municipalities, some peculiarities still emerge. Rural and peripheral areas have a lower CAS/SAI ratio than urban and core ones (3,2 against 3,6) and this seems mostly linked to the generally lower presence of CAS in relation to SAI in inner municipalities than in core ones. Such an element is particularly relevant for this research, since it hints at the higher attractiveness of socio-economic incentives to join asylum seekers and refugees' reception for peripheral localities compared to other ones, which has already been noted in the literature and contributes to connecting asylum seekers and refugees' reception to broader aims of repopulation or job creation (Gretter *et al.* 2017; Kordel, Weidinger 2018).

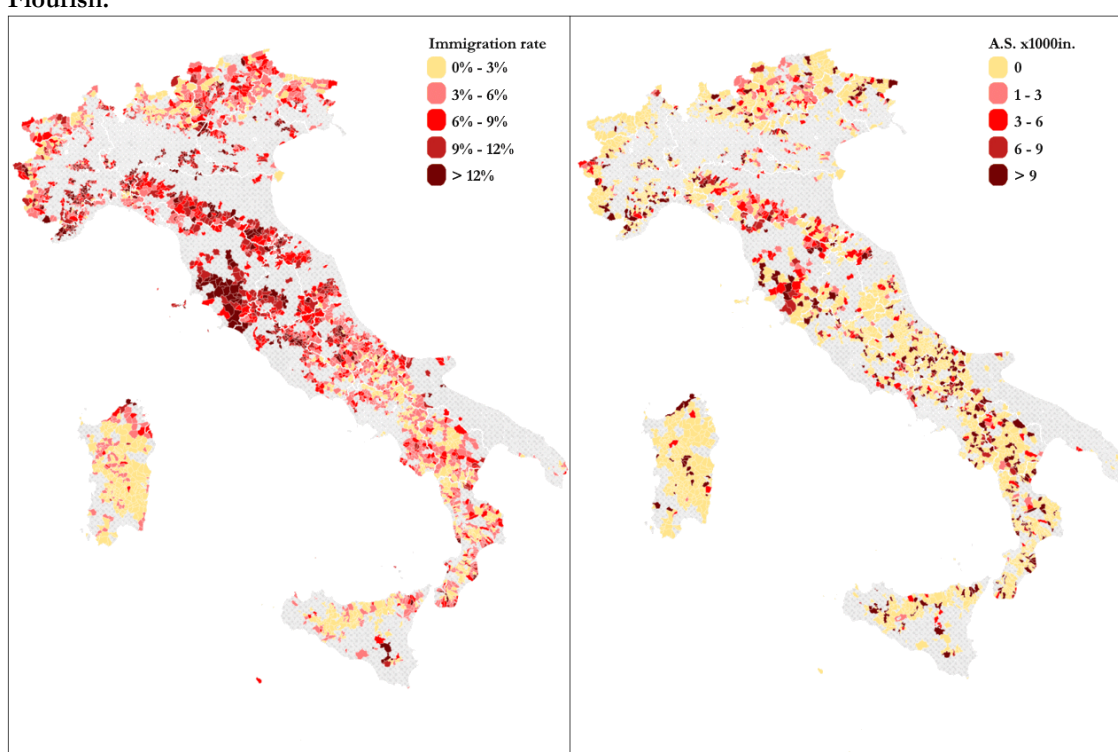
Table 4. Share of municipalities receiving asylum seekers, the relation between CAS and SAI's number and average values concerning social expenditure for immigrants according to locality type – Elaboration on Istat, Centri d'Italia and RETESAI data.

	Municipalities joining reception system (2020)	Average CAS/SAI relation (2020)	Per capita social expenditure for immigrants € (2020)	Social expenditure for immigrants on total social expenditure (2020)
<i>Rural areas</i>	28,5%	4,5	3,2	2,0%
<i>Urban areas</i>	54,6%	3,4	2,8	2,1%
<i>Inner areas</i>	28,9%	3,0	3,2	1,9%
<i>Core areas</i>	47,5%	4,6	2,9	2,1%
<i>Rural and inner areas</i>	25,5%	3,2	3,4	1,9%
<i>All municipalities</i>	38,0%	3,4	3,0	2,0%

All these elements point out that a variegated set of different experiences with immigration and diversification processes exist in Italian rural and peripheral areas. Such diversity also seems to have a spatial dimension that needs to be considered. Indeed, the geographical

distribution of rural and peripheral localities that are more interested by these processes shows both clustered areas formed by multiple municipalities and more isolated diversified towns. Moreover, spatial differences also emerge when looking at the main immigration patterns: on the one hand, diversifying rural and peripheral areas in Northern and Central Italy appear as characterised by more mixed immigration, in which labour immigration and other immigration types continue to play a relevant role; on the other hand, reception of asylum seekers and refugees emerges as the main pattern across most rural and peripheral areas in Southern Italy, also pointing out at more recent immigration processes. However, a partial exception to this divide is represented by some concentration areas at the Northern borders with France and Austria, suggesting a potential role for so-called “inner hotspots” (Semprebon, Pelacani 2020).

Figure 1. Immigration rate and asylum seekers per 1000 inhabitants in Italian inner and rural municipalities – Elaboration of Istat, Centri d'Italia and RETESAI data; Visual elaboration via Flourish.



Methodological note

The present research uses qualitative tools to explore if and how an immigration-development nexus is acknowledged by policymakers of rural and peripheral localities in Italy and what its contents are. In particular, it combines document analysis of local policy and political documents with semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders in 30 selected Italian municipalities. Such municipalities have been selected among those that are both “rural” according to Eurostat's (2021) typology and “inner” according to the SNAI (Barca, Lucatelli 2014). These definitions have not only been operationalised through the indicators provided in policy documents, but they have also been considered as “social representation” (Halfacree 1993). In this sense, they are political and discursive labels imposed from upper level institutions – i.e. the EU and the State – which produce actual effect on the self-perception of these places, providing material resources and identification

mechanisms centred on this definition. This dimension has been considered in the case-selection, emphasising the focus on rural and inner municipalities in the invitations to the interview, so as only policymakers perceiving their localities as such would accept to be involved.

Moreover, only localities with a certain degree of immigration-related diversity and policy activism have been considered. The number of eligible municipalities has been firstly narrowed to those having an immigration rate or a share of asylum seekers per inhabitant higher than the respective national medians. Then, policy activism has been operationalised by looking at those municipalities declaring a social expenditure for immigrants in the dedicated budget chapter or joining the SAI reception, so as to include only municipalities that are actually adopting some sort of immigrant policies. This latter element could represent a bias due to potential misclassifications of expenditure types and the potentially more positive account of immigration in active municipalities. However, since the ultimate interest of the article is to look at the potential acknowledgement of the immigration/development nexus and its framing by local policymakers, this threshold has been made necessary.

Building on these criteria, 30 municipalities have been selected by trying to involve localities from different socio-economic, geographical and immigration contexts in order to have a certain level of variety of diverse experiences. Therefore, 10 municipalities from each macro-area – North, Centre and South – have been selected, coming from 13 different Regions and representing both part of concentration areas and isolated diversified localities. As for other characteristics, selected municipalities have a population ranging from 654 inhabitants to 13556 and an immigration rate from about 3% to 30% (see Annex 1). They all have or had active reception centres on their territories, including CAS, SAI or structures for unaccompanied migrant minors. From a political point of view, they have a majority of civic administrations (12), followed by left-wing governments (9) and right-wing ones (9).

Localities to be involved have been selected at random among eligible ones in each macro-area. After a formal invitation has been sent, those municipalities refusing to accept the interview or not responding have been replaced with others having similar characteristics. Then, the first step has been to perform semi-structured interviews with the local stakeholder dealing with the design of immigrant policies at the local level for the municipality. These have been mostly mayors (23), since in many cases these are acting as the main decision-makers in this field, but also councillors with responsibilities for immigrant policies (5) and local welfare managers (2). Interviews are divided into three main sections, dealing with a) the general socio-economic context of the locality and its evolution in connection to the local immigration history, b) the evolution of local immigrant policies, its contents and aims, and c) the impact of these policies on wider strategies of local development.

As a second step, an analysis of policy documents issued from 2011 to 2020 in each selected municipality has been performed. This has firstly involved a set of common non-immigration-targeted documents that were available in almost all localities – namely, the Unique Document of Planning, the End-of-Mandate Report and electoral programmes of

the governing list(s) or, alternatively, the Start-of-Mandate Report – in which relevant information about the positioning of immigration and asylum seekers and refugees' reception within the context of wider political strategies could be found. Then, immigration-specific documents have been taken into account, by looking at reception contracts with trustees in case of municipalities joining the SAI, as well as other documents framing other specific immigrant policies. Among these, deliberations of local governments and municipal councils receive particular attention, since political justifications for proposed measures are often explicitly specified in the premises.

Finally, semi-structured interviews and policy documents have been coded together by applying to the research context the three-step abductive coding strategy proposed by Vila-Henninger and colleagues (2022) as an operationalisation of Timmermans and Tavory's (2012) abductive coding. In this sense, a first codebook has been formulated on the basis of the above-described theoretical literature on immigration towards rural areas and small- and medium-sized towns and then combined with other codebooks respectively generated from the separate inductive analyses of interviews and policy documents. The resulting abductive codebook has been thus applied to the research materials with the support of MaxQDA software in order to create a set of verified code equations from which main qualitative findings have been extracted. During the analysis, Deterding and Waters's (2018) advice of separately coding "great quotes" has also been followed to ease the identification of relevant or unexpected dimensions.

Framing the immigration/development nexus in Italian rural inner areas

Curbing the services' deprivation spiral

The first element that is worth noting is the fact that almost all interviewees acknowledge some sort of connection between the arrival of international immigrants in their towns and local development or – at least – some immediate practical benefits. In this sense, repopulation is of course the primary and most immediate contribution that is pointed out by interviewees. Within the context of a rapidly ageing population and strong outmigration processes of the younger cohorts, the arrival of immigrants allows these localities to have a better chance to demographically survive in the long run. Clearly, this benefit is more pronounced in the smallest and more peripheral municipalities, which often do not have consistent flows of voluntary migration and for which asylum seekers' reception can represent a way to maintain a certain population level. In this sense, the mere numeric contribution of immigrants to the population is seen in these contexts as a resilience element per se and it is also used sometimes to justify reception at the local level. The potential impact of asylum seekers taking residence in very small towns emerges for instance from the following quote:

The constant and progressive fall of the population, with the concurrent decline in terms of intellectual and workforce resources, is easily verifiable. Residents were 931 at the historical peak in 1961, 846 in 1971, 789 in 1981, 739 in 1981, 700 in 2001 686 in 2011 and 705 at the 31st December 2017, thanks to the 94 foreign persons coming from Northern African countries who got the residence in our municipality in the centres that are hosting them. (Municipality n.22, Document: End-of-Mandate Report, 2021)

However, repopulation does not simply mean increasing the number of residents or limiting its decline. Indeed, various other advantages have been noted by interviewees in

connection to the arrival of new immigrant residents, such as the increase in the local demand for goods and, most importantly, the possibility of maintaining services at the local level. Interviewed policymakers seem to be very aware of this in many cases, to the extent that even the choice to join the voluntary reception system is sometimes explicitly framed as a measure for the benefit of the resident non-immigrant population, which merges with other political justifications involving humanitarian reasons or the will to help the State dealing with large asylum seekers and refugees' inflow. Such dimension can be noted for instance in the following quote, summing up all benefits that the municipality is obtaining from reception:

[...] 5) With reference to the benefit for the receiving community, SPRAR [former name of SAI] services of our municipality are functional for: a. the inversion of the demographic haemorrhage characterising the municipality (the population is growing again after decades of residents' reduction); b. the creation of stable jobs for young people and especially for the women of the municipality and surrounding territories; c) the growth of the school population and thus, in the short-term period, the maintenance of the Infant School, the Primary School and the Middle School, that would have risked being closed in the near future (there are already mixed year classes); d) the revitalisation of the local micro-economy, the commerce and proximity services; e) the maintenance of essential services for the quality of life of residents; f) the providing of workforce to the artisan firms and the primary sector. (Municipality n.20, Document: Municipal Council Deliberation, 2019)

Among the development elements listed in the quote above, schools deserve a central spot. Indeed, the risk of schools to close is pointed out by many interviewees, who mention that this would cause serious damage to the local community and would accelerate depopulation processes, especially regarding younger cohorts and families. In this context, the presence of immigrant families seems to play a crucial role, since the relatively high number of immigrant children allows them to create more classes within schools and fulfil the criteria to keep them open. This is also one of the reasons for some of these places to join voluntary reception, since it allows them to choose which groups of asylum seekers are received in the centres, which, in many cases, include families with children or unaccompanied non-citizen minors. Moreover, in some cases, the school itself becomes the place for testing innovative measures, also using reception funds to create new projects that also benefit the non-asylum seekers or refugees population. In addition to the quote presented above, these elements are also shown in these other quotes:

We managed to maintain all mandatory grades in school. The majority of students are immigrants and this is the result of a successful integration, which grants us the number to keep the schools open. [...] When I think of the benefits of immigration, these first of all concern the school. I insist on this because we have a declining trend of the population and I think that the more services we are able to maintain the slower will be such decline, but this is valid also for the rest: we have a postal office and all basic services, such as the primary care practitioner and the pharmacy, and this is possible also because immigrant residents are using them. (Municipality n.1, Interview with a councillor with management responsibilities)

For many years, through the SPRAR project, the System of protection for asylum seekers and refugees, we have been hosting families with children. This system of secondary reception has allowed us on more than one occasion to save our schools from closing and to finance important projects for the teaching of English language and cultural integration by integrating them into the formative offer, but also to provide to our children various workshops and an afternoon playroom. (Municipality n.11, Document: Electoral programme, 2019)

You have to consider that in our municipality 22% of the school population is made of foreigners. Without them, we would have the [school] autonomy and instead we have it and we are able to arrive up to middle school. [...] We also do some projects to better include these children through the hiring

of cultural and linguistic mediators, so as to avoid them falling behind. And I can assure you that it doesn't happen, on the contrary, many of them are succeeding. (Municipality n.23, Interview with the mayor)

Revitalising local economies

The role of immigrants within the local labour market is also recognised by many interviewees, especially in places where labour immigration is prevalent. As already noted in the literature review, the immigrant population largely contributes to some specific labour niches, in particular agriculture, construction and care work – which is seen as especially relevant for the lack of public social services, – but their role seems relevant even in the revitalisation of traditional occupations, which would otherwise disappear in a context where the native young population is lacking and decreasing. However, the position of immigrants within the local labour market appears to be frequently shaped by differential incorporation patterns, since most of the locally offered employment opportunities remain confined to low-wage jobs. Gender and the country of origin also play an important role, as it emerges in the relevance of national networks in various economic sectors and in the over-representation of immigrant women in care work. Quotes presented below show some of these elements:

For us, the connection between immigration and local development is clear. When we planned to start this activity [the reception of asylum seekers and refugees, ed], the idea was exactly to recover our traditional sector, from agriculture to shepherding, and now we are doing it thanks to these people who arrived in our towns. (Municipality n.2, Interview with the mayor)

The added value is evident. We are losing population and their [immigrants] presence is helping to maintain some important services, as I mentioned before for schools. But there is also the possibility to find workforce that is important. In a mostly old population, they are perfectly integrated: the wives work as care workers and husbands in the countryside. This is very important for us. (Municipality n.4, Interview with the mayor)

The presence of these persons, who are integrating with no problem, is a way to strengthen those economic sectors, such as the metalworking one, that otherwise in the next years would fall into crisis due to the lack of workforce. (Municipality n.6, Interview with the mayor)

I believe that the immigrant community in our territory allowed us to develop because without them our firms would not be able to grow. This should be said with extreme honesty. They give us a lot, especially for what concerns the production phase, which is where the immigrant community had a very significant role because it was very difficult to find workforce. (Municipality n.15, Interview with the mayor)

Another important contribution of recent immigration flows to labour market restructuring that has been identified by interviewees is the relation between the reception of asylum seekers and refugees and the creation of new jobs. Indeed, reception, especially when it is planned within the SAI network, requires many professional figures and consequently creates a demand for qualified jobs in social work, which allows to intercept the request of younger cohorts of the population and, in some cases, also offer employment opportunities for immigrant persons who are leaving reception. Moreover, local untapped buildings and empty houses are used for asylum seekers and refugees' accommodation, paying rents with national funds, and the presence of reception structures allows for an increase in the purchase of goods at the local level. As it can be noted in the following quotes, local decision-makers seem aware of these advantages to the extent that, in some places, this also represents the first aim of joining the reception system. At the same time, according to

interviewees, its public acknowledgement also allows to improve the relations between reception centres and the towns and their inclusion in the local society.

We had a SPRAR here, that represented a source of occupation even for Italian citizens. Now it is closed after Salvini Decrees, but a cooperative still continues to offer asylum-related services. [...] The SPRAR was very relevant: apartments have been rented and an old youth hostel has been restructured to receive asylum seekers waiting for the document. (Municipality n.12, Interview with a local welfare manager)

The first reason [to join the reception system] is that of improving the town's income even at the economic level, in the sense that both CAS and SAI have been run by fostering purchases and recruitments within the local context. Although they are managed by external cooperatives, people who work there are from here and they buy everything here. Therefore, the aim of the municipality is to improve the local economy. (Municipality n.16, Interview with a local welfare manager)

Particularly relevant is the activity of the Retiree House, since it employs 15 workers and, since November 2015, manages the reception of migrants and refugees in the building of the former Retiree House, which has allowed to hire additional staff. (Municipality n.19, Document: Unique Planning Document, 2017)

I can tell you that the reception centre in itself is very well integrated into the town because it offers work opportunities and, therefore, we have some payrolls granted by it. This also allows people to know each other and friendly relations, or even sentimental ones, have matured between the centre and the town. (Municipality n.22, Interview with the mayor)

However, within selected case-studies, the above-described elements are more easily mobilised for SAI reception, while various obstacles arise when considering CAS. This mostly seems to be connected to the fact that, in the first case, municipalities maintain a planning role and reception can thus be directly framed within broader local strategies, while, in the latter case, reception is managed by private actors with the mandate of a supra-local institution and local authorities need to negotiate or conflict with these actors in order to coordinate reception policies with other local measures aimed at local development. Moreover, CAS reception, due to its emergency nature, also presents more often complex situations, such as the overcrowding of reception structures, which can seriously affect the local integration of asylum seekers and refugees in small receiving contexts and hinder the possibility to mobilise reception within the development framework. Examples of this are provided below:

I would say that there has not been an economic impact, also because, since the centre had 60 people, there was an external catering working there and I don't even know if they were buying bread in the municipality. However, it is maybe possible that some residents are working for the Waldesian Church [which is running reception, ed]; I am not sure about this. (Municipality n.18, Interview with the mayor)

We started receiving refugees firstly with a CAS, which was managed by private actors and brought to this reception centre from which persons always left. Then, we transformed it into a SIPROIMI, now SAI. These are long-term projects where the municipality is the active subject, that establishes the criteria for the tendering procedure and manages the reception. In this way, we had been able to choose to receive families, women and children. This makes people who come to our town to be more inclined to remain in our territory and this has actually brought a growth in the population. Of course, these are small numbers, but still important if you consider that we are small, too. (Municipality n.25, Interview with the mayor)

Hovering between a diversity discourse and a rhetoric of exceptionalism

The rise of diversity within previously homogeneous towns may also represent an asset in itself, promoting social innovation and new measures to revitalise local communities. These

involve a variety of different situations, including for instance strategies to relaunch local tourism by promoting cultural festivals or specific initiatives aimed at relating newcomers' experiences with local history. However, the mobilisation of local diversity appears as especially relevant in contexts with a set of specific characteristics, among which the presence of immigrant self-organisation or other spaces for immigrant civic activism seems to be particularly relevant, making it much easier to involve local immigrant communities with an actual active role.

We have an association formed by African immigrants, which was created about 10 years ago, and, when it was still possible to do public manifestations [due to Covid-19 pandemic], they used to organize the Festival of One Thousand Cultures a few days before the celebration for the local patron saint. (Municipality n.28, Interview with the mayor)

The project [the Festival of the Culture, ed] represents the conclusion of a co-creative process, promoted by the town's Commission for Equal Opportunities [...] and culminated in the planning of an event for social integration, interculture and the valorisation of diversity thanks to the synergy between various citizens and foreigners, as well as various associations and Commission members. Three types of events are planned (conferences and education activities, experience laboratories and open-air activities, concerts and dance spectacles), which will be realised in different locations of the municipal territory [...]. The event sees the cooperation of many local and non-local associations, witnessing that the project's aims are largely shared and generating the hope that it will contribute to the creation of a network of interpersonal relations that can both support foreigners [...] and trigger opportunities of growth and development for those abilities, knowledge and skills useful to a correct inclusion in the social and cultural context of the receiving locality. (Municipality n.26, Document: Deliberation of the municipal executive, 2016)

Despite being limited to spot events in many cases, within localities that also experienced large international emigration in the past and still maintain some contacts with the emigrant community or where native linguistic or religious minorities are present these initiatives often assume a broader perspective, relating the local history to new immigration flows in an attempt to rebrand the town itself through a diversity discourse. This seems to suggest that, when a certain acknowledgement of diversity is already present at the local level – for instance due to transnational networks created by past emigration or the presence of historical linguistic minorities, – social innovation may arise through the mobilisation of new diversification processes in combination with local historical and cultural resources. Some examples of these are shown below:

Together with a professor from a master in community narration, we created the “story walking”, in which places that matter for our local history are presented through the experience of elders and then put in relation with that of immigrants, that can thus include in this narration their popular cultures and experiences. (Municipality n.11, Interview with a councillor with management responsibilities)

“Solo Andata: emigranti di ieri e immigrati di oggi” [Single Journey. Emigrants of yesterday, immigrants of today, ed. Translation] is an initiative that the municipality has organised in the context of the day of the emigration. The event aims to create a meeting space between municipality's emigrants and immigrants who are present in the municipality with a view of integration between people. During the event, the municipality has delivered a certificate of “affective citizenship” to emigrants and organised a spectacle of traditional music and a multiethnic dinner with dishes prepared by the municipality's immigrant communities (Municipality n.16, Document: End-of-Mandate Report, 2018)

Such diversity discourse can also contribute to the creation of a welcoming culture, but it clashes in some cases with potential downsides for immigrants' incorporation of framing immigrant policies within development strategies. Indeed, as mentioned at the beginning of this section, in all case-studies some sort of connection between immigration and

development is acknowledged, but most localities also go further, by legitimising immigration itself based on its contribution to development in front of the local population. This is especially – albeit not exclusively – true for right-wing governed municipalities, which frequently use a “rhetoric of exceptionalism” aimed at distinguishing the local immigrant communities from broader discourse about immigration at the national level. As a consequence, immigrant/development policies may present exclusionary dynamics, exacerbating social stratification or issues of “usefulness” and “deservingness” and leaving outside of inclusion paths those people who do not fit in the immigration/development narrative.

Discussion

This article has explored the nature of the immigration/development nexus within rural and peripheral areas in Italy dealing with the way the nexus appears to be acknowledged and mobilised by local policymakers and what are its main contents at the local level. The research carried out through qualitative tools shows results which are mostly in line with what has been noted in previous works on these issues with some relevant additional elements. Indeed, decision-makers of these localities seem aware of the potentialities of the immigration/development nexus, or at least they appear to acknowledge it in a second moment if some conditions are satisfied. As for the contents of this nexus, four main macro-dimensions seem to emerge: repopulation benefits, contribution to the labour market, reception economy, and diversity policies.

Countering depopulation, countering the crises' spiral

An important finding to highlight is that repopulation does not simply mean increasing the number of local residents, but it brings along a set of related dimensions which depend on the type of immigration patterns. In particular, it crucially contributes to curbing the services' deprivation spiral, since the arrival of new persons makes local service delivery more economically sustainable. In this sense, the actual mobilisation of an immigration/development discourse in this field is strictly dependent on the willingness and capacity of local policymakers to implement policies to generate the conditions for immigrants' long stay and incorporation, as noted in previous literature focusing on the Spanish and Swedish cases (Bayona-i-Carrasco, Gil-Alonso 2012; Hedberg, Haandrikman, 2014; Hedlund *et al.* 2017). This can be a challenging task due to the temporariness of migrants' life paths in the Italian context, a situation that is even more emphasised in relation to the peculiar situation of asylum seekers. However, within selected case-studies, policymakers focus most of their action on this issue, especially for what concerns a specific target of the immigrant population, which is that of families and minors.

Indeed, these groups include cohorts that are among the first being lost through depopulation processes in rural and peripheral localities, namely women and young people. Moreover, the presence of minors crucially contributes to keeping the schools open. Despite being understudied in the literature, this issue emerges as a fundamental frame for the immigration/development nexus of selected localities, since schools are seen as one of the main elements to ensure the survival of the locality in the long term, by allowing to locally maintain groups that enable the generational turnover and to attract other families and minors from surrounding localities that are not able to keep the same services. As a

consequence, local policymakers invest in schools to try to create a welcoming and plural environment, so as to transform them into drivers of social incorporation for immigrant families and an incentive for people to remain or move into the municipality.

The two coin sides of labour market revitalisation

As for immigrants' contribution to the restructuring of the labour market, findings contribute to the literature showing how the arrival of people from a migration background often remedies the lack of workforce in particular economic niches, also pointing out the potentially critical aspects related to the exacerbation of economic stratification dynamics (Camarero, Sampedro, Oliva 2012; Munkejord 2016; Corrado, De Castro, Perrotta 2017). Indeed, despite interviewed municipalities seemingly being active in the contrast to exploitative labour forms, this is mainly pursued within a context of workers' replacement in traditional – often labour-intensive – sectors, leaving few opportunities to go beyond them. This dynamic also potentially creates a set of expectations about how people from a migration background are supposed to economically incorporate in the locality, which may result in forced labour segregation along gender and origin axes.

A parallel role in the context of local labour market restructuring is occupied by so-called “economy of asylum seekers' reception” (Galera *et al.* 2018). Indeed, the reception of asylum seekers and refugees introduces in these places new funds devoted to fulfilling a set of requirements which – directly or indirectly – create opportunities for local development. These primarily involve the (re-)use of untapped real estate assets and the creation of new job opportunities, which also allows to increase the attractiveness of the locality for young, qualified people. However, the mobilisation of reception within development frameworks seems to be more easily carried out in the case of the municipality-driven system of SAI rather than in the top-down and privately managed system of CAS.

This appears to be especially connected with the fact that private for-profit actors, which are often entrusted to CAS management, try to maximise revenues without necessarily employing local people, using local services or taking care of beneficiaries with the same guarantees as in SAI. Conversely, all these elements are usually the main objective in municipality-driven reception, including the creation of a same environment for beneficiaries. In case-studies of this research, this is done not just for humanitarian or ideological reasons, but also for utilitarian ones, since granting adequate reception standards links to the possibility for asylum seekers to remain and dwell in the locality and thus mobilise the aforementioned repopulation benefits.

Mobilising diversity as an asset

Finally, the third dimension emerging from this research entails the use of immigration-related diversity as an asset in itself for social innovation or relaunching local tourism. Such strategy is pursued through a wide variety of measures, including the organisation of local cultural festivals, the use of transnational networks to attract investments or international exchanges, the creation of hybrid initiatives relating immigrants and natives' experiences, the organisation of language courses, and so on. This aspect seems to be especially present in those localities that are able to recover some sort of diversity experience from their local history or cultural background and challenge the traditional idea of rural and peripheral

areas as lacking experiences of diversity. Indeed, policymakers may successfully create a retrospective narrative of local diversity based on experiences that are relatively frequent at least in the Italian context of rural and peripheral areas, such as past emigration processes towards other countries or the presence of historical linguistic minorities. Within some of the selected municipalities, this seems to foster social innovation in this field, integrating above mentioned initiatives in a more consistent way within the attempt to re-create and re-brand the locality.

Conclusions

Rural and peripheral areas in Italy, as in much of Europe, are at the core of global processes more than what is usually represented in the public discourse, as the relatively vast and growing academic literature on the topic has noted. These localities experience such dynamics from unique angles, which result from the interplay of global and local dimensions. Particularly in more remote places, multiple challenges emerge as demographic, economic, and other crises intertwine, exacerbating peripheralisation processes. However, globalisation in rural and peripheral areas is not just a disruptive force, but it also brings new opportunities and introduces new resources. This article has thus tried to show these dual facets, focusing on new international immigration flows towards these localities and their relation with local development trajectories.

The analysis reveals a multifaceted interplay among migration diversity, local context, and the ramifications of global processes, resulting in diverse outcomes across various places. Findings also underscore the role of people from a migration background as crucial actors for local development strategies of rural and peripheral destination localities. This holds particularly true regarding three principal aspects: repopulation benefits, labour market restructuring, and the use of diversity as an asset. In the case-studies of this research, international immigration appears relevant for all these dimensions; yet its potential impact also seems contingent – at least in part – upon the willingness and capacity of local policymakers to mobilise the immigration-development nexus.

The mobilisation of this nexus seldom relies solely on key decision-makers, and the involvement of other actors appear necessary, particularly the local population – both immigrant and autochthonous – and crucial local institutions such as schools. At the same time, findings also show that framing immigrant policies within development strategies is not without consequences for people from a migration background who are the targets of those policies and associated discourses. If these strategies remain exclusively tied to utilitarian perspectives, they may result in an exacerbation of social stratification, exclusionary practices and the creation of a cleavage between “beneficial” and “non-beneficial” newcomers, as highlighted in the earlier discussion on the “rhetoric of exceptionalism”.

In the Italian context, the significance of this latter aspect is particularly pronounced, especially in light of recent reforms – namely, the Law-Decree No. 103/2018 (so-called “Salvini Decree”) and the more recent Law-Decree No. 20/2023 (so-called “Cutro Decree”), – which have substantially curbed resources for immigrant policies and reception, thereby jeopardising the sustainability of many practices emerged during this research. Further studies on the Italian context seem thus needed to properly investigate

the evolution of the immigration/development nexus in rural and peripheral localities, as well as to produce more in-depth insights for comparisons with other case-studies. In this regard, the qualitative research presented in this article contributes to the growing literature on the topic by reinforcing some previously observed aspects and introducing new insights, thereby representing another layer to the understanding of immigration towards rural and peripheral areas.

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Annex

Table 5. Profiles of selected municipalities.

Case	Macro-Area	Population	Immigration rate (%)	Reception centres	P.C. immigrant expenditure (€)	Gov.
1	South	Less than 1000in.	10-15	-	1-100	Civic
2	South	Less than 1000in.	20-25	SAI	1-100	Civic
3	South	1000-5000in.	5-10	SAI	-	Left-wing
4	South	Less than 1000in.	5-10	SAI	>1000	Civic
5	North-East	1000-5000in.	20-25	CAS	1-100	Civic
6	North-East	1000-5000in.	15-20	-	1-100	Right-wing
7	North-East	1000-5000in.	5-10	-	1-100	Right-wing
8	North-East	1000-5000in.	5-10	CAS	100-500	Right-wing
9	North-East	5000-10000in.	5-10	CAS	100-500	Civic
10	North-East	Less than 1000in.	10-15	Public-run CAS	>1000	Right-wing
11	Centre	1000-5000in.	5-10	SAI	>1000	Left-wing

12	Centre	5000-10000in.	10-15	-	100-500	Left-wing
13	North-West	Less than 1000in.	25-30	CAS	1-100	Civic
14	Centre	1000-5000in.	10-15	SAI	-	Civic
15	Centre	1000-5000in.	10-15	-	1-100	Left-wing
16	South	1000-5000in.	5-10	SAI	500-1000	Civic
17	North-West	Less than 1000in.	5-10	SAI	-	Left-wing
18	North-West	1000-5000in.	0-5	CAS	1-100	Right-wing
19	North-West	1000-5000in.	5-10	Public-run CAS	1-100	Left-wing
20	South	Less than 1000in.	0-5	SAI	1-100	Right-wing
21	South	1000-5000in.	15-20	-	1-100	Civic
22	Islands	Less than 1000in.	10-15	CAS	1-100	Civic
23	Islands	1000-5000in.	15-20	-	1-100	Right-wing
24	Centre	10000-15000in.	10-15	CAS	100-500	Left-wing
25	Centre	Less than 1000in.	10-15	SAI	1-100	Right-wing
26	Centre	10000-15000in.	10-15	SAI	1-100	Left-wing
27	Centre	1000-5000in.	25-30	-	1-100	Civic
28	Centre	1000-5000in.	15-20	-	100-500	Right-wing
29	Centre	1000-5000in.	10-15	-	1-100	Civic
30	South	Less than 1000in.	20-25	SAI	-	Left-wing

Localised memories of migration and the construction of welcoming places in rural areas.

The role of linguistic minorities and remigration in Italy

Abstract

In the context of the growing international migration to rural areas in Europe, a commonly cited challenge for the creation of welcoming localities is the perceived lack of familiarity with diversity. This idea stems from the characterisation of many rural localities as new immigration destinations. While this perspective holds some truth, it overlooks other diversity-related experiences that may exist, such as international emigration and remigration, or the presence of localised rural minorities. This study delves into the Italian context, using a mixed method approach. It firstly employs a qualitative exploratory inductive analysis of determinants of immigrant policies in rural areas based on 36 semi-structured interviews with local decision-makers, specifically exploring how localised experiences of diversity can catalyse activism in immigrant policies. These qualitative findings serve as a basis for formulating hypotheses, subsequently tested in a quantitative analysis through logistic regression. Particularly, the paper focuses on two aspects highlighted in interviews as potentially linked to the adoption of local immigrant policies in rural settings: a) localised experiences of international emigration, particularly among influential local policymakers; b) the recognition of the locality as a place of historical linguistic minorities. These aspects are scrutinised through three logistic regression models to assess whether a remigration background in local decision-makers and the municipality's affiliation with a linguistic minority background is associated with more frequent activism in immigrant policies within rural areas. Results suggest that – with some caveats – a relation exists in both cases and that these experiences can indeed be mobilised for the construction of a more welcoming local place.

Introduction

Within the last decade, the volume and the variety of migration towards rural areas in Europe have significantly changed and now involve not just a larger number of persons but also a higher diversity of groups, both in terms of backgrounds and statuses (McAreavey 2017b; Kordel, Weidinger 2018; Woods 2018). In short, super-diversity is no more – if ever was – an exclusively urban feature (McAreavey 2017b; McAreavey, Argent 2018). Facing these transformations, migration studies started considering issues related to migration processes towards rural and peripheral areas in a more systematic way, expanding the framework created by the relatively few notable exceptions to the urban bias in early 2000s migration studies (Morén-Alegret 2004; Kasimis 2006; Corrado 2011). These works have highlighted a wide variety of pushing factors for these new dynamics, including

asylum seekers and refugees' relocation, secondary migration flows or the transformation and intensification of traditional labour migration towards these localities (Barberis, Pavolini 2015; McAreavey 2017a; Kordel, Weidinger 2018; Galera *et al.* 2018).

At the same time, policy challenges posed by a sudden rise of immigration-related diversity in these contexts have been also pointed out, noting various opportunities, but also obstacles for the adoption of a coherent immigrant policy and the construction of welcoming places (Caponio, Donatiello, Ponzio 2022; Martins, Davino 2023; Rossi 2023). Among these, the lack of local experiences of diversity both within the population and in local policymakers has emerged as one of the main barriers, and scholars have argued that this characteristic can potentially connect to a less welcoming attitude of long-lasting residents towards newcomers, or a reduced policy capability in the field of immigrant policies (Camarero, Sampedro, Oliva 2012; Leitner 2012; Cancellieri 2014; Glorius 2017; McAreavey 2017a; Woods 2018). However, such a feature cannot be taken for granted without problematising the idea of the rural as “historically homogeneous”, which mirrors stereotypical and nationalist narrations of the rural as static and idyllic. Indeed, this conception has been widely challenged in rural sociology and it particularly falters when considering experiences of diversity going beyond the narrow focus on contemporary migration flows (Cloke 2003; Panelli *et al.* 2009; Hedberg, Haandrikman 2014; Butler 2021).

Starting from this premise, this paper tries to challenge the conception of rural areas as traditionally alien to diversity, by focusing on direct and indirect experiences of diversity within rural and peripheral areas and how this can be mobilised by local policymakers for the creation of welcoming places for newcomer immigrants through immigrant policy activism at the local level. Such research questions are addressed through a sequential mixed methods design. Firstly, semi-structured interviews with local policymakers have been used for defining and refining a set of research hypotheses based on the above-exposed general research aim. Then, logistic regression analysis has been carried out to test such hypotheses using different models. More specifically, hypotheses built on qualitative findings concern two aspects of localised diversity experiences which result as potentially relevant for local immigrant policy activism: a) past experiences of migration, mostly represented by emigration processes and vehiculated by return migration; and b) the localised self-perception as a cultural, linguistic or religious minorities, especially when this is tied to historical and localised memories of migration.

The research focuses on Italy due to a set of specific characteristics that particularly fit with the aims of this research. These manifest in a recent and high growth of migration-related diversity in rural areas combined with relatively widespread localised experiences of diversity in these localities, which entail pre-existing migration flows, emigration and remigration, and the presence of multiple rural-based linguistic minorities (Bevilacqua 2001; Sciortino 2003; Steinicke *et al.* 2011; Angelo 2012; Membretti, Viazzo 2017). As for the paper structure, the next two paragraphs respectively introduce the relevant scholarship on the topic and the methodological aspects of this research. Then, qualitative findings are exposed and combined with quantitative analysis in the fourth and fifth sections. These sections precedes the final conclusions, which expose the main results by connecting them

with the relevant academic literature on the topic and pointing out future perspectives and limitations of this research.

Experiences of diversity in rural areas and its lacking

As it has been noted by some scholars, rural areas in Europe are not entirely new as immigration destinations, since some migration processes have characterised these localities at least since the 1980s, often in connection to the demand for agricultural and care work or to amenity and return migration (Kasimis 2006; Barberis, Pavolini 2015; Morén-Alegret, Wladycka 2020). However, it cannot be denied that international migration flows have particularly become relevant after the significant increase in the overall migration towards Europe following the various so-called “crises” of 2011, 2013 and 2015 (Barberis, Pavolini 2015; McAreavey 2017b; Kordel, Weidinger 2018; Woods 2018). Despite these new arrivals mostly consisting of humanitarian flows of asylum seekers and refugees, such processes have mixed with other already ongoing changes in immigration towards these localities, contributing to trigger a strong diversification of the local population in European rural areas (McAreavey 2017b, 2018).

Indeed, three main patterns related to these dynamics particularly stand out in the academic literature. First, relocation strategies of asylum seekers and refugees have been carried out by central governments both through top-down measures and incentive-based policies, increasingly moving reception centres outside urban areas towards rural and peripheral ones (Galera *et al.* 2018; Kreichauf 2020; Van Liempt, Mielle 2021). Moreover, the increase in housing prices within cities has led many lower-class immigrants to move outside urban cores, increasing the local diversity of rural and peripheral areas (Membretti, Lucchini 2018; Semprebon, Marzorati, Bonizzoni 2023). Finally, even traditional flows towards these localities – particularly labour migration in agriculture and care work, and amenity, lifestyle and return migration – have progressively mutated, shifting from a mainly seasonal or transitory nature to settlement immigration (Barberis, Pavolini 2015; Kordel, Weidinger 2018; Morén-Alegret, Wladycka 2020). These processes – either individually or in combination – contribute to increasing immigration-related diversity in many rural areas across Europe and push academic research to investigate their consequences on local immigrant policymaking and politics (Caponio, Donatiello, Ponzio 2022; Haselbacher, Segarra 2022; Martins, Davino 2023; Rossi 2023).

Scholars have thus pointed out some facilitating factors, such as in particular the higher potential for interpersonal connections in small places (Bevilacqua, Bertaux 2022; Whyte, Romme Larsen, Fog Olwig 2018; Woods 2018), and various obstacles, including the more serious effects of segregation in sparsely populated localities, the lack of resources, and the working conditions of some rural job niches (Fonseca 2008; Kreichauf 2015; Kalantaryan *et al.* 2021). A relevant role among hindering factors is taken up by the lack of experience with diversity at the local level, which is inscribed in the framework of new immigration destinations, used as a lens to analyse migration in these localities. This idea is expressed in various ways, ranging from the reduced capacity of policymakers in migration-related issues to the less welcoming attitudes of the local population towards people who are perceived as a threat to the homogeneity of the locality (Camarero, Sampedro, Oliva 2012; Leitner 2012; Cancellieri 2014; Glorius 2017; McAreavey 2017a; Woods 2018; Urso 2021). However, the

presumed homogeneity of rural areas does not apply to every case and it has been widely challenged in rural sociology (Cloke 2003; Panelli *et al.* 2009; Hedberg, Haandrikman 2014; Butler 2021).

Indeed, the assumption of the rural as a homogeneous space has been long criticised, arguing that rural areas are not necessarily new to international immigration flows and to other forms of localised diversity, involving for instance historically rooted or so-called Indigenous minorities (Panelli *et al.* 2009; Woods, McDonagh 2011; Hedberg, do Carmo 2012). This idea is strictly connected to the stereotypical construction of the “rural idyll”, which tends to project rural places out of time and space, by assuming them as characterised by fixity and distance from contemporary globalisation processes (Cloke 2003; McCarthy 2008; Hedberg, do Carmo 2012). Despite many studies having criticised this idea by depicting the rural as a space of lasting migration and mobility processes and as a potential place of minorities (Morén-Alegret 2004; Kasimis 2006; Farrell, Mahon, McDonagh 2012), this approach is not majoritarian in the literature of migration studies in rural areas, still largely focusing on these localities as solely new immigration destinations.

Starting from these premises, this article tries to build on the above-mentioned scholarship to look at how pre-existing experiences of diversity can be mobilised by rural localities in the context of new immigration flows towards rural areas in Italy. The focus is on the Italian context, since it presents particularly relevant characteristics of rural diversity. Indeed, Italy is certainly characterised by a recent increase and diversification of migration towards rural areas fuelled by the above-described pushing factors, but it also presents historical migration patterns due to specific economic niches heavily relying on migrant workforce, such as agriculture and care work (Corrado 2011; Barberis, Pavolini 2015). Moreover, rural areas in Italy have long been interested by emigration flows towards other countries (Bevilacqua 2001; Sciortino 2003), which can result in remigration processes and the construction of transnational networks. Finally, Italy presents a peculiar distribution of so-called historical minorities, whose diversity is mainly acknowledged on linguistic bases and which are mostly located outside urban areas (Toso 2008; Steinicke *et al.* 2011; Angelo 2012; Membretti, Viazzo 2017). The relations between these minorities and newcomer immigrants have also been already addressed by some recent studies (Steinicke *et al.* 2011; Liuzzi 2016; Löffler *et al.* 2016), although only from a qualitative perspective and focusing on specific minorities and immigrant groups.

Methods and data

The present research is based on a sequential mixed-methods design, in which the exploratory qualitative part is used to define and refine hypotheses further tested through quantitative methods in the second step. The paper focuses on the specific role of policymakers, looking for experiences and memories of migration and diversity within these subjects' biographies and attitudes. This is done both for practical and theoretically informed reasons: on the one hand, local policymakers in rural areas are easier to reach and involve through qualitative methods and, at the same time, available quantitative data do not allow to consider localised experiences of diversity at the population level; on the other hand, the scholarship on the topic of local immigrant policies within rural areas in Europe has pointed out that policymakers and other local stakeholders have a crucial role in

designing and implementing these measures, also shaping the discourse about immigration at the local level (Caponio, Donatiello, Ponzio 2022; Haselbacher, Segarra 2022; Miellet 2022). Therefore, in the context of this research, local policymakers are considered a privileged entry point for the study of the mobilisation of experiences of diversity and migration at the local level.

The first part of this work is thus based on 36 semi-structured stakeholders' interviews with local policymakers, which were conducted in the course of a previous research project about immigrant policymaking in Italian rural areas (see Rossi 2023). The interviews mostly involved mayors, but also councillors with management responsibilities and local welfare managers, depending on who was the main actor entitled to immigration-related issues at the local level. Such interviews have been conducted within rural municipalities which are active in immigrant policies, respectively operationalising rurality and immigrant policies' activism through the Eurostat spatial typology and a new indicator built by looking at the declared expenditure in social policies for immigrants and the participation in the municipality-driven reception system called SAI (System of Reception and Integration). Indeed, unlike the top-down emergency reception system based on CAS (Centres of Extraordinary Reception), the SAI is activated by municipalities on a voluntary basis, which is witnessing the willingness to be active in the immigration field of joining localities despite most funds being allocated nationally and thus not directly resulting in the local budget.

After a brief reconstruction of the local contexts, including local resources and limitations, interviews focused on the reasons which led local policymakers to adopt local immigrant policies, their contents and their impact at the local level. Transcripts have been coded using MaxQDA software and following an inductive strategy, so as to remain open to elements of novelty coming out from them (Charmaz 2006; Kuckartz, Rädiker 2019). Thus, a set of initial codes were elaborated through line-by-line coding and, in subsequent rounds, they have then been regrouped in larger thematic codes, up to produce the main guiding hypotheses for this research. During the coding of interview materials, the focus was particularly narrowed to two main aspects dealing with the general research aim and to the intersection among them within interviewees' discourses: determinants of immigrant policy activism, defined as the reasons to adopt local measures in this field, and localised experiences of diversity, corresponding to continuous relations with groups having a different migration, linguistic, ethnic or religious backgrounds compared to the majority of the population at the local level.

As regards selected municipalities, these have been randomly selected among those that result both active in immigrant policies and rural according to Istat data, providing that a certain degree of variety between them is granted. Involved localities are 10 from Southern Italy, 12 from Northern Italy and 14 from Central Italy and they are almost equally ruled by civic governments (13), right-wing (11) and left-wing (12) ones. In 12 cases, they voluntarily join asylum seekers and refugees' reception, while 13 municipalities have government-established emergency reception structures – the so-called CAS (Centre for Extraordinary Reception), – although in 3 cases these are publicly run by the municipality itself. They have an average population of 3902 inhabitants, ranging from 654 to 13556, and an average immigration rate of 13%. Moreover, 7 selected municipalities are included in the list of

places of historical linguistic minorities and 8 of them present at least one policymaker who was not born in Italy within the municipal council or the local government, although most interviewees (28) refer to their municipality as having a more or less recent history of emigration.

On the basis of qualitative findings, the focus has been narrowed to those localised experiences of diversity that emerged as most relevant during the interviews in the adoption and design of immigrant policies. Thus, the two above-presented hypotheses have been formulated to be tested in the second part through three logistic regression models, which have finally been related again to qualitative findings to produce final results. These models use as the dependent variable the same categoric dichotomous indicators used for selecting eligible case-studies in the qualitative part, which operationalises whether or not rural municipalities in Italy are active in local immigrant policies (see Table 1). Moreover, even in this case, only rural municipalities as defined in the Eurostat typology have been considered eligible to be included in the regression models, amounting to a total of 4940 out of a total of 5040 rural municipalities due to missing data¹. In addition to the main independent variables, that are illustrated below, both proposed models use the same set of control variables. These have been chosen on the basis of the literature on the determinants of local immigrant policies (Alexander 2010; Caponio 2010; Schiller 2016; Schamman *et al.* 2021), and on other results deriving from the inductive analysis of qualitative findings. Details about them can be found in Table 1.

Therefore, Model 1 considers hypotheses resulting from qualitative findings by testing the relation between immigrant policy activism and two main independent variables: the presence of policymakers with migration background within the municipal council or government, and the municipality's self-acknowledgement of being a place of linguistic minorities. The first independent variable is represented by a dichotomous predictor identifying whether there are or not people born outside Italy in the local governments of rural municipalities. Data come from the register of local administrators provided by the Italian Ministry of the Interior. The use of these variables to operationalise migration background in local policymakers is clearly a limitation, since a migration background cannot be taken for granted just on the basis of an individual's place of birth, but this choice is made necessary by data availability and it is widely justified by the literature in migration studies, largely relying on this proxy to identify migration background (Careja, Bevelander 2018; UN 2022).

The latter independent variable takes into account minority background, considering in particular the 12 linguistic minorities that are officially recognised by Italy as "historical minorities" by Law 482/1999². Individual data about self-identification with one of these minorities are not available, but it is possible to compensate for this absence using the list of municipalities with linguistic minorities provided by the Ministry of Interior. Indeed, the

¹ It should be particularly consider that among municipalities excluded for this reason there are all those from Aosta Valley, which is a Region characterised by many rural and historical minority localities. This is a limitation of the present study, that must be kept in mind while considering its results.

² These are: Albanian/Arbëreshë, Catalan, Germanic, Greek, Slovenian, Croatian, French, Franco-Provençal, Friulan, Ladin, Occitan, and Sardinian.

law establishes that localities can be included in this list if at least 15% of the population explicitly requires it – a criticised mechanism which leaves large discretion to local policymakers who ultimately decide on the proposal and formally present the request to the Ministry (Toso 2008; Piergigli 2017). In this sense, the inclusion of the municipality on the list can be considered as a proxy of the willingness of local policymakers to acknowledge and mobilise the minority background of their localities, although a certain degree of self-identification by the local population is still required (*ibid.*). Therefore, in order to test the second hypothesis, a dichotomous variable considering whether or not a municipality has been identified as a place of linguistic minority has been included in the analysis.

Model 2 considers an additional layer concerning the first of the two main predictors, by distinguishing between policymakers with an immigration background and those with a remigration background on the basis of their origin from an area of immigration towards or emigration from Italy. Of course, this distinction presents strong limitations, which are those already pointed out for the main indicator used in Model 1 and 3 and other ones more specific, for instance connected to the fact that some Southern American countries also represent countries of immigration towards Italy, while some African countries (Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Libia) can also represent countries of post-colonial remigration towards Italy. However, it is again justified on the basis of the above-mentioned literature and it seems to be also consistent with the data at stake.

Finally, Model 3 differs from the first two in how the second independent variable is considered. This is replaced by a variable distinguishing between those so-called “territorial minorities” and “sparsely located minorities”. On the one hand, the first ones are strictly connected to a specific territory within the country, as in the case of Sardinians or Friulans, and often present autonomist or independentist pushes. On the other hand, the latter are characterised by a more sparse distribution and to ancient experiences of displacement or transnationalism (Maraschio, Robustelli 2011). Such distinction has been used to test if the potential identification with a sparsely located minority may play a role in shaping the relationship between immigrant policy activism and minority background. This is hinted at in qualitative findings, as well as in the literature about linguistic minorities in Italy, suggesting a potential distinction between those linguistic minorities tied to historical experiences of migration and those emerging through the re-affirmation of a regional identity and specificity (Coluzzi 2006; Toso 2008; Maraschio, Robustelli 2011; Liuzzi 2016).

Table 1. Description of variables used in the regression models.

Variable	Definition/Categories	Source	Model and type
Immigrant policy activism	0. No (<i>reference category</i>): The municipality does not declare expenditure in the social budget chapter named “Immigrants, Rom and Sinti” nor is part of the SAI network for asylum seekers and refugees’ reception. 1. Yes: The municipality declares expenditure in the social budget chapter named “Immigrants, Rom and Sinti” or is part of the SAI network for asylum seekers and refugees’ reception.	Istat (2021), RETESAI (2021)	1, 2, 3 (DEP)
Policymaker(s) with migration background [1]	0. No (<i>reference category</i>): There are no councillors, councillors with management responsibility or mayor born outside Italy in the local administration.	Ministry of the Interior (2021)	1, 3 (IND)

	1. Yes : There is at least one councillor, councillor with management responsibility or mayor born outside Italy in the local administration.		
Linguistic minorities [1]	0. No (<i>reference category</i>): The locality is not included in the list of municipalities with historical linguistic minorities. 1. Yes: The locality is included in the list of municipalities with historical linguistic minorities.	Ministry of the Interior (2021)	1,3 (IND)
Policymaker(s) with migration background [2]	0. No (<i>reference category</i>): There are no councillors, councillors with management responsibility or mayor born outside Italy in the local administration. 1. Emigration background: There is at least one councillor, councillor with management responsibility or mayor born in one of the following area: Southern and Northern America, Australia, EU countries up to 2004. 2. Immigration background: There is at least one councillor, councillor with management responsibility or mayor born in one of the following area: Africa, Asia, European countries not part of EU up to 2004.	Ministry of the Interior (2021)	2 (IND)
Linguistic minorities [2]	0. No (<i>reference category</i>): The locality is not included in the list of municipalities with historical linguistic minorities. 1. Territorial minorities: The locality is included in the list of municipalities with historical linguistic minorities having a Sardinian, Friulan, Ladin or German (Trentino/South Tirol) minorities. 2. Sparsely located minorities: The locality is included in the list of municipalities with historical linguistic minorities having a Arbëreshë, Germanic (non located in Trentino/South Tirol), Greek, Slovenian, Croatian, French, Franco-Provençal or Occitan minorities.	Ministry of the Interior (2021)	2 (IND)
Immigration rate	Share of non-citizens in the resident population within the municipality.	Istat (2021)	1,2,3 (CON)
Diversity of the immigrant population	Share of non-citizens coming from the first two non-citizen national communities within the municipality	Istat (2021)	1,2,3 (CON)
Votes for anti-immigration parties	Average share of votes for anti-immigration parties in the 2013, 2018 and 2022 general elections for the Chamber of Deputies at the municipal level.	Ministry of the Interior (2013, 2018, 2022)	1,2,3 (CON)
Population	1. Sparsely populated areas: Municipalities with 1000 or 2. Very small Towns: Municipalities with a population between 1001 and 3000 inhabitants. 3. Small Towns (<i>reference category</i>): Municipalities with more than 3000 inhabitants.	Istat (2021)	1,2,3 (CON)
Variation in the population	1. Strongly declining areas: Municipalities with negative population trends that lost 15% or more of their population between 2011 and 2021. 2. Declining areas: Municipalities with negative population trends that lost less than 15% of their population between 2011 and 2021 3. Growing area (<i>reference category</i>): Municipalities with positive population trends.	Istat (2011, 2021)	1,2,3 (CON)
Per capita social expenditure	Per capita social expenditure in € in the municipality.	Istat (2021)	1,2,3 (CON)
Occupation rate	Share of occupied people among the population between 16 and 64 within the municipality	Istat (2015)	1,2,3 (CON)

Experiences of diversity and welcoming attitudes in rural areas

Qualitative findings show a variety of determinants for activism in immigrant policies within Italian rural municipalities – either coincident or peculiar compared to what the academic literature has noted in different contexts (Alexander 2010; de Graauw, Vermeulen 2016; Filomeno 2017; Schammann *et al.* 2021), – including political attitudes, the type and history of international immigration at the local level and various attempts to mobilise immigration as a way to counter depopulation processes or pursue broader development aims. Indeed, when dealing with rural areas, pragmatism often lies at the roots of these pushing factors, making local policymakers more inclined to adopt immigrant policies when there is a direct benefit to the whole locality or when externally determined situations – such as top-down-driven relocation of reception centres or a border position – force them to act in this field. This emerges both from this research and from above-exposed academic literature on the topic, but other root factors still exist, linking the adoption of immigrant policies to the (re-)affirmation of welcoming attitudes also within rural contexts.

What emerges from the qualitative part of this study is that localised experiences of diversity and memories of migration – not necessarily linked to recent international immigration flows – can indeed play a role in this sense, even more than local governments' political inclinations which have been noted as a crucial factor for the creation of welcoming places in more urban contexts (Alexander 2010; de Graauw, Vermeulen 2016). Within this context, the first element to look at is the potential relevance of long-lasting emigration processes from Italian rural areas towards other countries – usually in Europe or in Southern and Northern America – which also connect to experiences of remigration and the presence of return migrants at the local level or the establishment of transnational networks. In this sense, interviewed policymakers in localities that experienced relevant outmigration and remigration flows point out that these dynamics play a role in making the local community more open to newly arrived immigrants. This especially happens when initiatives celebrating migration in itself are traditionally organised in the municipality, as it is declared for instance by this mayor during the interview:

In a broader sense, Italy has the history of a country of emigration. Our area is particularly represented abroad and has some of the largest communities in London, Paris and, more in general, France, England, Belgium, Brazil and Argentina. Therefore, we always had a certain attention to this: we celebrated the emigrant during the summer, whether he was exiting or entering [our territory], and we often organised a specific municipal council dedicated to immigration and emigration in the villages of the municipality that have been more interested by these processes. There is a sensitivity on the topic, that is also the result of choices from the Tuscany Region through the institution of the groups *Lucchesi nel Mondo* ["Luccans in the world"] and *Lunigianesi nel Mondo* ["Lunigiana people in the world"], which have been also created in the United States. There are many things to say on this topic and this has created a welcoming culture that is above the ordinary average. (Interview n.25, Central Italy, right-wing mayor)

Personal experiences and contacts with migration in key local policymakers also seem to play a crucial role. Indeed, in various cases, interviewed stakeholders explicitly mention experiences of emigration – both firsthand or indirectly through relatives still living abroad – and connect them to a deeper understanding of recently arrived migrants' experiences. According to them, this empathic connection makes policymakers and the local population more welcoming towards newcomers. Interestingly, this mostly happens among case-

studies for right-wing local governments, seemingly mitigating the effect of politics-informed attitudes towards immigration in these municipalities. In some cases, the identification between remigrants and newcomer migrants also emerges in adopted measures, as it is the case of the first of the quotes below, where the municipality chooses to name the asylum seekers and refugees' reception centre in honour of a key figure in their local emigration history.

The first pushing factor [to join the asylum seekers' reception system] has been that our population, which up to the '50s was 5000 inhabitants, went for a mass migration outside Europe: in the sole city of Toronto in the United States [sic] there are between 20 and 25 thousand people from my town, counting those who are first and second generation, because this is a process that started at the beginning of the 1900s. We called the first reception centred *Duca d'Aosta* ["Duke of Aosta"] because he was the first to bring my fellow villagers to the United States. It is a vocation: we are genetically arranged to welcome other people, because we bear the sacrifice of emigration. To make an example, I have about 20 cousins in the city of Toronto, I have a sister and six or seven aunts and uncles living there. [...] Every citizen of this town has a relative there [in Toronto], not to mention other emigrants in Europe, Switzerland, Germany and – residually – in Prato, Turin and Milan. This was thus the first pushing factor. (Interview n.21, Southern Italy, right-wing mayor)

As I was saying, we gave the availability to receive refugees. No more than a month ago, together with the Prefecture, my municipality also gave the availability to receive people arriving with the emergence in Afghanistan. [...] This is our philosophy: we welcome everyone. I repeat myself by saying that I also was a migrant in the United States. I was a luxury [sic] migrant, since I didn't go there seeking success but they ask me to go there. I was lucky, but I know what migrating means because I spent my life wandering around the world just like those people who are migrating now. (Interview n.11, North-Eastern Italy, right-wing mayor)

In addition to the local emigration history, another localised experience of diversity appears to matter in very specific contexts, which are localities recognised as a place of historical linguistic minorities. However, this dynamic does not seem to emerge in all case-studies matching this criterion, but only for what concerns some specific minorities. This is particularly the case of Albanian/Arbëreshë³ municipalities and Franco-Provençal ones, which – unlike other territorial linguistic minorities that are present among case-studies, such as the Sardinian one – also present elements of religious diversity and perpetuate at the local level past histories of migration or exile. Such characteristics are thus related in these localities to present experiences of newcomer migrants in a similar way to what happens in the first case for emigration, either emphasising the fact that being welcomed firsthand makes them more welcoming or stressing that knowing what migrating means allows them to better understand people on the move.

In the case of Arbëreshë municipalities, interviewed policymakers argue that joining the reception system for asylum seekers and refugees – which is the main immigration pattern in these localities, since they are exclusively located in the South, – is considered a sort of paying back for being welcomed in Southern Italy when their ancestors fled from Albania in the XV and XVI century. Such a dynamic represents an extension of what Liuzzi (2016) noted for the relation of this minority with Albanian immigrants, who were brought together by the similarity of languages. Indeed, according to interviewed policymakers, the

³ Arbëreshë people are an Italian linguistic minority speaking an Albanian-derived language. They are the descendant of Christian Albanians who migrated in Italy during the XV and XVI century, following the Ottoman invasion of Albania. They are also characterised by the fact that Arbëreshë churches, despite formally being part of the Catholic Church, still maintain the Byzantine Rite (Liuzzi 2016).

memory of migration and reception, which is seemingly very much alive and inscribed in the local identity at least on the part of policymakers, contributes to creating a more open attitude at the local level, which contrasts with the widespread scholarly claim of rural areas as more closed towards newcomers and intertwines with more pragmatic considerations about reception's contributions to the local occupation and repopulation, legitimising new immigration flows also from a historical and identitarian point of view. The following quotes provide two examples of this narrative.

[Our town] has a 600-year-long history: we have Albanian origin, as it is also stated in the town's name itself, and we descend from Albanians who arrived in Italy in 1550 and found here a welcoming place. Therefore, this a place that was born with the actual welcoming of people coming from Albania, who were included here with no problems. [...] We also made that choice [of joining the asylum seekers' reception system] because we thought that it was a positive thing to make people who are in need and who are finding difficulties in being welcomed come to our municipality, where we were the first being welcomed in Italy 600 years ago. We had already experienced the condition of being welcomed and, consequently, we are in the condition today to be welcoming. (Interview n.2, Southern Italy, left-wing mayor)

For what concerns the population, it reacts very well [to the arrival of asylum seekers]. I see the actual integration when these persons go to do the shopping or to bring children to the kindergarten and to the school, as well as in other social moments. I would say that this is because we have the gene of welcomingness in our DNA: we were welcomed here in Southern Italy fleeing from Albania – this is what the story tells us – and this is probably the reason why there is this welcoming attitude and solidarity towards these persons [newcomer immigrants] (Interview n.3, Southern Italy, civic mayor).

From what concerns the Franco-Provençal minority, despite the result being similar, the narrative is quite different and religious aspects also intervene, due to the coincidence of the spread of the Christian Waldensian minority with municipalities labelling themselves as Franco-Provençal. On one hand, in these localities, minority religious institutions play a crucial and direct role as subjects entrusted with asylum seekers and refugees' reception and consequently shape the action of policymakers in this policy field. On the other hand, policymakers themselves acknowledge that this religious specificity has an influence on local attitudes towards diversity. Interestingly, as it can be noted in the quote below, this welcoming attitude is not simply linked to religious principles, but it is also referred to the history of Waldensians, which is characterised by exile and comeback in its origin territories in North-Western Italy and is also widely committed in the reception system (Rosso 2016; Caponio, Donatiello, Ponzio 2022). For instance, a mayor from a Franco-Provençal municipality declared:

We are Waldensian territory in a Waldensian valley and I think that for historical reasons – let's leave aside the religious ones that everyone has their own ideas – this has made our valley a very open place. Therefore, through the years, we experienced emigration, but also immigration. [...] We are part of a Mountain Union with other municipalities of the valley and we signed an agreement with the Prefecture of the Province, in which we established that about 100 [asylum seekers] will be sent to our valley and that the entrusted subject, that is the Waldensian Diaconate, will look for idoneous accommodation and structures. (Interview n.19, North-Western Italy, right-wing mayor)

The findings presented above have been used as the basis to formulate hypotheses about the impact of localised experiences of diversity on immigrant policy activism to be tested in the second quantitative step. What appears to emerge is in particular that, when dealing with international immigration towards rural areas, being a new immigration destination does not necessarily mean that these localities are lacking experiences of diversity and migration. Moreover, despite being clearly distinguished from the experience of most

contemporary migrants arriving in these areas, the pre-existing presence of local minorities or (re)migration networks seems to potentially play an important role in the creation of welcoming places and the adoption of immigrant policies, especially when these dynamics correspond to the preservation of a localised memory of migration.

Based on these explorative results, two main hypotheses are then formulated: a) past experiences of migration, mostly represented by emigration processes and vehiculated by return migration, can act as a pushing factor for the adoption of local immigrant policies, particularly when these are present among local policymakers; b) localised self-perception as a place of cultural, linguistic or religious minorities can make policymakers more open to the adoption of local immigrant policies, especially when this is tied to localised experiences of migration. These hypotheses are thus tested in the following section using three separate regression models, one addressing the issue from a general perspective and the other two considering specific aspects of these dimensions.

Rural areas facing diversity and diversification processes

As mentioned in the introduction, rural areas in Italy are increasingly becoming relevant in contemporary immigration flows for a variety of reasons and this is also mirrored by general descriptive statistics emerging from elaboration on the main data sources⁴. Indeed, about 13% of the whole immigrant population and 23% of all asylum seekers received in Italy reside in rural localities in 2021, representing about 7% of the total population living in those areas. This share is lower than that of urban areas (11% in cities, 8% in towns and semi-dense areas), but is constantly growing since 2011 to the extent that the immigrant population in rural municipalities has averagely increased by 28%. The above-presented framework consistently varies across different localities and Regions, but it is indeed true that a large share of rural municipalities in Italy is currently facing unprecedented immigration flows, as also noted by the scholarship on the topic (Urso 2021; Caponio, Donatiello, Ponzio 2022).

Due to this diverse history of international immigration, it is not a surprise that rural municipalities are less active in immigrant policies than urban ones, according to the indicator used in this research. Indeed, more than half of Italian municipalities (52%) are active in immigrant policies, but active rural municipalities account only for 43% of all rural areas, a share that is much lower than that of urban areas (70% of cities and 67% of towns and semi-dense areas). However, according to elaboration on Istat data, rural areas investing in social immigrant policies or asylum seekers' reception still represent more than half (53%) of all active municipalities and – when active – they averagely spend much more than urban counterparts, showing a per-capita expenditure for immigrant policies of about 7€ against the 4€ and 3€ of respectively cities and towns and semi-dense areas.

As concerns the two forms of localised diversity selected on the basis of qualitative findings, descriptive statistics also show some specificities of rural areas compared to urban ones. Indeed, more than one out of five municipalities in Italy shows at least one policymakers with migration background in the municipality. Cities are the spatial type with

⁴ Data about general immigration and municipalities come from Istat, while data about asylum seekers' reception are elaborated on RETESAI and Centri d'Italia data.

the highest share of municipalities having policymakers with migration background, but this frame acquires additional facets when looking more closely. First, distinguishing emigration and immigration backgrounds, cities show a relatively high rate of policymakers with immigration background, but they fall behind rural areas and towns and semi-dense areas if policymakers who potentially are return migrants are considered. Moreover, policymakers with migration background are confined to lower-tier public roles in cities, where about 75% of them occupy the position of municipal councillor, compared to rural areas, in which about 31% of them are included in the local government, including an 8% of mayors with migration background.

Table 2. Number of municipalities with councillors with migration background and share on the total according to spatial types (Elaboration on Ministry of Interior data, 2021).

<i>Spatial type</i>	Remigration background	Immigration background	Migration background
<i>Cities</i>	41 (16,1%)	24 (9,4%)	65 (25,5%)
<i>Towns and semi-dense areas</i>	467 (17,9%)	117 (4,5%)	584 (22,4%)
<i>Rural areas</i>	867 (17,2%)	179 (3,6%)	1046 (20,8%)
<i>TOTAL</i>	1375 (17,4%)	320 (4,1%)	1695 (21,5%)

Peculiarities in the distribution across different spatial types also emerge when looking at recognised historical linguistic minorities. At the national level, about 14% of the municipalities have been included in the list of places of linguistic minorities, including both those recognised by Law 482/1999 and those already acknowledged through the special status of some Regions⁵. However, municipalities self-identification with these minorities is not evenly distributed across spatial types and rural areas emerge as clear protagonists in this sense, since about 83% of municipalities of linguistic minorities are located in these areas. This represents an Italian specificity of historic minorities' settlement, which may be due to the higher likelihood of preserving specific identities and linguistic peculiarities in more isolated contexts, but also to the higher incentives of non-urban, deprived or peripheral areas to be included in that list to access the dedicated Ministry of the Interior's fund (Coluzzi 2006; Toso 2008; Maraschio, Robustelli 2011).

Table 3. Number of municipalities with recognised historical linguistic minorities and share on total municipalities according to spatial types (Elaboration on Ministry of Interior data, 2021).

<i>Spatial type</i>	Territorial minorities	Sparsely located minorities	Linguistic minorities (all)
<i>Cities</i>	5 (2,0%)	3 (1,2%)	8 (3,2%)
<i>Towns and semi-dense areas</i>	111 (4,3%)	68 (2,6%)	179 (6,9%)
<i>Rural areas</i>	575 (11,4%)	322 (6,4%)	897 (17,8%)
<i>TOTAL</i>	691 (8,7%)	393 (5,0%)	1084 (13,7%)

⁵ Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol and Aosta Valley.

Minority and (re-)migration backgrounds as determinants of immigrant policy activism

Starting from the above-described characteristics of rural areas, this paper proposes three binomial logistic regression models, which consider different levels of variables' deepening, to test the effect of above-considered experiences and memories of diversity and migration on the adoption of immigrant and reception policies, considered as a proxy for the "welcomingness" of a locality towards newcomer immigrants. The relationship between these variables is further controlled by other dimensions which emerge as relevant to the adoption of immigrant policies according to qualitative findings and the academic literature that has been exposed in the first section.

Regression coefficients are shown in Table 4, using as the reference categories for the main independent variables the cases in which there are no acknowledged linguistic minorities and no councillors with migration backgrounds. In the case of categorical control variables, the category with the largest number of cases has been used as the reference. All categorical predictors have been also tested for significance as a whole and all of them show a $p < 0.05$ level of significance in all three models.

Table 4. Coefficient with robust standard errors of binomial logistic regression models.

Independent variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	β	RSR	β	RSR	β	RSR
<i>Policymaker with migration background [1] (No)</i>						
Yes	0.160*	0.080	-	-	0.164*	0.081
<i>Policymaker with migration background [2] (No)</i>						
Remigration background	-	-	0.212*	0.088	-	-
Immigration background	-	-	-0.073	0.172	-	-
<i>Linguistic minorities [1] (No)</i>						
Yes	-0.319**	0.113	-0.321**	0.113	-	-
<i>Linguistic minorities [2] (No)</i>						
Territorial minorities	-	-	-	-	-0.855***	0.171
Sparsely located minorities	-	-	-	-	0.315*	0.140
<i>Population (Small Towns)</i>						
Sparsely populated areas	-0.997***	0.093	-0.989***	0.096	-0.991***	0.095
Very Small Towns	-0.312***	0.083	-0.186*	0.768	-0.293***	0.083
<i>Variation in the population (Growing areas)</i>						
Strongly declining areas	-0.263**	0.096	-0.267**	0.096	-0.303**	0.097
Declining areas	-0.187*	0.077	-0.186*	0.077	-0.110*	0.077
<i>Continuous independent variables</i>						
Immigration rate	0.134***	0.010	0.135***	0.010	0.131***	0.010
Diversity of the immigrant population	-0.014***	0.002	-0.014***	0.002	-0.014***	0.002
Votes for anti-immigration parties	-0.011**	0.004	-0.011**	0.004	-0.014**	0.004
Per capita social expenditure	0.002***	0.000	0.002***	0.000	0.002***	0.000
Occupation rate	0.015***	0.004	0.015***	0.004	0.012**	0.004
_cons	-0.481	0.260	-0.525*	0.262	-0.317	0.262
N of observations	4940		4940		4940	
Pseudo R2	0.141		0.141		0.147	

* $p < 0,05$; ** $p < 0,01$; *** $p < 0,001$

Regression results show that both having a policymaker with migration background and being a place of historical linguistic minorities prove to be significantly different from the respective reference categories when testing their effects on local immigrant policy activism. As for control variables, the size seems to matter, so that smaller municipalities are less likely to be active in immigrant policies compared to larger ones. The same is true when considering population variation, so that declining areas show less probability of being active than growing ones. The immigration rate positively affects the likelihood of adopting immigrant policies, while the diversity of the immigrant population seems to have a slightly negative impact, that could be due to the stronger negotiating power of more cohesive local communities in SMSTs (Andriopoulou *et al.* 2022). In line with the scholarship, the probability of being active decreases with the increase in votes for anti-immigration parties, despite its effect being small. Finally, the local social expenditure and occupation rate are significant and positively related with the likelihood of being active.

Coming to the main independent variables, having a policymaker with migration background increases the probability of being active in immigrant policies in both models using this variable. In Models 1 and 3, the odds of being active for municipalities that have policymakers with migration background respectively are 1,174 and 1.180, meaning that the likelihood to adopt immigrant policies for these localities are 17,4% and 18,0% higher than those not having a policymaker with migration background. The situation slightly changes in Model 2, in which this predictor is replaced with a variable accounting for different origins of such policymakers. In this case, only municipalities having policymakers with remigration background have a higher probability to be active compared to those not having any policymakers with migration background, showing 23,6% higher probability of adopting immigrant policies. This effect does not stand when considering policymakers with immigration background, a difference that could be due to their small number in rural areas, but also to the limits of the used indicator which have been pointed out in the methodological section.

The relationship between immigrant policy activism and the self-identification of the municipality as a place of linguistic minorities appears as multifaceted. Models 1 and 2 present a lower probability of being active for minority municipalities compared to non-minority ones, showing results that seemingly contradict research hypotheses. Particularly, the odds are 0,727 and 0,725, so that minority localities have a likelihood of being active that is about 27,5% lower than non-minority ones. However, Model 3 comes to the aid of deepening this result, distinguishing between territorial and sparsely located linguistic minority municipalities⁶. While the first ones are still associated with a much lower probability of being active compared to non-minority localities, the opposite is true for the latter, which presents instead a significantly higher probability of adopting immigrant policies. Indeed, in this case, the odds are 0,425 for territorial minorities and 1,370 for sparsely located ones, corresponding to a likelihood of being active compared to non-minority localities that is 57,5% lower for places of territorial minorities and 37,0% higher for places of sparsely located minorities.

⁶ See the Methods and Data section for a comprehensive explanation of the differences between these categories.

Therefore, both hypotheses are confirmed with caveats. The presence of policymakers with migration background appears to have an influence on the adoption of local immigrant policies in rural areas, although this only seems true for remigration background. Conversely, being a place of recognised linguistic minority seems to have a negative impact on activism in immigrant policies at a general level, but relevant differences emerge when considering the peculiarities of these local minorities. On the one hand, a more welcoming context seems to characterise those minority localities preserving memories of migration or exile, as it is the case of some territorial minorities; on the other hand, the case appears to be the opposite when considering territorial linguistic minorities.

Discussion

This article has considered whether localised experiences and memories of diversity and migration can act as drivers for the adoption of immigrant policies in rural areas, and – consequently – have a role in the creation of a more welcoming local context for newcomer immigrants. In doing this, it has tried to challenge the widespread idea of rural localities as having a limited experience of diversity, which is usually identified among the main obstacles for immigrant policymaking in these places (Camarero, Sampedro, Oliva 2012; Leitner 2012; Glorius 2017; McAreavey 2017a; Woods 2018; Urso 2021). Indeed, despite not always being the case, rural localities in Italy seem to have some experiences of diversity going beyond contemporary immigration flows, even when they can be formally considered as new immigration destinations. To test the relation between such experiences and the locality's welcomingness for newcomer immigrants, the connection of these factors with immigrant policy activism has been considered from the viewpoint of the policymakers, due to their key relevance in immigrant policymaking within rural municipalities (Caponio, Donatiello, Ponzo 2022; Haselbacher, Segarra 2022; Miellet 2022).

The research follows a sequential mixed-methods design, using semi-structured interviews with rural policymakers to formulate hypotheses to be later tested through regression analysis. In this sense, two main hypotheses have been extracted from qualitative findings, dealing with two particular dimensions of localised experiences and memories of diversity and migration which seem to positively interact with immigrant policy activism: direct migration experiences – largely connected to emigration and return migration – and the presence and acknowledgement of historically settled minorities at the local level, especially in the case of sparsely located minorities. These have been operationalised through indicators connecting them to policymakers' experiences and views by considering the presence of policymakers with migration background in political positions within the municipality or their willingness to identify their municipality as a place of linguistic minority. Such hypotheses appear to be partially confirmed by the quantitative analysis, which allows to generalise to some extent the findings of the qualitative part.

Firstly, the presence of policymakers with migration background – and more specifically remigration background – results to be a dimension affecting the propensity of rural municipalities to adopt immigrant policies. Connecting this finding to what was declared by interviewed policymakers, it seems possible to argue that a direct experience of emigration and remigration among actors who are in charge of deciding on immigrant policies can make them more open to their adoption, since it is easier for them to relate with the

experience of newcomer immigrants, despite migration paths and stories being different among return migrants and other international immigrants. This interestingly relates with the scholarship noting how the presence of elected women foster policy interventions in certain fields, usually connected to social policies: in both cases, descriptive representation seems to matter for improving the sensitivity towards issues that are considered as particularly important by traditionally underrepresented groups (Caiazza 2004; Tinker 2004; Mechkvoa, Carlitz 2021).

However, it is also worth noting that the case presented in this article mostly focuses on policymaker and target groups which do not share ethnic origin or gender, but are rather connected by common experiences and memories. This is further reinforced by the fact that having a policymakers with immigration background appears to be not significant, although this could be due to data limitation. In this sense, the context particularly matters. As noted in the qualitative section, the presence of long-lasting narrative of migration integrated in the local history may be important for pushing policymakers to mobilise such a background. Moreover, due to the influential position of local policymakers in immigrant policymaking of rural localities (Haselbacher, Segarra 2022; Miellet 2022), the role of these policy actors can assume an even more crucial role when they are capable of relating their own experience of migration, which is usually not exclusive but quite spread in the locality, with that of newcomer migrants.

For what concerns the second hypothesis, findings show more ambiguous relationships between the self-identification of the locality as a place of linguistic minorities and its welcomingness and activism in immigrant policies. At a general level, it seems that the first is negatively related to the latter, showing a lower probability of being active in municipalities that are included in the list of those having linguistic minorities compared to non-minority localities. However, when looking more closely at the different types of minorities, the frame changes. On the one hand, territorial linguistic minorities, which are strictly related to a territory and are defined by a language with no direct connection with that of other countries, show lower probability to be active compared to non-minority localities, potentially witnessing a role of forms of micro-nationalism in fostering a less welcoming attitude towards newcomers. This also relates with what many scholars have been noted as regards sub-state nationalism and minority nations' attitudes towards immigration (Maddens, Billiet, Beerten 2000; Adam 2013; Turgeon, Bilodeau 2014; Medda-Windisher 2018). According to them, autochthonous minority groups may tend to re-affirm their own identity both against the central State and newcomer communities, especially when this is paired with a strong independentist or autonomist push or nation-building projects (*ibid.*).

On the other hand, such relation is reversed when considering sparsely located minorities, characterised by transnationally spanning ethno-linguistic ties and a more scattered spatial distribution within the country. This different dynamic could be connected to various reasons. First, as also emerged in qualitative findings, minority groups such as Franco-Provençal and Arbëreshë seem to maintain an entrenched memory of past migration or exile at the local level, which – in the case of the latter – has also been revitalised in relatively recent time with the arrival of Albanian-speaking immigrants in the 1990s and

early 2000s (Liuzzi 2016). Second, some scholars have noted how the Waldensian Church, which is especially spread in places of French, Franco-Provençal and Occitan minorities, has assumed in recent times a more and more relevant role in reception policies, also taking direct responsibilities for some facilities in many minority municipalities (Rosso 2016; Caponio, Donatiello, Ponzo 2022). Finally, due to the more isolated nature of many of these localities, it could be hypothesised that newcomer immigrants are more often seen as an opportunity for the revitalisation of the local community than a cultural threat, as it has been noted in the literature for what concerns amenity migrants in the Slovenian minority localities of the Alps (Löffler *et al.* 2014).

Drawing on these findings, it is thus possible to conclude that localised experiences and memories of diversity and migration do matter in rural localities for the construction of a welcoming place and in fostering their activism in immigrant policies. This seems true even when these localities are not linked with contemporary international migration flows and can be considered new immigration destinations. However, not all localised experiences of diversity appear to be equally relevant. In particular, an element that seems to be crucial is the explicit acknowledgement of migration as part of the local history and identity, which brings together the relevance for immigrant policy activism of both remigrants as policymakers and local self-identification as a place of sparsely located minorities. In this context, the role of local policymakers emerges as crucial, since they potentially have the capacity of mobilising such experiences in actual policy measures. This mobilisation can be done by affirming either differences or commonalities with newcomer migrants and – consequently – by fostering a more closed or open attitude towards them.

To conclude, what emerges is a complex framework that cannot be fully captured by the present exploratory study, due to the above-mentioned limitations in collected data and the narrow scope of the research. Extensive and focused qualitative research or generalised surveys may allow in this sense to overcome the lack of more accurate data and produce a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena at stake, while quantitative research based on official statistics currently seems to have limitations of data availability in the Italian context. However, results still represent a valid starting point for future research in rural contexts considering the construction of narratives of welcomingness and the adoption of immigrant policies in relation to localised experiences of diversity not necessarily linked to contemporary migration flows.

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