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# **(In)security and Immigration to Depopulating Rural Areas in Southern and Southeastern Europe**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines a migration pattern which has been overshadowed by the 'security turn' dominating European discourses: depopulation. Across Europe, emigration is responsible for significant demographic transformations, especially in rural and remote areas. Depopulation leads to the reduction of services provided to citizens, further diminishing the attractiveness of these territories. Against this background, migration can counterbalance depopulation as part of a strategy for rural regeneration. This article analyses the case of Riace, an Italian town that has been hosting people seeking asylum and refugees for decades, and compares it to the Serbian town of Sjenica, where increasing numbers of non-EU migrants are settling after the 'closure' of the Western Balkans route. Our empirical findings indicate that there is both an opportunity and a political will to implement a similar model to that of Riace in Sjenica and in the southwest Sandžak region.

## **Keywords**

depopulation – Italy – migration – integration – Serbia

## 1 Introduction

Depopulation is considered as one of the most important challenges for the future of Europe. It threatens the very existence of small towns, particularly those of southern and southeastern European countries, where emigration trends are more marked (Espón 2017). The loss of resident population often leads to the reduction of services provided, which further diminishes the attractiveness of these territories for potential newcomers, as well as for their own local population. Since the early 1990s, the regeneration of rural areas has become a European policy priority, as a result of challenges associated with abandonment and economic shrinkage of rural regions (Matilde 2020: 41). There has been increased recognition that spatial imbalances and socio-economic inequalities have to be addressed through effective policies if the cohesion and integration of the European Union are to be realised (*ibid.*).

Against this background, the authors explore the policies implemented in Riace, in Italy's southern region of Calabria, to revitalize the town through the integration of migrants and use of local resources. This case is then compared with the Serbian town of Sjenica, where the authors have carried out interviews, to determine whether there is an opportunity and political will to integrate migrants as part of a strategy to foster territorial development, similarly to what is already being implemented in Riace. We consider the latter as paradigmatic of the consequences following depopulation, speaking for many other areas across Europe. Riace is used as a demonstrative example of how negative trends associated with depopulation can be reversed through proper integration policies, and of how a local identity can be strengthened through the acceptance of migrants and refugees (Sarlo and Martinelli 2016; Driel and Verkuyten 2019; Ranci 2020).

Despite the differences between Italy and Serbia regarding historical migration trends, the common ground linking the two case studies are the territorial challenges faced by both countries. Both Riace and Sjenica are located in rural areas and are subject to depopulation stemming from the lack of services and economic opportunities. However, the policies and strategies put in place to support territorial development and integration differ: the town of Riace has been showcased as a 'successful' model of integrating migrants, even managing to revert the declining socio-demographic trend through the effective integration of asylum seekers into the community (Driel and Verkuyten 2019: 5). This is ultimately why we seek to explore whether the policies implemented in Riace can be transferred to Sjenica as an opportunity for socio-economic development.

Understood in these terms, we will put forward an analysis of ‘scarcity’ (of skills, of population, of economic opportunities) rather than one based on notions of ‘excess’ and ‘abundance’ (of human beings), often evoked in anti-immigration arguments (Zoppi 2018). To do so, we have drawn on the theoretical framework of migration and mobility encompassing research on a so-called ‘fourth [durable] solution’ to displacement (Long 2014). The article also draws on literature reflecting on the relation between migration and (in)security, as well as on national government, intergovernmental, EU, and non-governmental organisation (ngo) reports and documents. We complement this information with updated statistical figures on depopulation regarding the two case studies: the authors accessed data made available by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (sors), and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (undesa). Furthermore, as mentioned above, the authors have engaged in interviews in the town of Sjenica: semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with three groups of participants: a) government officials, including police officers and municipality representatives in Serbia (Sjenica, Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Sombor); b) intergovernmental organisations in Serbia (the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Red Cross); and c) local ngos across Serbia. In total, 15 interviews were conducted over a period of one and a half years, with 9 participants from group ‘a’, 2 from group ‘b’, and 7 from group ‘c’ between July 2017–December 2018. Finally, informal discussions and observations were conducted in Sjenica with locals and those working in the hospitality sector due to a high number of foreign nationals and people seeking asylum in the area at the time.

This article is organised into four sections. The first section engages with the theoretical debate on migration and mobility. This section outlines the reality of depopulation and the challenges faced in Europe’s shrinking rural areas with a focus on Serbia and Italy. We then move on to explore the context and the specificities of the two case studies, Riace and Sjenica. By way of conclusion, we provide reflections on the integration of migrants in depopulating areas, clarifying limits and opportunities for policy implementation as well as transferability.

## **2 Theoretical Approaches to Depopulation and Insecurity in Southern and Southeastern Europe**

Many territories across Europe are experiencing acute emigration. Eurostat data on net migration (2019) show relevant outflows of people, especially

from regions located in eastern and southeastern European countries, while countries in central and northern Europe are attracting more and more immigrants (e.g. Austria, Denmark, Germany).<sup>1</sup> Emigration represents a twofold issue: first of all, it causes depopulation in concerned areas, leading to a lack of human labour and capital to ensure sustainable development. Secondly, since depopulation is often spurred by youth emigration, it results in a higher old-age dependency ratio (i.e. the number of elderly people compared to the number of people of working age) and an overall ageing population in the concerned areas. The most common implications of this transformation are the downsizing or withdrawal of state-provided social services and the gaps in the local labour markets (e.g. people working in the agriculture and elder-care sectors). A decline in population, and especially its repercussions on the old-age dependency ratio, causes therefore an overall incongruity between the supply and the demands of services, since some services become underutilised (i.e. education) while others are not sufficiently covered through the available labour force (i.e. elderly care). In other words, a mismatch occurs between territorial needs and available skills.

While there are several factors that contribute to explaining the causes behind depopulation, economic disparity is the key determinant behind the exodus of people from rural areas. Rosés and Wolf (2018) explain that since the 1980s, regional inequality in terms of gross domestic product (gdp) has grown dramatically in Europe.<sup>2</sup> It is not surprising that the Western Balkan countries are referred to as ‘human capital exporters’, since many of their young graduates, among whom are hundreds of doctors, engineers, and academics, have left their homeland in the past years to seek better job opportunities offered in central European and oecd countries (Vračić 2018: 4). In the face of a growing urban population, the share of the population living in rural areas (28%)<sup>3</sup> throughout Europe is predicted to keep shrinking and ageing in the upcoming years. The elderly population (65 years old and above) is likely to increase in rural areas, from 19% in 2011 to 30% in 2050, and urban areas are expected to progressively catch up with rural regions, as the share of the elderly is predicted to rise from 17% to 29% in towns and from 15% to 27% in cities during

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1 See ‘Population change—crude rates of total change, natural change and net migration plus adjustment’. Available from: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-datasets/-/tps00019>.

2 See for example the difference between the gdp per capita registered in Severozapaden, Bulgaria and in Oberbayern, Germany. Eurostat statistics. Available from: <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&plugin=1&language=en&pcode=tgs00005>.

3 Eurostat statistics. Available from: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Statistics\\_on\\_rural\\_areas\\_in\\_the\\_EU](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Statistics_on_rural_areas_in_the_EU).

2011–2050.<sup>4</sup> Undesa (2018) foresees that by 2050 only 17% of Europe’s population will be living in rural areas.<sup>5</sup> Hence, if on the one hand the analysis of demographics in Europe reveals that the continent as a whole is ageing and will continue to age in the near future—as people are living longer and the birth rate is falling—on the other hand rural areas will for the most part bear the consequences of ageing and service shortages (Espon 2017).

Against this background, the debate surrounding the recent migration flows in the European continent and the opportunities for migrants’ integration becomes particularly relevant. Ever since the 2015 influx of people arriving from outside of the European Union (EU)’s external borders, migration and integration have become an increasingly disputed and divisive issue across Europe. Scholars have pointed out the ‘securitisation turn’ of the migration debate, namely, the politicisation of the topic emphasising that immigration is a threat to the ethnic, cultural, and even racial composition of Europe (Gattinara and Morales 2017). At a policy level, securitisation has materialised in the forms of border fencing, physical pushbacks, and changes in asylum and migration laws in Europe and its neighbourhood, which have significantly sealed the continent off from what has been mainly portrayed as an external threat (Đorđević et al. 2018: 416).

The viability of mobility-centred approaches to displacement has been, nevertheless, of particular interest to policymakers and scholars over the past decade (Long 2014: 5), especially considering the recognition of migration fostering development (Nyberg-Sørensen, Van Hear, and Engberg-Pedersen 2002). Migration and mobility can have twofold benefits for people seeking asylum and for the local communities: mobility can be encouraged based on labour needs, and migration itself could strengthen peacebuilding initiatives in countries of origin by providing capital in the form of remittances and skills to be transferred back to country of origin (when the migrant decides to return).

Katy Long (2014) provides insight into the possibility of a fourth durable solution complementing the three durable solutions ‘available’ to refugees (resettlement, local integration, and voluntary repatriation)<sup>6</sup> as an alternative

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<sup>4</sup> See <https://matilde-migration.eu/blog/challenges-and-opportunities-in-diversely-ageing-regions/>.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations. World Urbanisation Prospects (2018). Available from: <https://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/Download/>.

<sup>6</sup> The three durable solutions available to refugees are repatriation, local integration, and resettlement (Van Selm 2014: 514). Resettlement to a third country annually assists less than 1 per cent of the refugees of concern to the UNHCR around the world, repatriation is often not viable, and local integration often results in the majority of people in need of international protection being confined in countries of first asylum.

to aid the rising number of displaced people around the world who find themselves with limited opportunities. Migration and mobility promote regulated labour migration, which could play an important role in addressing the needs of protracted or residual refugee populations unable to access the three traditional durable solutions (Long and Crisp 2010). A crucial difference between this so-called fourth solution and the traditional three is that it advocates that individuals should be free to move (Long 2014). In addition, migration and mobility do not confine refugees to camps dependent on humanitarian aid.

The viability of labour aiding in 'humanitarian challenges' is also presented in the 'refugee economies' theoretical framework developed by Betts et al. (2016), which by studying refugees' broader economic impacts in their host country (based on a case study of Uganda) argues that refugees need not be an 'inevitable burden', but that they have the capacity to contribute to their host societies if given economic freedoms (the right to work) and a 'significant degree of freedom of movement'. There is, however, concern about whether labour migration can actually contribute to narrowing the protection space—a direct opposite of the aim behind migration and mobility (Long 2014). This analysis in no way encourages limiting mobility or protection, but reinforces Ruhs' (2019) argument that new refugee policies need to combine both labour and humanitarian protection. In line with this, the International Monetary Fund has stated that the refugee influx could provide an economic boost for the EU, if refugees are integrated into the labour market (Kollewe 2016). Increased opportunities for labour migrations are also at the forefront of the Global Compact on Migration and Refugees, and refugees are thus also increasingly perceived as a 'development opportunity', rather than the objects of a resource-strained humanitarian assistance regime (Al-Mahaidi 2020). A combination of labour immigration and humanitarian objectives has, in fact, a chance of alleviating problems associated with depopulation and benefiting the largest number of people possible (Ruhs 2019). The shortcomings of humanitarian assistance programs have been presented (Harrell-Bond 2001), paving the way for policies and opportunities for strengthening local economies and local institutions for the benefit of both host and refugee communities. According to Dax and Copus (2018: 43), one of the 'flagship' approaches for rural development is the LEADER initiative, which integrated 'new' social groups, including migrants,<sup>7</sup> to reverse depopulation trends.

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7 LEADER is the acronym for the French denomination of the initiative 'Liason Entre les Actions de Developpement de l'Économie Rurale', which can be translated as 'Links Between Actions of Rural Economic Development'. Note: We will broadly use the term 'migrants' throughout this article to include economic migrants, family migrants, students and researchers, highly



The theoretical reflections explored in this section help underline that mobility and migration, extended to people in need of international protection, can represent instruments for rural regeneration and increased security for Europe's depopulating territories. Migration has been credited with increasing security for the migrants (Atoyan et al. 2016), the migrants' countries of origin (Long 2014, Zoppi 2018), and their new place of residence (Bonomi and Reljić 2017). In the context of recent migration flows and debates, migration into rural regions and social integration have received increased attention, and the willingness of some local communities to direct their funding to respond to local challenges posed by increased immigration have been highlighted as factors of success (ibid.; see also enRD 2016).

### **3 Depopulation in Italy and the sAI System of Integration**

ISTAT (2018) has estimated a 9% decline in the likelihood that the resident population of Italy will rise by any value before 2065; most likely, it will instead decline by more than six million, notwithstanding the recognised positive impact of immigration thus far. The population is expected to decrease from 59.641.488 recorded in 2020 to 59.220.500 in 2041, using the median scenario that excludes high variability associated with demographic events: in case of a more pronounced negative trend, the population could reach in fact even 56.267.000 in the latter year considered. The question of rural areas has recently been the subject of many scholarly works, as well as the focus of the government through the so-called 'National Strategy for Inner Areas' launched at the end of 2012 (Borghi 2017; Manella 2017). It emerges that 'inner' areas—defined by the Italian legislation as the territories characterized by significant distance from the centres of supply of essential services, such as health, education and transportation—include more than 4.000 municipalities with 5.000 or fewer inhabitants, which are usually located in hilly and mountainous territories that are up to 80 minutes by car from the nearest urban centre (Lucatelli 2015). While these territories are potentially rich in specific resources (arable lands, forestry), depopulation in inner areas causes the loss of agricultural soil (which is taken over by forests), and a worrisome increase in hydrogeological risks (i.e. landslides) caused by a lack of environmental maintenance (Agnoletti and Santoro 2018).

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skilled migrants, and forced migrants, i.e., asylum seekers, refugees, and other vulnerable groups.

Nevertheless, there are signs that a different trend might be under way: for example, Italy's inner areas have already become a pole of attraction for established foreigners, especially in the aftermath of the 2007–08 financial crisis, when many relocated to rural areas where housing was comparatively cheaper, and where they could take part in the agriculture sector (Corrado and D'Agostino 2016: 1). In 2019, slightly more than 5 million foreign residents were recorded in Italy, 3.1 million of whom live in areas classified as rural (Rete Rurale Nazionale 2020). In the same year, foreign residents in Riace amounted to 384, on a total population of 2.037 (18,85%).<sup>8</sup>

The Riace model has developed within the framework of SAI (System of Reception and integration),<sup>9</sup> which is the service that manages projects of reception, assistance, and integration of asylum seekers at the local level, including many small communities in rural areas. SAI embraces a network of local bodies (e.g. municipalities, provinces) that have been granted access by law to the National Fund for Asylum Policies and Services (Fnpsa), run by the Ministry of Interior, with the goal of managing reception centres for asylum seekers, refugees, and those with subsidiary and 'special' protection cases, which since 2018 have substituted the humanitarian protection status. SAI's inception logic envisages the dispersal of asylum seekers and refugees throughout the national territory, whereby municipalities choose to adhere to the SAI network on a voluntary basis, presenting projects for the reception of asylum seekers that will be ensured through the channelling of funds from the Ministry of the Interior. Minor co-financing is also required from local government bodies. In addition to the basic services, SAI beneficiaries also receive legal assistance, information on access to services and the labour market, psychological support, and Italian language instruction (Campomori and Feraco 2018: 132).

Considering SAI's decentralisation and voluntary access, the opening of SAI territorial projects represents a significant inflow of resources for small, depopulating towns, and also a way to safeguard the sustainability of otherwise endangered provisions of social services, which the then-siproimi report itself highlighted in 2019. Since 2003, when the available spots in SPRAR structures amounted to 3.000, the network has been growing steadily to reach 28.686 individuals overall by 2019, including 4.255 unaccompanied minors

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<sup>8</sup> Data retrieved on the ISTAT database, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Previously known as Siproimi (until 2020) and SPRAR (until 2018). SAI was established with Law Decree n. 130, 21st October 2020, then converted into state law (n. 173, 18th December 2020).

and 684 people with health issues (siproimi 2020). The network includes 844 reception projects that have involved 617 municipalities, 19 provinces, 27 unions of town councils, and 50 other local entities. The majority of projects (40%) are implemented in small villages with a population below 5.000. It is within this framework that Riace has managed to build up its innovative experiment of integration, which is the focus of the next section.

### **3.1      *The Riace Model as a Strategy for Territorial Revitalisation***

The Municipality of Riace has been for many years a strong advocate of a new approach to integration that has effectively promoted a micro-circuit of local solidarities between newcomers and residents. Throughout Italy, the experiment of Riace has consolidated itself into a 'model' for integration which has inspired other towns suffering from similar conditions of depopulation and peripheralisation to apply similar measures (Marrazzo 2018). Riace has gained increasing attention for being the village of 'accoglienza' (hospitality) (Driel and Verkuyten 2019: 2). In the past few years, the echoes of Riace have also travelled beyond national borders: in 2016, the Mayor of Riace, Domenico Lucano, achieved global acclaim when he was listed by Fortune magazine among the fifty most influential leaders in the world for his engagement in the field of immigration.

Just like many other towns in southern Italy, Riace had experienced severe depopulation in the previous decades, declining from the 4.000 inhabitants recorded in the 1940s to 600 in the 1990s (Pezzoni 2016: 220) due to high unemployment, corruption, the presence of the Ndrangheta mafia, and its remoteness (Driel and Verkuyten 2019: 4). In the last twenty years, however, the village has hosted more than 6.000 asylum seekers and refugees and has been able to revert the depopulation trend. Between 2001 and 2014, Riace inhabitants ranged between 1.500 and 2.150, with an average of 400 refugees from more than 20 countries (Manfra 2016; Driel 2020: 156). Today, the village comprises approximately 2.030 residents (ISTAT 2021). On top of that, some 40 new job positions have been created in the wake of the town's economic revival. The distinctiveness of the Riace model consists of the following features (D'Agostino 2017):

- a) Accommodation is offered to asylum seekers in the abandoned local town dwellings (houses and apartments left empty in the previous decades due to the emigration of the town's population).
- b) Workshops and training are offered to asylum seekers who have been placed in the town. These consist of workshops and training in glass making, knitwear, and weaving ceramics. They serve to revitalise the craft sector.

- c) Renovated old dwellings are also used for sustainable tourism purposes in the town.
- d) Due to the frequent delays in the payments received from the Ministry of Interior, the town has come up with an unofficial system of banknotes that work only within the town. The system allows asylum seekers to continue purchasing goods and food at local markets with the banknotes while waiting for government subsidies (which amount approximately to € 2.5 per day). This means of payment strengthens the town economy and avoids negative social consequences deriving from total economic marginalisation.

The town of Riace has become famous, and even elevated as a 'successful' model of integration, as it has managed to revert the declining socio-demographic trend through the effective integration of asylum seekers into the community (Driel and Verkuyten 2019: 5). Such reception measures have turned refugees into 'active participants in the revitalisation of the area' and made the town a living advocate for other depopulating territories (D'Agostino 2017: 558). The interviews conducted by Driel and Verkuyten (2019: 8–9) reveal that many among Riace's inhabitants perceive the town as a source of inspiration for other municipalities and give credit to the mayor for having turned Riace into a pole of international attraction. The close connection between labour, training opportunities, and territorial development realised in Riace is perhaps what explains the specific interest it has attracted (inter-)nationally compared to other, similar but less effective initiatives aimed at reviving depopulated towns (Schirripa 2017; Ranci 2020).

However, at the time of writing this article, a crucial change in the context of this research has taken place. In October 2018, Mayor Lucano was arrested on the charge of aid to illegal immigration for the alleged organisation of a convenience marriage aimed at ensuring a Nigerian woman the necessary documents to stay in Italy. After being confined to house arrest, the examining judge decided that Lucano should be released yet prevented from residing in Riace. The same residence ban was confirmed in January 2019, and this forced the mayor to find accommodation in a nearby town, after being invited by a number of supportive mayors across Italy. The ban ended in September 2019. None of the preliminary charges have been transformed into formal accusations against the mayor, although the trial is not yet concluded. The timing of these events is important: Lucano's arrest came a week after a series of anti-immigration measures were announced by Italy's then Interior Minister, Matteo Salvini (the so-called 'security decrees', including the abolition of humanitarian protection, and the reduction of funds for migrants'

integration and reception in the new *siproimi* system).<sup>10</sup> The news coming from Riace has polarised public opinion as many civil society actors have confirmed their intention to keep the Riace model alive. In the beginning of 2019, a new association was launched with the aim of carrying on the same integration initiatives in Riace without public funds from the Ministry. In June 2020, the Italian Council of State stated that the Ministry of the Interior had acted too fast, without giving Riace's administration the opportunity to remedy the contested irregularities, which were not even promptly reported. The decision to suspend funding in Riace, which stemmed from the alleged irregularities, led to the closure of some of the projects and to the emigration of migrants in the territory. It may be too early to evaluate long-term effects, but statistics show that since 2019 Riace's population is declining again (ISTAT 2021, see also Mira 2019).

Since the new legislation was enacted, many refugees (in particular those entitled to humanitarian protection) have been moved out of towns such as Riace by the authorities, or have unwillingly relocated themselves due to their exclusion from the integration system. These developments are thus useful from the analytical point of view in order to reflect on the relation between migration, labour market, and territorial development, and also on the implications of reduced integration opportunities without the provision of an alternative for managing depopulation (and migration). From the territorial point of view, these developments have resulted in unfavourable consequences for Riace as well as for refugees. Moreover, these latest actions have influenced the perceived security offered under then *siproimi*, since due to new legislation hundreds of individuals were no longer entitled to receive assistance and access integration measures, resulting in individuals becoming invisible or 'absent' (Zoppi 2019).

This case study shows the nexus between migration and the notion of development and is an example of how the integration of refugees in depopulated areas has enriched Italian towns, most notably Riace. We argue that the integration of refugees in rural areas expands from being a simple humanitarian concern to becoming part of a strategy for rural regeneration, displaying asylum seekers as its pivot (Sarlo 2015). It has required primarily an overall policy design extending to rural areas, the *SAI* system, and also a specific, comprehensive, and perhaps ambitious application, as seen in Riace. The integration of asylum seekers, together with that of other migrants, represents a precious

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10 Italian legislation envisages three layers of international protection that can be granted to asylum seekers: refugee status, subsidiary protection, and humanitarian protection. The so-called security decrees are the D.L. 4 October 2018, n. 113 and D.L. 14 June 2019, n. 53.

resource to counterbalance the consequences brought about by both depopulation and ageing residents. By the same token, both national and local strategies appear to lack a clear sustainability perspective, as demonstrated by the fact that depopulation again becomes a risk in the absence of public funds from the Ministry of Interior, which manages integration funds. The issue of long-term sustainability of policies is the major limitation we observe in the case of Italian small towns, as exemplified by Riace. This suggests that achieving a more balanced and even development in terms of integration and (de) population requires more concerted actions by local and national actors.

#### **4 Serbia and the Sandžak Region: Depopulation and Recent Migration Dynamics**

SORS (2021) has estimated the country's population for 2020 to be 6.899.126 inhabitants, confirming the depopulation trend that has characterised the country for the last years (-2.7% compared to 2015). Despite a rise in birth rates in Serbia's autonomous capital, Novi Sad, and the southwest Sandžak region, where Sjenica is located, the country's birth rate is declining.<sup>11</sup> According to SORS projections based on hypotheses of constant fertility and mortality rates, the country's population could further decline to 6.667.049 in 2031 and to 6.522.206 in 2041.<sup>12</sup> The disparity between rural and urban demographics is additionally concerning: SORS data on internal migration (i.e. registered changes of residence) reveals that, in the period 2014–2019, only major urban centres have been capable of attracting new residents (Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš, Kragujevac, and Subotica). In 2015, 2016, and 2017, 20 out of the total 24 administrative districts experienced a loss of residents; they became 21 in 2018 and 2019.<sup>13</sup> In 2017, Serbia had 7.369 foreigners residing permanently in the country.<sup>14</sup> In addition, 6.714 temporary residence permits were issued for the first time in

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11 Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, SORS (2018). <http://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2018/pdfE/G20181169.pdf>.

12 See the 'population projection' section in the SORS database: <http://www.stat.gov.rs>.

13 Belgrade is not part of any district and the data concerning districts in Kosovo are not contemplated by SORS due to the ongoing political dispute of the status of Kosovo. While Serbia still considers Kosovo as a part of Serbia under UN Security Council Resolution 1244, Kosovo declared its independence on 17 February 2008, which was ruled legal by the International Court of Justice on 22 July 2010 (Advisory Opinion).

14 SORS (2017). Available from: [http://www.kirs.gov.rs/docs/migracije/Migration\\_profile\\_of\\_the\\_Republic\\_of\\_Serbia\\_for\\_2017.pdf](http://www.kirs.gov.rs/docs/migracije/Migration_profile_of_the_Republic_of_Serbia_for_2017.pdf). SORS decided that due to the unfavourable epidemiological situation, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, to delay conduction of the national statistical survey until October 2021 which is before this article was submitted.

the same year, bringing the total number of valid (not expired) temporary residence permits to 20.524 (SORS 2017). Work and family reunification were the main reasons foreigners were residing in Serbia. These numbers do not include the 4.655 asylum seekers residing in the nineteen migrant centres in March 2021.<sup>15</sup> The UNHCR documented 5.675 new refugees and migrants in Serbia in February 2021, including those not residing in the government centres (ibid.). This is an increase compared to 2014 when there were only five permanent asylum centres in Serbia that could accommodate 810 persons (Krnjača, Bogovađa, Banja Koviljača, Sjenica, Tutin) (Belgrade Centre for Human Rights 2017: 79).

Serbia is considered a transit country for people using the so-called 'Western Balkans route' to reach northern Europe. Prior to March 2016, the country had little to no experience in hosting large numbers of migrants and displaced persons from outside of Europe. Taking into account the lack of opportunities, community, and familiarity with the local language, the State Secretary of the Ministry for Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Policy<sup>16</sup> in Serbia at the time of fieldwork highlighted that it is only normal that people seeking asylum do not want to stay in Serbia (personal communication, 31 August 2017). The reluctance to stay in Serbia has resulted in people residing in Serbia's asylum centres for prolonged periods of time without any permanent legal status and facing a completely 'ambiguous future', as pointed out by the government official above.

Due to Serbia's dire economic situation, it being seen as one of Europe's poorest countries,<sup>17</sup> the influx and transit of people in 2015 to northern European countries was perceived by many local residents as unfair. Moreover, some local residents even accompanied the flow of people, which led to applications from nationals of countries belonging to the Western Balkans accounting for the second largest group of applicants for international protection (after Syrians).<sup>18</sup> Rather than proactively developing policies to integrate more migrants in Serbia to counterbalance depopulation trends, according to the

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15 See UNHCR Serbia Monthly Snapshot here: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/85373>.

16 The Minister of this Ministry, Aleksandar Vulin, was appointed as the National Contact Point for Serbia at the Western Balkans Route Leaders' Meeting. See here: [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-15-5924\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-15-5924_en.htm).

17 Oishimaya Sen Nag (2017). Poorest Countries in Europe. World Atlas. April 25, 2017. <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-poorest-countries-in-europe.html>.

18 Totalling 199.202 applications (15 per cent of overall applications, of which citizens of Kosovo and Albania each accounted for 6 per cent of the total). See: Asylum trends—2015 Overview, European Asylum Support Office. <https://www.easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/public/LatestAsylumTrends20151.pdf>.

UNHCR in Belgrade the law on asylum is applied in Serbia in a very restrictive manner. Very often, almost automatically, the concept of a safe third country is applied (personal communication, 27 July 2017).<sup>19</sup> In the over ten years since the establishment of the national asylum system in Serbia, only 54 people were granted refugee status, and 74 people subsidiary protection (Belgrade Centre for Human Rights 2018: 54).

During the time of fieldwork, the then State Secretary of the Ministry for Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Policy said people saw Serbia as just an irrelevant bypass station and hoped that the borders will be open again so that they can escape to Germany (personal communication, 31 August 2017):

...we offer them integration, we offer the possibility of asylum, everything. But it's definitely not easy for them either. They come from Afghanistan, Pakistan, with the intention of going to Germany, but they ended up being stuck here. It's a psychological challenge as well, because they are deeply unhappy about being here. We try to make the situation as humane as possible, but when someone doesn't even really want to be here, well, that creates serious problems.

Developments in Serbia's asylum system have been ongoing since its establishment in 2008, due to the rise in forcibly displaced people transiting through the country and EU accession. In 2013, the Serbian government passed a decision on establishing accommodation centres for people seeking asylum in the country. 'Hotel Berlin' in Sjenica was one of the five asylum centres first established in Serbia. In spite of pushback from many local municipalities, Dr. Ugljanin Sulejman, a well-known political figure,<sup>20</sup> publicly declared at the session of the National Assembly in 2013 that asylum seekers were welcome in Sandžak (B92, 2013). The mayor of Sjenica stated that the citizens of Sjenica will show 'humanity and hospitality' to people seeking asylum (B92 2013).

#### **4.1      *The Intersection Between Humanitarian Help and Labour Needs***

The Sandžak region, where Sjenica is located, was historically an Ottoman administrative district. Today, the region is split between Montenegro and Serbia while also bordering Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Albania. The predominant ethnicity of the people in Sandžak is Bosniak—an autochthonous

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<sup>19</sup> See also Ilias and Ahmed v. Hungary, Application no. 47287/15, Council of Europe: European Court of Human Rights, 14 March 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Leader of the Sandžak Democratic Alliance (ruling party in Sandžak), President of the Bosniak National Minority Council, and Director of the Office for the Sustainable Development of Underdeveloped Municipalities.



people of Illyrian-Slavic origin who predominantly practise Islam. The region is hilly and mountainous, surrounded by forests and winding roads. It is also one of the poorest parts of Serbia, in terms of its economic development. Sjenica is a small town with an urban population of 14,060 (SORS 2011), and is distant from other urban centres and the main highway. The town is, however, surrounded by natural reserves and agricultural opportunities. Despite Sjenica's high birth rates, young people are leaving the town in droves. In 2011, Sulejman Ugljanin pointed out that citizens of Serbia are leaving the country as 'fake' asylum seekers, and that administrative practices needed to be simplified so that cooperation with investors could encourage more people to stay in their communities and be able to work (Blic 2011). In August 2015, the German Minister for Internal Affairs stated that it was unacceptable that forty percent of people seeking asylum in Germany are from the Balkans, and that the chances of them receiving asylum are minimal (Aljazeera 2015).

Even the recently increased presence of migrants and people seeking asylum in Sjenica has not led to a change in the everyday functioning of the town or to more attention on Sjenica with regard to long-term investments or development projects, something which the President of the Municipal Assembly of Sjenica highlighted as necessary in relation to the lack of opportunities for young people, mainly men. As opposed to the EU's 'hot spots', Sjenica, and in general Serbia, is not in a front-line position, and so more creativity in terms of integration and investment can be explored, mainly by local governments, as opposed to EU-financed incarceration and containment policies. All the asylum reception centres in Serbia are sponsored by the EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis, the 'Madad Fund'. In 2017, an old textile factory in Sjenica called 'Vesna' was renovated and turned into a second asylum centre due to the increase of arrivals in Sjenica, and at one point, both Hotel Berlin and Vesna were full of people. Since most asylum seekers are at peak working age, for Serbian decision-makers it is particularly important 'to advance social and institutional responses [to migration] while keeping in mind the current demographics of the country' (Lukić 2016: 32).

The municipality representatives of Sjenica stated that they believed migrants in Sjenica (originating outside of Europe) could be integrated and would be welcome to contribute to the community (personal communication with two local government representatives and the local director of the asylum centre in Sjenica, October 2018). In line with this 'hospitable attitude',<sup>21</sup>

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21 See Berg and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2018) for an analysis on the interlinkage between hospitality and hostility (hospitality) in which the power dynamics inherent in host-guest relations are explored.

the Serbian government has implemented a Decree on the Integration of Foreigners Granted Asylum in the Social, Cultural and Economic Life of the Republic of Serbia.<sup>22</sup> The Decree foresees assistance in accessing the labour market as an integral part of integration. 'Assistance' is viewed as help gathering documents for registration with the National Employment Service, recognition of previous education, and additional educational programs in line with labour requirements.<sup>23</sup> In March 2018, Serbia adopted new legislation which is aligned with EU Directives and provides people registered in the asylum centres with a legal status based on 'tolerated stay'.<sup>24</sup> As previously mentioned, however, most people still consider Serbia to be only a transit country, which is evident in the number of expressed intentions to seek asylum (a necessary legal step to be accommodated in the asylum centres) and of those that actually see through the entire refugee status determination process. According to the Serbian government representative in Belgrade (personal communication, 31 August 2017):

There will, probably, after some time, be a certain number of people who will decide to stay here, but I believe this will be a small minority. A greater part will try to go back home (especially to Afghanistan) by using the Voluntary Return system financed by the EU and facilitated by the iom.

A sense of obligation to help people in need was more frequently highlighted to the authors throughout the fieldwork than the need for labourers. An interesting point made by the State Secretary of the Ministry for Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Policy at the time of fieldwork was that there are 'not that many cultural challenges' between people seeking asylum throughout Serbia and the local population (personal communication, 31 August 2017):

There are not that many cultural challenges. First, there are not that many people. Also, we are talking about a predominantly Muslim population, a group that already has some history and tradition here, so this is not anything new for any of us, in that we, for example, don't know what they eat, how they live, things like that.

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22 The Decree on the Integration of Foreigners Granted Asylum in the Social, Cultural and Economic Life of the Republic of Serbia. See *Sl. glasnik RS*, 101/16 and 56/18.

23 While the Decree is a positive step as opposed to not having any type of integration plan, see the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights (2018) report outlining the shortcomings of the Decree in practice (p. 81).

24 The Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection (*Sl. glasnik RS*, 24/18), the Law on Border Control (*Sl. glasnik RS*, 24/18) and specific to 'tolerated stay': Article 124 (2) of the Law on Foreigners (*Sl. glasnik RS*, 24/2018).

The official was probably referring to the history of the Bosniak population. Amongst the national minorities in Serbia, Bosniaks are one of the minority populations that are concentrated in certain geographical areas and municipalities (Bašić et al. 2018). In 2018, applicants from predominantly Muslim countries—Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, and Syria (Belgrade Centre for Human Rights 2018)—were the main groups of people who applied for asylum in Serbia or who transited. Simplifying refugee protection in terms of religious affiliations neglects responsibility under international law, but also a wider reality which encompasses the Sandžak region—that hosting people seeking asylum may bring financial benefits and fill a gap left by the young residents leaving the region.

The challenges faced by the local populace in Sjenica, however, would only be magnified for people seeking asylum. The President of the Municipal Assembly of Sjenica highlighted some the challenges faced by the local populace, particularly the effects of centralisation on the region and how these challenges hinder local development (personal communication 12 October 2018):

Sjenica is surrounded by four natural reserves. One of them is the special natural reserve Uvac, where lies the lake of Sjenica and the Peščara. We, however, don't govern this area, but a company from Varoši [does]. We can't in any way influence our own tourism. We also have a major problem with controlling our forests. We have a very large territory of forests; however, we don't govern our own forests but a company in Ivanjica [does]. Srbijašume (Serbia Forests) takes a very large portion of our forest and takes it to Ivanjica where it is managed. In this way, they impact both the nature and infrastructure that surrounds us. We also do not manage our own waterworks. So, if there are floods in the city, we're not able to control our own waterways. We're fragmented in many other departments too, our hospital is in Užice, and issues concerning internal affairs are managed in Novi Pazar (the Court). We have the only Nordic ski park in Serbia; however, we have a big problem with Serbia Forests because we want to develop around the ski tracks and bring tourists, but we don't have permission. These types of things severely disrupt the lives of our local municipality and our citizens.

The quality of the roads to get in and out of Sjenica was also highlighted by the government representative in Sjenica as an obstacle for the local residents to prosper and also carry out the most basic administrative necessities. The needs of the local residents are torn between different urban centres, sometimes 100 km apart, and the quality of the roads makes administrative duties extremely

difficult for the local populace. According to an assessment by Minorities at Risk (MAR), Sandžak Bosniaks face few official political and cultural restrictions (Bosniaks hold both national and regional political posts); however, they are still informally disadvantaged in many ways through being territorially concentrated (MAR 2009). For example, unemployment is very high in the Sandžak region, and when the government stepped in to alleviate the lack of labour opportunities, it focused on ethnically Serb-dominated villages (MAR 2009). There is still minority economic discrimination occurring in Sandžak as a result of formal and informal governmental neglect and a lack of opportunities and affirmative remediation, and Bosniaks have been historically marginalised (Bašić 2002).

Considering the concentration of Bosniaks in an underdeveloped pocket in Serbia, and that an asylum centre was established there, in a way ‘out of sight’ is not ‘out of mind’ for the representatives of the Commissariat who were interviewed for this research. They pointed out that even though Sjenica is considered an example of good practice in terms of how the community has accepted new migrants and people seeking asylum, there is potential for things to go sideways (personal communication with two representatives from the Commissariat, 16 October 2018). The representatives said that the Serbian government has no security concerns about people who have been ‘stranded’ in Serbia for a longer period of time, and that segregation and isolation are the main triggers for insecurity and the EU’s main security threat.

#### **4.2      *Assessing Policy Transferability***

Any projects aimed at bridging the humanitarian concerns of people seeking asylum and the (socioeconomic) development in Sjenica (or anywhere else) are a form of governmentality. As Duffield (2006, cited by Raghuram 2009) argues, the ability of a society to protect life is a key characteristic of a developmental notion of society. In this regard, in order to address both the challenges of depopulation as well as those faced by increasing numbers of people migrating to Europe, local, national, and EU authorities require new systems of migration-development governance—the SAI system can offer a good starting point to improve the situation. But to what extent are policies transferable? And is this even desirable?

As observed in the case of Riace, local policies and orientations towards migration are important, yet local communities and administrations cannot make it without substantial support from the state. In Sjenica too, opportunities for seasonal (cash) work offered by private contractors to migrants and people residing inside the asylum centres have been limited, due to both the increase in financing from the EU since 2016, and also the securitising and

isolation of people inside the centres. The increasingly isolating administrative practices transfer the visibility from the individual and local level to the national level. The people inside the centres are being grouped en masse as 'others' (administratively as 'migrants', *migranti*), and the migration-development nexus is being hierarchised and centralised. The need to implement innovative social policies within a broader, state-financed policy framework is thus the most important limitation we have retrieved.

While Serbia and Italy have a high rate of unemployment, there are undeveloped areas and certain industries, such as rural tourism and agriculture, that would benefit from a younger workforce and that could contribute positively to the community, if only there were national and regional support to develop such projects. Importantly, both cases suggest that state governments need to be invested in the well-being of the population living in the depopulated areas, and in long-term strategies for rural and depopulating areas. Integration may encourage new skills, knowledge, and services in communities which may otherwise be neglected. In these circumstances, policy transfers are dependent on political will, and on the extent to which the issues faced by these areas feature in the governments agenda. As we have seen, even in Italy—where a strategy for inner areas does exist—such political support is not to be taken for granted, as state institutions may adopt different orientations towards migration and integration management over short spans of time.

By the same token, integration strategies such as that of Riace can help in addressing socioeconomic marginalisation, high unemployment, and the concern of violent extremism and returning foreign fighters, which all represent a potential security threat (Đorđević et al. 2018; Speckhard and Shajkovci 2018). While the radicalisation of Balkan youth is not the focus of this research, it is important to point out linkages between poverty, minority economic discrimination, and terrorism (Piazza 2011), and the significant security threat for all of Europe this would entail if migration and integration policies were not implemented effectively, or if they were intentionally or unintentionally neglected. The institutional neglect directed towards Bosniaks in Sandžak has encouraged investment from Turkey and the Persian Gulf countries, further sparking fragmentation in the region, with the latter introducing Wahhabi streams of Islam. While no separatist tendencies or violence have been reported in the Sandžak region, national security discourse needs to broaden its scope to encompass human security and entail not only ensuring freedom from fear, but also freedom from want. In addition to political security, human security encompasses economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, and community security (United Nations Development Programme 1994). As the case of Riace shows, refugee integration expands

from being a humanitarian concern to becoming a resource to counterbalance the insecurity brought about by both depopulation and marginalisation of rural towns comprised of predominantly ageing residents. Therefore, while there are some limits to their transferability, we argue that the policies implemented in Riace represent a concrete, valid strategy for revitalisation.

## **5 Conclusion**

This article has highlighted the common challenges that rural areas face in Italy and Serbia, against the background of Europe's worrisome depopulation trend. Our research shows that Serbian towns could benefit from the transfer of good practices seen in the Italian SAI, particularly considering there is already a significant number of asylum seekers in towns such as Sjenica. We illustrated also that the local government representatives in Sjenica would be in favour of implementing more integration strategies for people seeking asylum that would lead to an expansion of the workforce. The article has contributed to exposing the migrant's contested position within the field of (in)security: we highlight that the securitisation of migration overlooks the important aspect of newcomers' possibility to alleviate territorial needs in host societies with their skills and competences. In terms of opportunities, migrants can play a key role in regional and local development, revitalising sparsely populated areas and thus contributing to rural economies, as discussed at the EU level and by some EU countries (Matilde 2020: 14). This is valid for our case studies too.

However, there are also significant weaknesses that emerged in our research to report: firstly, while the interest of local actors remains crucial in both case studies, the actual results of integrating migrants into rural areas ultimately depend on pre-existing socio-economic aspects, such as modern infrastructure, informal markets, and the degree of perceived corruption. These aspects affect policy implementation chances and sustainability dramatically. Secondly, alleviating the insecurity brought on by depopulation requires effective integration with other national and regional policies, like economic development strategies (Huddleston et al. 2013; OECD 2018; see also Matilde 2020: 33). Beyond the full respect of the norms, standards, and principles of international human rights, the participation of relevant stakeholders, empowerment, accountability, and transparency are crucial for the implementation of a labour-centred migration approach. In these respects, the case of Riace has shown the limits of local social innovation policies when they are not supported or supported only partially by regional and national policy frameworks. If implemented in a way that prioritises protection while bolstering labour

opportunities, migration and mobility can offer viable alternatives to detention, dependence on aid, and securitisation.

In light of the above, we conclude that the overlooking of the potential positive impact of migration in policy and political discourses occurs in continuity with the socio-economic marginalisation already suffered by rural and remote areas due to various factors. The real challenge in the coming years will then be managing the various typologies of mobility in light of increasing territorial polarisation (Guild and Grant 2017). Against this backdrop, support for safe, orderly migration and mobility, and the integration of refugees and other migrants in an [expanding] labour force and in educational institutions is not only a humanitarian concern: it could prove to be in a region's best interest.

The findings of this article could be expanded from Riace and Sjenica to the broader European level, at least for all those areas experiencing similar depopulation and migration trends. Considering the urbanisation trend and the increase in the number of displaced people on a global scale, we conclude also that strategies of rural regeneration, focused on integration and local labour markets, represent an example of survival at the local level in response to depopulation as much as they are a humanitarian response. Ensuring their sustainability and long-term contribution to territorial development requires, however, a more ambitious approach by national governments.

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