



# Governing Immobility in the COVID-19 Crisis in Italy: Non-conforming Behaviors of Migrants Confronting the New Old Processes of Othering

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## Abstract

In this article, we critically analyze how different confinement sites for migrants in Italy, such as reception centers, pre-removal detention facilities, hotspots, and quarantine ships, have functioned as tools for controlling migration during the COVID-19 pandemic. We specifically focus on the nonconforming behaviors exhibited by migrants within these sites. Our analysis aims to shed light on the mechanisms of control by examining acts of resistance undertaken by individuals, both consciously and unconsciously, and carried out either individually or collectively. We investigate how these specific government practices, as evidenced by these acts of nonconformity, have materialized a sense of "sacrificability" and institutional abandonment. By analyzing protests, their content, and dynamics, we delve into how the concept of necropolitical sacrificability applies to both reception facilities and detention facilities and we argue that this concept extends beyond the COVID-19 crisis, prompting an examination of how power dynamics and people's lives, once deemed *sacrificable*, continue to be influenced and vulnerable at a social and political level.

## Introduction

Italy was the first country in Western Europe to be affected by the pandemic. Between March 8 and May 18, 2020, the Italian government implemented a nationwide lockdown to combat the extremely severe spread of COVID-19 among the population. Most work activities were suspended for the entire period of the lockdown and, in some cases, beyond, with remote work being encouraged where possible. Citizens were urged to stay at home, practice social distancing, wash their hands regularly, and use hygiene products. They were only allowed to leave their homes in exceptional circumstances, to remain within 200 m of

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their residences, and only in the cases that leaving their homes could be justified in the case that the police inquired (Anastasia and Ferraris 2021).

On April 7, 2020, Italian ports were closed by Interministerial Decree No. 150, deeming them unsafe due to the pandemic and unsuitable for receiving migrants safely—meanwhile, Libyan ports were considered safe (Lo Verde 2021). On April 12, 2020, Circular of the Head of the Department of Civil Protection No. 1287/2020 established Quarantine Ships, managed by the Department of Civil Liberties and Immigration, where migrants arriving by sea were required to spend a 2-week quarantine period upon entry. While the pandemic confined Italian citizens to their homes, it also immobilized migrants in reception systems, hotspot facilities, and pre-removal detention centers. This was not unique to Italy but was also observed in other countries, such as the Moria center in Greece (Meer et al. 2021; Tazzioli 2020) or the Mellilla center in Spain (Gabrielli 2021). As Crawley (2021) highlights, in these conditions, the government issued instructions to "stay home, stay safe, and practice social distancing" held little meaning for migrants. This article underscores the disproportional impact of COVID-19 measures on forced migrants in Italy and illustrates how migrants developed radical coping strategies, by highlighting some cases of nonconformities.

In Italy, the measures implemented by the government during the COVID-19 crisis did not have an equal impact on everyone. The severity of the consequences varied significantly depending on pre-existing social conditions; dependent on social characteristics of specific individuals, groups, and social classes. In general, COVID-19 exacerbated existing social trends in the country, and this was also evident in the management of border control. It should be noted that the differences in how the pandemic was managed and thereby experienced by the Italian population and migrants, also raises broader issues regarding migration control.

During this period, migrants were socially and symbolically portrayed as the spreaders of infection (Ullah et al. 2021). This narrative is not new (Spada 2020; Fabini and Firouzi Tabar 2022), but it continued to have tangible and symbolic effects evident in the management of migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this article, we critically analyze how various sites of confinement (reception centers, pre-removal detention facilities, hotspots, and quarantine ships) have functioned as tools for controlling migration in the context of the pandemic in Italy, encountering nonconforming behaviors by migrants. Our analysis aims to illuminate the mechanisms of control by examining acts of resistance undertaken by individuals, whether conscious or unconscious, and carried out individually or collectively. Regardless of their legal status, whether that of "illegalized migrants," "asylum seekers," "refugees" or simply individuals who have recently disembarked on Italian shores, migrants have faced more severe limitations on their rights compared to Italian citizens regarding pandemic risk management strategies implemented during COVID-19 in Italy. Examining the circumstances of confinement of migrants offers insights into evolving immigration control dynamics, as well as changing practices, rhetoric, and justifications for detention. These detention and *de facto* detention measures have in turn created resentment and even motivated physical protest and rebellion by migrants held in these centers. Dissent against the dire conditions of detainment were exacerbated by the worsening conditions of detention caused by COVID-19 lockdown. In this paper we examine acts of rebellion by "asylum seekers" and "refugees" in the reception system, disembarked migrants on quarantine vessels and in hotspots, and "illegalized migrants" in pre-removal detention, aiming to shed light on the discriminatory, racializing, and unequal treatment experienced by immobilized migrants during this period.

In this article, we examine non-conforming behaviors that have emerged in various migrant confinement sites as a specific starting point to observe and understand the mechanisms of power and control during the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy. These "counter conducts," including individual and collective protests, facility occupations or escapes, hunger strikes, and suicide attempts, highlight the common trend, particularly during the most critical phases of the pandemic, of subjecting asylum seekers and irregular migrants to extreme socio-spatial segregation and abandonment. Our analysis aims to demonstrate how specific government practices, as evidenced by these non-conforming acts, have materialized a sense of "sacrificability" and institutional abandonment. These practices reveal how strong securitarian approaches and narratives of control and containment have infiltrated and permeated humanitarian reasoning within the management of migration, as discussed by Fassin (2011) and supported by other studies and research that we will reference later. Rather than being a completely exceptional control mechanism, this security-oriented shift in the security-humanitarian rationale amplifies pre-existing injustices and provides an opportunity to expose and further illuminate the underlying dynamics of oppression and discrimination.

The article is structured as follows. First, we provide a literature review that examines the securitization of migration, the relationship between Humanitarianism and securitarian ideology, the effects of COVID-19 on border control, and the role of resistance in understanding control dynamics. We will then present the methodology used in our research, followed by the presentation of the research results, focusing on the reception system, detention at the exit, and detention upon entry. In the concluding section, we will revisit our two statements and reflect on the collected data to argue that COVID-19 has not introduced anything radically new to the field of border control. Instead, it has illuminated the pre-existing distortions, discrimination, and the disconcerting extent of border violence. By analyzing the data, we aim to demonstrate how COVID-19 has shed light on these long-standing issues within the context of border control.

## Necropolitical Sacrificability Beyond the COVID-19 Crisis

Reflecting on the migration control policies in France during the early stages of the COVID-19 health crisis, Didier Fassin (2021) emphasizes that certain groups such as "illegalized migrants" and "asylum seekers" were relegated to the lowest position in terms of institutional care and subjected to a regime of radical neglect. Even prisoners, who are subject to restrictive and punitive measures, were given a basic level of attention. Maurice Stierl and Deanna Dadusc (2021) argue that the COVID-19 pandemic served as an excuse to amplify existing forms of biopolitical and necropolitical violence at national borders, rather than being an exceptional event. They denounce the implementation of "further practices of securitization and containment that have been observed for several years along the Mediterranean border, which have now been pushed to new extremes under the guise of a global pandemic emergency" (p. 1467). This is what we refer to as *necropolitical sacrificability*, particularly evident in Italy's choices regarding sea entry and the closure of ports. We believe that this idea of *sacrificability* also extends to "illegalized migrants" within the country's territory and "asylum seekers".

Migrants who are subjected to this process of selective abandonment are portrayed as dehumanized individuals, devoid of worth except for the purpose of control and containment. They are represented and treated as "unnecessary" (Piccoli 2021) and literally

"left behind" (Dempster et al. 2020). This phenomenon occurs at a time when European and national institutions are faced with the urgent decision of determining who is deserving of socio-economic support and who can be excluded, leading to "a reorganisation of the whole economy of mobility and immobility, with far reaching consequences for the structures and subjective experience of domination and exploitation" (Mezzadra, 2021: 247). This abandonment takes material form in various contexts through extremely harsh practices of racialized immobilization and forced containment. For example, in Mexico, approximately 60,000 migrants found themselves stranded and de facto detained for months along the US border in dilapidated facilities and critical socio-sanitary conditions (Slack and Josiah 2020). In the Spanish enclave of Melilla, shortly after the declaration of a state of emergency in March 2020, around 1600 migrants, including 400 women and children, were stranded inside the temporary migrant center (CETI) in overcrowded conditions, with little institutional care provided (Gabrielli 2021). In the Moria hotspot on Lesbos Island, in Greece, under the pretext of protecting both migrants and the local population from the virus, thousands of people were confined in a sprawling and overcrowded camp, leading to severe humanitarian consequences (Tazzioli 2020). Similarly, the Maltese government banned the disembarkation of 425 migrants, detaining them on chartered cruise ships under precarious socio-sanitary conditions for 5 weeks (Tazzioli and Stierl 2021). In Cyprus, authorities decided to deport hundreds of "asylum seekers" from independent accommodations to the Pournara camp in the Kokkinotrimithia region, where they were effectively imprisoned during a nationwide lockdown, and even when restrictions were eased, residents of the camp were not allowed to leave (Meer et al. 2021). In these episodes, this type of discrimination was met with protests and acts of rebellion from the migrants themselves. For instance, in Melilla and Lesbos, hunger strikes and various forms of protest and denunciation of detention conditions by migrants played a crucial role in drawing attention to the dire situation unfolding.

We critically analyze the bordering practices, particularly within the context of the pandemic, as an open field marked by ongoing tensions, conflicts, and frictions between mechanisms of control and the emancipatory impulses of migrants. Here, the governance of mobility intersects with migrants' resistance, autonomy, insubordination, and unwavering determination to assert their rights and reclaim spheres of freedom (Papadopoulos 2013; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Hess and Kasparek 2017; Stierl 2019; De Genova et al. 2018, Mezzadra 2020). We would like to emphasize that adopting the interpretative perspective of 'border struggles' (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013) to analyze these forms of control does not entail embracing a naive or romantic view of the processes at work (Scheel 2013). We are fully aware of the violence that migration governance perpetuates, particularly in the context of the pandemic. However, we argue that the acts of resistance exhibited by migrants have the potential to redefine our understanding of the extent of marginalization, segregation, and abandonment faced by them. By examining the irregular and unexpected behaviors and demands that often emerge within reception and detention systems, we can gain insight into the control mechanisms employed to devalue migrants' agency and reframe their social and political issues as matters of security, public health and public order.

In the examples above, it becomes apparent how institutions in various contexts have prioritized objectives of confinement, isolation, stigmatization, and abandonment. These choices align closely with the notion that the control and management of borders are deeply influenced by securitarian logics and techniques (Huysmans 2000, 2006; Van Munster 2009; Neal 2009; Vaughan-Williams 2017), which involve the utilization of sophisticated surveillance techniques (Bigo 2006; Lyon 2004) and profiling (Harcourt 2007,

2009). Some scholars have put forth the proposition that the securitarian approach, particularly toward “refugees” and “asylum seekers”, tends to intertwine with a humanitarian control paradigm, where attitudes and practices of compassionate care and control coexist, alternate, and sometimes overlap (Malkki 1996; Fassin 2011, 2019; Agier 2005; Cuttitta 2018; Franko 2021; Tazzioli and Garelli 2018). They have also advanced the hypothesis of the increasing centrality in border control mechanisms of what has been termed the “humanitarian border” (Walters 2011) and have been critics of the gradual proliferation and strengthening of “ambivalent and hybrid securitarian-humanitarian regimes” (Hess and Kasparek 2017: 63).

When COVID-19 emerged in Italy and subsequently spread to European countries and beyond, the prevailing narratives portrayed it as a great equalizer that affected everyone *democratically*. It was believed that all individuals were experiencing the same situation, with no distinctions among affected groups or the measures implemented to manage the pandemic. However, this perspective has been strongly criticized. COVID-19 is now recognized globally as a ‘great amplifier’ of structural injustice and discrimination, further entrenching existing patterns of exclusion from healthcare services, social safety nets, socio-economic opportunities, and spatial integration (Guadagno 2020; Ullah et al. 2021; Crawley 2021).

When considering the social effects of COVID-19, it is crucial to recognize that the violent and organized strategies of containment and abandonment (Gilmore 2007) of migrants intersects with social contexts already characterized by widespread rights violations, power imbalances, and oppressive dynamics. Globally, policies for managing the health crisis have tended to intensify and multiply existing ethnic, economic, and gender inequalities (Goldin and Muggah 2020). In the case of “refugees”, “asylum seekers”, and “illegalised migrants”, COVID-19 has exacerbated pre-existing socio-economic injustices related to employment, income, and access to social protection measures, while simultaneously reinforcing xenophobia and racial discrimination (Dempster et al. 2020). Within this context, three critical areas have been identified where the already precarious living conditions of asylum seekers and refugees face further compromises: border closures and pushbacks, asylum procedures, and livelihoods, with a particular emphasis on detention and reception conditions (Crawley 2021). These challenges arise from intersecting forms of discrimination and subordination based on economic status, gender, and the social construction of *otherness*. These strategies target individuals who are structurally marginalized and vulnerable. In Italy, the management of the COVID-19 crisis has resulted in significant disparities between Italians and migrants:

Restricted in their mobility and stranded in countries of departure or transit, huddled in reception centers in precarious conditions and hampered in admission procedures and applications for asylum or international protection, forced to work despite health risks and made invisible to the public discourse, forgotten by public policies and discriminated against in their access to prevention or treatment, impoverished and more exploited in the labor market, accused of carrying the virus or being immune from it, segregated in the homes of the dependent elderly they assist, they are one of the most vulnerable groups at risk of suffering the heaviest consequences of this double crisis. (Della Puppa and Perocco 2021: 10).

In this instance we are offered a glimpse of the dynamics of abandonment of “asylum seekers” and “irregularized migrants” (as well as migrants with precarious legal statuses) during the COVID-19 crisis in Italy. In fact, “no urgent decrees adopted by the Italian government to contain the COVID-19 pandemic have explicitly dealt with the issues and needs

of the migrant population" (Giammarinaro and Palumbo 2020: 21). In addition to excluding large portions of the population from the protective and healthcare resources provided for Italians, some scholars have drawn attention to the exacerbation of pre-existing critical conditions within reception and detention facilities for "asylum seekers" and "illegalised migrants" (Esposito et al. 2020, 2022; Fabini and Firouzi Tabar 2022; Firouzi Tabar and Sanò 2021; Sanò and Della Puppa 2021). This is particularly evident in overcrowded reception centers and migration detention centers, where the lack of targeted interventions to prevent and control the risk of contagion, as well as the absence of clear socio-healthcare protocols, have jeopardized the health of thousands of migrants confined in cramped spaces and abandoned by the institutions (Giammarinaro and Palumbo 2020, D'ignoti 2020; Firouzi Tabar and Sanò 2021; Filippi and Giliberti 2021; Denaro 2021).

In this review, we have focused on the social effects of the COVID-19 crisis on the governance of migration in various contexts. Our examination of this management has prompted reflection on the interplay between securitization approaches and humanitarian approaches, highlighting the significance of exploring control mechanisms through the lens of resistance. We have introduced the concept of "Necropolitical sacrificability". The term "necropolitics," coined by philosopher Achille Mbembe (2003), refers to the power wielded by political structures to determine who lives and who dies. "Sacrificability" implies that certain individuals or groups are considered expendable or subjected to risks and violence, with consequences that surpass the COVID-19 health crisis. Our goal, centering on the non-conforming behaviors of migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic, is to comprehend which control mechanisms are deemed unacceptable from the migrants' standpoint. We seek to uncover hidden forms of control within supposed care dynamics, such as in reception facilities, and examine whether the issues that asylum seekers in Treviso protested are similar to those that "illegalized migrants" rebelled against in detention facilities. Essentially, through an analysis of protests, their content, and dynamics, we aim to explore how the concept of necropolitical sacrificability applies to both reception facilities and detention facilities from the migrants' standpoint. We believe that the concept of necropolitical sacrificability persists beyond the COVID-19 crisis, prompting an examination of how power dynamics and people's lives, once deemed *sacrificable*, continue to be influenced and vulnerable at a social and political level.

## Methodology

Our analysis incorporates empirical data from fieldwork conducted in the Veneto region (Northeast Italy), particularly in Treviso's center, as well as secondary data from reports by NGOs, the National Ombudsman, and civil society concerning hotspots, pre-removal detention, and quarantine ships.

The events reported and commented on in the article regarding reception facilities have been collected by drawing on the reports that appeared in the newspapers, especially in the local press. One of the authors obtained additional information on the Treviso reception center case through interviews with three activists and trade union members in Treviso who have been closely following and reporting on the criticisms surrounding the reception center for several years. An interview with one of the protest leaders, Abdoul,<sup>1</sup> who was then imprisoned, provided further insights.

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<sup>1</sup> The name has been invented to provide anonymity.

Regarding the reconstruction of events in detention facilities (such as hotspots, quarantine ships, and CPRs) during the COVID-19 crisis, the authors were unable to collect qualitative data directly. Therefore, they relied on data from newspaper articles and some other main sources: the weekly bulletin of the national ombudsman,<sup>2</sup> two reports by the Italian Coalition for Freedom and Civil Rights (CILD) titled "*Detenzione migrante ai tempi del Covid*"<sup>3</sup> and "*Buchi neri*",<sup>4</sup> reports by the project *In Limine*<sup>5</sup> of ASGI (Association for Juridical Studies on Immigration) based on 82 migrant interviews and FOIA, and secondary data from other research (Montagna 2023; Tazzioli and Stierl 2021).

All these data have been combined to analyze the non-conforming behaviors of migrants during the COVID-19 crisis in the reception facilities and in the detention facilities. By considering the border as a "battleground" (Ambrosini 2021) and focusing on migrants' autonomy, resistance, and resilience, we explore acts of resistance enacted by migrants themselves in these various control sites to unveil hidden mechanisms of power operating through legal norms and within the shadows of the law, and to question their underlying rationales.

## Trapped and Abandoned Within the Reception System

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) have highlighted that reception facilities in Europe, particularly the larger ones, have faced numerous challenges in terms of health screening practices and ensuring adequate social distancing measures for preventing the transmission of COVID-19. Additionally, managing isolation and quarantine operations for individuals who tested positive for the virus have posed significant difficulties. The ECDC, based on the available data, has gone as far as to assert that "evidence suggests that in settings with insufficient possibilities for physical distancing (such as cruise ships), mass quarantine may be counterproductive with negative effects on mental health, sexual and gender-based violence, and non-communicable diseases. In these contexts, early evacuation may be more effective in reducing transmission."<sup>6</sup>

The Reception System in Italy offers two types of solutions: The Reception and Integration System (SAI), which is the ordinary instrument that ensures the accommodation of a minority of asylum seekers, and the Extraordinary Reception Centers (CAS), which are the more widely used tool to accommodate "refugees" and, especially, "asylum seekers". During 2020, the first and most critical period of the pandemic crisis, a total of 101,000 "asylum seekers" were hosted in Italy, with 66% accommodated in CAS, of which 30% were in large or very large structures, on which this analysis focusses on (ActionAid, Open Polis 2022).<sup>7</sup> In the most critical phases of the pandemic, the reception system had transformed

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.garantenazionaleprivatiliberta.it/gnpl/pages/it/homepage/covid19/>.

<sup>3</sup> [https://cild.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Dossier\\_MigrantiCovid.pdf](https://cild.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Dossier_MigrantiCovid.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> <https://cild.eu/blog/2021/10/15/buchi-neri-la-detenzione-senza-reato-nei-cpr/>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://inlimine.asgi.it/>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/COVID-19-guidance-refugee-asylum-seekers-migrants-EU.pdf> (Guidance on infection prevention and control of COVID-19 in migrant and refugee reception and detention centres, p. 5).

<sup>7</sup> <https://centriditalia.it/home>.

into sites of forced containment, blurring the boundaries between the detention of "illegalized migrants" and the reception of "asylum seekers".

What happened during the summer of 2020 inside the extraordinary reception center (CAS) in the city of Treviso exemplifies the gravity of the situation experienced in similarly large reception facilities in Italy. After months spent without implementation of specific operational protocols for health screening or social distancing in common spaces, in June, just before the lockdown was planned to officially end for Italian citizens, a social operator at the CAS facility tested positive for COVID-19. This led the managing body to declare the center a "red zone," completely sealing it off from the outside and confining around 300 migrants inside. As reported in the local press, the decision to enforce a lockdown in the facility immediately sparked protests and unrest. On June 11, upon learning about a new quarantine in the camp, the migrants blocked the exits seeking to receive detailed information from the social and health workers remaining, so as to try to get more information on the quarantine, and to inquire about the possibility for those who tested negative to leave the camp for work. Their requests were rejected, and a few hours later, police riot squads forcefully entered the camp, leading to heightened tensions and clashes with many asylum seekers involved in the protest.

As explained by activists, lawyers, and trade unionists who followed the events—and as emphasized in an interview by the Mayor of the Municipality where the reception camp is located—the protests were sparked by the lack of information regarding the health situation, the fear of losing one's job, and the concern of being confined in an overcrowded place where the common areas (showers, kitchens, canteens) could become areas of high transmission for the virus. These were legitimate concerns, considering that 20 days later when the conflict in the camp seemed to have completely subsided, a COVID-19 test conducted on all migrants housed in the facility revealed the presence of 137 positive cases. A week later, on August 6, a new round of swabs brought the total number of positive cases to 257 out of the 280 people present in the structure, highlighting the serious deficiencies in monitoring and containing infections. The structural conditions of this large center placed the approximately 300 "asylum seekers in Treviso's center in a real social-health trap during those weeks.

What we would like to emphasize here is the extremely harsh institutional response to these protests. In the immediate aftermath of the protests, there were no apparent punitive reactions like the revocation of reception benefits which is typically implemented in similar situations (Firouzi Tabar 2019). However, this was merely the calm before the storm. On August 19, four asylum seekers who had participated in the protests were charged with crimes of destruction of property, looting, and kidnapping. They were subsequently arrested and transferred to prison. Two months later, following an order by the Department of Penitentiary Administration (DAP), the four "asylum seekers" were relocated to four different prison facilities and placed under *special surveillance* as per Article 14-bis of the Penitentiary Code. This measure allows for the isolation of individuals considered particularly dangerous. Tragically, on November 7, one of the four young individuals affected by this measure, 23-year-old Chaka Ouattara from Mali, took his own life using parts of his clothing as a noose in Verona's prison.

While we cannot establish direct causal links, testimonies collected through Chaka's lawyers and the chronological sequence of events strongly suggest that this tragic decision is closely linked to the extreme vulnerability and isolation brought about by the harsh criminalization and put into action toward those who protested against the confinement and abandonment inside the facility. The punitive intent of these criminal and prison measures, aimed at criminalizing collective rights-based actions, is evident. The use of special



surveillance measures typically reserved for different categories of prisoners further underscores the intention to punish (Firouzi Tabar and Maculan 2021).

A few months after the incidents, we conducted interviews with activists from anti-racist networks in the area and Abdoul, one of the four arrested and imprisoned “asylum seekers”. Shortly after his release from prison, while under house arrest, we had a lengthy conversation with Abdoul. He expressed his desire to delve into the root causes of the anger and frustration that fueled the uprising at Treviso’s CAS (Extraordinary Reception Center). According to him, several key issues contributed to the unrest: Firstly, there was a lack of information regarding the health situation from the outset of the pandemic crisis. The absence of clear communication, coupled with inadequate distribution of face masks and sanitizers, only heightened the tensions. Furthermore, the facility lacked proper medical protocols to prevent the potential spread of the virus or provide necessary interventions. One of the most concerning factors according to Abdoul was the inability to effectively isolate migrants who tested positive for COVID-19 from the rest of the population. The shared use of common spaces by both healthy and sick individuals perpetuated continuous outbreaks, creating a pervasive sense of vulnerability and abandonment. Abdoul also emphasized that similar protests had taken place in the past, notably in March 2017, driven by the unacceptable living conditions within the camp. Placards, banners, and letters addressed to local institutions and authorities voiced grievances about overcrowding, insufficient medical care and protocols, lack of privacy, and the precarious social and sanitary circumstances forced upon the residents.<sup>8</sup>

Overall, these factors contributed to a collective sense of frustration and disillusionment, prompting the protests as a means of demanding better treatment and living conditions. The case in Treviso serves as a significant example of the tensions prevalent in Italy during that period, highlighting both the intensity of the protests and the severity of government crackdown. However, it is just one of several instances of resistance that emerged as a response to the handling of the health crisis by the authorities. Coinciding with the events described earlier, in the nearby Province of Venice, numerous migrants staged a protest, displaying a large banner at the gates of the CAS where they had been relocated to from apartments. They had been subjected to a prolonged quarantine despite testing negative for COVID-19, as bureaucratic issues arising from the lack of clear sanitary protocols caused delays. Their demand was simple: to be allowed to leave the camp, particularly in order to return to work.

A month later, in Palinuro, located in the Province of Salerno in Southern Italy, around 80 migrants made the decision to abandon the reception camp and took to the streets surrounding the center, staging a day-long protest.<sup>9</sup> In this case, overcrowding and the practice of co-housing individuals who tested positive for COVID-19 with those who tested negative were denounced because it forced migrants to share common areas, exposing everyone to the risk of infection.

These incidents offer valuable insights into the challenges faced by reception facilities, especially the larger ones, in effectively addressing the pandemic crisis and implementing adequate strategies and protocols to safeguard the right to health. They highlight a concerning trend of escalating abandonment, marginalization, and segregation, which have been

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.meltingpot.org/2017/03/treviso-ex-caserma-serena-i-richiedenti-asilo-in-protesta-per-i-tempi-dattesa-per-la-commissione-e-le-condizioni-dellaccoglienza/>.

<sup>9</sup> [https://napoli.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/10/08/foto/covid\\_chiedono\\_fine\\_isolamento\\_migranti\\_blocco\\_la\\_strada\\_statale\\_a\\_palinuro\\_protesta\\_rientrata-269891438/1/](https://napoli.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/10/08/foto/covid_chiedono_fine_isolamento_migranti_blocco_la_strada_statale_a_palinuro_protesta_rientrata-269891438/1/).

deeply ingrained in the Italian asylum seeker and refugee control system for quite some time (Sorgoni 2011; Campesi 2014; Manocchi 2014; Pinelli 2017; Firouzi Tabar 2019). It is striking that while the closure of Italian ports and the activation of what has been defined as a "hygienic-sanitary border" (Tazzioli and Stierl 2021) were motivated by the aim to protect both migrants and the resident population, in this case the abandonment of people in these unsafe places identifies them as sacrificable subjects with reference to the sole objective of protecting the external space.

In addition, the particular management of conflict by the authorities in the case of the Treviso uprising highlights a certain degree of recrudescence of the repressive approach toward migrants and a particularly harsh use of penal instruments. In fact, the criminalisation of protests toward the management of COVID-19 in reception centers presents itself as an exceptional phenomenon, considering that usually the governance of conflicts in the reception sphere takes place through forms of internal regulation marked by continuous negotiations, threats, intimidation, false promises, blackmail or with the use of administrative instruments such as the revocation of reception (Campesi 2014; Firouzi Tabar 2019). Following the eruption of the health crisis, the governance of reception has crystallized around control and containment, with predictable exacerbation of pre-existing suffering, discomfort, and conflict such as those considered in this article. The asylum seekers find themselves excluded from the sometimes generous socio-economic aid provided by the Italian government to Italian citizens during the pandemic (Giammarinaro and Palumbo 2020). At the same time, migrants are at the center of a radicalization of socio-spatial segregation, witnessed by the worsening of already critical psycho-physical living conditions inside overcrowded centers, marked by forced cohabitation, absence of adequate management, and lack of care plans in case of potential health situations.

## COVID-19 Lens on the Material and Symbolic Aspects of Detention

During the initial lockdown period from March 8 to May 18, 2020, border closures rendered deportations impossible. Nevertheless, the detention of migrants for repatriation purposes, although greatly diminished, persisted. On March 26, 2020, the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe explicitly called for the release of migrants from the centers. The Commissioner cited the examples of Spain and Belgium, where centers had already been emptied due to COVID-19 (Brandariz and Fernandez Bessa 2021), and the UK, which had committed to reviewing the cases of all detained individuals (Mentasti 2020). However, by the end of May 2020, there were 195 individuals remaining in the ten Italian CPRs, representing the lowest recorded number to date.<sup>10</sup> This highlights the fact that the justices of the peace, who are responsible for monthly validation of detention orders (Asta and Caprioglio 2017), continued to validate detentions even when deportation options were not specified.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The individuals in the centers, as reported in the periodic bulletins from the Guarantor, numbered 425 on March 12th, 240 on April 28th, 204 on May 15th, 195 on May 22nd, and subsequently rose to 282 on June 25th and 332 on July 2nd (CILD).

<sup>11</sup> ASGI, CILD, Antigone, and other associations raised this concern in an open letter addressed to the justices of the peace. The letter "Is it legitimate to detain if expulsion is not possible?" can be found at the link: <https://www.asgi.it/documenti-asgi/covid-detenzione-lettera-giudici/>.

CPRs have always been challenging environments, but the situation worsened significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. A ministerial regulation dated March 26, 2020, provided the initial official guidelines for managing the risk of contagion within the centers.<sup>12</sup> These guidelines did not include pre-triage facilities, required new admissions to be placed in separate rooms for 14 days, called for constant monitoring of symptoms among the detained population, and emphasized space sanitization. Although the right to communicate with loved ones was granted, the prohibition on cell phones remained. Nevertheless, concrete measures such as social distancing and the distribution of disinfectants, gloves, and masks were not implemented (CILD 2021).

In late March 2020, migrants detained at the Gradisca pre-removal detention center, situated on the Italy-Slovenia border, staged protests due to the lack of hygiene kits, face masks, and gloves. On March 23rd, some of them initiated a hunger strike, expressing discontent over the substandard food quality, dire sanitary conditions, fear of contagion, and their demand for release to return to their homes. This was triggered by the transfer of a Nigerian migrant from Cremona's prison in Northern Italy to the Gradisca center on March 19th. The individual had tested positive for COVID-19 and, following an initial quarantine period at the center, was subsequently transferred to a nearby hospital on March 26th. The detainees began protesting upon learning about the presence of a COVID-19 positive person inside the center (Esposito et al. 2020: 32). The protests persisted for a significant period, during which local activists disseminated information about other migrants who had tested positive for the virus, ongoing shortages of face masks, and, notably, instances of violent police responses.<sup>13</sup> Allegedly, migrants complaining of chest pain were denied access to medical visits. On March 29th, detainees set fire to their mattresses, demanding release from the center.<sup>14</sup>

Similar protests erupted in other CPRs across Italy. For example, four women in Rome's CPR embarked on a six-day hunger and thirst strike,<sup>15</sup> echoing the demands of the Gorizia migrants for improved living conditions and release from the center. Violent protests also broke out in Macomer's CPR, situated in the heart of Sardinia. On June 19th, 2020, migrants climbed onto the roof of the center, with one individual even sewing their mouth shut.<sup>16</sup>

In general, there is a lack of transparency regarding the CPRs in Italy. Access for civil society is challenging, if not almost impossible. The limited information available primarily comes from oversight bodies such as the national ombudsman. Obtaining information through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests is also often met with difficulties. As a result, migrant protests must escalate to extreme measures (hunger strikes, thirst strikes, sewn lips, fires, rooftop demonstrations) in order to break through the wall of silence surrounding these centers and draw attention to the deplorable living conditions inside. Based on the protests of migrants, the detention conditions observed in CPRs during Italy's first lockdown fell short of even the basic standards outlined in the literature as "minimal biopolitics," which refers to the preservation of basic biological life through provisions

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/circolare\\_immigrazione\\_diffusione\\_del\\_virus\\_COVID-19\\_26.3.2020.pdf.pdf](https://www.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/circolare_immigrazione_diffusione_del_virus_COVID-19_26.3.2020.pdf.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> <https://nofrontierfvg.noblogs.org/post/2020/03/>.

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.ansa.it/canale\\_legalita\\_scuola/notizie/2020/03/30/ripetuti-incendi-in-cpr-gradisca\\_a83d1934-a9f4-4d1a-a099-89207ed898bd.html](https://www.ansa.it/canale_legalita_scuola/notizie/2020/03/30/ripetuti-incendi-in-cpr-gradisca_a83d1934-a9f4-4d1a-a099-89207ed898bd.html).

<sup>15</sup> <https://radioblackout.org/2020/04/aggiornamento-sul-cpr-di-ponte-galeria/>.

<sup>16</sup> <https://ilmanifesto.it/cpr-di-macomer-un-detenido-malmenato-e-sedato-gli-altri-salgono-sul-tetto>.

such as food and shelter (Johansen, 2013). The living conditions in CPRs, both in general and specifically during that period, displayed characteristics aligning with the politics of abandonment (Pinelli, 2017), verging on necropolitics (Esposito et al. 2022). The protesting migrants all shared a common demand to be allowed to leave, given the impossibility of actual deportation and the inability to comply with recommended hygiene and sanitary measures to prevent the risk of contagion. Yet, it is evident that containment has transformed into a mechanism aimed at safeguarding cities from the risk of foreign contagion rather than solely protecting migrants from the virus. This shift raises concerns as it allows for the potential sacrifice of lives deemed disposable.

A similar situation applies to the detention upon arrival in the hotspot facilities. Hotspots were established in Italy and Greece in 2016 as entry points for screening migrants, categorizing them<sup>17</sup> as 'asylum seekers' or 'economic migrants' (Pinelli 2017; Scieurba 2017; Ferri 2019). Only "asylum seekers" are granted entry, while "economic migrants" receive deportation orders, though actual deportation is not guaranteed (Fabini 2019; Campesi 2015).<sup>18</sup> Between 2016 and 2020, 21,720 individuals passed through CPRs, while hotspots hosted 123,081 individuals.<sup>19</sup> Despite the lockdown period, sea arrivals continued.<sup>20</sup> The Hotspots in Taranto, Pozzallo, and, at least until early August 2020, Messina were used to carry out quarantines and isolations in case of positive COVID-19 cases, while the Lampedusa Hotspot served as a hub for arrivals who were then transferred to Quarantine Ships.

Similar to CPRs, these facilities also struggled to meet the requirements of social distancing, adequate hygiene, and sanitation conditions. However, the hotspots faced even greater challenges in fulfilling these demands compared to the CPRs, particularly considering that they are not designed for longer stays of more than a few days. Similar to CPRs, hotspots have witnessed significant protests from migrants requiring to be released.

By the end of April 2020, protests occurred at the Lampedusa hotspot, where migrants engaged in acts of self-harm, subsequently sharing the images to denounce being "treated like animals." They highlighted the absence of water in the showers and sinks, hindering their ability to maintain proper hygiene. Furthermore, despite the completion of the 14-day quarantine period, they were still confined within the hotspot. Reports indicate that the quarantine countdown would restart every time a new group of migrants entered.<sup>21</sup> In many cases, migrants were subjected to prolonged quarantines lasting months, even with a negative test result, followed by repatriation without the opportunity to express or formalize their request for international protection. Furthermore, during the summer of 2020, migrants arriving in Lampedusa and Sicily underwent systematic testing and quarantines, unlike foreign tourists who faced no such restrictions.<sup>22</sup> These measures clearly violated personal freedom and were distinctly different from those imposed on foreign citizens arriving in Italy through other means. Because of all these reasons, there were numerous

<sup>17</sup> Differentiation is primarily based on nationality (Scieurba, 2017; Ferri, 2019; Montagna 2023) rather than individual case analysis as required by international law (Scieurba 2020).

<sup>18</sup> Detention in hotspots for up to 30 non-extendable days is possible for those who persistently refuse to provide fingerprints (Valentini, 2021, pp. 270–9).

<sup>19</sup> Data from the Ombudsman's annual reports on detainees' rights. [https://www.garantenazionaleprivatiliberta.it/gnpl/pages/it/homepage/pub\\_rel\\_par/](https://www.garantenazionaleprivatiliberta.it/gnpl/pages/it/homepage/pub_rel_par/).

<sup>20</sup> 67,040 migrants arrived by sea in 2021, 34,154 in 2020, and 11,000 in 2019.

<sup>21</sup> [https://meridionews.it/migranti-bloccati-nellhotspot-scoppia-la-protesta-atti-di-autolesionismo-manca-lacqua-nelle-docce/?refresh\\_ce](https://meridionews.it/migranti-bloccati-nellhotspot-scoppia-la-protesta-atti-di-autolesionismo-manca-lacqua-nelle-docce/?refresh_ce).

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.meltingpot.org/2020/11/i-migranti-in-quarantena-e-le-vite-inequali/>.

escapes from various hotspots, including Caltanissetta, Messina, and Pozzallo.<sup>23</sup> This situation persisted beyond the summer of 2020 and extended into the following year. In fact, among the most severe incidents was the July 2021 riot inside the Pozzallo hotspot, where migrants set fires on some mattresses and prompted many to flee.<sup>24</sup>

Certainly, the escapes from the hotspot also provoked protests from the residents. For this reason, the Messina Hotspot was closed already in August 2020. Messina's hotspot had previously sparked local controversy due to concerns about potential escapes and instances of theft involving detained foreigners. These fears intensified during the pandemic, as apprehensions about escape risks intertwined with anxieties about contagion from the "infected" foreigners (Firouzi Tabar and Sanò 2021).

The decision to isolate individuals on expensive ships (costing 2 million euros per month per ship for a 500-seat vessel<sup>25</sup>) was justified, according to former Minister of the Interior Lamorgese, by the "necessity" to keep foreign carriers of the virus away from fearful citizens: Cruise vessels owned by private companies that could not fulfill their original purpose, have been transformed into "floating hotspots" (Montagna 2023).

Disorders and tragedies also occurred on these vessels. On May 20, 2020, a 28-year-old Tunisian man named Bilal Ben Messaud died after jumping off a quarantine ship anchored in the harbor of Empedocle, Sicily (Adif 2020). Bilal was a migrant who had crossed the Mediterranean Sea in an attempt to reach Europe and had arrived on the shores of Italy. Upon arrival, he was required to undergo a mandatory COVID-19 quarantine period on a cruise ship along with many other migrants. Bilal tragically died while attempting a 50-foot jump into the sea at 4:25 a.m. despite the challenging conditions of the sea (sea state 5), wearing a life jacket. Bilal's death is not an isolated incident, as there have been other attempts by migrants to escape from quarantine vessels. For instance, on October 1, 2020, six migrants used sheets they had tied together to lower themselves from the ship *Azzurra*, which was anchored off the port of Augusta, and jumped into the sea. Similarly, on October 4, three other migrants attempted the same (one of whom is still missing), followed by seven more on October 6 (Esposito et al. 2020). Additionally, after Bilal's death, a group of his compatriots protested, demanding to be allowed to leave the ship. Although Red Cross workers managed to prevent the situation from escalating, tensions remained high on the ship. The next day, the ship was docked in port, and 14 Tunisians involved in the protests were transferred to Villa Sikaniana, a reception center in Siculiana, Sicily. Some migrants resorted to self-harm or, in even more tragic cases, attempted suicide (Montagna 2023). We consider these attempts to flee, protests, self-harm, and attempted suicide, whether viewed strictly as acts of resistance or not (Scott 1985; Saitta 2015, 2017), as testaments to the inhumane conditions of detention on these vessels, and they allow us to recognize the underlying mechanisms of sacrificability, even when they remain concealed.

From April 2020 and continuing into May 2022, a total of five quarantine ships were set up. Originally intended to remain in operation until the end of the state of emergency,

<sup>23</sup> <https://sicilia.gazzettadelsud.it/articoli/cronaca/2020/08/08/migranti-una-quarantina-di-nordafricani-fugge-dallhotspot-di-pozzallo-ae2b289b-0974-477c-8e02-7a93d3c95181/>.

<sup>24</sup> [https://www.ansa.it/sicilia/notizie/2021/07/18/migranti-incendio-in-hot-spot-alcuni-in-fuga-a-pozzallo\\_ecf17387-3299-46ca-a02a-0f0659982b55.html](https://www.ansa.it/sicilia/notizie/2021/07/18/migranti-incendio-in-hot-spot-alcuni-in-fuga-a-pozzallo_ecf17387-3299-46ca-a02a-0f0659982b55.html).

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.micromega.net/immigrazione-navi-quarantena-inchiesta/>.

which was extended in Italy until March 31, 2022, these quarantine ships continued to be operational in late May 2022.<sup>26</sup>

On the quarantine ships, migrants were left in a condition of substantial deprivation of freedom.<sup>27</sup> Individuals are expected to undergo health-related isolation initially set at 14 days by the government. However, surveys conducted by the In Limine project and CILD have revealed cases where the quarantine period restarted with each new group of migrants entering the ship, as already emerged for the hotspots. Far from being a residual measure, more than 10,000 migrants had boarded quarantine ships in Italy since their establishment until November 9th, 2020.<sup>28</sup> Unaccompanied minors were also detained on the ships, in violation of the ministry's ban in October 2020, which required minors to be received on land in suitable conditions. Furthermore, on the ships, individuals are detained without information about their legal status or the procedures for applying for asylum (Montagna 2023). This prevented them from accessing the asylum process and effectively produced their illegality (De Genova 2002). Additionally, some *prefettura*<sup>29</sup> have transferred "refugees" and "asylum seekers" who had already been hosted in the reception system for years, upon testing positive for the virus. This practice, as reported by CILD and ASGI, involves picking up individuals at night and subjecting them to medical isolation on the ships.

## Conclusion

Within the framework of the pandemic, we have witnessed a multiplication of borders and bordering processes. We have seen the suspension of the *non-refoulement* principle with the closure of Italian ports declared as unsafe spaces, the introduction of quarantine ships and offshore detention regimes, the poor socio-sanitary conditions in zones of violent containment and segregation of "asylum seekers" and "illegalized migrants", along with their exclusion from special social protection and care measures. These trends have led to the argument that we are facing a "securitization" of migration governance in Italy and the Mediterranean region, achieved through the "excuse" represented by COVID-19 (Stierl and Dadusc 2021), and a progressive "de-humanitarianization" of the securitarian-humanitarian rationale behind bordering and migration control strategies (Heller et al. 2023). Adding to these arguments is the idea that the main point is not so much a retreat of the "humanitarian reason," but rather a consideration of "how humanitarianism has been inflected through hygienic-sanitary logics and combined with deterrence measures aimed at preventively disrupting migrants' access to rights, asylum, and European territory." (Tazzioli and Stierl 2021: 541). However, the harsh choices of social isolation and (im)mobility (Sanò

<sup>26</sup> The Ministry of Infrastructure and Civil Protection published the last tender notice on December 10, which covered five ships until March 31, 2022 amounting to a total of 20 million euros between January and March 2022. This was reported by the national ombudsman (<https://www.ildubbio.news/2022/05/29/lemergenza-sanitaria-e-finita-e-le-navi-quarantena-sono-ancora-li/>). On May 31, the center-left parliamentarian Frantoïanni raised a parliamentary question regarding the continued operation of the quarantine ships, which went unanswered. The parliamentary question reference number is C.4/12238 (4–12,238).

<sup>27</sup> (<https://www.actionaid.it/blog/lunga-estate-migranti>).

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/11/9/italy-migration-ferries-coronavirus-quarantine-health-asylum>.

<sup>29</sup> In Italy, a *prefettura* is an administrative division at the regional level responsible for maintaining public order, coordinating emergency services, and implementing government policies.

and Della Puppa 2021) within the framework of the pandemic crisis appear driven by a rationale of control and containment of expendable individuals, thereby denying them the minimum protection from the health risks of contagion or the lack of resources for social protection and dignified survival, as "human beings who literally lost the material basis for the reproduction of their lives without usually having any access to public benefits" (Mezzadra 2021: 246).

If observed through the lens of those who opposed them, the discriminatory character of such measures emerge vividly, as well as the old new processes of Othering. As according to our first argument, the management of COVID-19 has introduced new elements but, more importantly, has magnified and clarified existing tensions within the system.

As we have demonstrated through the analyzed cases, in the context of the pandemic, migrants have been given lower priority than any other group, and as a result they have been subject to harsher protocols and have been excluded and deprived of resources and support. With their protesting, self-harming, fleeing, and attempting suicide, which we have proposed to read as non-conforming behaviors during the COVID-19 crisis, they denounced this situation, even in a context that lacked transparency. We argue that the exclusion of migrants from receiving care, their abandonment, is a direct outcome of the current management approach toward these individuals, making a transformative shift imperative. However, achieving such a shift would necessitate a comprehensive overhaul of the existing system. It is evident that the authorities neither desire nor possess the necessary resources to accomplish this fundamental change. In fact, one of the underlying factors driving the extreme violence within the reception and detention system during the COVID-19 crisis is the unwillingness of authorities to bear the social, political, and material costs associated with providing care to migrants. Furthermore, perpetuating the regime of stigma is always beneficial for populist governments (Melossi 2020), such as the current one in Italy at the time of writing.

While COVID-19 is portrayed as an emergency discourse, it seamlessly aligns with immigration control, as border control in Italy has consistently been depicted as an emergency (Ferraris 2021; Campesi 2012). Therefore, it does not even serve as a valid excuse; there is no need for it. During COVID-19, things continue without any structural discontinuity, meaning that the securitization we have reflected upon in this piece exists within a framework of continuity: migrants are subjected to poor treatment, even more so than before, but substantial justifications are unnecessary. The management of immigration, as it has been implemented, has merely reinforced and potentially heightened the sense of otherness toward migrants, where this otherness takes shape around the idea and practice of their expendability.

The control measures implemented in hotspots, quarantine ships, and reception centers further blur the lines between different structures and functions, making it difficult to distinguish between detention and reception. These elements form a continuum, referred to as a "chain" (Esposito et al. 2022), connecting and blurring multiple locations (reception systems, CPRs, hotspots, quarantine ships) and individuals ("illegalized migrants", "asylum seekers", "refugees"). COVID-19 radicalizes, accelerates, and highlights not only the pre-existing inequalities but also such confusion, which is apparent not only in the utilization of spaces but also in the methods of control within those spaces. Individuals are indiscriminately abandoned on cruise ships, unjustly deprived of their freedom of movement in hotspots and the reception system, and find themselves detained in CPRs regardless of the actual possibility of deportation. This continuum holds significant symbolic value, as it contributes to the construction of an imagery of otherness through the material conditions of detention and the discriminatory treatment experienced by migrants during

the COVID-19 crisis. Our cases demonstrate that sacrificability applies to every migrant, regardless of their legal status. These dynamics ultimately contribute to a progressive blurring of the figures of "asylum seekers" and "irregularized migrants," where migrants are sacrificialized because they are perceived as others, and they are continuously produced and reproduced as others because they have been sacrificed. As we situate the governance of migration and the production of "Others" within the interpretative framework of differential inclusion (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; De Genova 2002, 2013, Cuttitta 2016), we advance the proposal that a possible line of future research should investigate how this production of otherness, which during the pandemic has manifested in the form of sacrificability and social exclusion, has continued to operate in the mechanisms of control and resistance after the pandemic.

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