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The drivers of multilevel governance as a mode of policymaking: the case of asylum-seekers' reception in Italy

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Abstract
This article analyses modes of policymaking related to asylum-seekers' reception in Italy and other European Union (EU) countries during the decade of the so-called 2015 asylum crisis. It shows that, while most EU countries experienced shifts towards more hierarchical modes of policymaking on asylum, Italy pursued a unique experience of multilevel governance (MLG) between 2014 and 2016, which was then dismantled in 2017. By looking at this MLG experience as a 'heuristic case', the article contributes to an ongoing debate about the drivers of MLG as a mode of policymaking. The existing literature suggests that MLG modes of policymaking are driven by institutional and structural factors or pressure by subnational and supranational actors for more participatory policymaking processes. Complementing and challenging these theoretical explanations we generate some hypotheses about additional factors that drive the emergence and dismantling of MLG. First, we argue that both supranational actors and subnational authorities, typically considered to be agents promoting MLG, can also advocate for more hierarchical modes of policymaking. Second, we argue that a fundamental prerequisite for MLG to emerge or persist is an overall convergence of political priorities and goals among the actors involved in multilevel policymaking. Both the kind of pressures made by supranational and subnational actors and actors' political priorities can be decisively shaped by dynamics of multilevel party politics. These findings are derived from analyses of 147 interviews with key actors involved in Italian asylum policymaking in the 2010s.

Keywords: asylum; asylum crisis; Italy; multilevel governance; policymaking

Introduction

This article analyses modes of policymaking in the field of asylum-seekers' reception in Italy during the 2010s, comparing it with those prevailing in other European Union (EU) countries that were centrally affected by the 2015 European 'asylum crisis' (Greece, Spain, Germany, Austria and Sweden), and analyses the factors that drove the emergence and dismantling of a short-lived experience of multilevel governance (henceforth: MLG) in Italy.

We claim that analysing modes of policymaking in the asylum policy field and the factors that drive the emergence and dismantling of MLG – intended as a specific mode of policymaking characterised by nonhierarchical and collaborative relations between public and nonpublic actors at different governmental levels (Piattoni, 2010) – is highly relevant. While asylum-seekers' reception keeps being a highly salient policy issue in the EU, in policy debates MLG is considered as the most efficient mode of policymaking to promote comprehensive and coordinated responses

to complex and multifaceted challenges (see e.g. European Commission, 2001; OECD, 2022). Specifically in the migration policy field, OECD (2018) stated that MLG is fundamental to 'manage complementarities across sectors in order to successfully achieve integration objectives' (p. 30), while in 2016 the Council of the EU similarly advocated for more multilevel coordination in the asylum policy field, setting up a 'Partnership for the inclusion of migrants and refugees' as part of the ambitious 'Urban Agenda for the EU' (Council of the EU, 2016: 4).

Despite the extensive literature on asylum policy in the decade of the 2015 asylum crisis, most of the existing studies narrowly focus on policy implementation, largely ignoring policy formulation and policymaking processes. In particular, to the best of our knowledge, no study has assessed whether MLG or other modes of policymaking emerged in Italy during this crucial time period. More broadly, and also beyond the Italian case, we still know very little about the factors that drive the emergence and dismantling of MLG as a mode of policymaking in the asylum policy field. This article aims to fill these gaps, asking: which modes of policymaking emerged in Italy and other EU countries in the asylum policy field in the 2010s? And which factors shaped the emergence and dismantling of MLG modes of policymaking in this field?

The objectives and contribution of this article – that relies on analyses of 147 interviews conducted in Italy between 2017 and 2019 and secondary sources – are therefore twofold. First, to answer our first research question, we aim to assess the modes of multilevel policymaking in the asylum policy field in Italy and other EU countries in the decade of the asylum crisis. In doing so, we show that, while other EU countries were characterised by increasingly hierarchical modes of policymaking, asylum policymaking in Italy followed a complex trajectory. Before 2014, Italy was characterised by a predominantly hierarchical mode of policymaking. Between 2014 and 2016, a consultative MLG venue was created by the national government, with the aim of improving coordination with both subnational governments and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). This experience of MLG was dismantled in 2017 by the Gentiloni government which shifted towards a more hierarchical mode of policymaking.

Second, to make sense of such complex trajectory and to answer our second research question, we study the driving factors that shaped the emergence and dismantling of MLG in Italy. In doing so, using the case of Italy as an 'heuristic case' (Eckstein, 1975), we complement the existing theoretical literature on the drivers of MLG (see section "The Drivers of MLG" below) generating new hypotheses about the factors that drive the emergence and dismantling of MLG as a mode of policymaking.

The article unfolds as follows. In the second section, we discuss the literature on modes of multilevel policymaking and MLG in the migration policy field, illustrating our theoretical framework. In the third section, we describe our methodology. In the fourth section, we examine the modes of policymaking on asylum-seekers' reception in Italy and other EU countries in the 2010s. The penultimate section examines the drivers of the emergence and dismantling of MLG in Italy, making sense of its unique trajectory. The final section concludes the article.

MLG and its drivers
MLG and other modes of multilevel policymaking
The literature on migration policymaking has traditionally emphasised the key role of national governments in shaping migration policies (Brubaker, 1992; Freeman, 1995). However, since the late 1990s, responsibilities in this field have increasingly shifted upwards towards international and supranational institutions, outwards towards nonpublic actors and downwards towards local-level authorities (Guiraudon and Lahav, 2000). Since then, scholars have started to analyse the multilevel dynamics of migration policymaking, often applying the concept of MLG (for a review, see Scholten and Penninx, 2016; Caponio and Jones-Correa, 2018; Pettrachin, 2023).

Such concept, introduced in 1993 by Gary Marks' seminal work on European integration, is used in scholarly and policy debates in different ways (Tortola, 2017). Following Alcantara

et al. (2016), a major distinction can be drawn between an understanding of MLG as dispersion of state authority and a new system of power allocation, on the one hand, and as a mode or instance of policymaking, on the other. Although the first meaning reflects theoretical elaborations taking place within studies on systems of government, European integration and federalism, the second meaning is more grounded in research on policy networks and modes of governance laying at the intersection of public policy analysis and New Public Management. In this article, we adopt this latter perspective, looking at MLG as an instance of policymaking with three fundamental characteristics: (1) the involvement of different governmental levels on the vertical/intergovernmental dimension of policymaking; (2) the involvement of nongovernmental actors on the horizontal/state-society dimension of policymaking and (3) the presence of relationships between these different state and nonstate actors that defy existing hierarchies and take the form of collaborative, nonhierarchical networks (Piattoni, 2010: 83; Caponio and Jones-Correa, 2018).

As illustrated in Table 1, the existing literature typically identifies three modes of multilevel policymaking, which are linked to the type of relations that emerge among actors involved in multilevel policymaking on the vertical/intergovernmental dimension and on the horizontal/state-society dimension of policymaking (Peters *et al.*, 2022). *Hierarchy* is a mode of policymaking characterised by the prevalence of top-down relations of 'control and execution' on the vertical dimension, and by either control or the absence of any relations on the horizontal dimension. In the *intergovernmental* mode of policymaking, collaborative interactions take place exclusively on the vertical dimension, while no significant interactions emerge on the horizontal dimension (Scholten, 2013; Alcantara and Nelles, 2014; Alcantara *et al.*, 2016). Finally, MLG is a mode of policymaking characterised by the simultaneous presence of collaborative and nonhierarchical relations on both the vertical/intergovernmental and horizontal/state-society dimensions.

These four modes of multilevel policymaking are ideal-types, and concrete instances encountered in empirical analysis can present more nuanced and intermediate configurations.

The drivers of MLG

In this subsection, we review the existing literature on the factors that shape the emergence and dismantling of MLG as a mode of policymaking. Overall, the existing literature largely emphasises the role of factors that drive the emergence of MLG and much more rarely focuses on the factors that explain its dismantling. In doing so, the literature largely emphasises the role of *state structures*, *other institutional factors* and of *policy actors' agency*, particularly subnational and supranational actors putting pressure on national governments to establish an MLG mode of policymaking. We elaborate on these three factors in the paragraphs that follow.

State structures: The institutionalist literature on federalism assumes that MLG is more likely to emerge in countries or policy fields in which state structures imply a sharing of responsibilities and powers between subnational and national authorities (Benz, 2000; Hepburn and Zapata-Barrero, 2014). Alcantara and Nelles (2014: 191) similarly argue that the existence of 'complex interdependence' and 'distributed authorities' weaken hierarchical modes of policymaking and favour the emergence of MLG. Therefore, this literature suggests that MLG policymaking arrangements are more likely to emerge in federalist and regionalist systems, where the presence

Table 1. Modes of multilevel policymaking

Actors' relations	Hierarchy	Intergovernmental relations	Multilevel governance
Vertical dimension	• Top-down • Command and execution	• Bidirectional • Cooperative	• Bidirectional • Cooperative
Horizontal dimension	• Execution or no relations	• Absent	• Bidirectional • Collaborative

of multiple decisional arenas at different territorial scales can favour the emergence of cooperative arrangements on the vertical/intergovernmental dimension often extended also to include NGOs.

Other institutional factors: Along with state structures in general, the existing literature also emphasises the role of the institutional settings regulating policymaking in specific policy fields (see e.g. Piattoni, 2010), which can be more or less consistent with the overarching state structure. In policy fields where local governments and nonpublic actors play a key role in policy implementation, this literature suggests, MLG is more likely to emerge, as a response to challenges related to the coordination of these actors (Bache and Flinders, 2005). With respect to the asylum policy field, the emergence of MLG is therefore likely to be driven by the presence of reception systems that, formally or informally, delegate a high level of responsibility in policy implementation to local authorities and nongovernmental actors compared to highly centralised reception systems directly controlled by the national government and/or specialised central agencies.

Local agency: Recent works in local governance studies (e.g. Agranoff, 2018) – studying how local authorities and nonpublic actors mobilise in response to complex societal challenges (Pierre, 2019) – suggest that, regardless of state structures, MLG can emerge because of pressures 'from below' – for example, by local authorities or NGOs – on national governments and the EU (Scholten *et al.*, 2018; Caponio, 2022). Scholten *et al.* (2018), for instance, showed that motivated city councillors (aldermen) in Rotterdam and Den Haag, with the support of civil society organisations, were able to push national ministries and the European Commission (EC) to establish MLG consultative tables to coordinate policy responses across levels. While not necessarily focusing on MLG, other scholarly works on asylum policy reported of other actors advocating for a greater involvement of local authorities and NGOs in asylum policymaking, including national and transnational city networks and social movements (Lacroix, 2021; Alagna, 2023).

Supranational structures and agency: The literature on European integration suggests that the EU supranational system provides a specific opportunity structure that favours the inclusion of subnational actors in collaborative policymaking processes, therefore favouring the emergence of MLG (Caponio, 2022: 67). From this perspective, the EC is reported to have a key entrepreneurial role in forging multilevel formal and informal governance networks with subnational authorities, national governments and nonpublic actors (see e.g. the cases of cohesion policy, environmental policy and education analysed by Piattoni, 2010). With respect to the migration policy field, Penninx (2015) observed that the Commission intentionally aimed to build MLG alliances on migrant integration issues by introducing funding schemes (such as the European Integration Fund) targeting local and regional authorities and requiring a close collaboration with NGOs and Civil Society Organisations on specific projects.

Methodology

Methodologically, we combine different methods and data sources to explore our two research questions.

As to the first research question, to identify modes of policymaking in the EU countries that were centrally affected by the 2015 asylum crisis (Germany, Austria, Spain, Greece and Sweden; see EASO [2016] for more information on asylum applications in the EU in the 2010s) we rely on an in-depth review of the existing literature on national policymaking processes before and after the 'asylum crisis'. To explore the specific case of Italy, we rely on 147 interviews (see replication dataset) carried out between 2018 and 2019 in the context of the projects CEASVAL and MIGPROSP. As part of the CEASVAL project, 20 interviews were carried out with national policymakers. These were specifically designed to gather insights on modes of multilevel policymaking. As part of the MIGPROSP project, 127 interviews were conducted with a wide range of actors involved in asylum policymaking at different levels. These interviews were designed to study actors' decision-making processes and interactions with other actors involved in multilevel asylum policymaking (for more details see Pettrachin, 2024). We analysed

data collected from both projects applying qualitative content analysis. We specifically aimed to reconstruct policymaking processes and understand which actors were involved in policymaking processes at the national level in the 2010s.

To answer our second research question, we relied on the same data sources. In this case, our qualitative content analysis aimed to identify the key factors that drove the emergence and dismantling of the MLG experience in Italy (a unique case in the whole EU). While conducting our qualitative content analysis we considered the key drivers of MLG identified in the theoretical section, but also proceeded inductively with the aim to identify other potential factors that played a role in the processes analysed. Overall, in our analysis of the drivers of MLG, our Italian case therefore performs the function of a 'heuristic case', that is, a case study that allows to 'inductively identify new hypotheses, variables, causal mechanisms, and causal paths' (Eckstein, 1975).

Modes of policymaking in the asylum policy field in the EU in the 2010s

In this section, we aim to answer our first research question analysing modes of policymaking in other EU countries (first subsection) and, subsequently, in Italy (second subsection).

Modes of policymaking in other EU countries

When the 2015 asylum crisis broke out, different modes of policymaking characterised the asylum policy field in different EU countries, with a prevalence of either hierarchy or intergovernmental relations.

In Greece, which before 2010 did not have a structured reception system in place, competences on asylum-seekers' reception were scattered across different ministries and state authorities, with no involvement of actors at other governmental levels or nonpublic actors (Dimitriadi and Sarantaki, 2019). Also in Spain, a regionalist country, decision-making in the field of asylum-seekers' reception was highly centralised and hierarchical, with scarce vertical interactions and top-down relations with NGOs, involved only in policy implementation (Garcés-Mascareñas and Moreno-Amador, 2019; Garcés-Mascareñas and Gebhardt, 2020).

Contrary to southern Europe, Sweden had a highly institutionalised reception system in 2015, characterised by an intergovernmental mode of policymaking. Local authorities had full responsibility for the provision and organisation of services and, since the mid-1990s, the central government started to undertake negotiations with municipalities on the organisation of asylum-seekers' dispersal (Hudson *et al*., 2021). Finally, in Germany (Glorius, 2022) and Austria (Rosenberger and Müller, 2020) decision-making processes in the asylum policy field before 2014 were based on cooperative relations between the federal government and federal states, as well as (in Germany) on structural consultations with NGOs.

In most of the countries analysed, since 2014 we observed a shift towards more hierarchical modes of policymaking. Our analysis of secondary sources revels that, after 2014, neither subnational governments nor nonpublic actors were directly involved in policy formulation, with the partial exception of Germany (Caponio and Ponzo, 2022). In Greece, the mode of policymaking remained highly hierarchical throughout the whole 'asylum crisis', with the only exception of consultations over major reforms of the reception system carried out by the national government with the EC and UNHCR, which were a key source of funding of asylum-seekers' reception (Dimitriadi and Sarantaki, 2019). In Spain, since 2015, the hierarchical mode of policymaking was highly criticised by local governments and autonomous communities. The mayor of Barcelona mobilised more than 50 local authorities demanding more power and a greater involvement of local authorities in asylum-related policymaking processes, but this did not produce any changes in national policymaking (Garcés-Mascareñas and Moreno-Amador, 2019; Garcés-Mascareñas and Gebhardt, 2020). Responses to the crisis in Sweden were characterised by a move from intergovernmental relations to hierarchy, especially because of the Settlement

Act, which in 2016 drastically restricted local governments' power to negotiate with the central state on asylum-seekers' reception (Lidén and Nyhlén, 2022). NGOs involved in service provision were never involved in national decisional processes (Lidén and Nyhlén, 2022).

In Austria and Germany, the crisis also led to a reinforcement of federal authority and to shifts to more hierarchical modes of policymaking. In Germany, particularly during the first part of the crisis, several decisions about the redistribution of refugees to localities were made against the will of local authorities and without any negotiation (Glorius, 2022). In response, municipalities intensified their informal contacts with federal and state authorities. The federal government started regular meetings with representatives of the Association of German Cities (Beinhorn *et al.*, 2019; Glorius, 2022). These informal exchanges led to a significant reformulation of national asylum laws (Beinhorn *et al.*, 2019). Overall, a mode of policymaking based on intergovernmental relations was thus re-established in the second part of the crisis (Glorius, 2022). As for the horizontal dimension, NGOs had little access to high-level decision-making processes. Despite the requirement in Germany for NGOs and professional associations to be involved in the decision-making process, laws were passed quickly, nonpublic stakeholders were asked to provide feedback on draft versions of proposed bills on asylum-seekers' reception within 24–48 hours, and the government largely disregarded their input, which caused protests by nongovernmental actors (Beinhorn *et al.*, 2019).

In Austria, instead, at the outbreak of the crisis, the national government faced resistance from federal states which refused to accommodate refugees. In 2015, the national parliament entitled the national government to set up reception facilities without the consent of the municipalities. Municipalities and nonpublic actors were not involved in these key decisions and criticised the new law (Rosenberger and Müller, 2020).

The modes of policymaking that prevailed in different EU countries in the 2010s are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Modes of policymaking in the asylum policy field emerged in the 2010s in the EU countries that were most exposed to the 2015 'asylum crisis'

Hierarchy	Intergovernmental relations	MLG
Hierarchy	**Intergovernmental relations**	**MLG**
Austria (2015-2019) ⬅	Austria (2010-2014)	
Greece (2010-2014; 2015-2019*)		
	Germany (2010-2019) ⬅	Germany (2010-2014)
Sweden (2014-2019) ⬅	Sweden (2010-2014)	
Spain (2010-2019)		
Italy (2010-2013)* ➡		Italy (2014-2016)
Italy (2017-2019) ⬅		

[a]Limited form of intergovernmental relations.

Italy

The asylum policy field in Italy before the 2014 asylum crisis was characterised by a prevailing hierarchical mode of policymaking with some limited elements of intergovernmental relations. This was related to the two-pronged structure of asylum-seekers' reception in Italy, characterised by the coexistence of an 'ordinary' system, the so-called SPRAR, and an emergency system, the so-called CAS (Semprebon and Pelacani, 2020). The SPRAR system – established in 2000 following an agreement among the National Government, UNHCR and the Association of Italian municipalities (ANCI) – was formally under the jurisdiction of the Interior Ministry, covering 80% of its costs, but its operation was overseen by a central authority controlled by the ANCI, known as the Central Service. The system relies on the voluntary involvement of municipalities, which are responsible for creating new reception facilities, and control their operation, by delegating management to NGOs (Ponzo *et al.*, 2022). Key decisions related to the organisation and reforms of the SPRAR system were characterised by an intergovernmental mode of policymaking.

Conversely, the emergency CAS system was directly managed by the Ministry of Interior and its regional branches, the prefectures, which delegated the implementation of reception centres to nonprofit or for-profit organisations, without any formal consultation of local authorities. In principle the CAS system should have hosted asylum-seekers only temporarily, until when accommodation became available in the SPRAR system, but *de facto*, already before the crisis, it hosted the majority of asylum-seekers, due to the SPRAR's limited capacity. Key decisions related to the structuring and operation of the CAS system were taken hierarchically, with no consultation of local authorities and nonpublic actors. In 2012, when Italy received some thousand asylum-seekers from North Africa, Italian regional and local governments officially complained with the Interior Ministry about their limited involvement in key decisions related to the organisation of the CAS system.[1] In fact, the Interior Ministry developed some consultations with representatives of Italian local authorities, but requests formulated by them were largely ignored.[2]

Between 2014 and 2016, instead, the prevailing mode of policymaking on asylum-seekers' reception very much resembled an MLG mode. In particular, at the outbreak of the crisis, a consultative working group was established, the so-called National Coordinating Group on Asylum (NCGA), including representatives of a wide range of actors involved in asylum policy implementation. Such group was conceived as a venue for discussion and exchange about key decisions related to asylum policies. The NCGA was coordinated by the Department of Civil Liberties and Immigration of the Interior Ministry and included representatives of the Ministry of Labour, subnational governments (the organisations of Italian regions, provinces and municipalities) and representatives of the NGOs Caritas and ARCI (which in turn represented a broader group of major institutionalised Italian NGOs involved in asylum-seekers' reception, which regularly gathered in a purely nongovernmental venue, the so-called 'Tavolo Asilo'). UNHCR and the Ministry of Equal Opportunities were involved as invited members. Formally the NCGA had merely consultative functions and no power to make binding decisions. However, its tasks included coordinating national asylum policies, discussing potential improvements of the reception system, drafting a 'reception and dispersal plan' on an annual basis. While describing national decision-making processes during the initial stages of the asylum crisis, a high-level official of the Interior Ministry interviewed admitted:

> Everything we did, especially in the most difficult moments, was always in partnership with our two major international partners, namely IOM and UNHCR, along with the prominent Italian organizations we have consistently interacted with, including Caritas, Save The Children, and numerous other associations such as the *Consiglio Italiano per i Rifugiati*.

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[1]Source: http://www.regioni.it/home_art.php?id=432.
[2]Source: http://www.regioni.it/home_art.php?id=432.

> In particular, for years we have had a forum [the NCGA], through which we engaged in discussions regarding the adoption of new regulations or the modification of existing ones, including circulars or provisions that have a certain impact on the territory. These matters were always viewed, compared, and deliberated within this forum, in collaboration with these key associations and other actors. These discussions had a fundamental impact (High-level Official of Interior Ministry interviewed in 2018).[3]

The same official particularly stressed the importance of the involvement of NGOs in this forum, which not only improved horizontal coordination but also, indirectly, fostered vertical coordination between the national government and local governments, due to their close relations with local governments:

> We wouldn't have achieved anything without the great national associations, believe me. They have been incredibly important and extraordinary partners for us. Even in discussions, they were sometimes very determined in exchanging opinions, but it was truly strategic (Official, Ministry of Interior, interviewed in 2018).

As the quotes suggest, the NCGA played a key role in national policymaking processes. In 2016, discussions that developed during sessions of the NCGA led to a pivotal reform of the SPRAR system, which received explicit approval from all the actors involved in the NCGA. This reform introduced specific incentives to convince local government to join the SPRAR system, simplifying the procedure to initiate or extend reception projects, or increase their capacity, while also increasing co-funding from the Interior Ministry from 80 to 95% (Ponzo *et al.*, 2022).

In 2017, amid the escalating chaos resulting from the implementation of the 2015 EU Migration Agenda, and following the appointment of Marco Minniti as Interior Minister of the new centre-left government headed by Paolo Gentiloni, the relevance of the NCGA drastically diminished. From 2017 onwards, the NCGA convened only twice, merely to receive updates from the Interior Ministry, and it stopped playing any role in national asylum-related decision-making. Although communication between the national government and local authorities continued through informal channels, these interactions were much more hierarchical. Nongovernmental actors were entirely excluded from these discussions:

> The third-sector associations no longer manage to influence national policies as effectively as before. Previously, they were stronger or perhaps more politically recognized as interlocutors. Now, they are less politically influential but more so in technical and operational aspects because, in practice, they manage many projects. They are much less influential from a political standpoint (Official, SPRAR Central Service, interviewed in 2018).

The move towards a more hierarchical mode of policymaking became even more visible when Matteo Salvini became Interior Minister of the new populist government formed by the *Movimento Cinque Stelle* and the *Lega* in May 2018. Under the Conte I government, both horizontal and interinstitutional forms of consultation and coordination were largely dismantled (Ponzo *et al.*, 2022). In 2018, the NCGA was gathered only once, to 'approve' a bidding scheme for governmental reception facilities already adopted by the government. The management of the CAS and SPRAR systems became even more decoupled, in the absence of any venue where the management of asylum-seekers' reception could be discussed.

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[3]Some of the interview quotes are derived from Pettrachin (2024).

The drivers of MLG emergence and dismantling

This section discusses the key factors that – our qualitative content analysis suggests – drove the emergence and dismantling of an MLG mode of policymaking in Italy in the 2010s.

Our analysis suggests that, as expected, the *institutional structure of the asylum policy field* played a role in the emergence of MLG in Italy in 2014. Since the 2000s, the Italian asylum policy field was characterised by the direct involvement of local authorities and nonpublic actors in policy implementation, a feature that, the literature suggests, tends to favour the emergence of an MLG mode of policymaking (particularly in federal/regionalist countries). According to our interviews, the setting up of MLG venues in 2014–2016 was indeed related to the presence of institutionalised collaborations between local authorities, the national government and nonpublic actors in asylum policy implementation. The structural involvement of these actors in asylum management provided incentives to the national government to include them in policymaking processes and address challenges related to the management of asylum-seekers' reception. As an official from the Interior Ministry interviewed in 2018 put it, the creation of the NCGA aimed to 'improve coordination among all the key stakeholders involved in asylum-seekers' reception' and was 'decisively influenced' by the positive experience of the SPRAR, described as 'a model to pursue'. A narrow focus on institutional factors, however, our analysis suggests, does not allow us to make sense of the shift to a more hierarchical mode of policymaking in 2017 (as the structure of the asylum policy field did not change throughout the time period analysed).

Another key driver of MLG identified by the existing literature is *bottom-up pressures from subnational governments and nonpublic actors* advocating for a higher involvement in national decision-making processes. Our analysis suggests that such pressure existed throughout the whole time period analysed and reportedly it played a role in the emergence of the MLG experience. Remarkably, however, these pressures did not come from all local and regional governments, but rather specifically from those controlled by centre-left parties (which, in 2014, were the vast majority, following the success of the centre-left coalition in all major local and regional elections held since 2011). Importantly, our interview material reveals that such pressures from a group of centre-left local and regional governments continued also in the second part of the asylum crisis, but they did not prevent the dismantling of the MLG experience. Right-wing regional governments, instead, entirely disengaged from asylum policymaking since the early stages of the asylum crisis. As a regional official interviewed put it:

> Regional authorities in Italy don't have specific competences on asylum-related matters. Some regional governments decided to take an active role in these policymaking processes and coordinate the reception system, while others (…) decided not to have an active role and to be mere observers in these processes (Regional Official, Veneto, interviewed in 2017).

During an audition at the Chamber of Deputies in 2015, the right-wing President of the Veneto region Zaia explicitly declared its unwillingness to cooperate with the national government and to contribute to the organisation of the asylum-seekers' reception system. In the second part of the crisis, such disengagement turned into open pressure on the national government to further centralise asylum management and policymaking processes in the asylum policy field:

> Certain regions, including Veneto, were notably less inclined to welcome migrants. The influence of Veneto was pronounced and forceful, particularly as it received substantial support at the political level. (…) The key distinguishing feature [of Veneto] was not solely the resistance of municipalities in hosting asylum-seekers but also the political stances adopted [by regional and local governments] and their political discourses (Official, SPRAR Central Service, 2018).

These *pressures from subnational governments advocating for more hierarchy* represent one of the key factors that played a role in the dismantling of the MLG experience. Minniti himself declared that the 'management problems' highlighted by the mayors played a key role in the decisions he made in 2017 (*La Repubblica*, 29 August 2017). Remarkably, since late 2016, requests for a more centralised and hierarchical policymaking on asylum also started to be made by some centre-left local governments in northern regions (particularly Veneto and Lombardy). In these regions local progressive policymakers had started to perceive an increasingly hostile local public opinion or facing anti-immigrant protests (see Pettrachin, 2020).

Another key factor identified inductively in our analysis that played a role in both the emergence and dismantling of the MLG experience concerns the *convergence/divergence among the overarching vision on asylum policy and key political priorities and goals pursued by the key actors involved in multilevel policymaking*. Our interviews suggest that, until late 2016, the actors involved in the NCGA – and crucially, the national government, (centre-left) regional and local governments and NGOs – shared largely similar perspectives on the overarching goals of asylum policy (i.e. building an efficient and inclusive reception system and reducing social tensions without compromising asylum-seekers' rights). Starting from late 2016, however, the new Italian governments' political priorities clearly shifted, which led to a change in paradigm in Italian asylum policy at the national level (see Pettrachin, 2024). As a centre-left MP close to Minniti, reported:

> I believe that fundamentally there was a paradigm shift. At a certain point, it became clear that more emphasis needed to be placed on controlling the situation rather than purely on the humanitarian aspect. The humanitarian approach was sustainable as long as the numbers were contained, but when the numbers exploded, it was inevitable that an attempt to contain the phenomenon would follow (MP, centre-left, interviewed in 2018).

The newly appointed Interior Minister Minniti openly declared that the key priority for the new government was reducing migration flows and decreasing the number of asylum-seekers hosted in the Italian reception system. In 2017 the Italian national government – under pressure from several anti-refugee demonstrations, the rise of anti-migration parties in opinion polls and the approaching of national elections (as several key interviewees reported) – developed a new agreement with Libyan authorities to externalise border controls, restrictions on search-and-rescue operations by NGOs and a restrictive reform of the asylum procedure (see Geddes and Pettrachin, 2020). As a result of this shift in the government's political priorities, relations with centre-left subnational governments (those which kept pushing for a higher involvement of the subnational level in asylum policymaking, with the aim to make asylum-seekers' reception more efficient and inclusive) and pro-migrant NGOs became much more tense. These tensions and divergence in policy goals made the continuation of the MLG experience not sustainable. As a member of a regional government responsible for asylum-seekers' reception interviewed put it:

> In the initial phase of the crisis, the collaboration with the ministry was good. Today [under the Gentiloni government] it is more difficult because the ministry's directives have changed, and the situation is evolving. Up to a certain point, the ministry had to deal with the fact that hundreds of people were arriving and needed to find them accommodations and organize reception efficiently. Now, there are different priorities, other problems being addressed, which require different types of relationships. Consequently, the relationship with the ministry is much more problematic because this new approach is particularly damaging to the associations (Member of Regional Government, centre-left, interviewed in 2018).

Table 3. Findings of our qualitative content analysis on the drivers of MLG emergence and dismantling

		2010-2013	2014-2016	2017-2019
Factors driving the emergence of the mode of policymaking derived from the literature	*Federal/regionalist state structures*	✔	✔	✔
	Structure of the policy field – involvement of nonpublic actors and subnational actors in asylum policy implementation	✔ (partially)	✔ (partially)	✔ (partially)
	Bottom-up pressures by subnational actors advocating for more MLG	✔ (subnational governments)	✔ (centre-left subnational governments and NGOs)	✔ (some centre-left subnational governments and NGOs)
	Top-down pressure from the supranational level advocating for more MLG	✔ (part of the EC)	✔ (part of the EC)	✔ (part of the EC)
Factors driving the emergence of the mode of policymaking identified inductively	*Bottom-up pressures by subnational actors advocating for more hierarchical policymaking*			✔ (right-wing + some centre-left subnational governments)
	Top-down pressure from the supranational level for more hierarchical policymaking		✔ (EC - DG Home)	✔ (EC - DG Home)
	Convergent/divergent political priorities among actors involved in multilevel policymaking		✔ (*convergent* priorities – between the national government and other policy actors)	✔ (*divergent* priorities – between the national government and other policy actors)
Mode of Policymaking		Hierarchy (with limited forms of intergovernmental relations)	MLG	Hierarchy

✔ indicates that the factor is present when the specific mode of policymaking emerged; green background indicates that the factor played a role in the emergence of the mode of policymaking; red background indicates that the factor, while present, did not influence the emergence of the mode of policymaking.

Finally, another key factor identified in our qualitative content analysis is related to *strong pressure from EU institutions – and particularly the Directorate General for Home Affairs (DG-Home) – for higher centralisation of asylum management* (and a tougher approach on asylum). A representative of the EC interviewed in 2018 reported that, in his view, Italy should have reformed its reception system, centralised key decisions and taken a tougher approach with local governments. These pressures, our interviews suggest, did not start in 2017 but had rather been present throughout the whole crisis: while other EU institutions kept promoting MLG as a more

efficient mode of policymaking throughout the whole 2010s (Caponio, 2022; see Introduction of this article), starting from 2015 the EC and specifically DG-Home had tried to link migration-related funding to soft attempts to steer Italian asylum policies. However, in 2013–2016 relations between the Junker Commission and the Letta and Renzi governments were quite difficult (source: Interview with Official from EU Commission 2018), due to their different goals and perspectives on border controls and search-and-rescue operations in the Mediterranean. Minniti's new approach to asylum management was instead much more aligned to DG-Home's priorities. This allowed for a greater influence of pressures from DG-Home on key decisions related to the organisation of asylum policymaking in Italy.

Table 3 summarises the findings of our qualitative content analysis, identifying the factors that – our analysis suggests – influenced the emergence and then the dismantling of MLG in the asylum policy field in Italy in the 2010s. The table also indicates which specific factors were present and played a role in the emergence and dismantling of MLG (third and fourth columns).

Conclusion

This article aimed to answer two key questions. Firstly, we asked which modes of policymaking in the field of asylum-seekers' reception emerged in Italy and other EU member states during the decade of the asylum crisis. Our analysis has shown that modes of asylum policymaking in Italy varied remarkably throughout the crisis. While before 2014 asylum policymaking was highly hierarchical, an MLG mode of policymaking emerged between 2014 and 2016. This represented an exception in the European scenario, considering that most of the other EU countries in this time period were characterised by increasingly hierarchical modes of policymaking. From the point of view of the framework of the Special Issue (SI) of which this article is part, the Italian trajectory between 2014 and 2016 can be therefore seen as one characterised by 'non convergent changes' with respect to other EU countries (see *Introduction of this SI*). In the second part of the crisis, however, this MLG experience was quickly dismantled, and the mode of policymaking became highly hierarchical, in line with developments taking place in other EU countries (this can be therefore considered an example of 'EU mainstreaming'; see *Introduction of this SI*).

Secondly, we asked what are the factors that explain such trajectory and, specifically, the emergence and dismantling of an MLG mode of policymaking. The analysis we conducted complements and challenges dominant claims in the MLG literature that see MLG modes of policymaking as strictly linked to state structures, institutional factors related to the structure of the asylum system and pressure for more inclusive and nonhierarchical modes of policymaking by local authorities, nonpublic actors and EU-level actors. On the one hand, our analysis suggests that these factors indeed played a role in shaping the emergence of the 'MLG experience' in Italy in 2014, but none of them seems to have played a role in the dismantling of MLG. On the other, we identified other additional factors that were relevant in both the emergence and the dismantling of the MLG experience, which lead us to generate the following hypotheses about the drivers of MLG which should be further tested in future research.

First, we generate the hypothesis that bottom-up mobilisations from local authorities can not only advocate for the development of MLG modes of policymaking but also push for more hierarchical modes of policymaking. In 2016–2017, several Italian local authorities mobilised to advocate for more hierarchical and centralised asylum management by the national government. Pressure for more participatory policymaking processes and for more hierarchical ones can coexist, our case also suggests. Pressure for MLG particularly came from centre-left local authorities, while pressure for more hierarchy came mostly (but not exclusively) from right-wing local authorities, which disengaged from asylum management for ideological reasons and did not want to be seen participating in asylum policymaking by their electorate (see also Ambrosini, 2021).

Second, we challenge the existing literature on the drivers of MLG that tends to see the EU as a context that necessarily favours the emergence of MLG, either because of its peculiar institutional

structure or because of the agency of specific EU actors. We rather generate the hypothesis that supranational actors within the EU system can also push for the development of more hierarchical modes of policymaking at the national level and therefore for the dismantling of MLG. In the case analysed, we identified relevant political pressure from DG-Home for more hierarchical and centralised asylum management in Italy.

Third, the article generates the hypothesis that convergent political priorities among the key actors involved in multilevel policymaking is a necessary precondition for an MLG mode of policymaking to emerge, while divergent political priorities can lead to the dismantling of MLG. During the first part of the asylum crisis, the vast majority of Italian regional and local governments were affiliated to the centre-left coalition and shared very similar views and policy goals with pro-migrant NGOs and the centre-left national government. Such convergence of views and goals favoured the emergence of an MLG mode of policymaking in the highly polarised and politicised field of asylum. In 2016 the goals of the new Italian government and its Interior Minister Minniti diverged from those of centre-left subnational authorities and NGOs involved in the NCGA. The national government adopted a newly restrictive approach to asylum management, while (part of) the centre-left subnational governments and NGOs kept advocating for inclusive humanitarian approaches in asylum management, criticising the restrictive approach of the national government.

This article also suggested that both the kind of pressures made by supranational and subnational actors and the political goals of key actors involved in policymaking were decisively shaped by dynamics of multilevel party politics, actors' political needs and electoral strategies. The existing literature on the drivers of MLG that focuses on local authorities' agency already suggested that the emergence of MLG depends on the interests of key policymakers in the decision-making structure at different levels. Our analysis suggests that such interests should be also seen as political interests related to dynamics of party politics and electoral strategies. In other words, while MLG might sound in principle like a promising policymaking arrangement to facing the complexity of asylum challenges, in highly politicised policy fields policy actors do not necessarily follow functionalist logics aimed at solving problems.

Clearly, our analysis shows that all the above-mentioned factors are highly interlinked. Future research could further dig into (and model) the ways in which different combinations of actors, and specific types of 'political' pressures, influence the emergence and dismantling of MLG. More broadly, this article suggests that factors related to different actors' agency, ideological convergence and dynamics of multilevel party politics should be duly considered and accounted for in future research about the drivers of MLG, particularly in highly politicised policy fields. Future scholarship could test the hypotheses generated by this article in other policy fields and other time periods.

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