

## Seeking asylum in Italy: assessing risks and options

Eleanor Paynter

**In Italy, uncertainties inherent in the asylum system affect asylum seekers' motivation, decisions and well-being.**

Beginning in 2014, Italian authorities established 'centres of extraordinary reception' (CAS) across the country as an emergency measure to house asylum seekers. Intended as a temporary solution to a nearly fourfold increase in arrivals by sea between

demonstrate their commitment to integration. Although they knew that their asylum claims depended on their account of having to flee their home countries rather than on how well they adopted Italian customs, they assumed that demonstrating good citizenship

could only help their chances. At one centre in the southern region of Molise, staff – who mediated asylum seekers' communications with lawyers and other officials – praised those who regularly attended language classes or who helped out around the centre, praise that asylum seekers often interpreted as an added reason to hope for a positive decision.

Residents also

often attempted to identify patterns in decisions about who was granted protection, for instance in terms of nationality, age and month of arrival. This was to try to make sense of an opaque system and changing regulations. Moreover, recognising patterns reassured those who fitted the perceived profile for a positive outcome, and it enabled others to adjust the decisions they made about the options available to them while they waited.

By mid-2018, however, following national elections, the general sense among the CAS residents was that asylum officials were increasingly denying claims, regardless of nationality.<sup>2</sup> Multiple CAS residents whose applications had been rejected described feeling that these denials were also a rejection of the commitment they had made to integrating.



A CAS classroom, after an Italian language lesson. Italy, 2017.

2013 and 2014, these centres, which are often situated in repurposed buildings (former hotels, gyms or schools), have since housed a majority of asylum seekers, often for periods longer than the few months intended by the State and expected by the asylum seekers.

Language lessons are an important component of Italy's reception system, though modes of instruction and rates of attendance vary widely. The decision to participate reflects asylum seekers' varying views of how best to invest energy during the reception period. In interviews that I conducted at CAS between 2017 and 2019,<sup>1</sup> residents – primarily young men from Sub-Saharan African countries, reflecting trends in Mediterranean migration – described their hope that learning Italian would prepare them for post-reception life, for example by enabling them to find work, and that attending classes would

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To the asylum seekers, the asylum system seemed increasingly arbitrary, with decisions more clearly linked to political will than to the merits of their individual cases. They were also well aware of the anti-immigrant sentiment that shaped media coverage of their presence in Italy and their interactions with some local residents, both of which they felt had worsened since the elections.

One interviewee explained that he did not realise when his appeal was rejected that this decision was final. When he had entered Italy, multiple appeals were possible. While he was awaiting status determination, however, the law had changed. For him, like many others in his position, it seemed absurd that his chances for a successful claim could change so radically while he awaited a decision. To several other residents, the number of denials and their seemingly unfounded nature made waiting seem pointless. Some decided not to

wait for their appeals to be heard and opted instead to leave the CAS while it seemed possible to do so. Without resources, and unable to return to their home countries, many of them made their way to larger cities with more established migrant networks and communities. Becoming undocumented was a decision none of the men took lightly but one they felt became necessary when left without other realistic options.

**Eleanor Paynter** *ebp49@cornell.edu*

Postdoctoral Associate, Mario Einaudi Center for International Studies, Cornell University

<https://einaudi.cornell.edu/>

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2. Data show denials increased from about 55% in 2018 to about 80% in 2019. See (Italian only) [bit.ly/Villa-2020](https://bit.ly/Villa-2020)