

How Does the Italian Mafia Affect Mixed Migration?

Written by Carolina de Deus Pedreiro

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Mixed migration flows and mafia activities have both become very significant in international affairs, and often are interrelated. This essay will analyse this interconnection and respective impacts, ultimately arguing that the Italian mafia benefits off the vulnerability of mixed migration flows, creating negative impacts on a domestic and global level. Initially, the concept of mixed migration flows will be approached as it is vital to comprehend the importance of this umbrella term and how Italy is related to that phenomenon. Afterwards, the ways in which the Italian mafia affects individuals that compose migration flows will be explored, and, ultimately, the social and political impacts of this influence will be analysed by considering the rise of right-wing views, corruption and global security concerns and policies.

Mixed Migration Flows

The movements of people and respective nuances are one of the most relevant topics in the present days. The different types of movements are complex and can include migrants as well as trafficked people, asylum seekers, refugees and smuggled individuals. The concept of “migrant” is historically controversial as it has been applied in different settings and used interchangeably with other terms, thus not presenting a “universally accepted definition” (World Health Organisation 2017). Human trafficking is characterised by the main element of coercion and is defined as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit” (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime n.d.). Despite generalisations of equalisations between smuggling and trafficking, according to United Nations Refugee Agency, smuggling individuals refers to the “facilitation of a person’s illegal entry into a State” (n.d.), which might involve violations of human rights, yet, smuggling as a concept only applies to the enabling of irregular entry. Refugees represent individuals who have escaped their countries “at risk of serious human rights violations and persecution there” (Amnesty International n.d.). Refugees have a special recognition internationally, and a person can only be considered a refugee through “governments or UNHCR” determination, which is based on the “Refugee Status Determination” process (United Nations Refugee Agency n.d. b). An asylum seeker, on the other hand, seeks protection in a different country also due to extreme conditions but has not yet been officially and formally recognised as a refugee and is, thus, not granted the same legal status as refugees (Amnesty International n.d.). Thus, the nuance between the concept of “refugee” and “asylum seeker” lays solely on legal recognition, as all refugees were previously asylum seekers, but asylum seekers are only considered refugees once the status is legally established.

All these concepts are different, however, they are “multi-dimensional, often intertwined and influence each other” (Migration Data Portal 2022) – as, for instance, an asylum seeker can be smuggled into a country, creating an overlap between these definitions. Therefore, in order to cover these complexities, this essay will use the concept of mixed migration, as it is an umbrella term that includes such intricacies and all persons despite legal standings (Fargues 2020); moreover, according to the International Organisation for Migration, this term is “more neutral and should be preferred” (2019: 62). Italy plays a relevant role in mixed migration flows as most individuals in mixed migration “start their journey by sea towards Italy” (ACAPS 2022). In comparison to other European countries Italy reports the “highest relative growth of its migrant population over the last twenty years” (Danish Refugee Council 2019). The trends in Italy show that as of 2021 mixed migration flows were around 66 770 people, which is lower than the 2014-2017 period. However, there was a “considerable increase in 2018-2020”, despite the impact of the pandemic (Forin and Frouws 2022). In 2021 trends in nationalities of individuals arriving by sea show that Tunisia,

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Egypt, Bangladesh, Iran and Cote d'Ivoire rank as top origin countries of these individuals — which represents a significant change as Nigeria and Guinea used to be the departure countries with most people fleeing to Italy (Forin and Frouws 2022).

Italian mafia's influence in mixed migration flows

The mafia still plays a relevant role in various dimensions of Italy and, accordingly, is also able to profit off increased mixed migration flows (Agius 2015). On 23 September 2011, Sicilian mafia groups worked closely with the Egyptian Amro crime clan, arranging the transportation of 22 Egyptian men illegally into Italy, and as of their arrival the smuggled individuals were incarcerated in a basement for 8 days and were threatened and blackmailed to get money sent to the criminal groups in order to be released (Day 2013: 34). The Italian mafia's influence was shown to be vast, as transnational alliances solidify its character as an international security threat. Corroborating this rationale, earlier that year, the leader of the Brunetto mafia clan Salvatore Greco and Egyptian smuggler Badawi were tracked and arrested by the police as responsible for an international smuggling network – which included boats that could carry up to hundreds of persons which would pay up to \$6000 to travel from Northern Africa to Sicily (Tondo 2016). Moreover, kidnappings also took place in order to extort money from these people extending mafia's risks, as Fathy Abdelkader captured 6 children from a camp as a warning for those “who had failed to pay for services rendered by the Cosa Nostra” (Tondo 2016).

Many of these mafia-related transportations also include trafficked people and, as the mafia expert Corrado de Rosa argued, it becomes “inevitable” that human trafficking becomes intricately linked with the activities of mafia gangs (Day 2013: 35). This becomes significantly problematic as, in 2018, 14% of arrivals in the country were of trafficked humans (Milingi 2018). Correspondingly, Italian prosecutors presume the mafia could profit billions of dollars off exploiting these trends (Reguly 2015). Cosa Nostra is one of the most relevant groups that take advantage of these individuals' vulnerability (Milingi 2018), as it reportedly designed methods of incorporating them into “mafia-related criminal enterprises in Sicily” once settled (Omilusi 2019: 118). Trafficked and smuggled individuals, thus, become entrapped inside the mafia and respective activities, such as prostitution and the trafficking of soft and synthetic drugs (Duca 2014: 395) — expanding these criminal markets. Accordingly, Italy has reportedly seen a substantial rise in the “number of potential sex trafficking victims” arriving in the country (UN Migration Agency 2017).

The extensive alliance created between Nigerian criminal groups such as Black Axe and Italian mafia syndicates has also amplified these activities (Omilusi 2019). Both groups have divided Ballarò's zone to prevent rivalry and gang-induced violence (Milingi 2018), ultimately increasing security threats. Nevertheless, the type of alliance created is not one between equal parts, but rather of subordination with the Italian groups dominating Nigerian clans (Tondo 2016) — asserting Italian mafia's power. Nigerian groups then use not only trafficked and smuggled individuals as drug mules for the Italian mafia, but they also go to migrant centres and recruit asylum seekers, who, according to Italian prosecutor Scalia “work with Mafia permission and give them a percentage of the business” (Reguly 2015). The support from Italian mafia groups has increased Black Axe's danger, as the clan has become especially challenging for global security, with four members being charged for “slavery, human trafficking, kidnapping and recruiting prostitutes” last January (Wallis 2022).

Besides making use of migrant centres for recruitments, the Italian mafia has been able to control migrant centres around the country (Deutsche Welle n.d.). In the “Mafia Capitale” trial, Massimo Carminati and Salvatore Buzzi were sentenced as millions of euros for public services were extorted by a “mafia-style” network (France-Presse 2017). Accordingly, a member of Italy's board on immigration was accused of accepting bribes in regards to the distribution of migrant centres (Agius 2015). As these centres are assigned to local co-ops and then the businesses that are contracted to run them are often mafia-related, the criminal groups can, thus, benefit from the management of the place (Milingi 2018). State funded money is directed towards these facilities to support asylum seekers and refugees, but these mafia-run companies retrench expenditure in basic needs to keep the remaining funds (Nadeau 2018) — profiting off the residents and, once more, increasing their influence as a global threat. One of the most discussed examples of this phenomenon is Cara di Mineo, a key migrant centre in Europe (Pai 2018), where Cosa Nostra reportedly incorporated the inhabitants into “mafia-related criminal enterprises in Sicily” (Omilusi 2019: 118). The Italian mafia, thus, plays a role that goes beyond the criminal illegal realm by controlling and manipulating fragments

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of legal activities that dictate the lives of individuals belonging to mixed migration flows. Ultimately, Salvini, Italy's Interior Minister, decided to close Cara di Mineo in 2019, which had been functioning and providing shelter since 2011 (Wallis 2019).

Socio-political impacts created by the influence of the Italian mafia

The impacts created by Mafia's influence are various and encompass different dimensions. Besides the direct impact on the affected individuals presented previously, for instance, the extortions and exploitation, Cara di Mineo's closure case is an interesting representation of the further impacts created. This centre housed once more than 4000 people, as one of the most relevant centres in Europe, its closure reduces support and assistance to all the vulnerable individuals included in mixed migration flows that need shelter once arriving in Italy — putting their lives at danger and pushing them into precarious circumstances (Paynter 2019). Correspondingly, Cara di Mineo's closure was part of a set of policies which rejected the access of migrants, leading to headlines announcing that consequently “1,151 people had drowned in the Mediterranean and more than 10,000 others had been forced to return to face danger in Libya” (BBC 2019).

Right-wing's ascension in Europe is a relevant factor in this case. Salvini is part of Lega Nord, a right-wing populist party that applies anti-immigration rhetoric (Padovani 2018: 3554), with elements that legitimise xenophobic and racist views (Avanza 2010: 132). Accordingly, as of Cara di Mineo's closure, Salvini affirmed it was “good news” for locals (BBC 2019) — implying that the centre's residents represented a danger/security issue for the local communities, ultimately legitimising prejudice. The United Nations denounced this rising social issue of Italy's “unashamed racism and xenophobia” towards migrants, presenting it has having connections with the anti-immigration political campaigns present in the country (Sharman 2018). These affected individuals are already victim of a “state failure to address the protection needs [...] and to process their status” (Milingi 2018). Intensifying this issue and giving rise to nationalistic views, the Italian mafia's use of these facilities to recruit susceptible people and exploit them for criminal activities leads to a normalisation and solidification of xenophobic and racist prejudice regarding the “dangers” of accepting migrants in Italian soil. Contrasting with Salvini's anti-immigration claims, the security danger begins often with the domestic mafia that works alongside international gangs and takes advantage of migrants to increase criminal activities – putting local communities at danger and expanding security concerns to a global level, creating political instability.

The government's focus on “migrants” as the danger factor also avoids effective security policies that target the connections with mafia. This is reflected especially when considering cases like Mafia Capitale, which represents corruption issues in Italy that create national instability, putting security at risk and often involve mafia gangs. As of 2019, Giuseppe Conte entered the government and replaced Salvini as Interior Minister, implementing efforts to reverse the right-wing politician's policies. Humanitarian protections for those included in mixed migration groups have been re-established with 40% of applicants receiving protections in 2021, contrasting with the 81% rejection rate of Salvini's ministry (Panara 2022). Nevertheless, there is a need to implement policies that can restrict mafia's influence in mixed migration groups in order to protect the latter, as well as domestic and global security.

Conclusion

Mixed migration represents a broad term referring to individuals with different statuses involved in similar cross-border movements, including asylum seekers, refugees, trafficked and smuggled people. Accordingly, Italy is one of the main host countries for these individuals and is simultaneously considered the birthplace of mafia groups — who are still prevalent and influence mixed migration's groups arriving to the country. Such criminal groups have taken advantage of these individuals as they have been involved in smuggling and trafficking networks and, often extorted their victims and punished them if the payments were not made — for instance by kidnapping their children. Additionally, they created alliances with other criminal gangs, such as Nigerian clans, and took advantage of the vulnerability of individuals in migration centres to recruit and use them in criminal activities — such as drug trafficking and prostitution. Furthermore, their influence in those centres was extended by their control over the management of the facilities, restricting the expenditure on products and services for residents in order to pocket the difference. Ultimately, such acts put these people's lives at direct danger. Furthermore, pushing the latter into criminal lives

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gives the mafia more power and, simultaneously, intensifies prejudice regarding migrants — which influences the increase on xenophobic/racist right-wing views and results in political instability. The Italian mafia, thus, influences mixed migration by taking advantage of the vulnerability of these persons, increasing their influence and creating a domestic and global security threat.

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