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# **Cross-ethnic networks, self-reception system, and functional integration of refugees from former Yugoslavia in Rome, Italy**

by

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## **Introduction**

This article explores how the policy context pertaining to asylum migration in Italy influences the development of refugee strategies for integration. It outlines the main characteristics of the Italian reception and integration policy context and discusses its effect on the experiences of integration of refugees from former Yugoslavia in Rome. Within this general framework, discussion in this article focuses on the character of social networks developed by the refugees in Rome, and their efforts to become self-sufficient and independent in a very short time. Self-sufficiency and independence refer here to functional integration via the labour market or employment, and education.

The importance of networks to the process of migration and migrant communities has been long recognised in the field of migration studies. These networks are understood as sets of interpersonal ties based on kinship, friendship and shared national, ethnic and cultural origin that connect migrants and non-migrants in origin and destination areas (Massey et al., 1993). As such, they represent an important source of *social capital*. Social capital refers to an individual's ability to mobilise resources on demand (Portes, 1995: 12), or to a dynamic "process" facilitating access to benefits and resources controlled by the dominant group of society (Fernandez-Kelly, 1995), that best suit the goals of specific immigrant groups.

Literature on the importance of social networks for the process of migration focuses on three main areas of migration experience. It examines the role of social networks in the migration decision-making process (Hugo, 1981; Ritchey, 1976); in the choice of destination (Massey et al., 1987); and in the adaptation of migrants in host societies (Caces, 1987). Koser defines these three areas of migration experiences as the three stages of asylum cycle - pre-flight, flight, and exile (Koser, 1997).

This article considers the role of social networks in the adaptation stage of asylum cycle of the population for former Yugoslavia in Rome. It documents how the absence of developed system of services and government funding to help refugees settle in Italy, forces them to establish and rely on their own networks as an essential survival mechanism during their first years of exile. Analysis shows how the newly established refugee networks are characterised by *weak* ties and, therefore, the existence of these networks did not result in isolation of these newcomers from the established community of the receiving society. Gurak and Caces argue that weak ties include relationships among individuals that lack emotional links and strength that characterise family and kinship relationships within migrant networks (Gurak and Caces, 1992). They emphasise, however, the importance of weak ties because they unite diverse networks and increase the resources available to network members (ibid.). Discussion indicates that the importance of refugee networks among the case study population significantly decreased with an increase of the level of their economic security. This process allowed space for the establishment of closer ties with the established community of the receiving society.

The article is based on a research about experiences of integration of refugees from former Yugoslavia in Italy. The research is part of a broader comparative study entitled “Refugee Voices in Europe – Experiences of Integration of Refugees from

Former Yugoslavia in Italy and the Netherlands”. The study is underway at the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, since the summer of 1999, and is due to be completed in December 2001.<sup>1</sup>

As a way of contextualizing the discussion in this article, I will first briefly mention some of the main conceptual and methodological considerations of the research upon which this article is based. The discussion of the links and the aspects of integration mentioned earlier will follow these introductory remarks.

The research defines refugees in a broad sense, targeting displaced people from former Yugoslavia who are either convention or *de facto* refugees in Italy. Refugees are understood to be *agents* who have a range of skills and choices, albeit restricted, in finding ways of becoming active members of the country of their asylum. The current policy contexts and structures of the receiving societies constrain agency of refugees in different ways. The disadvantages of their position and the limitations they confront in the process of settlement are related, firstly, to a general tendency of the European states to move further towards policies and practices of exclusion (Muus 1997). Secondly, they are connected to different reception systems and integration policies in the EU states (ECRE 1998) and, therefore, to different life opportunities and choices available to refugees. Thirdly, the social and cultural aspects of their disadvantaged position in the two EU countries are related to the gender dimension of migration because the refugee experience in all its phases is importantly gendered (McSpadden and Moussa 1993, Indra ed. 1999). This research

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<sup>1</sup> This project is funded by The Lisa Gilad Initiative, European Commission through ECRE, The British Council, The Heyter Travel Fund, and The Oppenheimer Fund. The Lisa Gilad Initiative is a charitable trust, set up in 1998, to commemorate the life and work of the late Lisa Gilad, an anthropologist and founding member of Canada Immigration and Refugee Board.

aims to examine the Italian policy context and to explore the extent and ways in which it constrains or permits agency of refugees.

Integration is understood as a complex process of mutual adaptation of both the newcomers and the established community of the receiving society. In other words, integration is understood as a *dialogical* process, which implies two-way communication and mutual adjustment of newcomers as well as of the established community of the receiving society. This article, however, focuses on aspects of the integration of the most disadvantaged – refugees.

This research combined inquiry amongst individuals, the NGO sector, governmental and community organisations. It is based on qualitative research methods. The choice of methods is centrally related to the objectives of the research defined as a critique of a ‘top-down’ approach to integration. The refugee situation is generally framed, in Indra’s words (1993: 763), by an asymmetry of power and voice between the state, on the one hand, and the refugees on the other. Qualitative interviewing is an important way of learning from refugees because it permits fuller expression of refugee experiences in their own terms. In this sense, this study does not aim to produce an ambitious generalisation. Rather, it aims to provide insights about the complexity of the process of integration based on a more intimate knowledge of a smaller ‘slice’ of reality.

Interviews with representatives of governmental and non-governmental organisations provided information about the policy context in Italy. Contacts with leaders of the community organisations in Rome focused on formal community positions regarding the integration issues. In-depth interviews with refugees in Rome provided information about socio-economic and migration-related data as well as data

concerning specific needs, concerns and expectations of refugees, future plans, and their notions of 'home' and belonging.

### **Policy context in Italy - numbers, status, and assistance provided by the government and the NGO sector**

In Italy, the Ministry of Interior granted 77,000 humanitarian permits to stay to persons fleeing former Yugoslavia between 1992 and 1997. Those arriving after July 1997 could no longer be considered displaced persons and consequently could not be granted a permit to stay on humanitarian grounds. Those with such a permit however were allowed to remain in Italy after 1997. Their humanitarian permits to stay have been either renewed on yearly basis or changed into regular work permits valid for one or two years, provided that a person had proof of regular employment. My research however indicates that application of this legal provision depends on the way the local police headquarters interpret it. In other words, among the population in this research there were many who had regular work and still hold humanitarian permit to stay because the staff of the local police headquarters was not willing to issue them work permits to stay in the country.

This large number of *de facto* refugees from former Yugoslavia in Italy seemingly contradicts the fact that Italy has a relatively small number of asylum seekers. The number of asylum seekers and convention refugees in Italy in the past decade has been on average 2,000 persons per year with a percentage of recognised cases under 10 percent.<sup>2</sup> However, the real scope of the problem relating to the need of a systematic protection system in Italy becomes transparent when we note that the country does not judicially recognise *de facto* refugees but refers solely to the Geneva Convention. Consequently, the numbers mentioned above refer only to persons who

applied for convention status. Populations fleeing the general violence and armed conflicts of the 1990s, for example Albania and former Yugoslavia, were granted *temporary* resident permits, so-called humanitarian permits to stay, based on specific government decrees and their numbers are not included in the category of asylum seekers. This temporary status was usually granted without any lengthy determination procedure and was generally renewable on a yearly basis, with the right to work and study. For those fleeing former Yugoslavia, for example, it was usually sufficient to prove that they came from one of the former republics of the war-torn country in order to obtain a temporary right to stay, work and/or study in Italy.

Asylum seekers and convention refugees in Italy receive very limited support by the government. Although the immigration law of 1998, states that asylum seekers are to be accommodated at the government-run reception centres, very few such centres were established at the time of this research, two years after the law was enacted. Asylum seekers not accommodated at reception centres are entitled to financial assistance provided by the government in a form of a very modest daily allowance for the period of 45 days. During the determination procedure, asylum seekers do not have the right to work. If we note that the legal procedure lasts between one and two years, on average, the scope of the problem of asylum seekers in Italy becomes clear. The lucky ones get shelter provided by one of church organisations or NGOs, usually available for a period of up to three months. Church organisations also offer free meals (one per day), to destitute in general. They also provide language courses for refugees and immigrants. All these types of assistance offered by church organisation and the NGO sector are scarce, particularly

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<sup>2</sup> Data provided by the Ministry of Interior during exploratory research visit in September 1999.

accommodation, what contributes to the fact that asylum seekers are often forced to sleep on the streets of towns and cities where they would like to settle.

As regards to convention refugees, they are entitled to financial assistance during the first 90 days after their status acknowledgement in the form of a modest daily allowance, as well as to financial assistance for those who would like to start small family run businesses. This research documents that even this limited assistance is very hard to obtain because of a very bureaucratic procedure involved in applying and decision making process. Consequently, it is common that resources allocated by the government for this type of assistance remains unspent at the end of a fiscal year.

The vast majority of the 77,000 persons from former Yugoslavia granted temporary permit to stay in Italy have not received any assistance and were left to their own devices in finding their way into Italian society. The government did establish 15 reception centres for those fleeing the region. These centres were established primarily in the north of Italy, the first opened in November 1991, following the beginning of armed conflict in Croatia. Their gradual closure began at the end of 1995, when the government declared that the need for assistance had declined. At the time of my research, all of the 15 centres were closed.<sup>3</sup>

The centres could accommodate up to 2,000 persons at a time. The exact number of those accommodated at these centres was not available. A research initiated by the IOM office in Rome, indicates however that over 30 percent of people accommodated at these reception centres stayed for over two years, what indicates that there was not a significant fluctuation of population accommodated at the centres (Losi, 1994). Therefore, it can be safely argued that the number of persons assisted in

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<sup>3</sup> All data provided by the Ministry of Interior during exploratory research visit in September 1999.



these centres was not significant when compared with the total number of refugees from former Yugoslavia in Italy.

Canna's research documents that assistance consisted of shelter and food and no pocket money (Canna 1997). Although refugees had a freedom of movement, the majority remained confined to the boundaries of the camps because they did have no knowledge of the language and no money for public transport etc. (Canna 1997). According to Losi's research mentioned earlier, the vast majority of those accommodated at the centres were from Bosnia-Herzegovina, from rural areas or small towns, predominantly single parent families with female heads of the households (Losi 1994).

The type of assistance offered to refugees from former Yugoslavia can be characterised as emergency-assistance approach that has been adopted by the government and the NGO sector in Italy and is not specific only for this particular refugee population. This approach characterised by *ad hoc* measures set by the government has its roots and causes in the Italian history of migration as well in underdeveloped social security and welfare systems in the country.

### **The history of migration and social welfare system in Italy – consequences for the policy context**

The way in which a state formulates its admission, reception and integration policies is influenced by its history of migration as well as its social protection and welfare systems. Italy has long considered itself as a country of emigration and as a *transit* country. My research about the current policy context in Italy indicates that the way in which a country 'imagines' itself, i.e., either as a country of emigration or a country of immigration, affects the ways in which legal and institutional frameworks for immigrants and asylum migrants are developed. The recent social and institutional memory about Italy's migration history that caused the country to become a country

of *transit* has led to insufficient legal and institutional provisions for meeting the needs of asylum migration in Italy. Moreover, the way in which the state treats its citizens, i.e., the established community, shapes its approach to the protection of those seeking or granted asylum. Italy spends less than the EU average on social protection and welfare system, and does not have a developed public housing or welfare system for its citizens. In Italian society informal networks and church organisations are the key providers of basic social assistance services for vulnerable individuals.

The underdeveloped social protection and welfare systems in Italy have led to a corresponding approach to assistance for asylum seekers and refugees – the assistance is minimal and commonly does not cover even basic needs, such as the provision of shelter and food. This approach is largely based on the assumption that those in need will be assisted primarily through self-help systems established within refugee and migrant communities. This will prompt them to become self-sufficient and independent (meaning – shelter, and employment that provides sufficient earning for rent and a poor diet) in a very short period of time. Such an approach to reception and integration reflects the still existing perception that Italy is not a country of permanent settlement regardless of the fact that Italy declared in 1990 that it has become a country of immigration.

The lack of any integration strategy at national level, supported by a corresponding financial and institutional structure, makes the NGOs involved in refugee work in Italy constantly deal with emergencies, trying to meet at least some of basic needs of the recently arrived. In such circumstances, their often innovative integration initiatives aimed at employment and/or educational needs of refugees in Italy, for example, remain only small projects insufficient to meet the needs of a growing refugee population in the country.

The discussion presented so far, outlines the main characteristics of the Italian reception system and the policies pertaining to integration, as well as the specific situation of refugees from former Yugoslavia in Italy who have been granted temporary permits to stay issued on humanitarian grounds. Before discussing further the effect of the Italian policy context on the experiences of integration of refugees from former Yugoslavia in Rome, it is important to mention briefly the main characteristics of the group of people I interviewed. This will help us understand better the ‘voices’ of the refugees involved in this research.

### **Characteristics of the sample**

Since the main focus of the research is to explore a wide range of experiences of integration, the principal concern in selecting interviewees was to ensure they are of different age groups, gender, ethnicity, marital status, parental status, education, region and place of residence before the flight. The actual profile of the group of people interviewed in Rome depended, however, on the characteristics of refugee population from former Yugoslavia in the city. Consequently, the group of refugees involved in this research consisted of relatively young, urban, and well-educated individuals.

During the four months of fieldwork in Rome, in the winter and the spring of 2000, around 120 contacts with refugees from former Yugoslavia were established. Informal contacts with members of refugee communities of nationals from former Yugoslavia in Rome were almost exclusively the source of information in identifying interviewees for this study because the research revealed that refugees from the region have been clients of local NGOs and community organisations only in exceptional cases. Contacts with refugees established during short exploratory visits to Rome were expanded through a ‘snow-ball’ sampling technique during the fieldwork.

These informal contacts were useful for collecting general information about their situation in Rome and the people they knew. These gatherings were usually not one-to-one contacts and, therefore, not suitable for collecting more personal data and accounts of their life in exile. For these reasons, 40 individuals were chosen for in-depth interviewing.

Of the 40 refugees interviewed, 80 percent were between 20 and 40 years of age. In terms of gender, the split was almost even with 21 women and 19 men. As regards to education, 40 percent had a university degree, including one graduate from a university in Rome, 17.5 percent had a high or secondary school degree, including one graduate from a secondary school in Rome, and 42.5 percent had their education interrupted by war and flight. In terms of marital status 47.5 percent were single, 50 percent were married or in common-law relationships, and one person was divorced. Of those married or in common-law relationships, 30 percent had Italian spouses or partners. Of those married or in common-law relationships, very few were with children.

All the interviewees were from urban areas (i.e., small towns or city centres) and 63 percent were from Bosnia-Herzegovina. The table 1 shows the ethnic background of the people interviewed.

**Table 1:** Ethnic Background of the interviewees according to their place of residence before the flight

Bosnia-Herzegovina	
Bosniaks	7
Croats	1
Serbs	4
Mixed background	13
Total from B-H	<b>25</b>
Croatia	
Croats	2

Serbs	5
Mixed background	1
Total from Croatia	<b>8</b>
FR Yugoslavia	
Montenegrins	1
Serbs	5
Mixed background	1
Total from FRY	<b>7</b>
Total number of interviewees	40

Of the 40 refugees interviewed, 70 percent had fled their homes after experiencing the armed conflict in their hometowns for up to two years. Over one-third of the people who fled the territories directly affected by the war had a close family member or a relative killed or seriously wounded in the recent conflict. Among the interviewed, two men had themselves been subjected to severe physical suffering and torture either at the front or in one of the concentration camps in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Close family members of 30 percent of the interviewed were refugees in one of the post Yugoslav states or in one of the EU states.

### **Cross-ethnic networks of refugees from former Yugoslavia in Rome and spontaneous creation of a self-reception system**

*During the first years (in Rome, M.K.) the refugees from ex-Yugoslavia were the circle I used to socialise with. We were pretty united in these years, we stuck together, those who would and could help each other. Later, as people managed to attain some economic security, we started growing apart. So when I met an Italian girl, I definitely parted with most of our people. My present friends are mostly Italians. (**Mirsad**, a 25-year-old man from Bosnia-Herzegovina, in Rome since the summer of 1993. Bosniak)*

*Our comunita is small, most got here in 91-92 and 93, at the beginning of the war. Those that were here before (old immigrants, MK) just couldn't fit in with those who came during this war. Their attitude (of old immigrants, M.K.) towards Italy was different as well the attitude towards the people who were fleeing the war (in former Yugoslavia, M.K.). We weren't people looking for jobs and a better life.*

*The situations we were faced with here were extreme, no regular papers in the beginning, no job, war in our country, so those strong ties were made among those who fled the war. (Mirza, a 36-year-old man from Bosnia-Herzegovina, in Rome since the winter of 1992. Ethnically mixed background)*

*Each of us had our own opinions about politics. We'd have disputes over that, but despite the political discussions, we'd help each other whenever we could, regardless of where we were from and what our political views were. (Milena, a 33-year-old woman from Bosnia-Herzegovina, in Rome since November 1992. Ethnically mixed background)*

The importance of assistance and help to asylum seekers and refugees provided through migrant networks in Western Europe has long been documented. In the Italian context, in which asylum seekers and refugees are particularly disadvantaged because of the lack of social security systems, these networks literally mean *survival*. However, because of the characteristics of the immigrant population in Italy and in Rome specifically, networks of 'old' immigrants from former Yugoslavia were underdeveloped and therefore social networks that were almost exclusively *refugee networks* assisted those who fled the region and came to Rome. These refugee networks served as an *alternative* 'self-reception' system for disseminating information, for resolving housing problems, and for finding work. Only in exceptional cases were some of the interviewed helped through contacts with 'old' migrant networks in Rome. Almost all of the interviewees were sceptical about 'old' migrant networks and community organisations, assessing their activities as *political* rather than *humanitarian* or keen on helping refugees. The research indicates, however, that in many cases the community organisations of nationals from the post Yugoslav states in Rome were an important factor in establishing initial social contacts among refugees from the region. Nonetheless the organisations' programs and activities were of very little or no interest to refugees.

Van Hear reminds us that although diaspora communities may assist and support their members, they may also be characterised by division, exploitation, and

in some cases political violence (Van Hear 1998). Some studies about refugee populations from former Yugoslavia in EU states, other than Italy, attest to problems with ethnic tension among these migrant communities. Eastmond's analysis of the situation of Bosnian Muslim refugees in Sweden shows, for example, that in the town studied, "boundaries between Muslims, Serbs and Croats are strictly maintained." (Eastmond, 1998: 173). In explaining the complex set of factors contributing to this ethnic division and/or distance among exiles from former Yugoslavia, she points to the policy context of the receiving society. In Sweden, the policy context promotes and funds establishment of immigrant/refugee community organisations with an expectation that these organisations will fulfil the function of orientating newcomers. While, as Eastmond states, these organisations fulfil this function, "they also provide an important link to the institutions of the home country[...]These associations constitute the major arena for the articulation and affirmation of a national identity." (Eastmond, 1998: 164). In the case of populations fleeing wars in the post Yugoslav states, however, the issues concerning national identity were often problematic because national identities were intrinsically related to the identity politics of the war (Korac 1999).

The research among refugees in Rome reveals, however, that the refugee networks were composed of people of all ethnic origins and from different parts of former Yugoslavia and that the vast majority of refugees have contacts across ethnic boundaries. This is not to argue though that these refugee communities are free from ethnic tension resulting from the conflict in the region. Rather, it is to indicate that the policy context of the receiving country influences the ways in which refugees cope with experiences of ethnic persecution caused by the conflict they had fled. The intensive contacts across ethnic boundaries revealed in this research resulted from the

specific circumstances in which they took place. They were induced primarily by the *absence* of an organised reception and assistance system. Consequently, for many of the refugees, contacts across ethnic boundaries were literally a matter of physical survival during their first years in Rome. It can be argued, therefore, that the characteristics of the policy context concerning refugees in Italy have created a situation in which people fleeing the deeply divided and war-torn region had to *recreate* links and coexistence destroyed by war.

This cross-ethnic networking was facilitated by two contributing factors. One relating to the absence of developed networks of 'old' migrants, the other embedded in the characteristics of refugee population from former Yugoslavia in Rome. The lack of established community organisations supported by the Italian authorities or by the governments of the post Yugoslav states created a need for spontaneous self-organising by the newly arrived. These networks enabled them to cope better with their day-to-day problems in fulfilling their immediate needs, which proved to be common to all, regardless of their ethnic background. This spontaneity largely freed this population of political disputes about the conflict, the causes of their flight, and other highly politically charged issues. These cross-ethnic networks were also successful because most of the refugees from former Yugoslavia in Rome are young, educated and come from multi-ethnic urban areas, and are often themselves of ethnically mixed backgrounds. They themselves had no other experience but that of peaceful multi-ethnic coexistence and friendships before the conflict.

It can be argued that when reception and assistance systems for refugees fleeing wars involving ethnic conflict are set up in a way that does not require cross-ethnic coexistence, ethnic tension and divisions tend to be carried over and transplanted into the new context. Hence, they remain central to the exile experience.



This is even more so when these systems accommodate essentialized notions of national identities and ethnic divisions created by conflict. As Eastmond argues, “[C]ulturalist policies of receiving societies concerned with the consequences of people ‘uprooted’ from their native countries and reflecting essentialized notions of identity and culture may then rather be seen as expressions of the same nationalist logic of a ‘natural’ relation between a people, a place and a culture.”

Refugee networks of people from former Yugoslavia in Rome, as mentioned earlier, played a central role in resolving housing problems, finding first employment and in providing other vital forms of assistance for their members. Only those who had had well-established contacts with Italians prior to their arrival had less established links with refugee networks. With a gradual increase of the level of economic security, the importance of the refugee networks has significantly decreased. This process allowed space for the establishment of social contacts and closer ties with the wider community of people in Rome, i.e. the established community of the receiving society.

Analysis indicates that the refugee communities of nationals from former Yugoslavia are not isolated and closed communities. Almost all of the interviewees have gradually developed friendships with Italians. They generally perceived Italians as open to social communication and assessed the level and quality of their social contacts with the established community important to their feelings of connection to and incorporation in the receiving society. Interviewees emphasised that they shared many aspects of the Italian ‘life-style’ and perceived these similarities as important for establishing and maintaining social contacts with Italians. At the time of the research, approximately 50 percent of the interviewees had more contacts with Italians than with people from the region. The other half of the interviewees did not

express a tendency to isolate themselves from the established community or the society at large, but they preferred to socialise with “their own folk”. This preference, as they explained, stemmed from their feeling that they understand each other better because they still lead more “extreme” lives than Italians do.

### **Absence of a reception system and integration strategy - consequences for the quality of functional integration of refugees**

- ***Language, employment, and housing***

*I'd spent a year in a family (as a live-in house cleaner, MK) and then I found another job. It was an exhausting job. I'd be working all day long. I knew very little about money matters in Italy - they were paying me 300 thousand liras a month and soon I'd realised that it was very little here. (Vera, a 34-year-old woman from Bosnia-Herzegovina with a university degree, in Rome since the summer of 1993. At the time of the research, she was a student.)*

*I found my first job through people I knew (through the refugee networks, MK), and I got to carry bags of cement to the third floor, and I didn't get paid in the end. In such a situation you don't know how to react. Your language is poor; you have no one to protect you. So, that first period, in which you are supposed to earn some money to have something to start from, proved to be very disappointing. All we (the men with whom he shared lodgings, MK) could afford to eat was pasta bianca (plain pasta, MK) sprinkled with either sugar or salt. This went on for a long period of time, about one year, when all we could do with our tiny incomes was to pay the rent. (Srdjan, a 32-year-old man from Serbia, FR Yugoslavia, with a university degree, in Rome since the autumn of 1993. At the time of the research, he was married to an Italian and had a contract job with an NGO)*

*When I had that illegal job in the hospital (as a nurse, MK) I was paid 900 thousand liras a month and my Italian colleagues were paid over 2 million for the same job. However, I had to shut up because I needed that work so badly because we (she and her husband, MK) had to support a family of four. (Silva, a 41-year-old woman from Croatia with a secondary school degree, in Rome since the summer of 1993. At the time of the research, she had a secretarial job in an organisation.)*

Employment represents one of the core components of successful incorporation of newcomers in the receiving society. It is the central issue in the process of integration of refugees, both from the point of view of the receiving society and of the refugees themselves. Employment is also one of the hardest problems to

tackle because of a complex set of parameters ranging from the situation on the labour market of the receiving society, policies that progressively exclude newcomers from formal labour markets or their specific niches, to the newcomers' language and professional skills.

In Italy, convention and *de facto* refugees have the same rights to employment, including self-employment, as Italian citizens. The only exception to this principle is access to employment in the public sector. This research indicates that the restrictions in seeking work in the public sector for non-citizens makes the continuation of careers of highly educated newcomers in certain professions, such as medical doctors and nurses, extremely difficult.

Regardless of legal equality concerning employment, the majority of refugees find work in low-paid job sectors, such as agriculture (in the south of Italy), tourism, manufacturing plants in Northern Italy or domestic services. Many are self-employed in small businesses (i.e., co-operatives or small family-run businesses). A relatively high level of unemployment in Italy amounts to the problem of the high concentration of refugees in low-paid job sectors. Moreover, there is often a problem with the professional qualifications of new arrivals. Their qualifications either do not match the labour market demands due to the fact that there is no demand for the type of occupation and skills of these people or, when there is a demand, there is a problem with recognition of their diplomas. The latter problem will be discussed further in the following section of the article. Additionally, in Italy work is sought primarily through informal contacts, such as family networks. Refugees lack such contacts and networks and are thus disadvantaged. Newly arrived refugees have also poor language skills and because of the nature of the reception system in Italy (i.e. very little or no

assistance at all) they are forced to earn their keep from day one. Consequently, they do not have time for language courses and usually learn the language on their own.

Most of the refugees in this research did not know a word of Italian at the time of their arrival. Now they all speak Italian fluently, in most cases without the benefit of language courses. They say that it took between three to six months to begin to understand and up to one year to feel comfortable speaking it. When they now speak their mother tongue it often has a characteristic Italian touch to it. Those who are not students at one of the universities in Rome describe their Italian as good for day-to-day communication and work but not for anything more 'sophisticated'. Some speak Italian with a characteristic *Romanacio* dialect and proudly say that Italians often cannot tell if they are 'genuine' Romans or not. Those who were children, in their teens, said that they have learned the language quickly and without much difficulty. If they have siblings, they often speak Italian amongst themselves. Those who were younger understand their mother tongue but often have difficulties in speaking and/or do not speak it well.

For all these reasons, refugees in most cases find work in the "black" market, despite having the right to employment in Italy. This research reveals that this is primarily the result of the situation in the Italian labour market in which the underground economy is widespread. According to some sources, it is one of the most extensive underground economies of the industrialised world (ECRE 1998). Consequently, both Italian citizens (i.e. the established community) and newcomers (i.e. refugees and other immigrants) often work in the "black" market. In addition, highly educated refugees who commonly have problems with the recognition of their university diplomas in Italy are forced to work illegally if they want to find a job corresponding to their education.

In the given country and policy context, refugees in this research had to become economically independent in a short time. They succeeded in becoming self-sufficient primarily by relying on help of refugee networks through which they became functionally integrated via the labour market. Of the 40 people interviewed, 87 percent were employed. Of those working, 20 percent worked and studied, and of those who only worked 39 percent had jobs appropriate to their education. Those who did not work were young adults, living with their parents and working occasionally, when their school or university commitments permit. The majority of those working did not acquire legal employment for years, regardless of the fact that their permit to stay in Italy gives them such a right, and many still work illegally. Moreover, even in cases in which employers agree to register these people as employees they often do so only for a very limited number of working hours.

When they arrived, there emerged a sort of general pattern of finding jobs. The majority of younger women would find work within a matter of days as live-in house cleaners or nannies. This was due to the situation in the labour market in Rome but it was also related to the kind of social networks the women from the region had in the city. During the 1970s and 1980s, a number of young women, predominantly from Dalmatia, Croatia, and Herzegovina, the south-eastern part of Bosnia-Herzegovina, used to come to Rome for six months or a year to work as live-in house cleaners. They would earn some money, learn the language and return home. Many of the women interviewed had, prior to their flight, direct or indirect contacts with women from the region who did this kind of work. Through these contacts they gathered information about the best ways to search for live-in house cleaner's job in Rome. Nuns of the Croatian Catholic Church in Rome were also helpful in assisting women who arrived with the first refugee waves. Italian families in need of domestic help

and/or babysitting would usually contact nuns in search for reliable domestics. After the first refugee women found work, they served as a source of information and contact for those who arrived later. It should be mentioned here that the nuns of the Croatian Catholic Church were helping women from the region irrespective of their ethnic background.

A live-in house cleaner's job would not only secure a modest salary but also accommodation, food and an environment to learn Italian. After six months or a year, the women would learn enough Italian, and save enough money to quit the job, find shared accommodation and look for some other type of work. All the women interviewed described their experience of work as live-in house cleaners as a "prison-like" experience. The main problem they confronted was a lack of control over their time, and a feeling of isolation from the outside world. The change of employment was an important step forward for these women, even when they stayed in the 'cleaning business', because it meant – *freedom*. However, the excitement over the feelings of freedom after leaving the families they worked for would not last long. For the overwhelming majority the change meant only a possibility to make their own housing arrangements but in terms of the work they did to make a living, their situation did not change much. These women are educated, often with a university degree, hence, with much higher expectations of their lives and careers than house cleaning or waiting jobs can offer.

The situation of men in finding their first jobs was particularly difficult because of the characteristics of the labour market in Rome. In most cases, the first work men found, commonly through contacts refugee women developed with Italian families they worked for, were manual, unskilled jobs such as building, painting, gardening, etc. The problem with this kind of work is not only that it is poorly paid

but that it also may be not paid at all. Employers would often pay less than negotiated, or would not pay at all. These were black market jobs, and refugees from former Yugoslavia were not yet aware of the possibility of taking legal action against their employers. Hence, their first months, even years in some cases, depended on “sheer luck” in finding a “trustworthy boss”. Unlike many women whose jobs, although low paid, were paid regularly, men often had to work hard and long hours for little or no pay. This situation made the lives of many miserable because the vast majority had no savings and thus no means to sustain themselves. The problem was compounded by the fact that men had not only to find jobs immediately but also accommodation they could afford.

Families with children confronted significantly more difficulties in ensuring a minimal economic security than couples without children or those who were single. Because of the lack of a reception system and assistance for refugees with children, it was not exceptional that children in their early teens had to work and contribute to inadequate family budgets during their first year in Rome.

Due to the housing problem in Italy, asylum seekers and refugees are usually forced to seek assistance and help from their already established compatriots. The majority of the interviewees in Rome, both men and women had relatively decent rental accommodation in the city at the time of the research. Single people but sometimes also couples, often lived in shared accommodation. Some could afford to live on their own which was not the case for years after their arrival. When they arrived, the majority found their first shelter in apartments of known and unknown refugees from the region. Shared accommodation, with other people from the region, immigrants from other countries, or at a later stage with Italians they happened to come across during the first period of their stay, became a ‘housing model’ for many.

There were some, of course, who spent their first nights at Termini train station, as well as those who could not think of any other solution but to spend their first nights and their last money in inexpensive hotels. Only two found their first shelter in the dormitories of one of the church organisations or NGOs in Rome.

At the time of the research, the majority of those working worked six days a week, occasionally seven, depending on their line of work. Their working day was often longer than 10 hours, and they earned approximately ITL 1, 2 million liras per month (approximately EURO 600). A number of both women and men worked in restaurants or cafes waiting tables or as barmen. Some, mostly men, worked as kitchen helpers, assistants to chefs or chefs in restaurants. Some, mostly women, attended to the elderly. Others worked as sales personnel in retail shops or as cleaners in hotels or family-homes. Some men were still manual and unskilled workers: house painters, tennis court keepers, builders, gardeners etc. The lucky ones found secretarial jobs or were able to continue careers interrupted by the war and flight. A couple of people interviewed took courses in computer programming, which led to work in small computer firms.

- ***Diploma recognition and continuation of education***

*I started inquiring about how to go about having my diploma recognised soon after I completed my language courses (in the winter of 1993, MK). However, I wasn't successful in obtaining the right information until March 1995, when I started taking care of a woman who was the wife of a former Italian ambassador. Her daughter worked in the Italian Foreign Ministry and she helped my husband and me by providing information and with the documents needed for recognising our diplomas. Italian bureaucracy is a total mess. You get all kinds of contradictory information, so it was practically impossible to find out what was needed without connections. In May 95 we were informed that we were to pass seven exams and submit a thesis. After we'd passed the final exam, we still had problems. There's a medical association here and you have to be a member in order to be able to work. They refused to register us because there was supposedly a law that you cannot be a member unless you are an Italian citizen. We then filed a complaint in a court. The only way of doing it was to hire an eminent lawyer. As you can imagine, neither did we know any lawyers in Rome nor could we afford one, let alone an eminent*



*lawyer. Thanks to the nuns (the Croatian Catholic Church nuns, MK), we were lucky to get in touch with a very good lawyer whom we didn't have to pay. So we won in the end and then, after a year and a half, the medical association had to grant us membership, retroactively. However, the damage was already done, because we couldn't work as doctors until we were registered as members of the association.* (**Spomenka**, a 38-year-old medical doctor from Serbia, FR Yugoslavia, in Rome since April 1993. Before her diploma was recognised she worked as a cleaning person, and later had short-term contracts with several private clinics)

*Since I started my studies here (in the autumn of 1997, MK), I've learned a lot. By now I should have almost graduated but with my job that's impossible. I only managed to pass five exams to this day, with high grades though, because I lack the time and concentration for studying. When you work until three in the morning (at a bar, MK), you wake up at 10-11, you need time to pull yourself together, to sit and study, make lunch. So I have very little time for studying.* (**Mirsad**, a 25-year old student whose high school education was interrupted by the war and subsequent flight of his family from Bosnia-Herzegovina to Croatia where he completed high school before their flight to Italy. In Rome since the summer of 1993)

The recognition of school diplomas makes the process of integration difficult, particularly for newly arrived/recognised convention and *de facto* refugees. Most of them do not have all the required documents (i.e., transcripts of diplomas), and for many, it is very difficult to obtain them. It is equally hard or impossible for many refugees to find the time and money necessary for this undertaking given that there is practically no financial assistance for refugees. Consequently, they have to work long hours to earn their keep. Moreover, Italy has very few bilateral agreements with other countries on diploma recognition. For the most part, university diplomas are not recognised unless additional exams are passed. For all these reasons many educated people are often forced to accept the first job they are offered what commonly takes them to an inadequate and low paid niche of the labour market from which is very hard to move upwards. Even those with a sufficient level of education and professional skills that could generally be needed in the Italian labour market can rarely apply for jobs appropriate to their education. This is clearly a considerable loss for refugees and for the Italian society because the *cultural capital* that newcomers

bring to the receiving society remains unrecognised and unused. Detailed discussion of Bourdieu's complex concept of cultural capital is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is important to emphasise that the term refers to a set of accumulated conditions of life, primarily economic and educational, that, once "invested", position the subject in particular relation to others (Bourdieu, 1984).

Among the refugees in this research, for example, out of 16 persons with university diplomas only 3 managed to have their degrees recognised and two were not required to undergo the formal procedure because of the character of their skills. It would commonly take years of struggling with the bureaucracy, a considerable amount of money for translating documents and, in some cases, a lot of time to prepare for and pass exams to reach that goal. In all cases, the entire undertaking would not have been successful without the 'right connections' within the Italian bureaucracy.

The problem concerning the recognition of school diplomas was not only significant for the refugee population in this research whose educational qualifications, as mentioned earlier, were high. According to data collected by the Danish Refugee Council on the level of education of 1,449 asylum seekers in Italy whose applications were examined in 1997, 216 had university degrees, 507 had high school diplomas, 468 had secondary school certificates or the equivalent, 141 had technical school certificates, only 74 had primary school certificates, and 43 had no educational certificate (Johansen, 1998: 84). In other words, almost 50 percent of the asylum seekers whose cases were examined in 1997 had a high school education at least, which attests to the fact that in general, persons seeking asylum in Italy are well-qualified. There is also evidence that those seeking asylum in EU states today are better educated than labour migrants of the 1960s and 1970s.

The problem with diploma recognition is not only paramount for those well qualified who want to find employment appropriate to their education but also for those who want to continue their interrupted education. The persons interviewed in this research had an equally hard time continuing their studies in Rome. The conflict interrupted the education of 42 percent of the refugees included in this research. Of these, 76 percent succeeded in continuing their interrupted education or in completing short-term courses and finding employment in these new professions. It took between three to five years either to continue their education or to enrol in vocational courses. During those years, they struggled to earn enough for rent and a poor diet. There were also those that did not want to or could not afford to continue their university education and decided instead to enrol in courses and training for computer software specialists, chefs or barmen.

### **Country and policy context and satisfaction of refugees with their situation in Italy – concluding remarks**

*I think that working here made us feel better, regardless of what kinds of jobs we've had. I think that's what helped us keep our wits about us, and I think that's what kept me sane all these years. We've been working all the time, we were focused on how to survive, there was no assistance - here's a house, here's the money. I have contacts with many of my friends from Bosnia in Norway, for example, they still don't work. They're together all the time and preoccupied with stories of the past. I think it's good that we've started a new life here. You have to start it once. You can't live in the past. (Mirsada, a 37-year-old woman from Bosnia-Herzegovina with a university degree, in Italy since October 1992. Soon after she arrived she was joined by her extended family of four adults and three small children. They moved to a small town north of Rome where she was employed as a cleaning person in a hotel. In 1998 she moved to Rome to join her Italian partner. She is employed with an NGO on a short-term contract basis, holds a humanitarian residence permit)*

*In 1995, I went to visit my brother who is a refugee in Sweden. It seems that Italians are warmer than the Swedes. Their character is closer to us from ex-Yugoslavia. Italians are quite sociable while in Sweden everything seems to be more or less confined to family circles. It's another thing, of course, that Sweden gives you social security - accommodation, food and that sort of thing. However, I don't find their way of life interesting at all. (Dule, a 29-year-old man from Bosnia-Herzegovina whose university education was interrupted, in Italy since the summer of 1992. Between 1992 and 1999 he was employed as*

an assistant in a photo-shop. In the autumn of 1996 he enrolled at a university and graduated in the autumn of 1999. Since graduation, he has been employed in his profession on a short-term contract basis; holds a humanitarian residence permit)

*I don't know whether it's good or bad to have some kind of help. Frankly, I don't know where I'd be today with my life here if someone gave me a flat and a half a million liras a month. Perhaps I would have started studying, probably I would, but I don't know if I'd be feeling better right now, how determined I'd be to do something with my life here. I'm not saying that financial support isn't important – assistance in getting a place to sleep and something to eat, what I call 'economic zero'. But when that is provided, it's crucial that the person has some self-confidence to be able to go on and strive for improvement. (**Nermin**, a 31-year-old man from Bosnia-Herzegovina whose university education was interrupted, in Rome since March 1995. A student since the autumn of 1997 and a free-lance IT consultant, holds a humanitarian residence permit)*

The analysis of the experience of refugees from former Yugoslavia in Rome documents the case of functional integration in which the refugees, for the most part, have not encountered any kind of reception system, but the admission procedure was not lengthy. Although at times confusing due to the number of decrees regulating the different rights of refugees from former Yugoslavia, it did not create any excessive pressure on refugees by a prolonged uncertainty about their right to stay or fear of expulsion.

The lack of a reception system made it necessary to find *any* kind of work, literally the day after arrival. They were granted the legal right to work with their temporary residence permit to stay, and although this right was not exercised by many because the scope of the illegal labour market in Italy, it helped in finding better employment in the later stages of their exile in Rome.

One of the major problems has been the continuation of education or of interrupted careers of refugees because of the problems involved in the diploma recognition. Moreover, there has been no organised effort for those whose education and professional skills did not meet the needs of the labour market in Rome. In such

circumstances, the refugees were left without a guidance and assistance concerning vocational training opportunities that would enable the refugees to find employment more adequate to their skills and to move up the economic and social ladder of the receiving society. Such an opportunity would have not only met the needs of this particular population of refugees but it would have made better use of their skills and resources in the receiving society. Instead, after six or seven years in Rome, 70 percent of the interviewees regardless of their gender, age, and parental status, had low-paying jobs, worked six days a week, 10 to 12 hours per day, and often in night shifts. Consequently, almost none of the interviewees felt that they have succeeded in settling in Italy in a way that would give them a sense of security in planning their future.

In recapitulating their experience in Italy, however, none of the interviewees thought that they would have *felt* better about their lives if they had been in some other EU state or in North America. This attitude was shared equally by those who succeeded in finding better employment and/or in having their diplomas recognised as well as by those who after five or six years in Rome still worked as manual workers. Moreover, those who experienced exile in some other EU state before arriving in Italy, or those who could qualify for resettlement in the United States or Canada, for example, shared this feeling.

This assessment did not imply their satisfaction with the *quality* of their functional integration via the labour market and education. Although they prized the right to work, they also contended that the lack of an *initial* reception system forced them to become self-sufficient and independent at the cost of entering a niche of the labour market from which it is very hard to move up the economic and social ladder. For those with an interrupted education, the cost was delaying or abandoning the idea

of its continuation. The refugees defined the losses involved in their flight and exile in terms of losses of economic welfare or uncertain prospects for their future but not as much in terms of loss of personal agency.

This interpretation of experiences of exile as they are documented in this research has to be taken with caution because of the many limitations of this research. They are embedded in the fact that it explored a small slice of reality, i.e. the experience of those who were resourceful enough to survive seven or eight years in Rome with practically no assistance, all others left the city before my fieldwork took place. The limitations of this research are also grounded in the fact that the refugees in this research come from a social and cultural context that can be regarded as compatible with the receiving society, i.e. they are white and European. Moreover, they come from a Mediterranean country, therefore, they share some aspects of 'lifestyle' with the established community of Italian society. Additionally, these refugees represent a relatively young, educated and urban population that fled to Italy *spontaneously*. Spontaneous flight already implies a considerable level of agency and resources, ranging from material to social in terms of skills and networks. All these factors make this refugee population considerably resourceful and, therefore, more prone to develop successful survival strategies for re-establishing their lives in new environments in general, and in Italian society, in particular.

With all these limitations in mind, it can be argued that the Italian policy context allowed refugees from former Yugoslavia to approach their situation in the receiving society in an *active* way. The absence of a planned reception system compelled refugees to rely on their personal agency. The experience of the refugees in this research can be characterised as an *active reconstruction* of life. The characteristics of the policy context in Italy did not offer them any *dependent* role,

one of victims or of traumatised/sick persons. The level of agency these refugees are allowed in the Italian context, as well as the perceived level of *compatibility* between 'life-styles' of refugees and the established community, are central to the way in which they assess numerous problems of their integration in Rome, discussed in this article.

The emphasis on the importance of providing refugees with a framework for an active reconstruction of life, however, should not be understood as an *apologia* for the absence of a strategy for integration as well as legal, financial and institutional means to facilitate this process. Rather, the reasoning behind this emphasis is that a desirable and successful integration policy should provide refugees with a legal, financial and institutional framework within which they are given *space* for agency and the functional adjustment of their attitudes and skills necessary for penetrating the receiving society as social actors.

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