

The Hope Boats of the Balkans. Field Research on Asylum Seekers in Gorizia

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1. INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH

From September 2014 to March 2015 an increasing amount of asylum seekers reached the region Friuli Venezia Giulia and the town of Gorizia, on the Italian-Slovenian border. The presence of the asylum seekers in town caused an increasing interest in the media, especially local newspapers, and a growing discontent among citizens. At the same time, the local administration was dealing with the need to provide asylum seekers' temporary allocation and access to the Commission evaluating their protection request. In order to start responding to the growing questions of the community about this phenomenon, and to analyze the organizational system in place, in spring 2015 ISIG engaged in a field research on this topic.

2. FIELD WORK OBJECTIVES

The first objective of the research has been to define the reasons for the presence of asylum seekers in Gorizia and their expectations for the future, so to contribute to the local debate on the presence of these new migrants in the northern

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Italian town. A secondary goal was also to start a pilot research on management models to be extended in the future on a broader territory.

This goal is connected to the consideration that the situation in Gorizia, if approached on the basis of objective data, could be analyzed so to devise a model for the evaluation of the assets a community can activate in response to external stresses.

3. METHODOLOGY

The pilot survey focused on the migration routes reaching Gorizia from Afghanistan and Pakistan and on the personal stories of 30 immigrants.

In the period between May 5 and May 7, 2015, thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted with asylum seekers in Gorizia, at the CARITAS refectory and at the “Nazareno” premises (see further), being authorized by the institutions responsible for the hospitality.

The interview outline was structured as follows:

- Identification of the interviewee's profile;
- Tracing of the journey faced by the asylum seeker from the country of origin;
- Identification of the main reasons that brought the interviewee to Gorizia;
- Respondents' legal status and related legal issues;
- Exploration of the interviewee's perception on the reception system;
- Interviewee's expectations for the future;

Each interview was conducted in English by ISIG researchers and lasted 15 minutes on average. The interview development did undergo differences in duration and content detail, due to language barriers (in many cases it was necessary to have a support in translation, often from other asylum seekers speaking English) and/or the complexity of the respondents' personal stories.

4. INTERVIEWEES PROFILE

Respondents were Pakistani (18) or Afghan (12) nationals. All the interviewees were males, aged (allegedly) between 18 and 38 years. Several respondents did not know their exact year of birth thus it was impossible to trace their exact age.

The interviewees' profile seems to mirror the finding of other studies. The most represented age group for Afghan migrations is between 12 and 30 years, and the migrants are mostly male travelling alone (as confirmed by the work done by Dimitriadi, 2013). Also, a study on migration of Afghans moving from the mountains to the cities in Iran (Monsutti, 2007) highlights that, in Afghanistan, men often move to fight or to work, staying away from the family

sometimes for years, while women living in rural areas tend to move less and almost never alone. In both countries, women move less often from rural areas, and only if widowed or ostracized by the community. In 2008 a study commissioned by UNHCR highlighted that, also with regard to migratory movements between Afghanistan and Pakistan, most migrants were male (75.3% of the sample). Many of them moved regularly between the two countries in search of a job (Kuschminder and Dora 2009).

The majority of Pakistani national respondents came from the region of the FATA – Federally Administrated Tribal Areas, a semi-autonomous region in northeastern Pakistan, politically and administratively unstable, due to the presence of Taliban who, after the battle of Tora Bora in December 2001, took refuge there (Javai 2011). As for the Afghan respondents, their provenance was more heterogeneous, although most came from provinces located in the northeastern region of Afghanistan (with the exception of the Kandahar province, which lies to the south, along the border with Pakistan).

The Pakistani respondents were found to have a higher level of schooling than those of Afghan nationality. In fact, while among Pakistani respondents many had a university degree (e.g. in biology, medicine, computer science, economics), almost everyone had finished a secondary school (i.e. “intermediate level”) and only a few had stopped their studies after middle school, most Afghan respondents declared not to have any qualifications, others to have studied up to secondary school, a few to have finished high school and only one to have a university degree.

The differences that emerged between Pakistani and Afghan for what concerns the level of studies was mirrored also by the typology of employment they were engaged in before leaving their country. Among Pakistani respondents, almost everyone had had a specific job (e.g. shopkeepers, taxi drivers, etc.) and many had an occupation that required a secondary school diploma or a university degree (employees in international organizations such as UNHCR or WHO, professors, etc.). Many Afghan interviewees, instead, stated not to have been employed prior to the migration or to have had a job that did not require a high school diploma (painter, mechanic, managing the family shop, etc.); only one respondent reported being a National Army officer and one of being employed in a building agency as administrative supervisor.

Almost all of the respondents started their journey towards Europe on their own (only two traveled with a relative – a cousin or brother), leaving at home parents, brothers, sisters and sometimes even wife and children.

The main reasons of migration, common to both Afghan and Pakistani respondents, were related to:

- The need to protect themselves from the (local) government;
- the need to protect themselves from the Taliban, especially in the face of death threats caused by a refusal to enroll (as a young man who walked almost all the route on foot from Afghanistan reported: “My father was forced to fight

for the Taliban: then he was killed. The Taliban came to my house, and told my mother to send another man to fight or they would have killed us all. I was the older man in the family after my father. My mother cried. Then in the night she told me to run away and go far”);

- religious persecution (i.e. towards “Shiite” or “ahmadyya” minorities);
- war and corruption in the country.

5. THE JOURNEY

For the majority of respondents, both Afghans and Pakistani, travel arrangements were entrusted to what they called an “agents”, passeurs that were well known for organizing the journey to Europe.

The facilitation of the trip was paid on average between 8,000 and 13,000 US dollars, a sum that respondents reported was collected with the aggregated effort of the all extended family, often over long periods of time. In most cases the sum was paid to the agents by the families in tranches, either before the journey or when each agreed step along the route towards Europe was reached.

In some cases, the agent remained the same throughout the journey; in other cases, along the route, new agents were entrusted to bring the migrants forward.

The stages of this journey and the amount of agents involved were closely related to the payment amount and method. As reported by one of the respondents: «At each stopping point, the local contacts communicated the arrival [of the migrants] to the agent who had organized the whole thing, which in turn communicated with the family, who then paid for the next part of the journey».

Other respondents undertook the journey on their own, without relying on an agent. The majority of respondents spent 3 to 6 months, to arrive from the country of origin to Italy, even if the identified time span expands from 1 month to 2 years and it is not necessarily influenced by the country of origin. Longer duration journeys are often due to stays in other countries en route. As reported by the young man from Afghanistan who was sent away from home by the mother, to prevent him to be abducted by the Taliban:

«I escaped to Iran on foot. I had no money and when I got there I had to find a job. A good man took me as his apprentice in a barber shop. I worked with him for a year, then I had enough money to move on and I went to Turkey. When I reached Turkey I had finished my money. I stopped there another year and worked in a barber shop. Then I started the journey to Europe».

The longer stops in countries along the route were not always voluntary as in the example reported. When reaching Bulgaria or Hungary migrants report to have been stopped by the police and kept in custody, in refugee camps or prison camps. Some of the interviewees reported:

«We were kept in custody by the police for one month in a refugee camp»
«We arrived in Bulgaria and the police did not ask anything. They just took us to a place that looked like a cave. We had no food nor water for two days. It was weekend and there was no one that could help us there»
«I managed to run away and reached Switzerland, where they arrested me for one month».

In other cases the permanence in other countries before reaching Italy was deliberate. Those stays, often registered in Germany and the UK, were then interrupted by a formal denial of the asylum request, the re-addressing to the country of first entry in Europe and/or the deportation back to the home country. One respondent had even been living for many years as child with his parents in the UK as a refugee. When he turned 18 his protection as member of the family expired, and he was sent back to Pakistan to start the journey again and have his request for protection re-evaluated in Europe.

The life stories collected through the 30 interviews enabled the identification of two macro-routes from the country of origin to the city of Gorizia:

5.1. EU external route – from the country of origin to Italy (Gorizia)

Within the EU external macro- route, there are two main routes to Italy: the so called 'Balkan route' and the sea route (on boat from Greece).

The starting point of all routes was Iran, while the second common stop to all was Turkey, identified by all as an important hub for the different pathways to Europe. Iran and Turkey were reached on foot, or by bus.

a) The main Balkan route -via Turkey

After Turkey, asylum seekers reached Bulgaria (where a first detection of fingerprints was made and then they were arrested and put in refugee camps, with forced residence). Interviewees that were stopped in Bulgaria declared that, despite having been registered and their fingerprints taken, they were not allowed by the police to make a request for asylum.

The detention camps in Bulgaria were also a place where new contacts were made with other migrants or agents. Interviewees report to have escaped Bulgarian camps due to police's initiative («The policeman opened the cell and told us to go away and move to richer countries in Europe») or with the support of agents known by other migrants («I met a man who had contacts in Bulgaria. He made some phone calls and we were set free»). After fleeing Bulgaria most interviewees passed through Serbia (reached on foot or hidden inside trucks, after paying a 'transport' fee to the drivers) and reached Hungary, where they were again stopped and arrested by the police.

Some respondents arrived in Gorizia directly from Hungary:

«From the camp Bicske in Hungary I found a contact that drove me and other 4 in a car – we paid 500.00 euro per person. He told us that he would take us to Milan. He left us in front of the Gorizia station and told us that we were in Milan. Only after asking people in the streets, I realized that we were in another city. But to us it was enough that it was Italy».

Other respondents left Hungary to move to Austria or Slovenia. From there, the majority of entrances in Italy took place by train, with regular tickets or illegally, hidden in trucks.

a.1) *The secondary Balkan route – via Greece and FYROM*

A secondary route was identified from the reports of few respondents, that from Turkey reached Greece, and then crossed FYROM. From there, they also reconnected with the main Balkan route: Serbia-Hungary-Austria-Italy, or Serbia-Croatia-Slovenia-Italy.

b) *The sea route (Greece)*

After the stop in Turkey, some respondents undertook the journey to Italy by sea from Greece. In most cases, migrants travelled hidden in containers and/or trucks on ferries linking Greece to the Italian Adriatic coast. Some arrived in southern Italy, others in Trieste.

5.2. *EU internal route – from another EU country to Italy (Gorizia)*

A second macro-route, inside the EU, was covered by asylum seekers who were denied international protection in Germany and the United Kingdom and were sent back to their country of entry (Bulgaria), with a view to being deported to their home country. These represent the so-called “Dublin positive” cases.

These respondents turned towards Italy as a “last hope” for the approval of the asylum application. Respondents declared that Italy’s image as a good country to have the asylum request approved was widespread among the other asylum seekers met on the route and that «people who already have made it to Europe write on Facebook that Italy is the best country for asking for protection».

6. THE REASONS FOR THE PRESENCE IN GORIZIA

Most respondents claimed not to have Italy as their established goal, but to want to get to Europe, «in any place in Europe». As seen in the previous paragraph, however, Italy became to be considered along the route as an ideal country, «both from the point of view of the reception and from the point of view of the rapid bureaucratic procedure to receive refugee status”. As a respondent reported: “everyone [who has already done the route] knows that [in Italy] there are more chances of having a positive outcome of the [asylum] request».

In this sense, the choice for Italy as the destination country was made by some even before starting the journey, thanks to information gathered from acquaintances that had already reached Europe; for example, a respondent said that another asylum seeker already in Italy «had posted a video on Facebook saying that Italy is ideal for getting approval».

The choice of respondents was thus not much to come to Gorizia specifically (almost all of them in fact knew “nothing” about Gorizia before they got there). Only one interviewee said that he went intentionally to Gorizia «to be closer to his brother [who lives in Austria]».

Arrivals in Gorizia were mostly related to the city’s proximity to the border with Slovenia and Austria and to the fact of being passing and «stopped by the police». Some respondents stated that they arrived in Gorizia because ‘agents’ dropped them off immediately after the border or on the highway near Villesse, in an isolated spot where «there are not so many police checks».

Other respondents declared to be in Gorizia due to information received by personal contacts or acquired indirectly (internet, Facebook, etc.).

For asylum seekers who arrived in northern Italy, the re-direction to Gorizia was suggested by other immigrants, or volunteers of reception centers in bigger cities, such as Milan or Trieste, due to the overflow of temporary shelters in those cities.

Another factor determining the advice to move to smaller centers might be related to the bureaucratic timing for the submission of the asylum request, longer for larger cities. Some respondents in fact declared to have reached Gorizia after the advice of policemen in bigger Italian cities, where the waiting list for the access to the shelter facilities and to the Commission evaluating asylum requests was longer.

The arrivals of asylum seekers in Gorizia then seemed to follow three different paths:

- Directly, from the border with Slovenia or Austria;
- From other Italian cities such as Milan, Trieste and Udine, where it was often difficult to find acceptance and to apply for asylum;
- From southern Italy, to the north first and then to Gorizia.

Research findings show that the orientation of migrant fluxes toward the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region first and then to Gorizia seems to respond to a ‘law of supply and demand’ dynamic, since already saturated systems act for their self preservation and re-direct asylum seekers towards less exploited centers.

As one respondent reported: «I arrived in Trieste and there I asked a black man where I could find food and shelter. He said there was no more space there, bought me a train ticket and sent me to Gorizia».

Once in Gorizia, the main expectations of asylum seekers interviewed were connected to the possibility of finding protection, shelter and hospitality in a

structure “more quickly than in larger structures”. The added value of Gorizia was also perceived in it being a “safe” and “quiet place”, after the turmoil in their own country and the harshness of the route.

7. THE RECEPTION SYSTEM IN GORIZIA

At the time of the survey, the shelter system for asylum seekers in the Province of Gorizia was based on formal agreements between the Prefecture of Gorizia and the following:

FIGURE 1 – The reception system in the province of gorizia

STRUCTURE	MAXIMUM CAPACITY	ATTENDANCE MAY 11, 2015
Nazareno (run by il Mosaico Consortium)	150	150
Internazionale Hotel	40	37
Dormitory Faidutti (run by Caritas)	-	29
San Canzian d’Isonzo Municipality	-	15
CARA Gradisca	-	236
TOTAL		468

SOURCE: Gorizia Municipality–Welfare Department (2015)

The interviewed sample was divided, almost equally, among the asylum seekers housed at the “Nazareno” premises and those staying at the dormitory “Faidutti”.

As a general trend, the two sheltering facilities seemed to accommodate two different types of applicants:

- 1) Those who had just arrived, or had been in Gorizia from a few days up to a period of 2 months, were hosted at the Dormitory “Faidutti”
- 2) Those who had been in Gorizia for a period between 2 month and 1 year were hosted at “Nazareno” premises.

The aid and the material benefits/services that respondents said to have received in the reception centers were a bed, clothes and meals at Caritas refectory. Some also received some pocket money for daily necessities (37.5 € every 15 days). In addition, some respondents highlighted the role of the Red Cross for what concerned primary medical care. All interviewees, except those who had just arrived in town, were attending Italian language courses.

In the words of the beneficiaries:

«I get food, a place to stay, hot water, a place to pray and follow the Italian language courses».

«I get blankets, towels, soap, toothpaste, food, accommodation. I have not yet received money but I will receive it after 15 days».

In most cases the respondents did not know the other asylum seekers living in the same accommodation facilities upon arrival in Gorizia. Out of 30 cases, only two had traveled with a relative (cousin and brother) and only one claims to live with «friends made on the go».

Solitude and the impossibility to work were declared by most as the worst things to endure. However, compared to their previous situation, all respondents stated to be very happy to be in Gorizia, «Very good in Gorizia, much better than the other stages of the journey»; «I love Gorizia so much, it is a clean and quiet town»; «I love Gorizia, mainly because the people have been very welcoming and helpful. When I lived in the tent in via Brass, every day volunteers and citizens from Gorizia passed with aid and to give assistance. In Italy there is a lot more human respect than in other European countries».

8. LEGAL STATUS AND LEGAL ISSUES

The respondents could be classified in three main categories for what concerned their legal status:

- Asylum seekers on the waiting list for the interview with the evaluation Commission (this was the situation of most interviewees);
- Asylum seekers waiting for the outcome of their asylum request, after having been interviewed by the Commission;
- Refugees, who had been given permission to stay since several months (just three cases among the respondents) and were looking forward to the residence in order to obtain all the necessary documentation (i.e. health card, social security number, etc.).

Interviewees gathered information on how to request for international protection through different means, closely linked to their level of education. Those who spoke English and worked in collaboration with international organizations in their home country gathered relevant information already before starting the journey, either consulting websites of international organizations, or Facebook profiles of acquaintances that had made it already to Europe. In most case, however, respondents declared to have understood what they could and had to do only on-site (when reaching Gorizia) from:

- police officers – met on the street or at the police stations;
- other applicants – met both along the way and in Gorizia. As a respondent summarized it: «I am neither the first nor the last one to make this journey. There will always be someone who can give you advice on how to move forward»;
- social workers – at the “Nazareno” premises, for example, a course was organized by volunteers on major aspects of the asylum request and the interview procedures. Volunteers at the Caritas premises also provided support to applicants on the official presentation of the asylum request;
- Through a previous experience as asylum applicant either in Italy or in another European country.

Only one respondent reported being followed by a lawyer «representing a number of asylum seekers», whose contact was provided to him by the Red Cross.

9. PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

One point addressed during the interview concerns the respondents’ prospects for their future.

As far as preference toward the city or the nation in which to live in the future, the respondents’ answers could be summarized as follows:

- Some expressed the desire to live and find work «preferably» in Gorizia, generally regarded as «a quiet town»;
- other would prefer move to other major Italian cities, especially Milan and Rome, due to the larger array of possibilities offered by a big city, both for what concerns finding a job («Gorizia is too small to get a job, «finding a job is more difficult in a border area») and meeting new people, even «more people from the same community [as from the country of origin] »;
- Most saw the possibility to find a job as the main criterion for choosing the place to live, «no matter where».

The importance played by the possibility to work was also mirrored by the fact that most respondents were clear on the activity they would have liked to carry out in the future. “Working in a hospital» opening «a grocery shop, with Italian and Pakistani products», «opening a business as a barber» were some of the answers that were given for what concerns the respondents’ hope for the future. Working or finding a job was seen by some as a very important aspect related also to the possibility for their family to join them as soon as possible.

Some respondents were not able to express a preference, because when interviewed they had just arrived in Gorizia, because they felt still confused as to their future or because they were waiting to receive «recognition or refusal of the refugee status» before making a decision.

10. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND INSIGHTS FOR A MANAGEMENT MODEL

Many of the questions raised by the public opinion (e.g. Why are they only men?, Why are they in Gorizia?, How come they all have a cell phone and no shoes?) have found an articulated response in this study.

As revealed by the field work conducted, the profile of the asylum seekers Gorizia is that of a male between 20 and 30 years of age. The reason why they are mostly men (and young) is rooted both in:

- a) a consolidated tradition (revealed also by the other studies summarized) of male migration for the improvement of the economic situation of the family;
- b) in the physical and mental harshness of the journey along the migration routes, a journey that can be endured only by the strongest/fittest.

The reason why asylum seekers end up in Italy is mostly because it seen as a 'last chance' if asylum request has been denied in other European countries (Germany, UK, etc.) and because humanitarian standards are perceived to be higher in Italy than in other countries (i.e. their arrival in Europe often starts with a forced detention in prison camps in Bulgaria). The presence in Gorizia is mostly motivated by mere chance. No respondent knew of Gorizia before arriving there. Gorizia is the first town in Italy at the end of the Balkan route and migrants are intercepted there by police or dropped there by smugglers. If arriving in bigger Italian cities (such as Milan, Rome or even Trieste), asylum seekers are redirected to smaller centers (such as Gorizia) where assistance and volunteers' aid is still available and not overflowed.

Asylum seekers present in Gorizia declared not to care where they could settle down, be it Gorizia or another town, as long as they could be safe and start reconstructing their own life (e.g. finding a job, a house, having medical assistance, etc.).

For what concerns the fact that all asylum seekers had a phone or a smartphone, this is related to the fact that the generation of migrants reaching Europe is now a 'digital generation'. Smartphones are an accessible commodity all over the world and once the extended family gathers the necessary amount of money to finance the journey of one family member to Europe, the investment includes a smartphone to keep in touch and also to be able to use GPS when having to walk long distances on foot. What strongly emerged from all the stories collected was the key role played by smartphones in the successful outcome of the journey.

Smartphone was needed to communicate with the family, as well as with the agents and further contacts made along the route. It was used to contact via email or social networks persons that could provide help. It was also very important to be able to rely on the phone's GPS system when walking long distances on foot towards Europe without a guide.

Starting from the research findings, the further research goal for the future is to frame and contextualize the situation in Gorizia, with specific reference to the possibility of receiving and integrating refugees.

This goal is connected to the consideration that the situation in Gorizia (as pilot area, but the same applies to any other town interested by these new migrations have chosen) if objectively approached on the basis of scientific data, could be analyzed so to devise a model for the evaluation of the assets a community can activate in response to external stress.

The baseline theoretical framework, for the envisaged assessment, could be the Rural Livelihoods Approach, as set out by Scoones (1998) for IDS (Institute for Development Studies) and subsequently adopted by international organizations such as DFID (Department for International Development, UK), and FAO.

Although the proposed model is applied by Scoones to a rural context hit by an external stress brought about by socio-environmental changes, in our case its theoretical valence could be a starting point for structuring an integrated analysis of the adaptive capabilities of Gorizia in front of the new migration occurrence.

The starting assumption of the model is that each community (and therefore any individual inside the community) holds four types of resources: financial, natural, human (knowledge, perception, awareness, skills, etc.) and social (presence of formal and informal networks, operation of institutional systems, etc.).

Each community has these elements in different proportions and sizes, which determine unique and contextually specific arrangements which define the characteristics of every community, as well as its resilience, i.e. its capability to answer to an external stress, adapting itself and preserving (or even enhancing) its abilities.

According to this approach, an external stress can be a great opportunity for a community to increase its own resources, since it drives the concerned community to revise them creatively and to make them available for overcoming the crisis.

The identification of the 'starting point' (i.e. sequencing) of a community, the trade offs and the connections among the different types of resources is the basis for the assessment of the system is sustainability and for the assessment of the fluidity of communication among the different nodes, which allows each of them to function in a simpler and more effective way.

The field work detailed in this article is the first step of analysis for the development of such sequencing. The perceptions and perspectives of a sample of asylum seekers have been collected in order to better understand the characteristics of this new migration flow, its reasons and the future projections of the phenomenon, through the stories of the individuals that shape it.

In order to develop a model of sustainable management for receiving and responding to asylum seekers requests for international protection, a precise analysis also of the four resources shaping the receiving community is required.

Since the theoretical framework adopted (Scoones) is based on an assessment of resilience to purely environmental stressors, in our context the model would have to be adapted to embody the specificities of the study case.

To this end, an assessment is appropriate for the following elements:

- natural capital, as “physical” capacity of the reception system (number of beds, meals, etc.);
- human capital, as the set of resources and reception capacity of volunteer networks and/or private initiatives (associations, willingness on the part of citizens, etc.);
- social capital as the set of networks/rules at the institutional level for the reception and for handling asylum applications;
- financial capital as the set of available economic resources (at the institutional, private, voluntary, etc., level).

In addition, it would be important to assess the connections and relationships between the four dimensions. It is evident that, for example, the financial capacity is closely linked to the effectiveness of the social capital and of the human one. Similarly, the natural capital per se is not existing and quantifiable merely as “number of available spaces”, but is instead the result of a combination of factors, including one of a purely physical nature and one institutional (existence of conventions/protocols for the reception management).

Through this study, understanding on the one side the needs and perspectives of migrants (as done in the pilot in Gorizia) and on the other the characteristics of the receiving system, a clearer view on the social change that is occurring (and can no longer be called ‘emergency’ since it is consolidate and constant within the last years) could be available. This in turn could result in a viable support for informed decision making on allocation of resources, both to guarantee the right to international protection to asylum seekers and to allow the community to adapt and benefit from the potential of social growth always hidden in moments of great change.

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