

Irregular migration and security governance in disembarkation ports: the case of Messina

Between 1 and 26 March 2022, irregular migration to Italy reached 18,000 people, marking a significant increase compared to previous years. While these numbers are more modest than in the period between 2013 and 2017, often referred to as a migration “crisis”, the governance of these flows remains a complex challenge. Tackling this challenge requires not only traditional law enforcement capabilities, but also the logistical resources needed for hosting migrants as well as the legal, medical, linguistic and cultural skills required to interact with minors and other vulnerable people from many different nationalities. The war in Ukraine has not only displaced millions of refugees, but is also threatening a global food crisis with inevitable repercussions on irregular mobility. Moreover, the persistence of the COVID-19 pandemic has added the need to contain the spread of pandemic diseases to the other risks traditionally attributed to irregular migration.

The making of effective humanitarian and public security policies that go beyond emergency logics and prove capable of tackling migratory flows guaranteeing both security and respect for fundamental rights is therefore essential. As stressed by several studies, security policies should be understood as forms of governance that require coordination between international, national and local institutions, as well as between public and private actors. This tendency is especially apparent in the case of migration policies, which warrant synergies between European agencies like Frontex and Europol, non-governmental organizations, and national and local governments.

Local government agencies play a crucial role in accommodating migrants upon arrival, a process that requires a balancing of public security concerns and the protection of fundamental rights and a need to mediate between local populations’ understandable concerns and legal, ethical, and humanitarian imperatives. Security scholars belonging to the so-called Paris school have pointed to the pivotal role played by security practices, stressing the need to study the habitus, routines, and organizational cultures of security forces in order to gauge the difficult relationship between security and individual rights. The local dimension of Italian irregular migration governance, however, has benefitted from few and out-dated studies.

This project consists of a systematic study of local irregular migration governance in Messina. Often used as a place of disembarkation for migrants rescued at sea, the city of Messina is an ideal case study for the local security and humanitarian policies developed in response to irregular maritime mobility across the Mediterranean. Thanks to a six months period at the prefecture of Messina, the selected PhD student will be able to examine the daily practices developed by local security forces and their interactions with migrants and the different organizations focusing on migrants’ accommodation and integration. Moreover, a six months period at the university of Granada will allow for developing a comparative dimension, enabling the student to examine how local government agencies in two different European countries of irregular migrants’ first entry tackle the challenge of irregular maritime mobility.

Given the multidisciplinary nature of the project, the selected PhD student will employ different research methodologies, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. Access to quantitative data on the size and demography of migratory

flows, irregular migrants' alleged involvement in crime, and financial and human resources allocated to migrants' disembarkation, identification, and accommodation will enable the PhD candidate to use descriptive and inferential statistics. Moreover, the field research at the Prefecture of Messina will enable the candidate to conduct semi-structured interviews, ethnographic research, and participant observations.

By doing so, the project will provide an innovative contribution to the scientific literature on securitization practices, and how these evolve over time and across countries. Moreover, the research will contribute to the development of knowledge and competences that are vital for Italian public administration by examining different modes of security governance at the local, national, and European level. The findings will therefore contribute to enhance public administrations' ability to develop effective policies to govern irregular migration flows, strengthening the organizational, management and communication capabilities of security forces by applying cutting edge theories from the fields of political science and sociologies.

Thanks to a teaching and research portfolio that combines history, law, sociology, and political science, a multidisciplinary research programme like the doctorate in Political Sciences at the University of Messina will equip the PhD candidate with all the theoretical and the methodological tools required for researching this subject, thereby offering an ideal environment for conducting the project proposed above.