



Reinforcing Integration via
Sponsorship Enhancement

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REINFORCING INTEGRATION THROUGH SPONSORSHIP ENHANCEMENT

LITERATURE STUDY ON COMMUNITY SPONSORSHIP IN
BELGIUM, ITALY AND LITHUANIA



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Sylvie Van Dam

Mieke Schrooten

Editors

January 2025

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List of Abbreviations

AMIF	Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund
ARCI	Associazione Ricreativa e Culturale Italiana – Recreative and Cultural Italian Association
ASGI	Italian Association for Juridical Studies on Migration
BBB	Bed, Bath and Bread
BELCO	Belgian Cultural Orientating training
BIPs	Beneficiaries of international protection
BPM	Blocchi Precari Metropolitan
CARA	Centri di Accoglienza Richiedenti Asilo – Asylum seeker centres
CAS	Centri di Accoglienza Straordinaria
CEI	Conferenza Episcopale Italiana
CESCR	UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
CGRS	Belgian Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons
CIAC	Centro Immigrazione Asilo e Cooperazione Internazionale di Parma e Provincia
COMET	Complementary Pathways Network
CS	Community Sponsorship
CSI	Community Sponsorship Ireland
EC	European Commission
EEA	European Economic Area
ELA	European Labour Authority
EMN	European Migration Network
EU	European Union
EUAA	European Union Agency for Asylum
EWSI	European Website on Integration
FCEI	Federazione Chiese Evangeliche in Italia – Federation of Evangelical Churches in Italy
Fedasil	Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers
FIAIP	Italian Federation of Real Estate Agents

ICC	International Criminal Court
ICMC	International Catholic Migration Commission
IHV	International House Vilnius
IOM	International Organization for Migration
LAIs	Local Accommodation Initiatives
LGBTQI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex
LIFO	Last In First Out
MEDU	Medici per i Diritti Umani
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NIEM	National Integration Evaluation Mechanism
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OMI	Osservatorio del Mercato Immobiliare
PCI	Italian Communist Party
PCSW	Public Centre for Social Welfare
PSR	Private Sponsorship of Refugees Programme
QSN	Quality Sponsorship Network
RISE	Reinforcing Integration through Sponsorship Enhancement
RRC	Refugee Reception Centre
RRRP	Regional Refugee Response Plan
RWI	Refugees Welcome Italia
SAI	Sistema di Accoglienza e Integrazione – Reception and Integration System
SPRAR	Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati – Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats
UMCs	Unaccompanied Migrant Children
UN	United Nations
UNAR	National Office against Racial Discrimination
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Preface

In 2024, the number of people forced to leave their homes due to conflict, violence, climate change, and other reasons hit record highs. This surge has placed significant pressure on the reception systems in the EU, with some Member States struggling to meet their obligations to provide suitable accommodation for all applicants of international protection. In response, the European Commission (EC) has emphasised the urgent need for sustainable accommodation solutions, with community sponsorship (CS) emerging as a promising approach.

This report presents the findings of a literature review led by Odisee University of Applied Sciences and conducted during the first phase of the RISE – Reinforcing Integration through Sponsorship Enhancement – project. This study supports our project aims by exploring the reception and housing issues faced by beneficiaries of international protection in the three project countries: Belgium, Italy, and Lithuania. It examines relevant policies, trends, and the implementation of community sponsorship models. By synthesising these findings and combining them with the findings of the RISE Assessment Report, we aim to distil actionable insights and highlight opportunities for enhancing community sponsorship practices.

I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to all our project partners, whose invaluable support and collaboration made this project possible. Special thanks to Odisee University of Applied Sciences (Belgium), Roma Tre University (Italy), Priëmimo ir Integracijos Agentūra (Lithuania), and the International Organization for Migration colleagues from Country Offices in Lithuania, Belgium, and Italy, the Regional Office in Vienna, and the Global Office in Brussels.

We are also thankful for the contributions of our project associates: the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania, Lietuvos Savivaldybių Asociacija, Stiprūs Kartu, Vilniaus Arkivyskupijos Caritas, Refugee Council (Lithuania), the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers Fedasil (Belgium), and of course, the project donor, the European Commission. Additionally, we extend our gratitude to all other partners whose support made this work possible, even though we cannot list them all here.

As the project manager, I have witnessed the dedication and hard work of our team in producing this study. Despite the vast differences in our three project countries and varying experiences with community sponsorship, our collective efforts have resulted in a report that we are proud to present to you. We hope it provides valuable insights and fosters further discussion on community sponsorship and integration. Thank you for your interest and engagement.

Vytautas Ežerskis

RISE Project Manager

1. Introduction

Mieke Schrooten, Sylvie Van Dam (Odisee University of Applied Sciences)

The growing scale of displacement worldwide continues to challenge the international community. In 2023, 1 048 900 first-time asylum applicants (non-EU citizens) applied for international protection in EU countries, marking the highest figure since the peaks of 2015 and 2016 (Eurostat, 2024). Additionally, 17 EU Member States collectively pledged over 29 157 places for resettlement and humanitarian admissions (European Commission, 2024). Concurrently, approximately 4,2 million people fleeing Ukraine after the Russian invasion benefitted from temporary protection measures in the EU. In 2024, the global number of displaced individuals due to conflict, violence, natural disasters, and other reasons has reached unprecedented levels in modern-day records (IOM, 2024).

This escalating demand for protection has placed significant pressure on Member States' reception systems. The irregular and unpredictable nature of arrivals in recent years has exacerbated these challenges, leaving countries like France, Italy, Cyprus, Belgium, Greece, Ireland, and Lithuania struggling to meet their obligations to provide suitable accommodation for all applicants of international protection (Mouzourakis et al., 2019).

In this light, the European Commission has repeatedly highlighted the urgent need for sustainable accommodation solutions (European Commission, 2020a, 2022). Its *Recommendation on Legal Pathways to Protection in the EU* (2020b) encouraged Member States to adopt community sponsorship (CS) models to expand resettlement opportunities while enhancing integration. These models involve leveraging community-based housing solutions rather than relying solely on traditional state-led reception facilities. The Commission has also pledged its support to Member States in establishing and scaling up such initiatives.

Community sponsorship programs have shown considerable success in countries like Canada, Australia, the UK, and the US, where they have facilitated community-driven integration support for beneficiaries of international protection. In Europe, however, these programs remain relatively nascent. To address this gap and build further expertise around community sponsorship in Europe, the RISE - Reinforcing Integration through Sponsorship Enhancement – project was launched in Belgium, Italy, and Lithuania. The project seeks to alleviate housing shortages for beneficiaries of international protection by refining, developing, and piloting community sponsorship schemes while strengthening sponsor engagement.

This report presents the findings of a literature review conducted during the first phase of the RISE project. The review aimed to enhance understanding of reception and housing issues faced by beneficiaries of international protection in Belgium, Italy and Lithuania. It explores relevant policies, trends, and the conceptualisation and implementation of community sponsorship models in these countries. These insights will inform subsequent project phases, which focus on assessing and piloting housing solutions within community sponsorship frameworks and developing tools to support innovative schemes.

Chapter 2 outlines the general concept of community sponsorship and reviews the current European situation around community sponsorship. Chapters 3 to 5 examine reception and housing policies and the context of community sponsorship in Belgium, Italy and Lithuania, respectively. Chapter 6 offers a cross-national analysis of the findings.

2. What is community sponsorship?

Mieke Schrooten, Sylvie Van Dam (Odisee University of Applied Sciences)

Even though there is no uniform or settled definition of community sponsorship, it is broadly understood as “a public-private partnership between governments, who facilitate legal admission for refugees, and private or community actors who provide financial, social and emotional support to receive and settle refugees in the communities” (ICMC Europe et al., 2017, p. 36). By directly involving local communities, sponsorship programs aim to foster better integration outcomes and broader public support for refugee resettlement.

While community sponsorship is not a legal pathway to protection in itself, it serves as a mechanism for hosting refugees, based on the shared responsibility of public authorities and private actors. Ideally, such schemes create additional pathways to protection, allowing more refugees to be admitted beyond a country’s existing resettlement commitments (Duken & Rasche, 2021).


2.1 ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF COMMUNITY SPONSORSHIP

Sponsorship originated in Canada with the ‘Private Sponsorship of Refugees Programme (PSR)’, which has been operational since 1978. This program enables Canadians to resettle specific individuals or families who qualify as refugees under Canada’s refugee and humanitarian program. Privately sponsored refugees are approved by Canadian visa officers outside of Canada and become permanent residents upon arrival.

Private sponsors are volunteer groups of Canadians or organisations, including faith-based associations, ethnocultural groups or settlement organisations. These sponsoring groups are responsible for providing refugees with settlement assistance, as well as material and financial support for up to one year from their arrival date. Additionally, they offer social, emotional and settlement support (UNHCR, 2024).

Research from Canada has shown that sponsorship can be cost-effective, reducing the financial burden on the government. Moreover, sponsored beneficiaries acquire language skills faster, enter the labour market earlier and thus become self-supporting sooner than government-assisted refugees (Hyndman, 2011; Yu et al., 2007).

In recent decades, the sponsorship model has expanded globally, taking on diverse forms. This move aligns with international trends emphasising civil society’s role in expanding national resettlement programs and promoting refugee integration in host communities. While several other countries have also implemented private sponsorship, community sponsorship models have emerged as well. Although both models involve the engagement of local communities for the reception and integration of refugees, they differ in their nature.



Private sponsorship versus community sponsorship

Private sponsorship pathways are complementary pathways that facilitate the admission of refugees in a new country. In this model, sponsors play a key role throughout the process, as they identify and select the beneficiaries and are actively involved in their admission, reception, and integration. Unlike resettlement, which is based solely on the risks and needs of refugees and managed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), private sponsorship allows sponsors to nominate individuals based on other factors such as family links, skills or professional and educational backgrounds.

Community sponsorship, on the other hand, involves individuals, organisations or communities supporting the reception and integration of refugees who have already been accepted into a country through UNHCR referral or different pathways like education or employment opportunities. In this model, the sponsored person is selected and admitted independently from the sponsor, with the sponsor's role beginning only after the beneficiary's arrival in the country.

2.2 VARIATIONS IN IMPLEMENTATION ACROSS EUROPE

Ten years ago, no CS models were found in Europe. The first European community sponsorship programme was introduced in the UK in 2016, followed by the Basque country's 'Auzolana II Community sponsorship programme' in 2018. Subsequently, programmes emerged in Ireland (Community sponsorship Ireland, CSI) and Germany (New Start in a Team, NesT) in 2019, and in Belgium in 2020. Spain expanded its efforts following the success of the Basque pilot, launching sponsorship programmes in Valencia and Navarra in 2020 (Reyes & D'Avino, 2023). More recently, CS programmes have been piloted in Portugal, Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden (EUAA, 2024).

In Europe, community sponsorship has been deployed with a degree of flexibility across member states as an all-encompassing approach to supporting the integration of refugees and offering pathways to protection. Although sponsorship programmes vary in each national context, current practice generally falls into two categories:

- Resettlement-based sponsorship: integrated into existing resettlement programs.
- Complementary pathways: offering additional routes to protection beyond resettlement.

Despite variations, sponsors typically bear practical – and often financial – responsibilities for facilitating refugee integration in the host society. These responsibilities include providing housing, language support, cultural orientation and emotional assistance.

2.2.1 Resettlement-based sponsorship schemes

Programmes in countries such as the United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany, Spain, Portugal and Belgium are structured as resettlement-based sponsorship schemes. Refugees are identified and nominated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), primarily based on vulnerability criteria. Refugees are then selected by the European country's government. While some member states deploy this approach within their resettlement efforts, others do so by creating additional resettlement places.

In these schemes:

- Sponsors act as mentors, assisting refugees with navigating local systems, building community connections and accessing language and cultural support. They are usually also responsible for fundraising and securing accommodation.
- Civil society organisations facilitate the matching process between refugees and volunteer sponsoring groups, and offer support during the sponsorship period (EUAA, 2024; Reyes & D'Avino, 2023).



Resettlement

Resettlement is an instrument to grant international protection to refugees whose life, liberty, security, health or other fundamental rights are threatened in the country in which they have sought refuge.

It consists of transferring refugees from the country where they have sought asylum to another state that has agreed to take them in and eventually grant them permanent residence.

Resettlement is in line with the European Commission's aim to strengthen legal and safe migration routes to the EU and provide sustainable solutions. In doing so, the Commission seeks to respond to the often-dangerous routes that people on the run take to try to get to Europe. Resettlement is also a way to show international solidarity with countries receiving large numbers of refugees.

Across Europe, the design and implementation of community sponsorship programmes vary widely, influenced by local, regional and national contexts. Key areas of divergence include:

- **Actors and roles:** The extent of involvement by government entities (local, regional, or national) and civil society organisations differs. Different compositions bring about distinct implementations.
- **Financial responsibilities:** Sponsorship groups may bear varying levels of financial responsibility for refugees' reception and integration.
- **Selection and matching processes:** These processes can be government-led, NGO-driven or managed directly by sponsors.

2.2.2 Complementary pathways through humanitarian corridors

In countries like Italy, France and Belgium, sponsorship programmes operate through humanitarian corridors or complementary pathways in addition to resettlement. Civil society organisations, in agreement with their respective governments, identify and select refugees, who are initially admitted in the country on humanitarian visas, to be welcomed according to vulnerability criteria and in collaboration with the UNHCR. These organisations coordinate refugees' arrival and match them with groups of volunteers for settlement support (Duken & Rasche, 2021; Reyes & D'Avino, 2023).

2.2.3 A focus on Belgium, Italy, and Lithuania

In the rest of this report, we investigate the operationalisation of community sponsorship in Belgium, Italy and Lithuania. Belgium has piloted a CS model since 2020, however its scale has remained limited. In April 2023 Fedasil launched a recruitment campaign to mobilise new sponsor groups, but this has not generated much interest so far. To address this, new approaches are being explored, including dedicated investment to reduce the housing barrier and strengthen outreach to diaspora groups in collaboration with IOM's Diaspora Advisory Board.

In Italy, the implementation of humanitarian corridors, where Civil Society Organisations sponsor the selection, entry, accommodation, and integration of people in need of protection, has successfully ensured the safe arrival of several thousand individuals. However, evaluations of the programme have highlighted the need for intercultural training to improve social relationships between sponsors and beneficiaries, as only 6 per cent of beneficiaries were living autonomously in Italy after the programme (Agatiello & Hueck, 2022).

Although Lithuania does not yet have a formal community sponsorship programme, there are community-based initiatives providing support to refugees. One notable example is 'Strong Together', where Lithuanian society united to support war refugees from Ukraine.

In the next chapters, we will highlight key challenges and policies related to refugee housing in each country and examine the role of international organisations in addressing these topics. We will also document existing practices. In the final chapter, we will identify lessons learned and assess how these insights can enhance community sponsorship frameworks.

3. Refugee reception and housing in Belgium

Sylvie Van Dam, Mieke Schrooten (Odisee University of Applied Sciences)

Evi Vermeulen, Audrey Bety, Rosalie Reyntjens, Daisy Van de Vorst (IOM Belgium)

In this chapter, we explore the pressures and challenges Belgium faces in the reception and housing of applicants for international protection. We begin by presenting general migration and asylum statistics in Belgium, followed by an in-depth discussion of the reception and housing conditions for newcomers. Finally, we contextualise community sponsorship concepts and practices in the country.

3.1. MIGRATION AND ASYLUM TRENDS

The history of migration in Belgium can be divided into several phases, each marked by distinct policies and socio-economic conditions.

During the first phase, between 1946 and 1974, labour migration was regulated by quotas to meet the demands of post-World War II industrial production. Bilateral agreements with countries like Spain, Greece, Morocco, Turkey, Tunisia, Algeria, and Yugoslavia facilitated this controlled migration. Turkish and Moroccan citizens became the largest non-European nationality groups in Belgium, a trend that continues today. The European Communities also began their integration process, granting free movement of workers within the Benelux countries in 1958 and among the six European Community Member States in 1968. However, economic downturns in the late 1960s led to stricter immigration controls and an official ban on economic migration by 1974, with around 9 000 people regularised by the end of this period (EMN, 2009).

The second phase, from 1974 to 1983, was characterised by a migration stop and efforts to integrate immigrants. The borders were closed, and the migration balance turned negative by 1983. The Aliens Act of 1980, which remains a cornerstone of Belgian migration and asylum law, was adopted during this period. Integration became a political priority, with significant support for granting local voting rights to foreigners, although this was only realized in 2004 (EMN, 2009).

The third phase, from 1983 to 1999, saw a resurgence in immigration despite closed borders and high unemployment. The rise of a parallel economy and global migration trends led to increased family reunifications and asylum applications, peaking in the early 1990s. The fall of the Iron Curtain and conflicts in the former Yugoslavia contributed to these numbers. Policy measures like the LIFO (Last In First Out) principle and the removal of financial benefits for asylum seekers were introduced to manage the influx, and the concept of "Fortress Europe" emerged, prioritizing deterrence over integration (EMN, 2009).

The fourth phase, from 1999 to 2008, marked a shift towards a more balanced and global approach to migration. The Verhofstadt I government aimed to combine strict removal policies with openness, exemplified by a one-time legalization campaign benefiting over 50 000 people. Migration policy began to align more with European Union standards, moving away from the idea of "zero migration" to a more comprehensive approach. The Treaty of Amsterdam and subsequent European Councils further developed a common asylum and migration policy. This period also saw the appointment of Annemie Turtelboom as the first Belgian Minister solely responsible for Migration and Asylum policies (EMN, 2009).

In recent years, Belgium has faced several reception crises, notably in 2015 and 2021, due to spikes in asylum requests and political decisions affecting reception centres. The Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil) has been strained by various factors, including evacuations from Afghanistan and a housing market crisis. Measures introduced in 2022 aimed to alleviate the situation by encouraging working asylum seekers to leave reception centres. However, a backlog of cases at the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRS) has led to prolonged stays in reception centres, delaying the availability of spaces for new applicants.

As of January 1, 2024, Belgium’s total population was 11 763 650.¹ Of this, 64.8 per cent were Belgians with a Belgian background, 21.6 per cent were Belgians with a foreign background and 13.7 per cent were non-Belgians.² There are notable regional differences in these demographics. The Flemish Region has the highest proportion of Belgians with a Belgian background, while the Brussels-Capital Region has the lowest. Conversely, the Brussels-Capital Region has the highest percentages of Belgians with a foreign background and non-Belgians, with these percentages being lower in the Flemish and Walloon regions (Statbel, 2024).

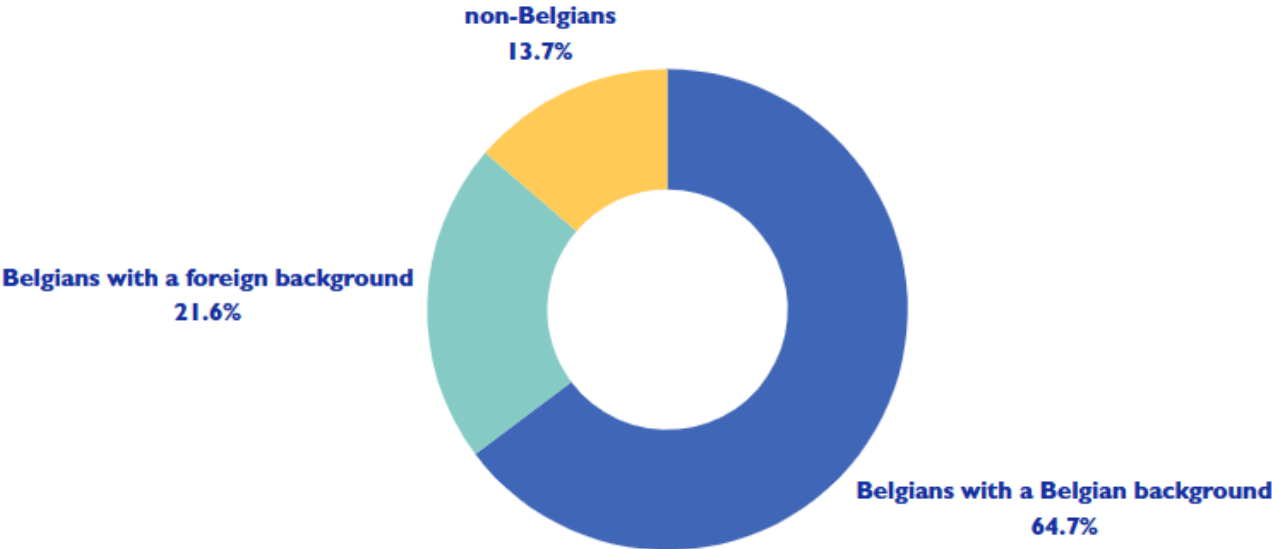


Figure 1. Percentages of Belgian citizens based on their national background

Overall, diversity by origin has increased in Belgium over the past decades: the share of Belgians with a Belgian background has decreased, while the proportions of Belgians with a foreign background and non-Belgians have risen (Vandekerckhove et al., 2023). This broader diversification of society includes various factors, one of which is the influx of applicants for international protection.

In 2023, 35 507 people applied for international protection in Belgium, including 284 persons through resettlement programmes. The main countries from which the applicants for international protection

¹ This figure excludes individuals in the waiting register, which records persons with an asylum application that is still under review.
² The category 'Belgians with a foreign background' includes individuals who did not have Belgian nationality as their first registered nationality but have since acquired it, as well as those who have Belgian nationality as their first registered nationality but have at least one parent with a foreign first registered nationality.
 Nearly all Belgians with a Belgian background (98.4 per cent) were born in Belgium. In contrast, 68.9 per cent of Belgians with a foreign background and 14.7 per cent of non-Belgians were born in Belgium.

originated were Syria, Afghanistan, Palestine, Turkey and Eritrea. Additionally, 2 594 applicants were identified as unaccompanied migrant children (CGRS, 2024a).

Regarding outcomes, 43,5 per cent of final decisions in 2023 resulted in applicants being granted international protection. Of these decisions, 42 per cent were decisions granting refugee status and 1.5 per cent were decisions granting subsidiary protection status (CGRS, 2024a).

3.2. THE BELGIAN RECEPTION SYSTEM

In Belgium, asylum policies are a federal responsibility, meaning the national government is tasked with providing accommodation for international protection applicants during the examination of their application. Initial registration of applications typically occurs by the Immigration Office (IO) in Brussels.

The Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil) manages the national reception capacity. Fedasil conducts initial social and medical screenings, informs applicants of their rights and responsibilities and allocates them a reception place. The IO handles application registration and conducts the Dublin examination to determine whether Belgium is responsible for processing the application under EU rules. The Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRS) then reviews the application (Fedasil, 2022a).

Once an application for international protection is submitted, applicants are entitled to material assistance – commonly referred to as BBB (Bed, Bath and Bread) – throughout the procedure. This assistance includes accommodation in an accommodation centre, meals, clothing, social and medical support, psychological care, a daily allowance, legal assistance, interpreting services, and access to training programs. The number of such collective accommodation centres fluctuates between 60 and 80, spread across Belgium. The accommodation centres are generally operated by Fedasil, the Red Cross or Caritas. They offer collective accommodation within an open reception structure.

As of March 2024, the entire reception network had a total capacity of 35 643 places, with collective accommodation centres accounting for 77 per cent of the capacity (Fedasil, 2024a). The remaining spaces are provided through Local Accommodation Initiatives (LAIs), organised by municipalities and NGOs. LAIs are mainly intended for the most vulnerable refugees, such as families with children, and for refugees who are most likely to be accepted because they originate from high-risk countries (Beckmans & Geldof, 2024).

When the application procedure concludes, the right to accommodation also ends. If the application is denied, the individual receives an order to leave the Belgian territory, generally within 30 days. Applicants can submit appeals or initiate alternative procedures, such as family reunification, humanitarian or medical regularisation. During this time, the right to accommodation persists until all legal avenues are exhausted. For those with confirmed negative decisions by the Council for Alien Law Litigation, open return centres are available (CGRS, 2024b).

If the application is approved, the individual receives a residence permit and must begin the search for independent housing. Refugees or beneficiaries of subsidiary protection are allowed to stay in accommodation centres or LAIs for an additional two months while they seek housing. During this transition, they can receive support from Public Centres for Social Welfare (PCSW) to find suitable accommodation (Wyckaert et al., 2020).

3.3. CHALLENGES AROUND RECEPTION AND HOUSING

3.3.1 Reception or accommodation crisis

Between 2015 and 2021, the number of reception centres in Belgium varied between 50 and 80, providing 17 411 places in 2015, which increased to 33 659 places in 2016 and decreased to 28 169 in November 2021 (Beeckmans & Geldof, 2024).

Belgium is currently grappling with a severe reception or accommodation crisis, with its origins traced to different moments in recent years. Some sources indicate the summer of 2015 as a starting point, when a sharp increase in asylum requests occurred (Geldof et al., 2023; Groeninck et al., 2019; Myria, 2022; Rea et al., 2019). Others point to winter 2021, when reduced asylum applications and political decisions led to the closure of many reception centres. This left Belgium unprepared for the subsequent surge of asylum requests (Sewell et al., 2023; UNHCR, 2023b).

Several additional factors have compounded the crisis:

- Severe floodings in Wallonia in 2021 damaged parts of the reception capacities/network.
- A backlog of cases at the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRS), which by January 2024 had reached 20 086 files, caused prolonged stays in reception centres and delayed the availability of spaces for new applicants.
- Challenges in mobilising resources and staff, along with local resistance to accepting refugees.

The crisis has left many without shelter. While some people found shelter with acquaintances or humanitarian emergency shelters, others were left to their own devices in squats or on the streets. Initially, young single men were most affected, but by October 2022, families, children and women were also being denied access to accommodation. The shortage of reception places has led to both legal and humanitarian consequences. Many asylum seekers have been denied basic human rights, including access to essential services and social assistance. Several social initiatives offer emergency and homeless services, but they are overwhelmed by the overburdened reception system.

This situation has drawn sharp criticism and legal action. In January 2022, ten social organisations filed a lawsuit against the Belgian state for failing to fulfil its international obligations regarding material aid for applicants for international protection. The Brussels Court of First Instance therefore condemned the Belgian state 6 761 times between 2022 and May 2023. By March 2024, the Belgian state had been condemned 9 100 times, reflecting ongoing systematic issues.

In 2023, the European Court of Human Rights condemned Belgium in the Camara judgment because the country did not provide reception to an asylum seeker for five months. The Court identified a systemic

No. of accommodation places in Belgian reception facilities

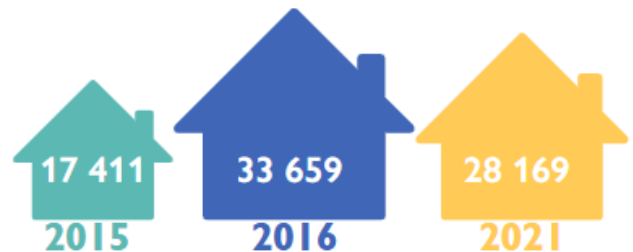


Figure 2. Visual representation of number accommodation places in Belgian reception facilities

problem and pointed to the Belgian State's manifest refusal to comply with court orders, which had ordered the government to provide reception.

In March 2023, 3 000 people were on the waiting list for reception centres. Since 2023, the reception crisis has only worsened. By March 2024, this number rose to 3 800, and by mid-June 2024 to 4 097, with waiting times reaching 9 months and more (Myria, 2024; Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen et al., 2024).

3.3.2 Housing crisis

The challenges faced by applicants for international protection do not end with the approval of their application. After being granted asylum or subsidiary protection, they must leave accommodation centres or LAIs and find independent housing, usually on the private rental market. This transition is fraught with obstacles, including an oversaturated housing market, prejudice and discrimination, which severely limit their ability to secure appropriate housing (Beeckmans & Geldof, 2024; Geldof et al., 2023; Lakševics et al., 2024).

Besides a reception crisis (see 3.3.1), Belgium is currently also facing a significant housing crisis characterised by rising demand, limited supply, and geographic price disparities. The private rental market is dominated by individual landlords, and the availability of affordable housing is severely constrained, particularly in urban and suburban areas. This situation is exacerbated by sharp population growth, especially in regions like Brussels, where real estate and rental prices have surged (Beeckmans & Geldof, 2024; El Moussawi, 2024; Heylen, 2023; Housing Europe, 2021).

Belgian administrations and policy makers have a range of housing policy instruments at their disposal. One key instrument is social housing, which supports people in vulnerability in the housing market. Social housing properties are managed by private, non-profit organisations, municipalities, social services, the Housing Fund, and, in some cases, social rental agencies. In social housing, allocation is based on housing needs rather than free market principles. Rent prices are income-linked and capped according to market value (Heylen, 2023).

Despite its importance, social housing represents a small share of the housing stock – 5 per cent in Flanders, 6 per cent in Wallonia and 7 per cent in the Brussels-Capital Region as of 2019, with slight declines or stabilisation over time. Approximately half of the available housing consists of single-family homes. Allocation is centralised and often involves long waiting lists:

- Flanders: An average waiting time of 1 409 days (3.86 years) in 2021.
- Wallonia: Nearly 2 years, with waiting times increasing fivefold over the past five years.
- Brussels-Capital Region: Sharp population growth (9 per cent between 2011 and 2020) has raised real estate and rental prices, further limiting access to affordable housing. At the end of 2021, 51 615 households were on the waiting list for social housing in Brussels, while only 2 164 homes were allocated that year. In addition, about 280 000 households in the Brussels Capital Region meet the criteria for social housing but are not on the waiting lists, amounting to nearly 50 per cent of households in the region (Heylen, 2023; Housing Europe, 2021).

Besides long waiting lists, social housing is also plagued by stringent eligibility requirements. Notably, recent changes under the Flemish coalition agreement further tighten access to social housing by introducing language proficiency requirements (Vlaamse Regering, 2024).

As refugees face several barriers in accessing social housing, many turn to the private housing market, where they again face numerous obstacles. A shortage of housing stock, particularly single-family homes in and around cities, limits their options (Agentschap Wonen in Vlaanderen, 2024; Heylen, 2023). Rental and real estate prices have risen significantly, particularly in cities and suburban areas, exacerbating the affordability problem for lower-income groups (Godart et al., 2023). Moreover, in search for private rental housing, newcomers face financial barriers when they are, for instance, unable to pay both the rental deposit and the first month's rent. Alternative rental guarantee mechanisms often have stigmatizing effects, further compounding their difficulties (Agentschap Wonen in Vlaanderen, 2024).

In addition, landlords and real estate agents frequently discriminate based on income source, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, age, and other factors. This systematic bias significantly reduces the pool of available housing for refugees (Unia, 2023b). Racial discrimination in the Belgian housing market remains a significant issue, as evidenced by various studies (Unia, 2023a; Verhaeghe, 2020; Verhaeghe et al., 2023). Research conducted by the Vrije Universiteit Brussel highlights that ethnic minorities, particularly those of Maghreb, Sub-Saharan African, and Turkish descent, face substantial discrimination when seeking rental housing. This discrimination manifests in landlords and real estate agents being less likely to respond to inquiries from individuals with non-Belgian sounding names. Moreover, research with mystery calls and field tests also shows that real estate agents too often respond to requests to discriminate against ethnic minorities and people receiving social allowances (Verstraete & Verhaeghe, 2020).

As formal housing options dwindle, squats have become a structural, albeit precarious, solution for migrant families. These informal arrangements provide immediate relief but face political opposition and frequent eviction threats, further exacerbating the vulnerability of those relying on them (Deleu et al., 2022; Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen et al., 2024). The quality of available housing is another a concern, with issues like overcrowding and poor living conditions prevalent in certain areas (El Moussawi, 2024; Lejeune et al., 2016; Paquot, 2023). These challenges highlight deeper structural issues within the Belgian housing market, making it increasingly difficult for many to secure adequate and affordable housing.



Figure 3. Key challenges faced by beneficiaries of international protection in Belgium

3.4. ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES

In response to the surge in asylum requests in 2022, the Belgian federal government opened 14 new reception centres and urged local authorities to increase their reception capacities. Despite these efforts, the increase was insufficient to address the growing influx of protection requests. Consequently, the government approved 5 100 additional places in March 2023 and amended the Reception Act to facilitate the transition to sustainable housing for recognised refugees while strengthening return policies for rejected asylum seekers (EMN Belgium, 2024).

Despite various initiatives to increase capacity, the reception network remains strained. Measures to accelerate outflow, such as requiring working asylum seekers to leave reception centres, have not resolved the issue. Since autumn 2021, priority for shelter has been given to families, leaving single men on waiting lists. In August 2023, State Secretary for Asylum and Migration Nicole de Moor even temporarily suspended shelter for single men, a decision overturned by the highest administrative court in October 2023, but the practice persists.

In January 2024, the Migration Code was introduced to streamline asylum, labour, and student migration procedures, ensure reasonable processing times and coherent appeal processes, combat procedural abuse and strengthen return policies. However, it has been criticised for not addressing the oversaturated reception system or providing a framework for a distribution plan (Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, 2021; Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen et al., 2024).

While the federal government oversees the accommodation of applicants for international protection, housing is a regional competency. Policy measures to address housing issues include rent regulation, tenant protection, housing quality standards, and financial support such as rent subsidies.

Initially, housing policy in Belgium was federally regulated through the Housing Tenancy Act, which aimed to provide a stable, sustainable, and balanced legal framework to ensure housing security. Key provisions included standard tenancy agreements lasting nine years, free rent determination within a tenancy period, and minimum housing quality requirements to safeguard safety, health, and living conditions (Agentschap Wonen in Vlaanderen, 2024).

Since January 1, 2019, rental housing in Flanders has been governed by the Flemish Housing Rent Decree, which retained the federal Act's principles but introduced two additional goals: promoting access to the private rental market and avoid complexity in housing legislation. These objectives align with the Flemish housing policy, anchored in Articles 1.5 and 1.6 of the Flemish Housing Codex, which upholds the mission that: "Everyone has the right to dignified housing. To this end, it is necessary to promote the availability of adapted housing, of good quality, in a decent living environment, at an affordable price and with housing security" (Agentschap Wonen in Vlaanderen, 2024).

In November 2024, the Brussels-Capital Region introduced amendments to its rental legislation to enhance housing quality and tenant protections (Brussels-Capital Region, 2024; Ordonnance modifiant le Code bruxellois du Logement en vue de concrétiser le droit au logement, 2024). Key changes include:

- Expanded authority for the Regional Housing Inspectorate to enforce safety, hygiene, and equipment standards.
- Limiting rental guarantees to a maximum of two months' rent.

- Ensuring price stability by fixing base rents for nine years.
- Penalizing landlords who evict tenants without a court order.

Additionally, measures were introduced to ensure tenants are well-informed and protected, such as standardised termination letter templates and clear criteria for rental agreements (Brussels-Capital Region, 2024; Ordonnance modifiant le Code bruxellois du Logement en vue de concrétiser le droit au logement, 2024).

In Wallonia, the Regional Housing Inspectorate plays a crucial role in ensuring housing quality and tenant protection. It enforces safety, hygiene, and equipment standards for rental properties, ensuring compliance through inspections and investigations. The Inspectorate has the authority to issue conformity check attestations and certificates of conformity, which verify that properties meet the required standards before they can be rented out. Additionally, it can impose rental bans on non-compliant properties, requiring tenants to move out if necessary. These measures help maintain decent housing conditions and protect tenants' rights in Wallonia (Brussels Housing, 2024).

Recent updates have also further enhanced tenant protections, such as limiting rental guarantees to two months' rent and fixing base rents for nine years. The Walloon government has also ended temporary measures restricting rent indexation based on energy performance, allowing landlords to adjust rents using specific methods. These measures aim to balance tenant and landlord interests, promote access to decent housing, and ensure affordability and quality in Wallonia.

3.4.1 The role of international actors

Since 2022, Fedasil has received support from the European Asylum Agency (EUAA) to enhance both the quality and capacity of its reception facilities. The EUAA provides operational support in three areas:

1. Human resources: EUAA experts are deployed as social workers and mentors in reception centres.
2. Interpretation services: Approximately 40 interpreters work across various Fedasil services to support applicants for international protection.
3. Material support: The EUAA supplies accommodation containers, with 150 already installed and an additional 522 planned for 2024 (Fedasil, 2024b).

Meanwhile, international organisations like Amnesty International and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have consistently condemned the Belgian state for its handling of the reception crisis, citing severe consequences for applicants. They have called on the Belgian government to take urgent and decisive action to address the shortcomings in the reception system (IOM Belgium, 2024; Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen et al., 2024).

3.5. COMMUNITY SPONSORSHIP IN BELGIUM

In Belgium, three sponsorship schemes co-exist:



Figure 4. Community sponsorship and adjacent initiatives in Belgium

- A resettlement-based community sponsorship programme, coordinated by Fedasil in collaboration with Caritas International.
- A humanitarian corridor programme, coordinated by Sant’Egidio.
- A higher education pathway pilot, run by Fedasil, Caritas International and KU Leuven.

Additionally, several other solidarity practices in Belgium, while not officially labelled as community sponsorship, share many of its core elements. These practices generally involve private individuals or non-governmental actors supporting refugees with reception and guidance over a defined period. As these practices can inspire the development of toolkits and clear guidelines for existing or prospective sponsorship schemes – a main focus of the RISE project – we include them in this report.

Specifically, we focus on two examples:

- The citizens’ platform BELRefugees, which emerged in Brussels during the 2015 reception crisis.
- #FreeSpot, an accommodation project in response to the arrival of Ukrainian refugees in 2022.

In the following sections, we briefly outline these initiatives. We then conduct a thematic analysis of five areas relevant to the RISE project: key stakeholder engagement, recruitment of volunteers/sponsors, support of volunteers/sponsors, matching criteria and housing.

3.5.1 Resettlement-based community sponsorship scheme

The community sponsorship programme in Belgium, introduced in 2020, is a reception model within the traditional resettlement programme. The programme is coordinated by Fedasil and Caritas International. The program’s objectives include:

- Diversifying legal and safe pathways for people in need of international protection.
- Strengthening civil society actors’ expertise.
- Fostering a positive image of refugees in Belgium.
- Promoting refugee integration through neighbourhood involvement (Fedasil, 2022a).

The target group consists of vulnerable resettled refugees who have consented to participate in the CS program. Candidates are identified by the UNHCR, selected by the Belgian Commissioner General for

Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRS), and screened by Fedasil in their country of origin. After selection, Fedasil and Caritas match the refugees with host groups in Belgium, of at least 5 citizens, also known as sponsor groups. If no suitable match is found, refugees enter the standard resettlement process (Fedasil, 2022b; ICMC Europe, 2023).

Once matched, the refugees are welcomed by the sponsor group upon their arrival and accompanied to their new accommodation. From then on, the focus is mainly on accompanying the resettled refugees, welcoming them into the community, helping to build social networks and activities to gain language and social skills with local people. The commitment has a limited term of 1 year.

There is also a financial commitment, especially during the transition phase, when people are just arriving in Belgium. Usually, the sponsor group deposits the rent deposit and also pays for utilities in the beginning. They can partly fall back on a budget from the programme for this (Schrooten et al., 2025).



Resettlement in Belgium

Since 2013, Belgium has had a structural resettlement programme with an annual quota. Since then, Belgium has resettled 5 232 refugees. This involves mainly Syrians from the neighbouring Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon, and Congolese from the Great Lakes region (Schrooten et al., 2025).

3.5.2 Humanitarian corridors

A second programme in Belgium is the humanitarian corridor initiative. Humanitarian corridors originated from a collaboration between the Italian Community of Sant'Egidio, the Waldensian Church, and the Evangelical Churches in Italy (Sant'Egidio, n.d.). Unlike traditional resettlement programmes, beneficiaries of this humanitarian corridor follow the same process as regular applicants for international protection (EUAA, 2023).

Humanitarian corridor programmes aim to:

- Facilitate safe and legal transfers for refugees to Europe through organised channels.
- Promote social inclusion within host countries using solidarity networks.
- Respond to the needs of those fleeing war and poverty, particularly individuals identified as vulnerable under the criteria of European Directive 2013/33.

Participants benefit from an integration program lasting 12-18 months, which provides comprehensive support. However, they are free to exit the programme if they no longer require assistance with their integration (Sant'Egidio, n.d.).

In December 2021, the Belgian State Secretary for Migration and Asylum signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Sant'Egidio community to initiate a humanitarian corridor from 2022 to 2024. The goal was to resettle 250 vulnerable refugees from Afghanistan, Lebanon, Libya, and Syria, with a quota of

75 people set for 2022. However, due to the reception crisis in Belgium, the programme's start was delayed, and the first group of 26 refugees arrived only in November 2022.

By February 2022, over 4 400 individuals have been resettled in European Humanitarian Corridor programmes. Since the start of the project in 2016, the total number of refugees arrived in Belgium as part of the 'Humanitarian Corridors' was 310 in May 2024 (Sant'Egidio, 2024).

3.5.3 Higher education pathway

In 2022, Fedasil and Caritas International launched a higher education pathway project as part of the EU Passworld pilot project, which involves Ireland, Italy and Belgium. This program offers refugee students the opportunity to continue their studies in a third country, supported by a group of volunteers. It is run by Fedasil, Caritas International and KU Leuven.

In 2023, the first 3 students were supported. After responding to a call for applications from their initial host country, their files were reviewed by the KU Leuven. The Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRS) conducted an initial analysis of the selected students' needs for international protection. Fedasil, Caritas and the KU Leuven then chose the three students based on a selection interview that assessed their competences, motivation and social skills (Fedasil, 2024c).

Meanwhile, UNamur and UCLouvain have joined the consortium, and there are plans to expand the programme to other Belgian universities (ICMC Europe, 2023).

3.5.4 BELRefugees

A prominent example of a grassroots movement that, while not an official community sponsorship programme, plays a vital role in supporting and sheltering refugees is the Citizens' Platform BELRefugees. The platform originated during the 2015 reception crisis. In August 2015, the Belgian government imposed a quota on daily asylum registrations. Consequently, many people were forced to seek refuge in the adjacent Maximilian Park. In response, numerous citizen-led initiatives emerged to support these displaced individuals with material aid (e.g., food, clothing and tents), information, and eventually also accommodation. Many citizens opened their homes to provide temporary shelter. To coordinate these diverse efforts, the Citizens' Platform was established, creating a dynamic system to connect refugees with available resources and shelter (Depraetere et al., 2017; Nobbe & Schrooten, 2021; Vandevordt, 2020).³

The Platform's initial efforts were substantial. In the first eight months, it organised:

- Daily support for 500 individuals.
- 101 000 overnight stays, approximately 70 per cent of which were in private homes.
- 58 000 meals, with breakfast alone costing €33 000.

³ Politically, especially this citizen accommodation was a sensitive matter and some people were prosecuted for housing the refugees and transmigrants. They faced allegations of human trafficking.

- A network of 5 000 foster families and over 40 000 members, managed by a dedicated team of approximately 40 volunteers (Simon, 2018).

Although the initial camp in Maximilian Park was dismantled in October 2015, the Platform continued to grow as a nationwide network. To reflect this broader scope, it changed its name to Citizens' Platform BELRefugees, establishing regional branches to address localised needs. These branches operate primarily through donations and solidarity efforts, supplemented by subsidies from entities like the Walloon Region.

Today, BELRefugees provides a comprehensive range of services, including collective emergency accommodation, day care, legal information, restoring family links, psycho-medical-social support and activating rights to mental and physical health. They also offer material aid and activities such as language courses, computer courses and cultural and artistic activities (BELRefugees, 2021). As such, the Platform has become an important actor in supporting refugees and migrants. It continues to coordinate private emergency shelter provided by citizens and has received subsidies for a number of collective reception places.

3.5.5 Private accommodation of displaced Ukrainians

Another notable initiative in Belgium is the private accommodation of displaced Ukrainians following the Russian invasion in 2022. After Russia's war on Ukraine in February 2022, Europe experienced a significant influx of displaced Ukrainians. Despite concerns about this surge, Ukrainians were widely welcomed across Europe. The EU Directive of 4 March 2022 granted them immediate temporary protection status, providing access to social and financial support, healthcare, employment, education, and guaranteed suitable accommodation – either directly or through financial support from host countries.

However, as described earlier, Belgium was already grappling with a reception crisis and severe challenges in its housing market. To address these gaps, many European countries, including Belgium, called upon their citizens for assistance. In this context, former State Secretary for Asylum and Migration, Sammy Mahdi, launched the #FreeSpot campaign on 28 February 2022. This initiative invited private citizens to open their homes to Ukrainian refugees. Within the first week, citizens offered 22 000 places, either by sharing their homes or providing separate accommodations (EUAA, 2022; Schrooten et al., 2022). The hosting period often lasted for several months, with no clear agreement on the duration of the hosting prior to the start.

In addition to the private accommodation facilitated by the #FreeSpot campaign, the Ukrainian diaspora in Belgium played a crucial role in accommodating refugees from Ukraine. Leveraging personal networks of family, friends, and religious organisations, many members of the diaspora helped displaced Ukrainians find shelter.

Belgium has other examples of private accommodation of refugees as well. Since 2016, Pleegzorg Vlaanderen (Foster Care Flanders) has been working with host families to provide accommodation for unaccompanied migrant children and refugees with physical or psychological impairments. This initiative, known as 'Geef de Wereld een Thuis' (Give the World a Home), has facilitated placements for vulnerable refugees with foster families who offer a supportive environment tailored to their specific needs (Pleegzorg Vlaanderen, 2024; Schrooten et al., 2022).

3.6 A THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Having briefly outlined various sponsorship-related models in Belgium, we now turn to an analysis of five thematic areas common across these initiatives. The thematic areas include the engagement of key stakeholders, the recruitment and selection of volunteers/sponsors, the training and support provided to volunteers/sponsors, the establishment of effective matching criteria and the availability and verification of housing. While we will not delve into the specifics of how each initiative addresses these areas, we will provide some overall reflections. By addressing these thematic areas, we aim to identify key lessons that will shape the implementation and evaluation framework for the RISE project.

3.6.1 Engagement of key stakeholders

Through the various initiatives in Belgium, stakeholders play diverse and crucial roles, involving a mix of (local) authorities, social actors and citizens. A key lesson learned is the importance of developing a stakeholder engagement strategy. The experience with the private accommodation of displaced Ukrainians highlighted this need. Due to the crisis nature of the initiative, such a strategy could not be developed beforehand, leading to significant challenges for all stakeholders involved (Schrooten et al., 2024).

The community sponsorship project serves as an inspiring example of how to establish a clear division of responsibilities among partners. In this project, the roles are divided as follows:

- Fedasil: Organises social and medical screenings to assess eligibility for the CS program and provides orientation courses on life in Belgium and the resettlement program. Based on screenings and refugee preferences, Fedasil, in collaboration with Caritas International, makes matching proposals.
- Caritas International: Recruits and selects sponsor groups, develops support frameworks, and proposes matches for Fedasil's approval. Prepares sponsor groups before refugee arrival, monitors them, and acts as a safety net during the support period.
- Sponsor groups: Welcome resettled refugees, support them with housing for one year, cover financial costs until social benefits are received, and assist with daily life, administrative tasks, and community integration.

Role division in Belgian Resettlement-based CS schemes



3.6.2 Recruitment and selection of volunteers/sponsors

Figure 5. Community sponsorship task division in resettlement-based Belgian schemes

The recruitment and selection of volunteers in various Belgian initiatives highlight the importance of structured and flexible approaches to ensure effective support for resettled refugees.

In BELRefugees, recruitment occurs through engaged citizens' networks, the initiative's website and its Facebook page, which centralises information and connects potential hosts and refugees. Unlike the CS program, there are no specific pre-set criteria for selecting sponsors. Anyone willing and capable of accommodating refugees can volunteer. Similarly, the #FreeSpot campaign had no specific selection criteria, allowing for broad, inclusive recruitment strategies that engage a wide range of volunteers.

In the community sponsorship project, any group of at least five individuals can apply to be sponsors. However, applicants undergo a screening process that assesses their motivation, relevant experience, professional activities, capacities, and time availability. A criminal record check is also required (Fedasil, 2022b). This thorough screening process ensures that sponsors are suitable for the role. Given the difficulties around finding housing, the recruitment of landlords requires specific attention. Within the programme, landlords can participate as both landlords and sponsors or choose to rent their housing to resettled refugees without joining a sponsor group. Allowing landlords to participate in different capacities provides flexibility and increases housing options for refugees.

A potential barrier in recruiting potential sponsors is the financial support expected, estimated between € 3 000 to € 5 000 to cover initial costs before refugees receive social benefits (ICMC Europe, 2023). This financial aspect is different from other CS programs in Europe, where sponsors act more like buddies without financial obligations.

3.6.3 Training and support for volunteers/sponsors

The training and support provided to volunteers in various Belgian initiatives underscore the importance of structured and continuous assistance to ensure effective support for refugees.

The community sponsorship programme places a strong emphasis on supporting sponsors through Caritas International. This includes training and preparation before the arrival of refugees, as well as ongoing support throughout the sponsorship period. Refugees also receive a Belgian Cultural Orientating training (BELCO) before arriving in Belgium. Developed by Fedasil, this cultural orientation programme is designed for refugees who meet the conditions for resettlement in Belgium. It takes place after identification by the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRS) in the first country of asylum and a few weeks before transfer to Belgium. BELCO sessions cover themes such as the resettlement process in Belgium, housing, education, the costs of living, standards and values and the social security system (Fedasil, n.d.). The aim of BELCO is to help set expectations and ease the transition. In the humanitarian corridors, considerable attention is also given to training and supporting those involved in refugee support.

In BELRefugees, volunteers can rely on contact persons from the Platform and other partners for support. A critical feature of the Platform's approach is its development of a clear framework for volunteers,

particularly for citizens hosting refugees or providing other forms of support. This framework educates volunteers on the ethical and legal aspects of their roles while highlighting the potential opportunities and challenges of engaging with refugees (Plateforme Citoyenne et al., 2023).

The support of host families who participated in the #FreeSpot campaign varied strongly across municipalities. Many host families felt a lack of support, especially during the first months of the campaign, highlighting the need for better training and support mechanisms, prior to and throughout the period of support (Schrooten et al., 2022).

3.6.4 Effective matching criteria

In the community sponsorship programme, Fedasil provides Caritas International with an anonymous shortlist of eligible candidates, including basic information such as family composition, age, language skills and reception needs. Caritas International then submits a matching proposal to Fedasil for approval, primarily based on the profiles and capacities of the sponsor groups. If no match is found, refugees follow the standard reception process (Fedasil, 2022b; ICMC Europe, 2023).

In the humanitarian corridors programme, matching occurs through the networks of the initiatives and communities that are involved, leveraging existing connections and relationships. In BELRefugees, matching is facilitated through social media platforms. In the #FreeSpot campaign, matching was coordinated by local administrations. In both initiatives, there is no extensive matching process.

3.6.5 Availability and verification of housing

Depending on the form of community sponsorship under review, different approaches and actors are involved in searching for accommodation and performing quality control. In more structured programmes, such as the CS programme, partner organisations conduct housing quality checks based on indicators like the availability of separate rooms and other facilities.

In contrast, the #FreeSpot campaign did not include detailed housing checks in most cases, at least during the initial months. However, at a later stage, local administrations or social organisations often closely monitored the conditions in which displaced Ukrainians were received and accommodated.

Despite these efforts, the availability of quality housing remains a significant challenge in Belgium. This issue cannot be resolved by local administrations or social organisations alone but requires a comprehensive approach involving combined efforts at various levels of governance.

4. Refugee reception and housing in Italy

Stefano Portelli, Vincenzo Carbone, Francesco Maria Pezzulli (Roma Tre University)
Alice Tusarelli, Sirio Morrone, Federico Seibusi, Federica Parisoli (IOM Italy)

4.1 MIGRATION AND ASYLUM TRENDS

Out of Italy's population of 58,9 million, 5 million (8,8 per cent) are foreign citizens. Italy hosts migrant communities from 198 countries, with five nationalities comprising nearly half of its foreign residents: Romanian (1 million people, i.e., more than one in five foreign resident), Moroccan (420 000), Albanian (419 000), Chinese (300 000), and Ukrainian (225 000) (IDOS, 2023). Due to its geographical location, Italy serves as an entry point to the entire European Union, especially through its maritime frontiers, which are currently among the deadliest borders on earth. On its population

Italy officially acknowledged its status as a country of immigration only at the end of the 1990s, when the Italian government passed the main law regulating migration and the status of migrants and asylum seekers (*Testo Unico sull'Immigrazione*). Since then, the law has been constantly modified according to the shifting geopolitical conditions and internal transformations of the political and social landscape. During the last five years (2018-2023), a series of legislative decrees tightened the possibility of entry to migrants and asylum seekers and reduced the economic resources devoted to their reception. However, the number of foreign citizens reaching the country did not descend, resulting in the management of such phenomena being increasingly confined to emergency policies.

Italy remains a country of emigration, with 4 million Italians officially living abroad in 2013, 54 per cent of whom are in Europe. Their average age is 35-49, and only 20 per cent hold a university degree. Emigration from Italy grew after the economic crisis of 2008, peaking in 2011. This trend also affected non-EU migrants residing in Italy, as thousands of third-country nationals were forced to move from Italy to another European country (e.g. Indians to the UK).

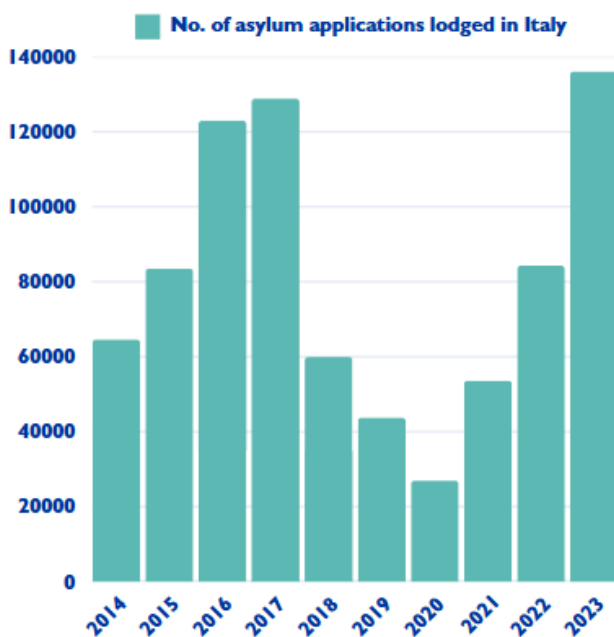


Figure 6. Number of asylum applications lodged in Italy from 2014 until 2023

Until the early 2000s, asylum requests registered in Italy mostly originated from European countries (Romania, Albania, ex-Yugoslavia). With the opening of the central-Mediterranean routes from Tunisia and Libya in 2003, asylum applications submitted by people from African and Asian origins increased, peaking in 2008 with 31 732 requests, mostly from citizens of Nigeria, Somalia, Eritrea, Bangladesh and Pakistan. The central-Mediterranean route was abruptly tightened in 2009 following a controversial agreement between Italy's president Berlusconi and Libya's president Gaddafi. However, the aftermath of the Tunisian revolution and the outbreak of the war in Libya in 2014 pushed the number of asylum requests in Italy up to a new peak of 37 350 (7 030 of which from Nigeria). A

new agreement between the Italian government and post-revolutionary Libya resulted in a decrease in arrivals from the central-Mediterranean route. However, in 2014, arrivals by sea skyrocketed again to a total of 170 000, while asylum requests analysed by the Italian authorities – also thanks to the creation of EU-financed hotspots – reached a record number of 130 119 in 2017⁴.

According to the Ministry of Home Affairs, 157 652 people arrived autonomously to Italy by sea in 2023. Among those registered, one-fifth were originally from Bangladesh (8 754), 15 per cent from Syria (5 831) and 13 per cent from Tunisia (5 114). Almost 19 000 of them were registered as unaccompanied migrant children (UMCs). 2023 displayed a growing trend in arrivals, doubling the numbers of 2021 (67 040). The number of arrivals decreased again in 2024, with 40 660 autonomous arrivals in the first eight months, one-third compared to the same period in 2023.⁵

2023 represented an extraordinary year in terms of deaths at sea: an estimated 3 105 number of people died crossing the Mediterranean. In 2024, 1 620 casualties were recorded until October. Between 2021 and the end of 2022, at least 2 500 migrants departing from Libya died or disappeared, while almost 40 000 were intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard and forcibly brought back to Libya, where they were retained in prisons or migrant detention camps in conditions considered inhumane by the UN. Despite the Italian Court of Cassation declaring Libya an unsafe country in 2021, the Italian Parliament and the European Union confirmed the validity of the 2017 agreement that entails granting €10,5 million to the Libyan Coast Guard to prevent trans-Mediterranean migration to Italy. In July 2022, the Italian Parliament granted an additional €11,8 million to the Libyan Coast Guard (SOS Humanity, 2024). Significantly, while the number of people reaching Italian shores by sea is periodically published on the website of the Ministry of Home Affairs, data on the arrivals by land has not been made public for several years.

Meanwhile, in 2023, 1 648 people reached Italy regularly, mostly Afghan nationals, through third countries (182 within resettlement programs, 779 through humanitarian corridors, 687 via humanitarian evacuations). In 2024, the same number was almost achieved in the first half of the year, with 1 525 people having already reached Italy through legal pathways by August (62 resettlement, 600 humanitarian corridors). It is important to highlight that the number of refugees relative to the total population is much lower compared to other EU countries, with 3.5 refugees for every 1 000 residents (in Sweden and Austria, the numbers are 25 and 15 per 1 000 residents, respectively).⁶

Contrasting with the lower number of arrivals by sea, the first half of 2024 represents an unprecedented peak in asylum requests registered in Italy, amounting to a total of 98 353, an increase compared to the 72 460 presented in the same period in 2023. 2023 had already been considered a peak year for asylum requests, which almost doubled those of 2022, overcoming the reduction of 2020. The 135 820 requests registered in Italy in 2023 represent more than 12 per cent of the total asylum requests forwarded to EU countries in the same period (1.1 million requests) (Eurostat, 2023).

By the end of 2022, Italian reception facilities hosted over 100 000 people. Despite efforts to expand their capacity, many still live in overcrowded and substandard conditions with limited access to basic services and support (Migrantes Foundation, 2022). The surge in newcomers during the first four months of 2023, when the island of Lampedusa was reached by 26 150 migrants (a 498 per cent increase compared to the

⁴ See "Cruscotto statistico giornaliero, Ministero dell'Interno", at <https://www.interno.gov.it>

⁵ See "Cruscotto statistico giornaliero, Ministero dell'Interno", at <https://www.interno.gov.it>

⁶ See "Cruscotto statistico giornaliero, Ministero dell'Interno", at <https://www.interno.gov.it>

same period last year)⁷, further burdened an overstretched reception system, leading to the extension of emergency and temporary accommodations.

4.2 THE ITALIAN RECEPTION SYSTEM

The reference regulation on the status of refugees in Italy is formally the 1951 Geneva Convention, ratified by Italy in 1954 and translated into national law (39/1990) in 1990. In 1997, Italy adopted the Dublin Convention, which states that the country of arrival is the only one considered able to process the asylum request. The request must be forwarded to the border police post, which checks the criteria of exclusion and forwards the request to the immigration office (Questura), which issues a provisional residence permit. A Territorial Commission decides on accepting or rejecting the asylum request. For people who are rejected, the Commission may request a temporary permit from the Questura; otherwise, the person may be subject to expulsion. Temporary permits do not allow work; thus, asylum seekers are supported with financial compensation, which until 2005 only lasted 45 days.

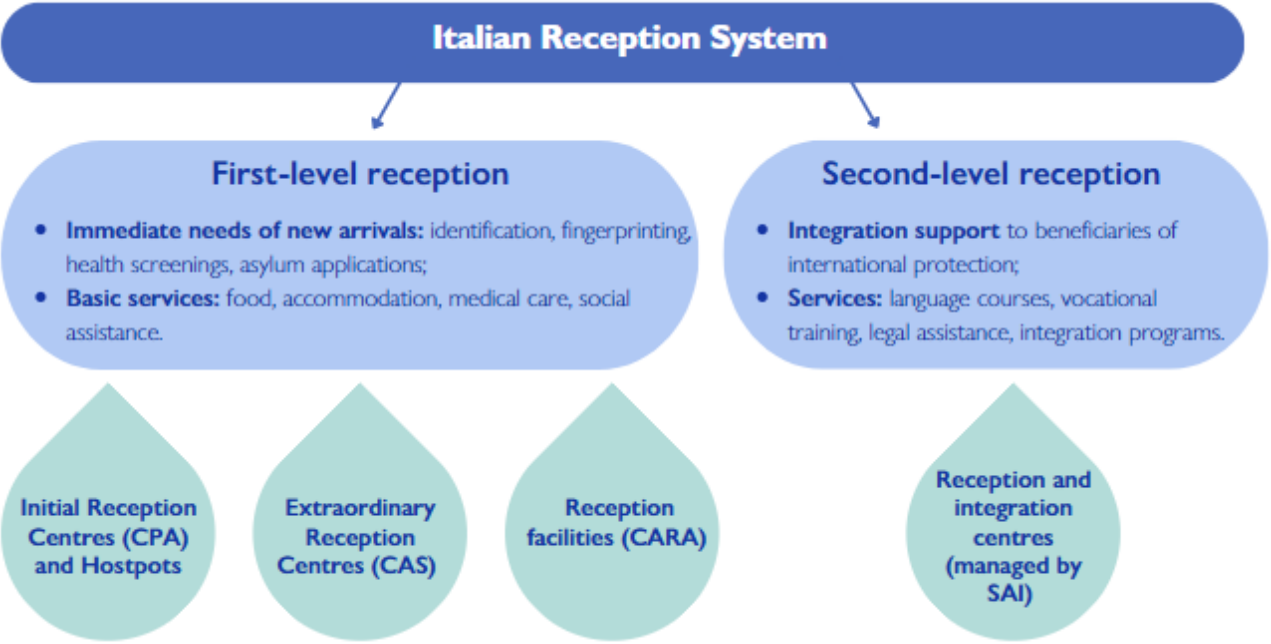


Figure 7. Reception facility types in the Italian reception system

The Italian reception system has been initially framed through an emergency paradigm. DLGS 112/98 entrusted its management to the Ministry of Home Affairs, which in turn delegated the responsibility to its decentralised agency in the different territories (*Prefettura*) and to the civil body of *protezione civile*. The system is organised in a first stage called *prima accoglienza*, where asylum seekers are housed while requesting refugee status (such as CARA, *Centri di Accoglienza Richiedenti Asilo*), and a second level, *seconda accoglienza*, aimed at facilitating integration into the receiving society. Most of these facilities, called CAS

⁷ See "Cruscotto statistico giornaliero, Ministero dell'Interno", at <https://www.interno.gov.it>

(*Centri di Accoglienza Straordinaria*), are run by the Ministry of Home Affairs: they are large emergency shelters located in different parts of the Italian peninsula, either owned or rented by the Italian State, and managed by private firms or non-profit organisations. In 2017, a new decentralised system of *seconda accoglienza* was created, especially targeted at vulnerable people, and entrusted to the management of municipal authorities, under the name of SPRAR (*Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati*), later modified to SIPROIMI and today known as SAI (*Sistema di Accoglienza e Integrazione*). The binary between the governmental system of emergency shelters (CAS) and the decentralised SAI system, managed by local authorities, has not yet been solved.

SAI include smaller shelters, flats or houses that aim to protect refugees by contributing to their integration in their local environments. Despite constant praise to the social function it develops, SAI only host only one-third of the migrant population (32.8 per cent) and have recently suffered budgetary cutbacks. Many SAI shelters have become unable to provide professional services necessary for integration. In 2021, the number of migrants hosted in SAI was 42 464, a 13.6 per cent increase from 2020. This increase is mostly (42.2 per cent) due to unaccompanied migrant children, who now make up 19 per cent of the people hosted in the SAI system.

Non-emergency approaches to migration are also in place. In 2020, for instance, Italy inaugurated its ninth wave of regularisation (*sanatoria*) aimed at migrant people employed in agriculture and domestic work. This practice is more common in Italy than in other EU countries; the previous one had taken place twelve years earlier, during the global financial crisis of 2008. Seventy-five per cent of the new residence permits were granted to people who were already present in Italy. Thus, the regularisation lowered the number of irregular migrants in Italy more effectively than expulsions. During the same year, 520 000 people were regularised, and 3 838 people were expelled (only 15.1 per cent of the expulsion orders issued), representing the 0.7 per cent of Italy's irregular migrants. In March 2022, over 207 452 new requests for regularisation were presented by employers, but only 61.9 per cent of them were examined, and only a quarter of those resulted in a labour permit (55 202). Of the 13 000 requests presented by employees, 79 per cent resulted in a labour permit.⁸

Grassroots experiences of migrant reception were also attempted by independent organisations or small municipalities. The most famous example took place in the Calabrian village of Riace, which, starting from the disembarkation of Kurdish migrants in the late 1990s, turned into an experiment of cohabitation that attracted international attention. Its promoter, the mayor Domenico Lucano, suffered a significant defamatory campaign led by minister Matteo Salvini but was ultimately cleared of all accusations (Carbone, 2019). Other grassroots initiatives attracted less public attention but were equally successful in creating opportunities for integration for small groups of migrants and asylum seekers.

Recent legislative changes have configured a repressive turn in migration management. The so-called “*Decreto sicurezza*” issued in 2018 by the right-wing minister Matteo Salvini further reduced funding for integration, thus reinforcing a securitarian approach to asylum. The most important transformation introduced by *Decreto sicurezza* has been the abolition of the national humanitarian protection, which pushed many asylum seekers into marginality and isolation. In 2023, “*Decreto Piantedosi*” limited the action of NGOs' rescue at sea activities, and in 2024, “*Decreto Cutro*” confirmed the abolition of the humanitarian protection.

⁸ See “Cruscotto statistico giornaliero, Ministero dell'Interno”, at <https://www.interno.gov.it>

The majority of SAI today are in small cities or impoverished parts of the country, where economic conditions make the integration of migrants a slower process, even if they are often managed by innovative organisations that turn the influx of migrants into a way of repopulating areas left empty by emigration (see Carbone & Di Sandro, 2024). SAI are almost absent in the most economically dynamic parts of the country (SAI, 2022). CAS, on the other hand, are mostly managed by large holdings that aim to maximise profits, thus reducing the quality of services and increasing the number of beneficiaries (Openpolis & ActionAid, 2023). The richer regions of the Northeast receive more migrants in relation to the resident population (0.21 per cent), but almost always within the CAS system, which is concentrated in some provinces. Rome is the metropolitan city where reception structures are largest, both for CAS (59,4 people per shelter) and for SAI (20,2 people).

Today, the ratio between the local population and the beneficiaries hosted in reception centres slightly reaches 0.18 per cent. Italy, however, lacks a comprehensive and coherent frame of legal procedures to guarantee the reception of migrants, and the reception system seems always on the verge of collapsing. Many legal improvements have been implemented as a result of pressure from international bodies: for example, in 2021, the Constitutional Court cancelled the prohibition on local authorities providing asylum seekers with residence permits, issued in the 2018 *Decreto Sicurezza*. In contrast to these challenges, some judiciary bodies and especially some grassroots organisations have maintained a very high level of attention to discrimination in the reception system, proposing systematic transformations (see Road Map per il Diritto d'Asilo e la Libertà di Movimento, 2024; Rossi, 2022).

4.3. CHALLENGES AROUND RECEPTION AND HOUSING

4.3.1 Reception crisis

According to an immigration expert, 2022 has been the year in which the Italian migrants' reception system has shown crucial signs of collapse, making its radical transformation inevitable. The binary between CAS and SAI has shifted from a productive tension between two models of reception to a source of permanent precariousness and weakness of the entire system, worsened by the conflict between political tension and organisational inertia. The systematic lack of organisation and coordination among the parts of the system seems to be presented as the only possible model: a "non-system" which hides between supposed unchanging realities that are, in fact, the very factors blocking its development (Rossi, 2022).

Poverty

In 2021, out of a national total of 5.6 million people in absolute poverty (representing 7.2 per cent of the entire Italian population), 29 per cent were foreign nationals: a total of 1.6 million people, almost one-third (32.4 per cent) of all foreigners living in the country. Foreigners, however, are only 12 per cent of the 2 460 000 beneficiaries of citizenship income (*reddito di cittadinanza*), one of Italy's basic subsidies. Non-EU citizens are 221 000 among the total 306 000 foreign beneficiaries of *reddito di cittadinanza* (IDOS, 2022).

Growth of emergency paradigm

Despite the positive outcomes of the SAI system and repeated declarations in favour of small reception facilities, emergency centres and large reception facilities have grown in recent years. The emergency paradigm entails that the amount of funds managed without public competition is quickly growing: in fact, more than 66 per cent of contracts for large CAS shelters are direct allocated without a public tender. Tenders for the management of small SAI centres, by contrast, have requirements that are very difficult to meet (Openpolis & ActionAid, 2023). CAS facilities between 2018 and 2020 suffered a general decline in quality of services offered; some of them hosted situations of severe decay and danger (Europasilo, 2022).



The crisis of 2022

In 2022, as the SPRAR/SAI system reached its 20th year of existence, Italy faced the Ukrainian refugee crisis. For the first time, refugees could be received outside the despised limbo of “clandestinity” in which thousands are confined since the “Bossi-Fini” law of 2002. The EU directive 55/2022 allowed special temporary protection for Ukrainian refugees, an unprecedented move that showed the possibility of a legal and ordered management of a refugee crisis.

Despite a government’s statement in 2021 that it would receive approximately 100 000 Ukrainian refugees, 154 000 people had already arrived in Italy by September (IDOS, 2022). Eighty-one percent of them received public assistance, which only partially covered the costs of living. Most refugees found shelter in private houses (especially with other Ukrainian families) and through the help of non-profit organisations. Eight thousand refugees were hosted in hotels paid for by the Italian state. Very few of them were hosted in the SAI/CAS official reception system (9%); and programs for “accoglienza diffusa” (spread over the territory) were largely hampered by bureaucratic problems. Italy today hosts 185 000 Ukrainian migrants; 20 000 arrived in Rome, but more than 10 000 of them moved again to a third country.

Despite the significant deployment of resources and the predictability of the figures for which it was necessary to provide shelter, the official reception system showed extreme signs of inability and collapse. Observers attribute this not to Italy’s bureaucratic messiness and disorganisation, but to structural features of the reception system itself, which seems almost intentionally designed to increase the perception of crisis rather than finding solutions to the problems (Rossi, 2022).

In the same year, over 5 000 Afghan refugees that the Italian army evacuated from the collapse of Kabul to the Taliban and brought to Italy on military flights – mostly high-level diplomats linked to the Italian military mission in Afghanistan – still had not received proper shelter from the Italian reception system. The Ministry of Home Affairs only raised the number of available beds to 3 000, thus accommodating only 60% of the people evacuated. According to the Ministry, only 700 were housed in the SAI system, while approximately 3 000 remained in CAS or in the Covid hotels where they passed the obligatory quarantine. The system was unprepared to host entire families, despite it being well known that the diplomats had fled with their families.

In March 2022, a series of new decrees set up new reception facilities and channels for people fleeing the Ukrainian war (both Ukrainian and third country nationals living in Ukraine), all managed by the Ministry of Home Affairs and Civil Protection units. A series of exceptions were set in place, including the historical acknowledgement of an automatic temporary protection (Morgese, 2022). The exceptions nearly completely matched those that grassroots organisations had requested during decades to smooth the reception procedures. However, they were implemented on an ethnic basis, only for Ukrainian nationals. Nonetheless, when by April 78 000 Ukrainian had already reached Italy, the Civil Protection had only provided 23 530 beds, 15 000 of which were directly managed by the Civil Protection and not even integrated into the existing structures of CAS and SAI. Moreover, SAI was increased by only on-third of the increment of CAS, thus maintaining the existing proportions between emergency and planned reception facilities, as was criticised by Oxfam with the statement “there is solidarity but not reception” (OXFAM Italia, 2022).

According to an observer, to avoid scrutiny of the failures of the Italian reception system for Ukrainian refugees, the Ministry of Home Affairs decided not to publish the data and even hampered the work of independent journalists (Schiavone, 2022).

Less resources for integration

Despite the Afghan and Ukrainian crises leading to an expansion of the SAI system, CAS emergency shelters still represent the 60 per cent of the reception system. The capacity of emergency shelters has increased from an average 266 people admitted per shelter to the current 335. Thus, many centres for the initial reception of migrants (*prima accoglienza*) are overcrowded, not only in the summer season when arrivals are higher, but also in winter (Openpolis & ActionAid, 2023). Moreover, the abuse of the emergency paradigm has increased the number of agreements that the Ministry was able to conclude without a public tender, through direct assignment. Since 2018, with the reduction of resources to SAI, several private and third sector operators have refused to participate in tenders, thus leaving the market to less professional and experienced competitors. The result is a further reduction in the quality and services of the reception facilities.

Informal housing

For all those excluded from the official reception system, the alternative is precarious housing in informal settlements or squatted buildings. Regarding the former, MEDU and UNHCR reported in 2021 that one in four people in informal settlements is only passing through and will only spend few days in the makeshift accommodation (MEDU, 2021). This transient population is the most vulnerable part of the migrant population in Italy and is often the object of violent police operations such as forced evictions and displacement. One of the most famous operations was the eviction in July 2021 of a service area near Tiburtina Station in Rome, where the non-profit organisation Baobab had precariously housed several hundreds of migrants and refugees in tents. Other informal settlements host hundreds of people near productive areas such as the agricultural fields of Foggia or Latina (Belloni, 2016).

Occupied buildings

The hardships experienced in accessing public and private housing are overcome by a significant share of migrants and refugees through strategies such as the illegal occupation of empty buildings, often mediated by well-organised groups of housing activists that inherit the experience of the huge struggles for housing of the 1960s and 1970s. Especially in big cities such as Milan or Rome, but also in Catania, Palermo, Naples..., large abandoned buildings have been occupied by migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. These occupations may involve hundreds of families and last for decades, during which the activist network that promotes them often offers some form of free service, such as bureaucratic counselling to process documents or help obtain basic services such as doctors or schooling. Some of these occupations have resulted in negotiations with local authorities that brought about the assignment of council flats to the occupiers (Midulla, 2024).

4.3.2 Homelessness and housing crisis

As in most EU countries (FEANTSA & Foundation Abbé Pierre, 2018), Italy is experiencing a homelessness and housing crisis that reverberates across many aspects of its social and political life, including the discrimination of migrants. The country's economy was not hit as hard as Greece or Spain by the global financial crisis of 2008, mostly due to the higher level of family wealth and home ownership. Nonetheless, over a decade of disinvestment in social and housing policies, coupled with the permanent stagnation of salaries, brought Italy to the brink of a debt and eviction crisis even before the Covid-19 pandemic. The harsh distancing measures that lasted from March 2020 almost until the end of 2021 contributed to a wave of tenant impoverishment that is slowly turning into a wave of evictions (Esposito, 2024). A coherent debate on equal access to housing, however, is still absent from the public sphere.

The shrinkage of the rental sector, both private and public, coincided with a reduction in social expenditure on housing that began in the 1970s (Boni & Padovani, 2022; Esposito, 2024), and was worsened by the strong public policy bias towards home ownership. The latter, in turn, resulted into the liberalisation of financial credit, the sale of public housing stocks, and thus the increase of class disadvantage and the wealth gap. During the last decade, the increase in short-term rental housing for tourism further reduced the supply of housing available for long-term rents (Celata & Romano, 2020). This phenomenon – either mediated by platforms as Airbnb or by other private enterprises that profit from tourism – especially grew in connection with mega-events such as the 2024 Olympics in Milan-Cortina, or the upcoming 2025 Jubilee in Rome, when the city expects to receive 37 million people, including tourists and pilgrims.

Today, more than half of the Italian population lives in cities or areas classified under “high housing tension” by the Italian Observatory of the Real Estate Market (Osservatorio del Mercato Immobiliare (OMI), 2023). The share of the population that lives in rented apartments, and is thus more prone to suffer the highs and lows of the rental market, is steadily growing (from 24 per cent in 2020 to 25 per cent in 2024); and the houses available for rent are only 10 per cent of the total housing stock (MEF e Agenzia delle Entrate, 2019). This includes the poorest share of the population (Peverini, 2021), among which many are families of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. For refugees, housing is the prerequisite for any path to integration and placemaking; precarious housing can be often traced as a cause for social marginalisation and increase of social tensions (Fravega, 2022). The marginality and precariousness of housing also

reverberate in the housing discrimination of non-EU migrants, who generally have less access to savings and family assets, as well as to bank credit. They also have few opportunities to be included among the beneficiaries of social housing. In 2021, 65 per cent of foreign citizens living in Italy were housed in privately rented apartments. Another 7.4 per cent lived in their workplace (such as cleaners and caregivers who live in the house of their employers), 7.6 per cent lived in the houses of relatives or friends (often overcrowded), and only 20 per cent live in an owned house; while among Italians, this percentage is 80 per cent. According to the 2022 IDOS report, discrimination in access to basic resources such as housing played a role in the recent reduction of foreign students in Italian schools (IDOS, 2022).

In 2021, the Italian Federation of Real Estate Agents (FIAIP) signed a memorandum committing to avoid discrimination (UNAR & FIAIP, 2021). Nonetheless, the free rental market in Italy shows clear signs of structural racism. Operators of refugee facilities confirm that many landlords would not rent to migrants (Camera dei deputati, 2017). The landlords' distrust of refugees and migrants in general is one of the main obstacles to autonomy in housing (Ministero dell'Interno et al., 2018); even the National Integration Plan for beneficiaries of international protection, published in 2017 by the Ministry of Home Affairs, identified access to housing as a primary problem requiring intervention (Ministero dell'Interno, 2017).

Apart from generalised racist attitudes among the Italian populations, several reports by international NGOs and GOs have reported very clear signs of racial discrimination in public policies for housing. Though discrimination in access to housing is illegal, for example, there are no reports of judiciary sentences against racial discrimination in housing. Migrants and refugees who are not hosted in the official reception system, are generally forced to live in very small and derelict urban flats, precariously rented or with black market agreements, often managed by the Italian equivalent of slumlords, who profit from the discrimination suffered by this part of the population; others are housed in co-habitation or precarious solutions such as temporary shelters (*Centri di Alloggiamento Temporaneo*) (Azim, 2024; IDOS, 2022).

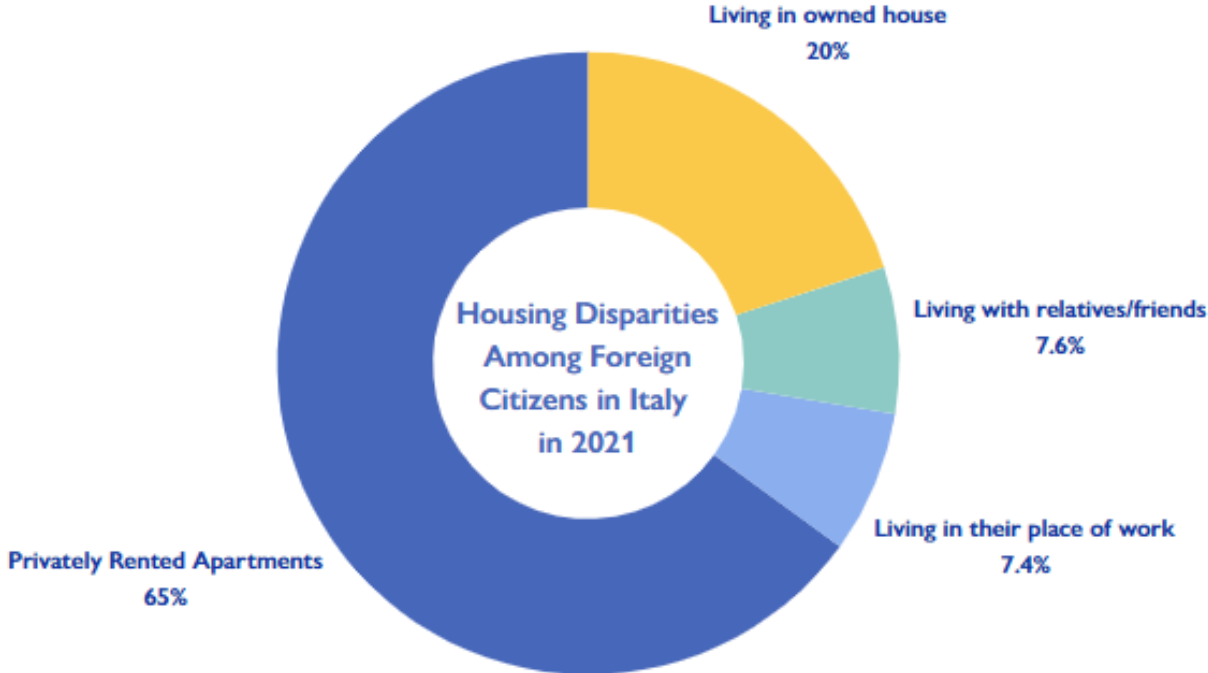


Figure 8. Housing disparities among foreign citizens in Italy in 2021

Public policies also do not encourage access to housing for migrants. Publicly owned flats in Italy are fewer than the average of EU states; the public share has consistently represented between 5 per cent and 6 per cent of the overall housing market in the last thirty years though concentrated in big cities, i.e., the areas with highest housing pressure. The nearly 800 000 publicly owned units can accommodate a population of nearly 2 million, but the number of people on the waiting lists already reached 650 000.

The Council of Ministry's National Office against Racial Discrimination (UNAR) has recently issued an opinion on discrimination in access to public housing, stating that many regions or local councils impose additional requirements to migrants that hinder access public housing, such as the arbitrary criteria of several years of residence in the region. In 2020, the Constitutional Court declared that the requirement of five years requested by the Region of Lombardia was illegitimate; other regions are under scrutiny, and recently Tuscany eliminated the requirement (*Access to autonomous housing in the context of international protection*, 2023; Colombo, 2019).

Other municipalities request that migrants provide proof of the absence of property ownership in their home countries as a requirement to access to public housing. Such a document is obviously very hard to obtain for those who have no access to their country's registers, such as asylum seekers and refugees. The Constitutional Court in 2021 declared that this requirement by Abruzzo Region was illegal, influencing all other regions' requests (UNHCR et al., 2021).

Since 2014, moreover, the Italian government has issued a controversial law that forbids local administrations from registering a legal residency for people who live in occupied buildings. Art. 5 of the Decree Renzi-Lupi, or *Piano casa*, has de facto pushed thousands of people living in irregular housing into an even worse state of marginalisation: without a legal residence, it is very difficult to renew a permit, as well as obtain proper health care and education (Colucci et al., 2023). Some municipalities, such as Rome, have provided a loophole to the prohibition, consisting of a "fictitious residence" address, which is used to register people who are denied the right to registration.

Moreover, the Italian system of subsidies and vouchers for tenants excludes people who hold illegal rental contracts or other forms of informal agreements, de facto excluding many migrant and refugee families. Thousands of migrants and refugees, for example, who rent their houses on the black market, were cut out of rental subsidies during Covid-19 for not being able to prove their condition of tenants; similarly, they are excluded from vouchers such as the "no-fault arrears" benefit that may help to prevent an eviction.

All these obstacles have the obvious consequence that very few refugees hosted in the official reception system of SAI and CAS manage to shift to autonomous housing when their reception time is over. Until 2018, the SAI system published annual figures on how many people reached "integration"; the number did not reach 5 per cent (Ministero dell'Interno et al., 2018). Following the disinvestment in the SAI system, and thus the virtual abandonment of its focus on integration, this information has been omitted from the latest versions of the report (Schiavone, 2022).

4.4 ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES

From the point of view of international and national law, access to housing should be provided to refugees on the same basis as it is provided to residents. Article 21 of the Convention on the Status of

Refugees guarantees that all State Parties “shall accord to refugees lawfully staying in their territory treatment as favourable as possible and, in any event, not less favourable than that accorded to aliens generally in the same circumstances”. The EU law 95/2011 also states the principle of equal treatment for the beneficiaries of international protection, and local laws on the matter, such as Article 29 of Law 251/2007, are even clearer on the need to counter discrimination in access to housing (UNHCR et al., 2021). Nonetheless, the legal action needed to ensure the implementation of these laws has not yet been carried out.

According to data provided by the Osservatorio Casa Roma (2024), €1,5 billion would be enough to house 45 000 people; €15 billion would suffice to house the entire waiting list for public housing . These amounts are comparable to that of a crucial urban infrastructure; for example, the Minister’s funding to the City Council of Rome to complete the construction of Rome’s C line of the Metro amounts to €4 billion; €1.5 billion is the increase in military expenditure foreseen for 2024 (a 5.5 per cent increase from 2023, for a total amount of €28 billion).

Moreover, the recent statistics made public by ISTAT (2024), according to which one property in three in Italy is empty, clearly shows that the issue of refugee accommodation is not a problem of funding or of goodwill of property owners, but of public policies that systematically prevent fair access to housing for all, despite the international covenants that Italy has signed and ratified.

Italian Local government promoted initiatives supporting refugees



Figure 9. Local government promoted housing support initiatives targeting refugees in Italy

Italian policymakers and private entrepreneurs forwarded proposals to cope with this housing shortage, but most of them fail to address the structural problem or could even result in additional issues. For example, the Agreement between the EU Investment Fund and the Italian Cassa Depositi e Prestiti to allocate €300 million to combat homelessness (FEI & CDP, 2023) will mostly be used for residences for students, which are also the only housing facilities included into the Italian 2021 Recovery Plan. Such a policy will certainly fail to cope with the structural lack of housing of which refugees are victims. Regional governments have promoted local initiatives such as Lombardia’s “Social real estate mediation” (*mediazione immobiliare sociale*, managed by the foundation Dar Casa – Cesare Scarponi Onlus) or Emilia-Romagna’s

“*Accompagnamento all’abitare*” in Parma and “*Progetto vicini di casa*”, directly oriented at refugees. In Rome, Centro Astalli has promoted the project “Home Sweet Home”; in Basilicata, the Social Cooperative Adan has promoted a “Social Housing” project specifically aimed at supporting refugees.

Interesting experiments such as co-habitation and co-housing are often discussed in public meetings about migrants’ access to housing. Co-housing is often presented as not only an opportunity to spend less money in housing but also as a way of facilitating integration through the sharing of spaces. Though these approaches are certainly promising, they risk the *naïveté* of those who consider that social problems can be addressed solely through architectural solutions. Problems of integration are not because refugees live in individual or non-shared apartments, but because most of them completely lack access to housing.

The Italian Association for Juridical Studies on Migration (ASGI), together with the housing syndicate SUNIA and UNHCR, in 2021 issued a guide for access to autonomous housing for migrants, under the title *La casa dei rifugiati* (UNHCR et al., 2021). The main point of the guide is that access to housing is often hampered by the lack of information. The guide provides help to sue landlords for discrimination, and to circumvent local regulations that prevent the registration of a legal residence.

Twenty organisations that provide solidarity help to refugees and asylum seekers gathered in the network Europasilo, and published a report under the title *L’accoglienza di domani*, where they propose seven alternatives to the current stalemate of the reception of migrants in Italy (Europasilo, 2022). These include some structural policy changes: the most important is overcoming the binary between SAI and CAS, in respect to Law 173/2020 that allows decentralised and community-based reception to receive enough resources to provide quality services. They also ask for the clarification of the ambiguities in the role of third sector and non-profit organisations, in respect to the notion of subsidiarity. A recent sentence of the Constitutional Court stated that SAI should not follow the principle of economic competence but seek instead a convergence of objectives between public and private organisations. SAI must provide psychological and social support, cultural and linguistic mediation and other services that aid towards integration; these aims must also be pursued by CAS, that should be evaluated through the same standards. The system of tenders that currently entrusts CAS to service providers must also be reformed, by introducing an independent body that oversees the management of all structures.

Another report submitted to the Italian government by the representatives of 32 civil society organisations that gave birth to a “Tavolo Asilo Nazionale” proposed seven similar basic transformations to improve the policy of migrants’ integration and access to autonomy (Tavolo Asilo Nazionale, personal communication, 2022). They propose that SAI becomes the only system of reception, to overcome the problems created by the huge CAS emergency shelters; and that the structure of tender through which they are managed is replaced with a system that entails its progressive absorption into the SAI system. They also claim that the relationship with local non-profit and third-sector organisations should be characterised by cooperation to basic social aims, not economic competition; and experiences such as the reception of refugees in family houses and community facilities should be encouraged.

Few reports on the condition of migrants in Italy consider the need to address the housing market as a testbed for access to basic rights. Community sponsorship, thus, appears as one of the channels that might support Italy’s shift from a catastrophic and emergency-based management of migration to a permanent and sustainable form of integration into local societies and territories.

4.4.1. The role of international actors

Migration and refugee policies in Italy have repeatedly evolved in response to condemnation or suspension of funds by international actors. The most blatant example is the sentence issued by the European Court of Human Rights in 2012 against the Italian government, which forced Italy to receive migrants rescued at sea.⁹ In 2021, the International Criminal Court (ICC) received a criminal complaint against the Italian government for the alleged severe violation of personal freedom perpetrated by the Libyan Coastal guard, financed by the Italian government since 2018 (Olterman & Giuffrida, 2022). In 2023, the European Court for Human Rights condemned Italy to reimburse four migrants from Sudan for the inhumane treatment they suffered in a refugee emergency shelter managed by the Italian government (Laugeri, 2023).

Housing policies have not evolved in a similar manner. Since 2021, the UN Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights has issued a series of requests for interim measures to the Italian government to avoid the irreparable harm elicited by the eviction of vulnerable families in several Italian cities (most of which in Rome, and many of which are migrants and refugees) based on the potential breach of Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and on the individual communications stipulated by the Optional Protocol which Italy signed in 2015. The communications were forwarded by individuals suffering the threat of eviction, and counselled by pro-housing organisations, the most active of which is Rome's *Assemblea di Autodifesa dagli Sfratti* (Davoli & Portelli, 2022). In 2023, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) reached a final decision regarding a group of five North-African families who had refurbished a vacant building in Rome that had been reclaimed by the Italian Railways Real Estate division. The Committee requested the Italian government to provide housing to the families and to compensate them economically for their precariousness (Barragino, 2024).

Though individual judges have often suspended the eviction of vulnerable families at the request of the UN, the Italian government has not respected the UN interim measures of protection of vulnerable people from evictions. In May 2021, the Presidency of the Council of Ministry issued a statement requesting the Court of Rome to proceed with an eviction procedure suspended by the UN, and several precariously housed migrant families – including the North African group on which the UN had reached a final decision – were evicted, often with no alternatives.

In this context, it is important to remark that international organisations have insistently focused on “good practices” of housing for refugees within the existing restrictions, or support for access to housing. Despite the results, this task is highly disproportionate to the number of people that are suffering housing shortage among refugees and among the population in general. Initiatives that aim at influencing official policies are much less common; nonetheless, the aim of policy interventions could focus more effectively towards removing the existing obstacles for housing, than in praising the few occasions in which the right to housing has been respected.

IOM promoted the initiative “Includ-EU”, whose report entails among other the identification of good practices of public-private participation in the management of small co-housing projects that include migrants in Italy, Spain, Greece, the Netherlands, Romania and Slovenia (IOM, 2023). This initiative uses

⁹ Previously they were pushed back to Albania; see ECHR [27765/09](#)

AMIF funds to respond to the EU Action plan for integration and inclusion 2021-2027, and reports on the following initiatives that concern Italy:

1. “Condominio della Solidarietà Casa di Zia Gessi” in Turin, owned by the City Council of Turin, and managed since 2008 by the financial foundation Compagnia di San Paolo. It includes 30 apartments, most of which permanently accommodate elderly families, and the rest for temporary hosts which include families of extra-EU migrants.
2. “Tandem” in Parma, managed by the City Council and a non-profit organisation, CIAC Onlus.

Another important example is the COMMIT project, implemented by IOM in Italy, Portugal, Croatia and Spain between 2019 and 2021, aiming at developing forms to train “community mentors” (*mentori di comunità*) for the reception of refugees. It was managed by Consorzio Communitas, a network of civil society groups organised by Caritas, together with Adecco Foundation and the Università per Stranieri di Siena. It developed a questionnaire and a database of potential mentors. The manual *Percorsi per l'integrazione* has been the main outcome of this activity (Benucci et al., 2021). It includes four modules for a 12-hour formal training of a mentor. The training is mostly focused on intercultural communication techniques, active listening, and contains an eight-page self-evaluation questionnaire for the mentor. The competences that mentorship is meant to help develop for refugees include practical activities such as obtaining health care, relating with schools, banks, post office, find housing, buying in a shop and travelling. “Intercultural communication” is based on a constructivist approach to culture pioneered by the North American sociologist Milton J. Bennett (Castiglioni, 2005). This project, however, does not specifically focus on the difficulties of obtaining housing in Italy.

Consorzio Communitas and Caritas had already developed a long trajectory in executing projects for the integration of refugees and asylum seekers since the early 2000s. In 2013-2014, for example, it promoted the project “Rifugiato a Casa Mia” to house 20 refugees in family homes, and in 2013-2016 the project “Rifugiato in famiglia” to house 40 refugees in family homes, as a part SPRAR projects in Milan and Parma. Other projects (Mediterranean bridge 2015, Presidio 2, Fami tra noi, Amif share, Family first, Pier2, Amif Max, Apri) gradually increased the number of people supported, while Communitas started working on the opening of humanitarian corridors. The last project, “Custodi del bello”, aims at involving refugees in taking care of parks, gardens, streets and squares as a form of integration in the urban society.

All these initiatives are doubtlessly well intentioned, but they fail to address the vast lack of housing solutions that migrants and refugees struggle with in Italy. A more systematic adoption of community sponsorship and legal pathways to asylum and inclusion would require structural transformations. International organisations might be able to play a role in pressing for such changes. This is especially true in a framework in which supranational bodies such as the EU and the UN have repeatedly alerted to the need to change the Italian approach to such a crucial element of urban life as housing (Farha, 2017).

4.5 COMMUNITY SPONSORSHIP IN ITALY

There is no exact translation of the concept of community sponsorship (CS) in Italian. The very term “community”, often translated with the Latin equivalent – *comunità* – in Italian holds a different meaning than in English. Past misunderstandings caused by this “false friend” have been highlighted by sociologists and anthropologists evaluating the impact of Anglo-Saxon community studies in Italy and other

Mediterranean countries between the 1940s and 1960s. Researchers such as Edward Banfield lamented the absence of “communities” in Italian traditional settings, especially in the South, identifying one of the basis of the country’s “backwardness” (“amoral familism” in Banfield’s terms) in the difficulty to organise in formal associations, or in the lack of “social capital”, to use Robert Putnam’s paradigm. Most of these researchers misunderstood the nature of social networks in Italy. It is important to learn from these past misunderstanding in order not to repeat the same mistake in addressing the application of “community sponsorship” in Italy.

Anglo-Saxon researchers noted the absence of the concept of “community” in the Italian language, inferring that it had to do with a specific vision of social bonds. In Cancian’s terms, *“More important is the lack of the concept “community”. Italian has the word comunità, but it is used to refer specifically to a monastic community. In my own experience, many attempts to use the word in the American sense were always corrected”* (Cancian, 1961, p. 13, in Sabetti, 1995). This approach obscures the structure of community relationships in Italy, which are different according to the different contexts, and which Anglo-Saxon researchers mostly failed to describe properly. Scholars have recently worked in depth to the meaning of the term “community” for groups of refugees and migrants in Italy (Scaglioni & El Bahlawan, 2024).

Regarding the reception of migrants and refugees, it is important to highlight that before the Schengen agreements of 1985, there have been historically occasions in which refugees have been received through forms of community sponsorship, though related to state’s institutions in different ways. Without going back to the premodern mass migrations that created the contemporary linguistic and ethnic enclaves in Southern Italy, such as the over 100 000 Albanian *Arbreshë* community in Basilicata and Calabria, it is important to note the reception of refugees from Croatia and Slovenia after World War II in the border city of Trieste, or the reception of former Italian settlers from Tunisia and Libya after decolonisation in the 1960s. Moreover, between 1945 and 1952, up to 70 000 children suffering dire living conditions in Southern Italy (due to famine, disease and abandonment) were housed by Northern Italian families and communities through the mediation of local organisations, also linked with the Italian Communist Party (PCI) (Bassoli & Luccioni, 2023; Molfetta & Marchetti, 2018).

Solidarity actions towards non-EU migrants by Italian private citizens are documented since the Balkan crisis of 1991, when up to 20 000 people physically went to the Balkan to provide help to people suffering from the conflict. Hundreds of refugees from the Balkans were housed by private citizens in the early 1990s, almost entirely without the help of local authorities or the state, while hundreds of Afghan and Kurdish refugees were received by local residents of Apulia and Calabria in the late 1990s, giving birth to unusual experiences of co-habitation, such as the case of Riace in Calabria (Carbone, 2019). In Turin, from 2009 and 2014, around 150 refugees were hosted by Italian families through the mediation of the city administration. In 2013, Caritas Italia inaugurated a project called “Rifugiato a casa mia” which allowed approximately 30 people to be sheltered in the houses of Italian families (Feraco, 2016). Some of these had already been housed in refugee centres and were in search of completing a path towards autonomous housing.

Two projects in 2014-2015 expanded the approach: “Rifugio diffuso” in Turin and “Rifugiati in famiglia” in Parma, managed by the local SPRAR (later SAI) facilities, to implement the autonomy of people that completed their time in the shelters (Molfetta & Marchetti, 2018). The aim of these projects was to become a stable feature of the SPRAR system. The SPRAR system itself promoted this approach of “family reception”, leading to an expansion of these experimentations in Bologna with “Progetto Vesta”, and in Milan. In 2017, the Italian branch of the international organisation “Refugees Welcome” opened, applying

an approach of “sharing economy” to the reception of migrants (Bassoli, 2016). Some projects of family reception are even implemented by the local CAS administrations, such as those in the city of Asti, managed by Consorzio Coala (Campomori & Feraco, 2018; Marchetti, 2018).

None of these activities, though, had been related with the idea of “community sponsorship”. The concept of CS is translated in Italian as “accoglienza comunitaria” (community receivership) and is presented as an extension of the project of *corridoi umanitari* (CU), or humanitarian corridors. *Corridoi umanitari* is currently considered a form of community sponsorship, since they represent legal pathways to reach Italy, and entail the engagement of people or organisations providing housing.

The first agreement for a CU was signed in December 2015 by the Italian government with the religious organisations Sant’Egidio, the Federation of Evangelical churches in Italy (*Federazione Chiese Evangeliche in Italia*, FCEI) and Tavola Valdese, to grant visas to approximately 1 000 Syrian refugees. In 2017, a second corridor was organised for approximately 500 Sub-Saharan people through Ethiopia, which also involved FCEI. In 2021, a new protocol for the first time included a secular organisation, ARCI. The total number of people who arrived in Italy through the legal pathway of humanitarian corridors reach the approximate number of 5 000 in slightly less than 10 years.



Figure 10. Organisations active in community sponsorship and similar community support activities in Italy

Other forms of legal pathways, such as academic corridors for students, were experimented in the last decade (Girasella & Tarsia, 2023). The selection of the beneficiaries of these projects has always been in charge to UNHCR, though the private organisations that are managing them have been experimenting with different procedures for “naming”, also following the Canadian model of sponsorship, where 60 per cent of beneficiaries are not selected by UNHCR but by local communities.

In Italy, there is only one project that is explicitly labelled as an ongoing experiment in community sponsorship and that is based on the acknowledgement of the involvement of Italian civil society in the response to the Afghan and Ukrainian crises. The project, called COMET – Complementary Pathways

Network, was proposed by Oxfam and FCEI, and aims at institutionalising a series of grassroots initiatives, and to employ EU AMIF funds to support and extend the state's response to the management of refugees. Furthermore, the Autonomous region of Trento has developed *Corridoi umanitari* for Syrian refugees explicitly as a form of CS since 2019, in collaboration with FCEI, Caritas, and Sant'Egidio (Borgonovo Re, 2019).

Other grassroots initiatives partially fit the model of community sponsorship, since they contribute to providing housing and other services for refugees based on informal network of local individuals and stakeholders. The Italian chapter of the network "Refugees Welcome" coordinates the biggest matching project between refugees and families offering housing. One of its coordinators, who is also a scholar, has proposed the concept of "homestay accommodation for refugees" to describe the kind of solution proposed by the network, and by other structures in other contexts. Other forms of support include smaller networks such as Progetto ALI and Asinitas, as well as activist networks for squatting such as Spin-Time (Action network) and BPM-Movimento per il diritto all'abitare. All these organisations frame their activity as a way of creating occasions to overcome structural and social racism, by creating different forms of everyday exchange between locals and refugees (Ghebremariam Tesfau, 2023). The way these contacts are framed, though, are different according to the specific focus of the organisations that develop the projects.

4.5.1 Caritas

Caritas is a transnational Catholic network of religious and non-religious operators and volunteers, based in parishes and Church infrastructure. Caritas International operates in 160 countries. Caritas Italia, part of the Conferenza Episcopale Italiana (CEI), is financed by the 8/1000 funds that Catholic taxpayers allocate each year. Since 2014, it has been involved the humanitarian corridors initiative, which aims to provide complementary pathways to the sponsorship of migrations to Italy. The structure of *corridoi umanitari* is loosely based on the idea of community sponsorship. It operates independently of UNHCR, which focuses on resettlement policies and programmes. Instead, it is implemented through an agreement with the Italian government which grants humanitarian visas to individuals proposed by Caritas, on the condition that the organisation takes care of housing, financial and other needs of the refugees. To date, Caritas has signed four protocols and implemented three of them, transferring a total of 1 300 people. Most beneficiaries are Afghan nationals who fled Kabul after the Taliban takeover, many of whom were active members of the previous government and thus at risk of reprisals, incarceration or death. Other beneficiaries include Iraqi, Syrian, Eritrean, South Sudanese and Somali nationals. Currently, humanitarian corridors are activated from Pakistan, Turkey, Jordan, Ethiopia and Niger (Humanitarian Corridors, 2019).

Since 2019, Caritas, together with FCEI and UNHCR, has also implemented an experimental project of "Student pathways", which facilitates the mobility of student refugees to Italy. Another project, "Labour pathways", is currently under study, aiming to match potential workers with employers. Fondazione Migrantes, a pastoral organisation of CEI linked with Caritas, promotes housing of refugees in families (Caritas Italia & Fondazione Migrantes, 2022).

4.5.2 FCEI (Mediterranean Hope)

The Italian Federation of Evangelic Churches (FCEI) is collaborating with the global NGO Oxfam to implement CS based on the Canadian model. This policy aims to improve the integration of refugees, strengthen internal bonds among local communities, provide better services to refugees, create affinities between local communities and refugees, and modify the local perception of refugees by influencing the narrative about people who seek asylum in Italy. The proposed project is managed by a partnership called “Mediterranean Hope”, which has participated to debates and initiatives about CS, also sponsored by the Canadian embassy. The proposed project is called CMET.

Mediterranean Hope has already managed several refugee reception project that may be assimilated to CS. One such project is the Solidarity Hostel *Dambe So* in the southern region of Calabria. The organisations have refurbished an abandoned hotel to host 21 migrant workers, with plans to host 42 more after further refurbishment. This region known for the exploitation of migrants in orange harvesting, and in 2010, racist attacks on migrants led to a full-scale revolt of thousands of migrant workers, who were eventually deported and placed in immigrant detention centres (Colson, 2010; Fa la cosa giusta Trento, 2023). The aim of the project is to prevent migrant workers from relying on shantytowns and informal housing provided illegally by employers or mediators who profit from the segregation of agricultural workers in Calabria. All workers contribute €90 per month for their accommodation, with additional expenses covered by the cooperative sale of fruit produced by the migrants themselves. In summer, the project also develops tourism activities to create opportunities for interaction between tourists and migrant workers.

The project “Accoglienza Comunitaria: il modello di *Community sponsorship*” was proposed in early 2024 to enable civil society and churches to support and receive refugees and people in search of international protection. Its aim is for individuals, groups of friends, colleagues and members of a community to gather and take the initiative of receiving refugees in their area (EU COMET, 2024). The programme aims to improve the integration of refugees, change the narrative on refugees and strengthen local communities through networking between religious and secular organisations. This activity is considered a continuation of the humanitarian corridors which FCEI has supported since 2017 and includes the offer of housing to refugees for 12 months as the first requirement from sponsors.

4.5.3 Sant’Egidio

Sant’Egidio is a significant network of Catholic volunteers active in Italy and beyond, financed with the 8/1000 funds that Italian taxpayers donate annually. It is among the organisations that are managing *corridoi umanitari*, particularly for Afghan refugees. Recently, Sant’Egidio has been discussing the possibility of implementing community sponsorship to enhance the quality and effectiveness of refugee reception and reduce the marginalisation many refugees face. Sant’Egidio signed agreements for *corridoi umanitari* in 2015, 2017 and 2021.

4.5.4 ARCI Solidarietà

ARCI (Associazione Ricreativa e Culturale Italiana) is a social promotion association founded in 1957, with over 1 million volunteers across the country. It manages SAI facilities and is committed to forms of community reception for migrants, developed in collaboration with local authorities and utilising its network of volunteers and operators. Since 2016, ARCI has managed 100 SAI facilities in Rome. It has established a permanent collaboration with a real estate agency, which provides apartments for rent that are leased directly to ARCI and then used to accommodate refugees in cohousing. ARCI is the only non-religious organisation partnering with the government in designing CS policies.

4.5.5 Refugees Welcome Italia

Refugees Welcome is an independent network of volunteers which operates in 15 countries. Refugees Welcome Italia (RWI) is a non-profit organisation dedicated to fostering cultural and social transformation in Italy by promoting the reception of refugees in family houses. The initiative aims to encourage values such as reciprocity, circularity and responsibility, ultimately transforming public perceptions of refugees. Housing is considered a primary area of action, as it serves as a foundation for reducing various vulnerabilities. Civil activism is acknowledged as a key tool for driving social change (Maraldi, 2012).

In 2019, RWI published a report summarising three years of work with local administrations, professionals, researchers and academics. The report focuses on scaling up the network through which they provide housing to refugees, aiming to achieve autonomy through limited periods of cohabitation. It also offers insights to resolve conflicts and address potential issues. By the time of the report's publication, RWI has facilitated nearly 120 cohabitations between refugees and Italian families. The aim of the project is to promote social and cultural change by promoting circularity, mutualism and responsibility, thereby influencing how people who seek international protection are perceived (Refugees Welcome Italia, 2019). Scholars have noted the affective connection between the host and the guest as a potential ambivalences, as it may create and reproduce everyday intimate bordering processes (Bassoli & Luccioni, 2023; Monforte et al., 2021).

3.4.6 CIAC onlus

In 2023, the *Community Matching* project was promoted by UNHCR and Italian local partners Refugees Welcome and CIAC Onlus (Centro Immigrazione Asilo e Cooperazione Internazionale di Parma e Provincia), with funding from the Buddhist Foundation Soka Gakkai. The project's goal is to match refugees with volunteers, referred to as "buddies", who assist with the integration process and organise

events to build community relationships. Although the project does not directly focus on housing, it has developed a toolkit that helps potential sponsors enhance their capacities.

The program, which lasted only six months in 2022, successfully matched 358 people, including 120 Ukrainian refugees. During this period, 62 per cent of participants secured job contracts, but only 17 per cent obtained proper housing contracts.

3.4.7 Informal networks providing help or housing for refugees

Smaller independent organisations are playing a crucial role in supporting refugees in ways that go in the direction of community sponsorship. These groups provide different forms of housing for refugees, either through personal means or activist networks, which may sometimes involve activities classified as illegal, such as occupying vacant buildings. In big cities like Rome and Milan, many migrants are accommodated in occupied buildings by housing activist networks, often in cooperation with health institutions, but outside the official channels of public housing and migrant reception. Participating in these occupations typically means forfeiting the possibility of requesting housing through legal ways. Other informal networks house refugees in their own homes or assist them in finding housing by creating informal support groups or organising cultural activities where refugees can gain social recognition and engage in social life.

3.4.8 Progetto ALI

Progetto ALI is a small grassroots project that, between 2017 and 2021, established a network of private individuals to assist refugees in their quest for autonomy in Rome. Based on the “Rete famiglie accoglienti” network active in Bologna and Turin, it managed to provide housing or assistance to dozens of migrants. In addition to housing some refugees in members' homes, it also organised events and cultural activities to enhance refugees' social lives.

3.4.9 Asinitas

Asinitas is a non-profit association that has been offering Italian language courses for refugees and migrants since the early 2000s. Its founders and teachers are volunteers who view language courses as a tool to facilitate integration between migrants and locals. Language competency is not only aimed at developing administrative or bureaucratic autonomy but also at helping individuals recreate themselves in the receiving country and giving value and visibility to refugees' experiences and perceptions. Besides language teaching, Asinitas organises sports, concerts, and an annual theatre workshop that brings together dozens of refugees and locals, creating significant moments of intercultural exchange. According to many refugees and Italians, theatre has been one of the most effective activities in providing community support to refugees and migrants. The networks formed during the months of rehearsals and performances have helped many find homes, jobs, partners, or groups of friends.

3.4.10 Spin-time

Spin-time is an informal network of housing activists that, in 2012, occupied a large vacant office building in the city centre of Rome, accommodating nearly 140 migrant families, many of whom are refugees or asylum seekers. In a common space, migrants participate in activities such as language training and receive assistance with bureaucratic procedures. The building is home to many migrant families and is also a well-known site for cultural activities attended by many Italians. Although physical proximity does not always guarantee contact and integration, the associations working within the building provide significant advocacy and counselling for refugees and migrants. Recently, the Vatican authorities have recognised the building as an important initiative, prompting the Rome city council to secure proper housing for the families hosted there (Cacciotti, 2024).

3.4.11 Blocchi Precari Metropolitani

Blocchi Precari Metropolitani (BPM) is a pro-housing organisation established in the 2010s that occupies vacant buildings to provide housing for migrant and refugee families. It currently manages four occupied buildings: Porto Fluviale, Quattro Stelle, Metropoliz and Bibulo, each accommodating several dozen families, with Quattro Stelle housing over 500 people. The organisation actively campaigns against restrictions on registering a residence for migrants and has led several housing protests involving over 1 000 migrants and refugees. Through the network created by this activist organisation, many migrants and refugees find a role in Italian society, despite the political and social marginalisation faced by activists. In addition to housing, BPM offers a form of collective social protection, which develops through collective activities, frequent meetings, and demonstrations (Dadusc et al., 2019).

4.6 A THEMATIC ANALYSIS

4.6.1 Engagement of stakeholders

The Oxfam-FCEI project is experimenting with involving private companies in providing work for refugees, facing several controversial issues, such as that the conditions requested by private companies shall not be considered a preferential issue to select people liable to participate to community sponsorship. Community sponsorship should be a refugee-oriented, not company-oriented, programme. The community sponsorship proposal aims to involve people selected by UNHCR and experiment with allowing Italian residents to select refugees for community sponsorship.

Caritas selects housing refugees before they begin their journey to Italy. Preferred locations are properties owned by the church, such as parishes or other real estate properties, which the organisation can access without needing additional funding. According to members of the organisation, finding suitable housing is

not the primary challenge in organising humanitarian corridors. The parent organisation provides €15 per day per person to each local Caritas that receives migrants. Most facilities are in Southern regions (Apulia, Sicily, Calabria), but some local Caritas branches in Northern Italy also have plenty apartments to accommodate refugees. For example, the bishop of Parma controls 400 flats and is considering dedicating them to beneficiaries of humanitarian corridors.

ARCI Solidarietà has established a permanent relationship with a private real estate management company that provides apartments for the SAI system. The project began with the personal involvement of the manager, who rented one of her properties to ARCI for use as a SAI facility. The manager then informed her clients, which resulted in providing housing for new SAI projects. However, the involvement of private landlords and real estate agencies has been limited to renting houses to ARCI, not individual refugees, due to the guarantees the organisation can offer. Despite its commendable intentions and achievements, this involvement did not aim to address the structural discrimination inherent in the Italian real estate market.

4.6.2 Recruitment and selection of volunteers/sponsors

In the Oxfam-FCEI project, community sponsors are selected from:

- Private individuals, organised in groups of at least 5 people;
- Non-profit organisations such as association, foundations, social cooperatives, religious organisations;
- Universities;
- Private companies;
- Workers unions or professional corporations (*associazioni di categoria*);
- Local institutions, city councils, or group of local institutions (FCEI & Mediterranean Hope, 2021).



They must organise in groups of at least five individuals, with one person acting as a spokesperson (*referente*). The project encourages the creation of wider networks of sponsors.

Figure 1 | Community Sponsor selection groups in the Oxfam-FCEI project in Italy

FCEI is developing an assessment for community sponsors involving a series of activities designed to test the suitability of potential sponsors or groups of sponsors, based on the Canadian sponsorship model. These activities have not yet started but are intended to help select potential sponsors. The aim is to adopt a Canadian model for “naming”, so that beneficiaries of sponsorship are not only named by UNHCR, as in most EU countries, but also by the communities themselves. This activity is based on the structure of

naming for humanitarian corridors and aims to identify more effective ways to match sponsors with beneficiaries, starting from existing relationships.

CIAC Onlus continues to provide an online matching system to connect refugees with families willing to offer accommodation. It accepts proposals through an online form (see CIAC, 2024). Volunteers participate in an initial interview, receive a training, and are then matched with refugees. During the hosting period, CIAC provides ongoing support to both parties to ensure a smooth relationship.

Refugees welcome Italia has set up a virtual platform to match sponsors and refugees and has published several documents to help potential sponsor engage in hosting refugees in their homes. Participants undergo a telephone interview and an in-person interview. If deemed suitable for the project, the organisation matches them with a refugee or group of refugees. The quality of housing is a criterion for determining if a family is suitable for the project, as well as the ability to reach the city without a car.

4.6.3 Training and support for volunteers/sponsors

FCEI-Oxfam considers training and monitoring sponsors to be the primary duty of the organisations managing the community sponsorship project. Sponsors receive training and support throughout the project via specific training session, peer-to-peer learning experiences, monitoring, and targeted interventions in cases of conflict or breaches of the sponsorship relation. Support also includes assistance with fundraising and securing financial support. The brochure “*Come prepararsi*” outlines guidelines for preparing sponsors, focusing on organising the team (*squadra*) that will act as a sponsor and enhancing their ability to leverage existing networks to develop the necessary resources. The structured training covers topics such as dealing with trauma, expectation management, intercultural dialogue, gender issues and community fundraising.

The COMMIT project, developed between 2019 and 2021 by OIM, Consorzio Communitas, Adecco Foundation, and Università per Stranieri di Siena, aimed to facilitate the integration of refugees in Croatia, Portugal, Spain, and Italy. Its main activity was training mentors.

4.6.4 Effective matching criteria

Caritas operators prepare matching based on family size and available spaces. The organisation rarely accepts individual offers of housing for refugees, preferring to rely on parishes and church-owned properties (see Feraco, 2016). Similarly than for other organisations, matching is generally conducted on the bases of availability of housing and on housing needs. Several organisations, however, are drifting explicitly towards a model which considers other factors, such as the existing links between sponsors and refugees, which may guarantee successful inclusion (FCEI & Mediterranean Hope, 2021). The participation of sponsors and refugees to similar networks, such as sports groups, may contribute in creating conditions for a successful matching. Nonetheless, criteria that are not based on vulnerability may not be effective in including people more in need, less able to participate in networks based on common interests or leisure, or to be part of academic corridors (see Girasella & Tarsia, 2023).

4.6.5 Availability and verification of housing

FCEI includes providing housing and livelihood among the duties of sponsors towards refugees. A Committee would be set up within the Ministry of Home Affairs that will supervise and monitor sponsors' activities, similar to the SAI system. According to preparatory materials for sponsors, houses may belong to the church, be owned by a church member, or be found through personal contacts or a real estate broker. Sponsors must verify that the house is well connected to the city centre, that the rent is sustainable in the long/medium term, that it does not need refurbishing, that the owner is willing to register the residence, and that the contract requirements are suitable (FCEI & Mediterranean Hope, 2021).

5. Refugee reception and housing in Lithuania

Vytautas Ežerskis, Agnė Kurpytė-Nishnianidze, Gabrielė Urbonaitytė-Rondienė (IOM Lithuania)

5.1 MIGRATION AND ASYLUM TRENDS

Lithuania is located at the geographical centre of Europe, where the main routes from Northern and Western Europe to Eastern Europe and Central Asia intersect. The total length of the state border of the Republic of Lithuania is 1 763.05 km, of which 1 643.41 km run on land and in border waters, and 119.64 km run in the territorial sea. Lithuania's resident population at the beginning of 2024 was 2 885 891. Due to its location, natural conditions, and historical links, Lithuania is an attractive destination for inhabitants of post-Soviet states and territories.

Starting from May 2021, the number of migrants attempting to irregularly cross the Belarus-Lithuania border increased significantly. In 2021, more than 4 300 cases of migrants irregularly crossing the border were recorded, compared to 81 in the whole of 2020 and 55 in 2019 (Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Lithuania, 2023).

In 2021, Lithuanian reception centres were filled beyond capacity (both in terms of infrastructure and human resources) when 4 259 persons applied for asylum within a few summer months (Migracijos departamentas prie Lietuvos Respublikos vidaus reikalų ministerijos, 2023a). A state of emergency was declared in the country and temporary facilities were transformed to provide accommodation with strict limitations on the freedom of movement, which led to tensions and protests by migrants.

The reason for this prompt increase was the migratory pressure exerted by Belarus to deliberately overload and destabilise Lithuania's existing asylum capacities. This included organising irregular crossings of the EU's border by bringing migrants to the state border and directing them to Lithuania (as well as Poland and Latvia), attempting to instrumentalise human beings for political purposes. As a result, several important decisions were made in Lithuania in 2021 and 2022, directly linked to the efforts of the country's authorities to address the challenges posed by the sudden increase in irregular migration flows and the number of asylum applications.

The situation in Ukraine has significantly impacted Lithuania's asylum and migration trends. Since the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Lithuania has welcomed a substantial number of Ukrainian refugees. As of early 2024, over 85 000 Ukrainians reside in Lithuania, making them the largest community of foreign citizens in the country. Lithuania has implemented various measures to support Ukrainian refugees, including granting temporary protection status, which provides access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities. Despite these efforts, challenges remain. Many Ukrainian refugees face difficulties in accessing language courses, medical care, and stable employment. Psychological trauma and financial anxiety are also significant issues that hinder their integration.

According to the 2024 data, Lithuania currently hosts a total of 218 244 migrants, with 50 252 having arrived in the year 2023.¹⁰ Out of those, 575 people are international protection applicants (Migracijos

¹⁰ <https://migracija.lrv.lt/media/viesa/saugykla/2024/5/rLJIATCEk-E.pdf>

departamentas prie Lietuvos Respublikos vidaus reikalų ministerijos, 2023b). The biggest share of migrants are non-EU citizens, the top 5 countries of origin are: Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. The largest age group among migrants is 20-40 years old. The main reasons for migration, as indicated when issuing temporary residence permits to migrants, include fleeing from conflict or political circumstances in the country of origin; employment opportunities and labour; family reunification; and education (IOM Lithuania, 2024c).

Therefore, whereas migration is not a new phenomenon per se, Lithuania has experienced a dramatic shift in migration scope and patterns in the last 5 years. Up until 2019, Lithuania was an emigrating country, with the number of people emigrating to EU (European Union) or EEA (European Economic Area) states higher than the number of people immigrating into the country. 2019 marked the first year where Lithuania emerged as an immigration destination country, where migrants would try to obtain long-term residence permits rather than treat it as a migration transit country.



Relevant statistical data sources on migration data and research in Lithuania

- [Migration Yearbook 2023, released by the Migration Department of the Republic of Lithuania \(in Lithuanian\).](#)
- [European Migration Network.](#)
- [Migration in Lithuania in numbers, released each year by the Migration Department of the Republic of Lithuania \(in Lithuanian\).](#)
- [Latest \(monthly\) data on migrants, asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection \(in Lithuanian\).](#)
- [General statistics on Lithuania.](#)
- [IOM \(International Organization for Migration\) website for Lithuania on country specific migration information.](#)
- [OECD \(Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development\) for migration data and analysis for Lithuania.](#)

After Russia started its military aggression against Ukraine, more than 72 000 refugees registered in Lithuania in 2022 alone. Lithuania became one of the largest host countries for Ukrainians in the EU, in proportion to its population. Consequently, Lithuania made swift decisions to ensure adequate accommodation for the arrivals, their enrolment in the education system, and integration into the labour market. The country has also fully transposed Council Directive 2001/55/EC of 20 July 2001 on minimum

standards for giving temporary protection in the event of a mass influx of displaced persons and on measures promoting a balance of efforts between Member States in receiving such persons and bearing the consequences thereof ('Temporary Protection Directive'). Hence, in 2022, the number of people immigrating to Lithuania more than doubled (an increase of 118 per cent) compared to 2019, and has since continued to grow exponentially, solidifying Lithuania as a migrant destination country.

5.2 THE LITHUANIAN RECEPTION SYSTEM

Migrants who have obtained refugee status or received subsidiary protection are housed in the Refugee Reception Centre (RRC), for up to three months, which can be extended for up to six months in exceptional cases (EMN, 2024). After departure from RRC, refugees relocate to housing in municipalities, where they are expected to integrate according to the integration plan provided by RRC and with assistance and support from NGOs. Such integration lasts from 12 to 36 months, depending on necessity and the needs of vulnerable groups (large families, at risk people, people with low level education, mental health problems, etc.) (Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministerija, 2024a).

A part of asylum seekers consciously opt-out of living in the Refugee Reception Centre and make a decision to settle in a place of residence of their own choosing, with the intention of speeding up the integration processes in Lithuania. Such choice ends up hindering the asylum granting procedures and integration processes, due to the aforementioned lack of information, insufficient provision of social services, insufficient access to the vulnerability assessment procedure, and limited opportunities to open a bank account and perform banking operations, among others (Lietuvos Raudonasis Kryžius, 2024).

The systematic approach to integration of refugees in Lithuania is limited. Other than the aforementioned initial housing and integration of RRC, the remainder of burden of integration and its monitoring falls on the refugee and NGO, which tailors the integration process to the individual needs of the refugee. It is observed that the system of integration of foreigners in Lithuania also faces problems such as the lack of a clear definition of the roles of local authorities, national level, and other actors in the system of integration of foreigners, the lack of interinstitutional cooperation, the absence of a long-term monitoring and evaluation system for integration, and the lack of dedicated funding for the integration of foreigners, not just refugees. As the number of foreigners in Lithuania increases, an effective integration system with clearly defined roles and functions is becoming increasingly important (Žibas, 2018).

The Lithuanian Ministry of Social Security and Labour is currently developing a policy that seeks to systemise and unify the integration policies on the local government level. This corresponds to fragmented system of migrant integration in Lithuania. The first strategic document targeting the integration of foreigners in Lithuania was approved at the end of 2018 with an introduction of an Action Plan for the Integration of Foreigners into the Society for 2018-2021. In the context of the war in Ukraine, in 2022 a large number of municipalities had to take lead and coordinate the reception and integration of foreigners along with the help of several NGOs which put stress on the municipalities but also creates an opportunity for further development and learning from experience.

Lithuania's Refugee Reception Centre will become the Reception and Integration Agency starting from 2025, according to the government decision. The agency will be subordinate to the Ministry of Social Security and Labour and will be responsible for ensuring material reception conditions and assistance for

all foreigners. According to the ministry, the new agency will manage and select all temporary accommodation places for foreigners through public procurement or partners, thus placing all non-detained foreigners in temporary accommodation.

Under the plan, the new agency will take over some functions of the State Border Guard Service (SBGS), including the transport of foreigners to temporary accommodation places and the organisation of social and other services.

5.3 INCLUSION PROCESSES FOR MIGRANTS

Having obtained a residence permit or received temporary protection, migrants have the option to register at the Lithuanian employment service and receive free Lithuanian language learning programmes and vocational trainings. Foreigners who are applying for or are granted asylum, as well as Ukrainian nationals of Lithuanian background are offered a wide range of integration activities, such as language courses, culture classes, consultation on employability, legal assistance, etc. Psychological support is provided as well (Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministerija, 2024a). In response to changing migration trends, and the growing need to provide information and services to all foreigners living in Lithuania, a physical Migration Information Centre was opened in Vilnius in October 2023 by IOM Lithuania.



Relevant sources on challenges and policies

- [On adaptation and integration of Ukrainian migrants.](#)
- [On the reception and integration of Belarussian migrants in Lithuania and Poland.](#)
- [On the perceptions of refugees among Lithuanian nationals.](#)
- [On migration policy analysis and recommendations \(source from 2019\).](#)

Starting from January 2024, in cooperation with the Ministry of Social Security and Labour, the centre's services were expanded and strengthened through funding from the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) for the Migration Information Center – MiCenter project (project code: PMIF-2.01-V-01-01). The project is being carried out until December 31, 2025. The project's activities aim to address the challenges faced by foreigners living in Lithuania, such as the lack of relevant information in foreign languages, assistance with integrating into local communities, and promoting a positive perception of migrants among Lithuanians.

The findings of the Needs and Intentions Survey of Ukrainian war refugees carried out by the International Organization for Migration Vilnius Office (IOM Lithuania) in 2024 shows that 71 per cent of Ukrainian war refugees are willing to return to their country of origin when it is safe to do so, while around 12 per cent are still undecided. The main needs remain financial support - 60 per cent, language courses - 43 per cent, employment - 36 per cent, health services - 34 per cent, long-term accommodation - 25 per cent (IOM Lithuania, 2024a).

Between January and March 2024, IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix surveyed 485 refugees from Ukraine in Lithuania, with a demographic breakdown of 86 per cent female and 14 per cent male respondents. This research, part of IOM's ongoing Ukraine Refugee Response, focused on critical areas such as healthcare access, labour market participation, and social integration.

The findings provide critical information on the specific needs, movement intentions, and integration challenges faced by refugees. While many refugees express a strong desire to integrate within their host communities, they encounter several significant obstacles. For example, many refugees possess valuable skills and qualifications but lack the local certifications or language abilities required to secure employment. Notably, there is a significant increase in demand for Lithuanian language courses among refugees from Ukraine, with the percentage of those expressing this need rising from 8 per cent in early 2023 to 43 per cent by March 2024. This trend coincides with a growing number of refugees planning to remain in Lithuania and uncertainty about returning to Ukraine, suggesting a shift in their integration needs and future considerations within the country.

This analysis reveals a need for targeted skills and language training that aligns with the demands of the Lithuanian job market. In addition, enhanced employer engagement initiatives can help bridge this gap, encouraging businesses to recognise and utilise the diverse talents that refugees bring. Additionally, refugees face challenges in accessing healthcare services. Bureaucratic hurdles, such as complicated registration processes and a lack of clear information about available resources, deter many from seeking the medical care they need. This can lead to unmet health needs, further complicating their ability to integrate and thrive in their new environment.

Lastly, financial support remains a critical need, with 60 per cent of respondents identifying it as a top priority. This demand for financial assistance has been steadily increasing, likely due to the challenges refugees face in securing stable employment, covering basic living expenses, and adjusting to a new environment.

5.4 CHALLENGES AROUND RECEPTION AND HOUSING

There are several challenges that refugees and international protection applicants face in Lithuania. Here, we will discuss the most compelling issues.

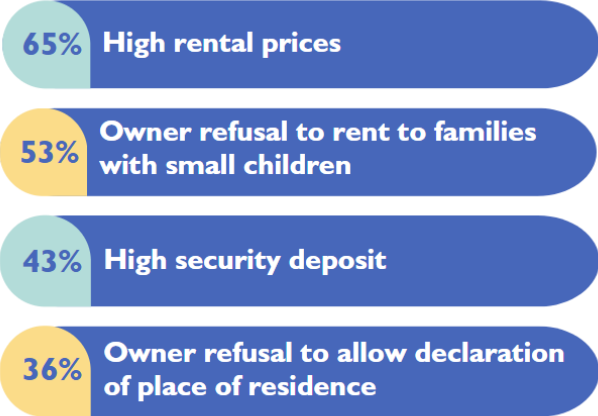
Housing: access to privately owned rentable housing on the open market is difficult due to the financial limitations of migrants, as well as the societal attitudes towards migrants of certain origins. For instance, to be able to receive a residence permit, migrants are required to declare their place of residence. The declaration must be signed by the landlord of the property, posing a problem, as many of them are unwilling to both vouch for the migrant and pay rent income taxes (EMN, 2022).

Housing in Lithuania is also becoming increasingly less affordable, with the rental housing prices continuously increasing over the years. Even though rental prices are still growing, over the past year they are growing at a slower rate. When it comes to availability of housing, the formal rental market is extremely thin. Fewer than 3 per cent of households formally rent their housing: just over half of tenants live in social or municipal housing (1.6 per cent), with an even smaller share in formal private rental housing (0.8 per cent) (OECD, 2023). There is a general trend of housing being rented without formal declaration of housing as a rental, with more houses being available for undeclared rent. In cases like these, it is not possible for tenants to declare their housing as an official place of residence (EWSI, 2024; OECD, 2023).

Lithuania has a relatively small stock of social housing. The most recent estimates suggest that just under one-third of the total municipal housing stock (of around 39 700 rental units) is rented out as social housing. The general trend is that most of the migrants and beneficiaries of international protection are seeking housing in countries biggest cities, due to employment opportunities and more international environment (IOM Lithuania, 2024c).

The core principle of CS is to connect forcibly displaced individuals with groups and individuals who assist refugees in settling into a new country. This recent mobilisation for Ukrainian refugees embodies this principle. However, a representative survey of Ukrainians in Lithuania carried out by IOM Lithuania in June 2023 revealed some of the challenges related to access to suitable accommodation faced by the Ukrainian war refugees. The survey found that upon arrival to Lithuania, 34 per cent Ukrainian war refugees rented an apartment, 27 per cent found accommodation with Lithuanian hosts via the non-governmental "Stiprūs kartu" initiative, 18 per cent settled in the premises provided by the state or municipality, while 4 per cent lived in other premises (hostels, etc.). Only about 30 per cent still live in the same premises that they lived upon arrival, while about half of the respondents changed their place of residence more than once.

Difficulties encountered by beneficiaries when trying to rent an apartment



Significantly, 73 per cent of respondents (N=870) stated that they encountered difficulties trying to rent an apartment. The following key difficulties were mentioned: high rental prices (65 per cent); owners did not want to rent to families with minor children (53 per cent); owners requested high security deposit (43 per cent); owners refused to allow declaring the place of residence in their apartment (36 per cent); high utility payments (20 per cent); owners refused to accept tenants with pets (17 per cent). The language barrier, the low supply of apartments for rent on the market, and the unwillingness of landlords to rent to the Ukrainians were also mentioned.

Figure 12. Representation of difficulties encountered by beneficiaries of temporary protection when trying to rent an apartment by percentage

Almost half of the respondents (42 per cent) knew about the state support for the Ukrainian refugees in securing accommodation but did not make use of it; 33 per cent did not know about it, while only 25 per

cent both knew and made use of state support. Among the latter (N=297), 54 per cent received compensation for a part of the rent, 21 per cent got a lump-sum payment for settling in, while 19 per cent received compensation for heating costs (IOM & EMN, 2023).

The National Integration Evaluation Mechanism (NIEM) report by the Diversity Development Group noted that beneficiaries of international protection (BIPs) who participated in the focus groups stated that the biggest challenge they had to face when looking for housing is related to the prejudices of the Lithuanian population towards refugees (especially Muslims), which became worse with the increase in the number of asylum seekers in Lithuania. In addition, due to the lack of Lithuanian language skills, difficulties are encountered not only in finding suitable housing but also communicating with homeowners. As during the questionnaire survey, high rent prices were also mentioned as one of the challenges. Asylum seekers also cited the lack of a strategy for support in finding housing as the number of foreigners seeking housing increases (Blažytė, 2022).

Social attitudes versus migrants may thus also hinder them to find accommodation or to integrate in the host society. There are important differing attitudes towards migrants of different origin. Societal attitudes towards migrants from Ukraine and third-country nationals differ drastically, with the society being more inclined to help Ukrainian nationals fleeing conflict. It has been observed that Lithuanian nationals tend to more willingly welcome and accept migrants of Ukrainian origin in their homes, compared to third country nationals from central Asia or the middle east. Lithuanian government has also introduced more integration and support measures to Ukrainian nationals compared to other third country nationals (Brazienė et al., 2023; ELA, 2023).

Next, there are issues regarding integration, but also employment and education. Integration is burdened by migrants not knowing the local language, making it difficult to secure employment and successfully integrate (IOM Lithuania, 2024b). Language barriers and the recognition of foreign qualifications are key issues here. Refugees and migrants find it difficult to find employment matching to their education level and professional capacities, with mostly lower-qualification jobs being accessible. Migrants arriving are also placed in precarious situations with regards to job security: they face discrimination of pay, lack job or social security that is usually attached to employment in Lithuania (employer pays all the social security taxes) or are working without an official contract (Huseynova, 2024).

At the same time, matching skills from refugees and migrants with (potential) employers pose a challenge. Refugees and migrants find it difficult to find employment by their education level and professional capacities, with mostly lower-qualification jobs being accessible. Moreover, qualification recognition is difficult to realise.

5.5 ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES

When it comes to challenges that the beneficiaries of international protection face, the government response has been targeting the most pressing issues at different levels.

Free Lithuanian language learning programmes are organised to migrants who officially register at the Lithuanian employment service, they also provide re-qualification courses. These services are, however,

only eligible to migrants with official residence permits and beneficiaries of temporary protection (Employment Service, 2024).

There is no unified integration approach, besides financial support. The government does not manage or allocate social housing, it is provided by local municipalities. Housing for refugees is a short-term provision, with refugees offered temporary housing in the refugee reception centre from 3 to 6 months, depending on their personal circumstances. After that period, a refugee is expected to find individual housing options, under the integration plan that is individually tailored to each beneficiary of international protection. Housing solutions to beneficiaries of international protection are then organised and provided at the local municipality level, with each municipality in one way or another implementing its own housing schemes. Most of the housing is provided rent-free for up to 6 months, as a social housing scheme. After that period migrants are expected to seek out more permanent rental housing by themselves.

Migrants of Ukrainian origin also receive some financial support, every Ukrainian national that relocated to Lithuania after February 24, 2022 has received a one-time relocation compensation. They are also eligible for the same social benefits as Lithuanian citizens, and in cases of lack of housing and/or income they can seek housing in the Refugee Reception Centre or municipal social housing (if available) (IOM Lithuania, 2024c).

During the period of integration in a municipality, people who have been granted asylum can receive free of charge Lithuanian language lessons, paid a lump-sum settlement benefit ranging from 704 EUR to 1408 EUR (based on the number of persons in a family receiving asylum), paid a monthly benefit for basic necessities (housing rental, public utilities, food, transport, etc.) ranges from EUR 352 to EUR 705 per person for up to seven months and 50-100 per cent of the aforementioned amount from the seventh until the twelfth month (Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministerija, 2024b; Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania, 2024).

5.5.1 The role of international actors

International institutions keep a constant dialogue with governmental institutions in order to establish possible cooperation frameworks, share data they have accumulated about migrants and their needs to encourage the establishment of necessary government programmes (IOM Lithuania, 2024c).

International institutions also try to recognise the shortcomings of governmental institutions and fill the gaps with their own programmes, such as rental assistance, legal consultancies, psychological support, complex services, etc. UNHCR Lithuania was partnering with Lithuanian Ministry of Social Security and Labour and implementing a Regional Refugee Response Plan (RRRP), which focuses on integration and protection of Ukrainian refugees.

According to the plan, Ukrainian migrants received mental health and psychosocial support and needs-specific humanitarian assistance, counselling. RRRP also focused on strengthening protection mechanisms to mitigate the risk of human trafficking, gender-based violence and sexual exploitation and abuse (IOM Lithuania, 2023; UNHCR, 2023a).

IOM Lithuania is actively aiding migrants in integration processes by providing legal consultations, cash-based assistance, translation services, and helping migrants and beneficiaries of international protection obtain residence permits, find employment and housing. As previously mentioned, in 2023, IOM Lithuania opened the [Migration Information Center \(MICenter\)](#), serving as a one-stop-shop where migrants can get legal advice, career guidance and psychological counselling, as well as attend various activities and spend time with their community.

IOM Lithuania integration assistance and services



Figure 13. Integration assistance and services provided by IOM Lithuania

IOM also ran a temporary housing programme with Airbnb, accommodating Ukrainian refugees until 30 days, before they could find more long-term housing solutions. IOM Lithuania has awarded €75,000 to promote entrepreneurship for war refugees from Ukraine. The 26 Ukrainians with the best business ideas received financial support after the selection process. In total, IOM received almost 100 applications, while almost 150 people participated in the entrepreneurship training beforehand. IOM has also contributed almost €152,000 to help 774 Ukrainians cover part of their rent. Since the start of the large-scale war in Ukraine, almost 87,000 Ukrainian war refugees have arrived in Lithuania. Over the past year, IOM Lithuania has assisted nearly 17,000 war refugees with various assistance measures (IOM Lithuania, 2024c).

Vilnius Archdiocese Caritas Integration Centre for Foreigners provides social, legal, psychological and employment specialist consultations. Conducts group activities and training: art therapy, ceramics classes, Lithuanian and English language courses. Special attention is also given to community and cultural events, children activities, summer camps. While there are several other initiatives and projects that could be mentioned, we will not detail them here.

5.6 COMMUNITY SPONSORSHIP IN LITHUANIA

Here we discuss in what manner CS occurs in Lithuania. As we will see, there is no formal CS program in this country so far. However, in line with Belgium and Italy, we will see that there is much to learn from other projects regarding the support and housing of refugees and migrants.

The concept of CS is not yet applied in Lithuania, and to the best of current knowledge, policy documents, academic research, or other projects have not looked into this phenomenon up until now. Lithuania has

historically been a country of emigration and transit. Positive net migration and increased number of asylum seekers in Lithuania is a new phenomenon, which partly explains the absence of community sponsorship in academic literature, political vocabulary, and the field of practice (IOM Lithuania, 2024c).

A literal translation of the concept "community sponsorship" into Lithuanian can be misleading. The direct translation - "*bendruomenių rėmimas*" - suggests programs that support local rural communities within the country, unrelated to the relocation and integration of third-country nationals. Therefore, a more suitable Lithuanian term should be identified to accurately represent CS, which remains a largely unknown concept. Community sponsorship, as understood in this literature review, is a new concept that is not well-known in Lithuania but has been explored in practice over the past few years, particularly in response to the displacement of individuals affected by the war in Ukraine (IOM Lithuania, 2024c).

The programme most similar to Community sponsorship was implemented by Strong Together, a Lithuanian NGO, which mobilised Lithuanian citizens to provide their housing to Ukrainians fleeing from conflict free of charge. Citizens got involved in this programme very willingly, however, the service was only provided to Ukrainian nationals. Lithuanian residents who welcomed Ukrainians commonly referred to hosting as providing shelter ("*prieglobstis*", "*globa*") and receiving or housing refugees ("*pabėgėlių priėmimas*", "*pabėgėlių apgyvendinimas*"). However, there has been nothing resembling Community sponsorship programmes that was tailored to satisfy the needs of third-country nationals (IOM Lithuania, 2024c).

Although Lithuania has thus not yet implemented a community sponsorship scheme, there is a clear interest and ongoing efforts to develop and pilot such programs, particularly in the context of housing and integration of international and temporary protection beneficiaries. For instance, there is interest from the Ministry of Social Security and Labour in testing such models. Consequently, the Ministry is a member of the Advisory Committee of the RISE project (IOM Lithuania, 2024c).

As pointed out by the National Audit Office in its February 2023 study, Lithuania lacks a dedicated institution to coordinate the settlement of refugees in municipalities, propose measures that would address the housing needs of refugees, and ensure an environment conducive to their integration. National entities, except for the Refugees Reception Center, are not actively involved in securing housing for these refugees, deferring the task to NGOs or the refugees themselves. A related challenge, noted by the National Audit Office, is that the state does not have any strategy for the distribution of refugees, and they are allowed to settle where they want, which tends to be in the largest cities (IOM & EMN, 2023).

The European Migration Network (EMN) Inform on Resettlement, Humanitarian Admission and Sponsorship Schemes from June 2023 provides a brief overview of resettlement situation in Lithuania. In 2016-2021 Lithuania resettled 779 persons, but reported high drop-out rates from resettlement programmes. Moreover, refugees leaving for other countries has been a challenge (EMN, 2023).¹¹

Housing and community support initiatives in Lithuania

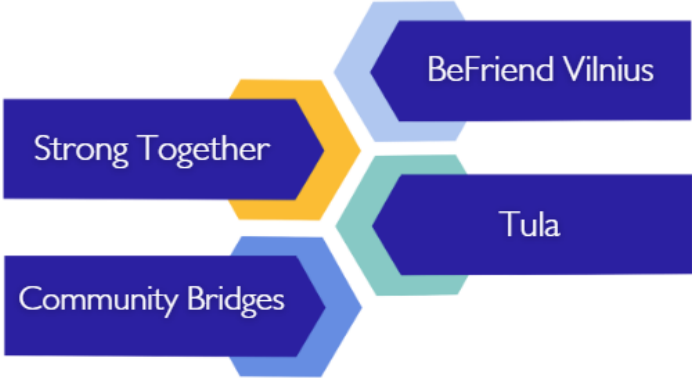


Figure 14. Community support initiatives adjacent to community sponsorship in Lithuania

5.6.1 Strong Together

As mentioned, we might learn from the experiences of NGOs such as Strong Together. There have been ongoing efforts of the [Strong Together](#) (in Lithuanian, “Stiprūs kartu”) initiative, which successfully mobilised volunteers to provide housing for refugees, with over 10,000 places offered to Ukrainians fleeing the war. This organisation helped Ukrainian refugees find temporary accommodation with Lithuanian host families for up to 3 months. Although 3 months is a standard and recommended period of hosting, the exact duration has often been negotiated between hosts and “guests” along the way. Overall, the initiative was limited to Ukrainian nationals and has now closed due to a decrease in arrivals from Ukraine and its voluntary nature (Stiprūs Kartu, 2024).

5.6.2 BeFriend Vilnius

International House Vilnius (IHV) initiative BeFriend Vilnius could also be mentioned as another more distant example. It is a mentoring initiative by the municipality of Vilnius, only for people who are staying in Vilnius and need some mentorship support. As there are a lot of questions coming to a new city:

¹¹ In this EMN Inform on Resettlement, Humanitarian Admission and Sponsorship Schemes “sponsorship” is explained as community or private initiatives that allow a person, a group, or an organisation, to assume responsibility for providing financial, social, and emotional support to a resettled person or family, for a predetermined period of time. Nonetheless, Lithuania did not have anything to report in this inform on sponsorship. Another EMN Inform from January 2024 on Access to autonomous housing in the context of international protection, reported that refugees in Lithuania often faced challenges transitioning to autonomous housing. Home rental/sales advertisements were mostly in Lithuanian and prospective landlords were not always willing to communicate in a language other than Lithuanian.

how to navigate the public transport system, how to register with a doctor, what to see in a city the aim of the project is to provide the answers from locals and share practical advice that will help not only integrate more quickly into local life, but also build friendly and respectful relationships with the local community (International House Vilnius, 2024).

5.6.3 Community Bridges

In 2021, the VA Caritas Integration Center for Foreigners initiated the "Community Bridges" project. One of the activities of this project was family friendship and mentoring. Lithuanian families befriended and mentored foreign families, helping them with everyday problems and introducing them to Lithuanian culture and society. This activity continues to be successful and has been adapted by Caritas Lithuania to support Ukrainian families in different regions of Lithuania (Artscape, 2022).

5.6.4 Tula

In addition, there are Ukrainian-Lithuanian family programs and gathering meetings for mutual integration and cultural enrichment organised by the [NGO "Tula"](#). The organisation also arranges three-day family camps for Ukrainian and Lithuanian families, with accommodation in Vilnius, Kaunas, and other cities. These camps include cultural exchanges, art therapy exercises in theatre, art, dance, and movement, as well as sense-making conversations around themes such as human rights, freedom, war, loss, hope, life, work, citizenship, and identity. The camps also offer lectures on parenthood, empathetic conversations, and interpersonal relationships, as well as collaborative creation of dreams through artistic representations bridging the past, present, and future. The organisation hosts Tula gatherings, which are regular evening meetings of Lithuanian and Ukrainian families and young people, lasting 2-3 hours each. These meetings are held in various public spaces in Vilnius, Kaunas, and other Lithuanian cities, such as libraries, museums, and galleries.

Finally, there are some informal sporadic initiatives in organised by grassroots organisations through a Facebook groups or Joiner App.

According to the number of apartments and houses registered through the platform "Strong Together", Lithuanian people were able to accommodate around 30 000 Ukrainians. As of June 2024, Lithuanian people have provided more than 10 000 housing options (rooms, houses, flats) for Ukrainian families through this initiative. Other initiatives did not have a housing element but rather provided support. It could be mentioned that IOM Lithuania has contributed almost €152 000 to help 774 Ukrainians cover part of their rent and has assisted nearly 17 000 war refugees with various assistance measures in the past year (Lapėnienė, 2022). Some initiatives have become less active and have died down, while international organisations and NGOs that were established long before the war in Ukraine remain active (IOM Lithuania, 2024c).

5.7 A THEMATIC ANALYSIS

In the absence of a formal community sponsorship programme in Lithuania, the war in Ukraine has spurred an unprecedented mobilisation effort. This situation marks the first large-scale attempt by Lithuanian citizens to act as private hosts for refugees. The initiative, primarily facilitated through the platform "[Stiprūs kartu](#)" and to a lesser extent via ad hoc matches through social networks, workplaces, friends, and other initiatives (i.e. [Ukreate HUB](#)), underscores the community's dedication.

5.7.1 Engagement of stakeholders

The initiative of Strong Together mainly included landlords and homeowners. There were no real estate agencies involved.

A representative survey of homeowners who accepted Ukrainian refugees was carried out by IOM Lithuania in June 2023. In the survey, 20 per cent of all respondents (N=245) claimed that they would not host Ukrainians again; 40 per cent said they would, and 40 per cent were undecided. Among the 20 per cent who had terminated hosting agreements at their own initiative, the main reasons for terminating the agreement included the following: 31 per cent disagreements with the hosted Ukrainians; 29 per cent got tired of participating in the programme; 18 per cent due to property damage; 15 per cent could not afford renting for free anymore; 13 per cent stated increased utility costs, and 13 per cent claimed they needed their property for themselves.

5.7.2 Recruitment and selection of volunteers/sponsors

Regarding recruitment and selection of community sponsors, the main focus lies on outreach and awareness. This involves raising awareness about the initiative and the need for community sponsors. Various channels were applied for sensitisation and awareness raising, such as social media, local community events, and partnerships with other organisations.

In the application process, individual citizens with interest in hosting and/or supporting refugees can apply to become hosts. They fill out an application form detailing their capacities. Following this, screening and selection was coordinated by the intermediary. There were only minimum requirements such as accommodation space (IOM Lithuania, 2024c).

5.7.3 Training and support for volunteers/sponsors

There was no training and support provided for sponsors in the recent projects. A three-month monetary compensation for housing is provided to Ukrainians. For those who have accommodated the Ukrainian refugees, the Lithuanian government decided to pay cash incentives of 150 euros for one person

and 50 euros for each additional person. This compensation was paid from the second month of accommodating Ukrainians and for a maximum of three months, hoping that the foreign nationals would find work during this period (IOM Lithuania, 2024c).

5.7.4 Effective matching criteria

The matching process entails no particular screening on particular matching criteria. Only the availability of accommodation was verified. The availability of a spare room or apartment is a key factor. Hosts need to have the capacity to accommodate refugees in their homes. Another element taken into account is the duration of the hostees' stay. The host must be willing to provide accommodation for up to 3 months (IOM Lithuania, 2024c).

5.7.5 Availability and verification of housing

To verify the availability and quality of the offered housing, a questionnaire is conducted by communication over the phone (IOM Lithuania, 2024c).

6. Discussion

Mieke Schrooten, Sylvie Van Dam (Odisee University of Applied Sciences)

This literature study has examined the concept and existing practices of community sponsorship in Belgium, Italy and Lithuania. We began by exploring the conceptualisation of community sponsorship, identifying its key features and variations. Building on this conceptual foundation, we delved into the specific context of the three countries participating in the RISE project, analysing the unique challenges they face, and the existing practices associated with community sponsorship and related initiatives.

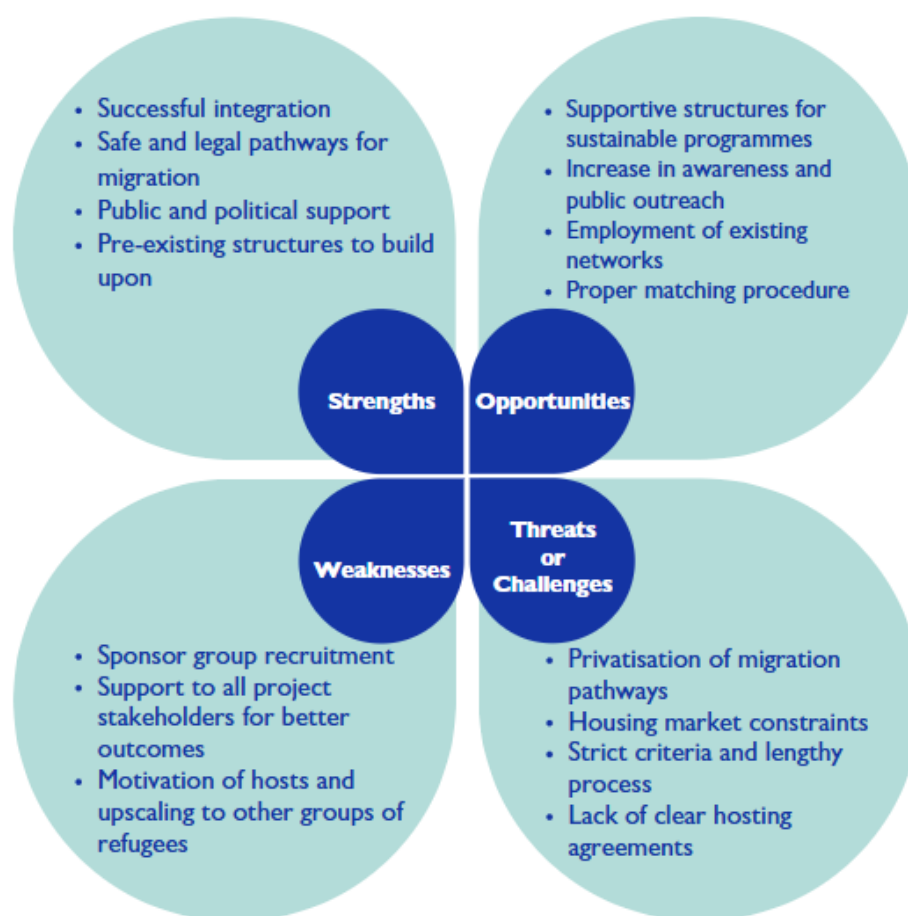


Figure 15. SWOT analysis of community sponsorship schemes in Belgium, Italy in Lithuania

In this chapter, we provide a focused discussion of the key lessons learned from the literature review through a SWOT analysis of the three countries—Belgium, Italy, and Lithuania. This analysis integrates insights from five thematic areas explored in the contextualisation of CS within each country: the engagement of key stakeholders, the recruitment and selection of volunteers/sponsors, the need for volunteer/sponsor training, effective matching criteria, and the availability and verification of housing. By synthesising these findings, this chapter aims to distil actionable insights and highlight opportunities for enhancing community sponsorship practices.

6.1 STRENGTHS

6.1.1 Successful integration

Successful integration is not only a primary objective of community sponsorship but also one of its most notable strengths. In our project, we understand successful integration as a multidimensional process that allows individuals to establish the economic, social and psychosocial relationships needed to maintain life, livelihood and dignity and achieve inclusion in civic life.

The personalised, hands-on involvement of community members—citizens volunteering their time and resources—greatly enhances refugees' access to social networks and connections. This active engagement fosters smoother integration into society and creates meaningful relationships. Furthermore, hosting refugees in private homes outside formal reception systems reduces pressure on reception centres. Community sponsorship initiatives are supported by comprehensive frameworks that offer legal, informational, logistical, and psychosocial support, as exemplified in Belgium's approach.

6.1.2 Safe and legal pathways for migration

Community sponsorship offers a vital alternative to dangerous and irregular migration routes. By providing a structured, legal pathway for refugees eligible for international protection, CS initiatives such as Italy's humanitarian corridors stand out as an inspiring practice. These corridors not only enable safe migration but also popularise the use of humanitarian visas and sponsorships as viable entry channels, marking an important evolution in migration management (Morozzo Della Rocca, 2017).

6.1.3 Political and public support for legal migration

Across Europe, there is stronger support among policymakers and the general public for regular migration compared to irregular migration. Moreover, projects such as Belgium's #FreeSpot campaign and Lithuania's Strong Together initiative highlight the potential for swift societal mobilisation in response to migration crises. By fostering collaboration between sponsors and partner organisations, CS programs provide practical support and positively influence perceptions about refugees, promoting migration as an opportunity for mutual growth (Marchetti, 2018).

6.1.4 Existing structures

Community sponsorship initiatives benefit from a wealth of existing networks, ranging from diaspora communities to NGOs, local administrations, landlords, and real estate connections. These

networks provide a robust foundation for support structures, enabling sponsors and partner organisations to work effectively.

6.2 WEAKNESSES

6.2.1 Recruiting sponsor groups

The literature review showed that CS programs sometimes struggle with recruiting sponsors. For instance, Belgium's CS program, managed by Fedasil and Caritas, remains relatively limited in scope. In April 2023, Fedasil launched a recruitment campaign to mobilise new sponsor groups, but this has generated limited interest so far.

The financial expectations placed on sponsors may hinder the successful recruitment of hosts and sponsors. In Belgium, sponsors are expected to contribute financially to support refugees during the transition period between their arrival and their eligibility for state support.

6.2.2 Support for all stakeholders

The success of CS programs relies heavily on robust support for all stakeholders, including host families, refugees, and partner organisations. Volunteers assume extensive responsibilities, which often go beyond providing shelter or financial support. Their commitment underscores the importance of robust partner organisations, which play a pivotal role in enhancing the quality of support provided to refugees as well as volunteers.

In cases like the hosting of Ukrainian refugees, the rapid mobilisation of citizens exposed gaps in the infrastructure, such as a lack of preparation and resources at the local level (Schrooten et al., 2022; 2024). Local administrations and partner organisations require well-defined and supportive structures to guide and assist stakeholders effectively. Without equipping hosts and refugees with resources and guidance before and during the sponsorship trajectory, the programme risks not reaching its objectives and potentially causing harm.

6.2.3 Motivation of hosts and upscaling to other groups of refugees

The motivations of hosts vary widely and can significantly influence the success of CS initiatives. However, societal attitudes toward refugees often differ based on cultural or geopolitical factors. For example, Lithuanians' positive perception of Ukrainian refugees is partly rooted in the perception of cultural similarities and shared geopolitical concerns. This contrasts with attitudes toward other migrant groups, which are often less favourable (IOM Lithuania, 2024c). Similar dynamics are found in other countries as well (Geldof et al., 2023; Mickelsson, 2025).

Expanding CS programs to include a broader range of refugee groups requires addressing these perception gaps, along with challenges related to cultural differences and potential language barriers.

6.3 OPPORTUNITIES

6.3.1 Supportive structures

Research with host families who opened their homes to persons displaced from Ukraine in Belgium suggests that host families could play a significant role in the operationalisation of state reception and asylum policy, offering more sustainable and compassionate accommodation for refugees, provided they receive adequate and consistent support (Schrooten et al., 2022).

The development of a clear framework, and a strong cooperation with a wide range of supportive structure is a key opportunity for new CS programmes. In general, the structures developed within the CS program of Fedasil and Caritas could be replicated and adapted to such emergency responses.

Barriers to participation linked to programme design need to be addressed, and support mechanisms for sponsors must be carefully constructed. Lastly, sponsors and local communities need to be prepared for the arrival of refugees to keep sponsors motivated (Zanzuchi & Dumann, 2023).

6.3.2 Increase in awareness and visibility

Given that the community sponsorship programme is currently not well-known, there is a significant opportunity to increase awareness and visibility. By implementing targeted marketing campaigns, leveraging social media platforms, and partnering with influential community leaders and organisations, the programme can reach a broader audience. This increased visibility can attract more sponsors, and supporters, ultimately enhancing the programme's impact and sustainability. Additionally, raising awareness can help shift public perceptions and foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for refugees.

6.3.3 Existing networks

It is neither necessary nor desirable to artificially and painstakingly construct new networks. Instead, existing networks could be further explored for their availability and willingness to be involved in implementing or upscaling the CS program. Tapping into existing networks among social organisations or within diaspora communities might be the key to recruiting and retaining sponsors, and accordingly providing more sustainable support for all stakeholders involved. Collaborating with diaspora communities can provide an opportunity to tap into new sponsor groups and help newcomers build social networks early on.

Further investment in these networks is required for securing, upscaling, and diversifying (potential) partners and sponsors. For both recruitment and retention, it is important to invest in outreach and activities to reach new audiences. Untapped diaspora networks or collaborations with particular social organisations like LGBTQIA+ associations can be considered.

To include such networks, looking for some middle ground between private and community sponsorship might be an interesting opportunity. In this approach, coordinating organisations might turn to diaspora or other organisations and networks in order to combine the strengths of both forms of sponsorship – i.e. still reach the more vulnerable profiles of beneficiaries related to CS, but with a higher chance on success of finding and engaging sponsors through existing networks.

Yet, it is important to notice that some of the networks targeted might themselves also encounter socio-economic challenges or suffer discrimination. This could pose a barrier in the support they are supposed to offer within the CS scheme.

6.3.4 Matching

A proper matching procedure with criteria to be tested before matching refugees with sponsors would increase the chance of successful hosting of refugees. However, in many of the initiatives described earlier, actual matching criteria or procedures are lacking. In Lithuanian practices, the availability of accommodation and the time that sponsors or hosts are willing or able to invest are decisive for matching hosts and hostees. In other projects, the size of the refugee family and the availability of space within hosts' homes primarily matter in the matchmaking. There are still many opportunities to further finetune matching criteria and to implement matching procedures.

6.4 THREATS OR CHALLENGES

6.4.1 Privatisation of migration pathways

One overarching concern with CS schemes is the potential privatisation of migration pathways, where responsibilities are shifted to private individuals, organisations, or charities instead of the public sector. This trend reflects broader debates on the privatisation of welfare and the delegation of traditionally state-managed responsibilities to third-sector entities. Scholars warn of a “privatisation of humanitarianism” (Hirsch et al., 2019), urging careful consideration of the balance between private and public responsibilities.

We can note an additional threat in contexts – like Belgium – where CS is embedded in a country's existing resettlement commitments. When a government decides to reduce its resettlement efforts, this impacts the continuation of CS. In this scenario, questions raise on how to ensure adaptability and sustainability of the CS programs and how to prevent loss of expertise and network following reduced funding.

Evaluative research indicates another pitfall: refugees face increased risks of exploitation when they are not supported within a framework or by organisations with particular expertise and instead make use of existing networks and communities (EMN, 2022).

6.4.2 Housing market constraints

Finding adequate and sustainable housing for refugees remains a significant obstacle across all countries. Overburdened housing markets amplify these difficulties, even when sponsor groups provide substantial support. Issues with finding adequate housing can also demotivate sponsors, as seen in Italian projects near Lake Como, where securing accommodation proved to be a persistent problem. Similarly, in Belgium, sponsors struggle to find suitable and affordable accommodation in a timely manner (Zanzuchi & Dumann, 2023).

These constraints not only affect the start of the sponsorship period but also continue throughout. Although the aim is to find more sustainable housing for the refugees, the one-year timeframe of the support is often insufficient to secure adequate housing in the overburdened housing market. This challenge is evident in the three countries studied, as well as in CS projects in other EU countries that struggle with limited housing capacity and a lack of emergency accommodation (EMN, 2022, 2024; IOM Belgium, 2024; Justice & Peace Netherlands, 2022). Moreover, discrimination on the housing market also plays a key role (Beeckmans & Geldof, 2024; Brown et al., 2024).

6.4.3 Timeframes

Lengthy procedures and strict eligibility criteria often deter potential participants in CS programmes. Sponsors sometimes hold unrealistic expectations about the time and effort required to build trust with refugees, while government institutions and organisations struggle to address the complex needs of refugees within tight timeframes and limited resources (EMN, 2022).

6.4.4 Private accommodation

Other challenges arise from hosting refugees in private homes. Without clear agreements on the hosting period, the lack of predictability and continuity of private accommodation can be stressful for displaced persons who may have to move to a reception centre if the private host is no longer willing to provide accommodation (Bouchta & Schrooten, forthcoming; EMN, 2022).

Moreover, without proper oversight, there are risks of exploitation and abuse. Ensuring housing quality and safe, secure hosting situations is crucial. Scholars have also highlighted the risks inherent in the concept of “hosts” itself, especially when applied to the beneficiaries of CS. As Lenette (2022) argues, “uncritical uses of the term ‘hosting’ can reinforce rather than disrupt dominant political discourses about ‘burden’ sharing and un/deserving refugees. When notions such as hosting and hospitality are contested across contexts of

exile, displacement, and resettlement, it becomes crucial to identify who performs the labour of hosting and extends gestures of hospitality. Challenging the myth of so-called host communities can reveal gender-specific experiences that are otherwise ignored or minimised in research, policy, and practice”. It is important to reflect on how CS may prevent such harmful effects to people already undergoing stigmatisation and exclusion.

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Reinforcing Integration through Sponsorship Enhancement (RISE)

project aims to promote community sponsorship (CS) schemes and integration of persons in need of international protection. The objective is to contribute to addressing housing shortages for beneficiaries of international protection by piloting community sponsorship schemes and enhancing engagement of sponsors in Belgium, Italy and Lithuania.

For more information visit: [The project page.](#)



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