

Italian mayors and migration: How have things changed under Meloni?

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Since migration rose to the top of the EU policy agenda in 2013, Italy has been on the frontline, both geographically, as a first entry point for hundreds of thousands of people, and politically, within EU debates. While national governments and prime ministers have often taken the spotlight, sub-national authorities have also played an increasingly important role.

This is especially true of mayors and local governments, who have been tasked with varying responsibilities in frontline reception, full responsibility for unaccompanied minors and shifting degrees of involvement in second-line reception. In several cases, they have also become visible advocates at the national and EU levels. Some mayors and cities in particular have become champions of an active and critical stance towards restrictive and inhumane EU and national policies – for example, Leoluca Orlando, mayor of Palermo from 2012 to 2022, or Domenico “Mimmo” Lucano, mayor of the small Calabrian village of Riace from 2004 to 2018 (and again from 2024 to date).

Over the past three years, however, much has changed: from the right-wing turn in Italy – and, more broadly, across Europe and the global North – to the end of the mandates of some of these mayors, as well as the transformation of several of the most significant local initiatives in the migration field. This brief offers an up-to-date overview of how Italian mayors are navigating the migration field since Giorgia Meloni’s government took office in late 2022.

Institutional work

Little has changed in terms of the institutional work carried out by mayors, particularly within the framework of the SAI – *Sistema di Accoglienza e Integrazione* (Reception and Integration System). The SAI (and its predecessors, SPRAR and SIPROIMI) has long served as Italy’s national system for reception and integration, providing comprehensive services to refugees, asylum seekers, unaccompanied foreign minors and young people entrusted to social services upon reaching adulthood. It is funded by the Ministry of the Interior and managed jointly by local authorities and non-governmental organisations. As of August 2025, the system comprised 869 active projects, involving around 2,000 municipalities, with a total of 40,132 available places¹.

¹ <https://www.retesai.it/i-numeri-della-rete-sai/>

Yet municipalities increasingly denounce inadequate resources and flawed allocation criteria for the SAI system – and for integration and reception more broadly². As recently highlighted by the Deputy Mayor for Welfare Policies of the City of Bologna, Matilde Madrid, this is the result of a discretionary choice by the national government. At present, resources appear inadequate not only in absolute terms but also from a relative perspective, when considered on a per capita basis. This is a shame – she added – as the SAI system is the only instrument capable of ensuring dignified reception, unlike other schemes envisaged under Italian law³.

A further strain has emerged with the reception of Palestinian refugees, who are assigned to the ordinary SAI system. As Madrid pointed out, it is unacceptable that, in times of genocide, no derogation from the standard system has been envisaged – in stark contrast to the exceptional measures adopted for refugees from Ukraine⁴.

Political work

The political dimension has shifted more visibly. As mentioned above, some of the mayors most active and vocal in the migration field ended their mandates, while a (far) right-wing turn took place in Italy – and, more broadly, across Europe. Although mayors no longer openly challenged government policies in the way they did when many opposed Matteo Salvini's closed-ports policy by declaring their cities 'open harbours'⁵, a new wave of mayors began to take a stand vis-à-vis EU and national measures.

These included, in particular, the (then) centre-left Democratic Party mayors of major cities – Roberto Gualtieri (Rome), Beppe Sala (Milan), Gaetano Manfredi (Naples), Stefano Lo Russo (Turin), Matteo Lepore (Bologna) and Dario Nardella (Florence) – who in 2023 drafted a manifesto expressing their deep concern over proposals to alter SAI, the only reception system in Italy that is genuinely public, structured and non-emergency-based. They stressed that excluding asylum seekers from SAI would deny them any integration pathway and a real chance of inclusion and emancipation within local communities. They also opposed the abolition of "special protection" and underlined the inadequacy of the CAS system – consisting of large, second-line centres – compared with the more tailored and supportive reception and integration offered by SAI.

In their document, the mayors further called for a rethinking of the system for unaccompanied minors and put forward four proposals: (a) strengthen the unity of the reception system; (b) ensure access for asylum seekers; (c) restrict CAS to first-

² <https://www.actionaid.it/press-area/accoglienza-collasso-centri-ditalia-2024/>

³ High-level event *Welcoming Cities: Municipalities at the Heart of Reception and Integration*, European Parliament, Brussels, 23-24 September 2025

⁴ High-level event *Welcoming Cities*

⁵ <https://www.politico.eu/article/matteo-salvini-italy-migrants-mayors-rebel-against-order-to-block-migrant-ship/>

line functions – identification and health screening; (d) re-establish the distribution mechanisms outlined in the National Plan⁶.

While comprehensive and ambitious, this political document went largely unheard, with no concrete follow-up. Similarly, another ambitious text – the *Manifesto of the Welcoming Cities*, drafted by the Tavolo Asilo e Immigrazione (which comprise a range of civil society actors)⁷ – has not produced any tangible changes. Together, these experiences highlight the challenges of the current period: a lack of receptiveness on the part of the central government and the overall limited bargaining power of mayors, regardless of their determination to contest the prevailing policy regime.

At the political level, further change has come with the ‘distant port’ policy introduced by the Meloni government. Although mainly designed to hinder sea rescue operations by civil society organisations – by obliging their ships to undertake longer journeys before disembarking rescued people⁸ – the policy had a significant side effect. It thrust port cities that had traditionally remained on the margins of migration governance into the spotlight, re-politicising their agency and prompting them to become increasingly vocal on migration matters.

The case of Livorno is particularly notable. Designated as a place of safety in more than twenty instances since December 2022, the city has received over 2,000 people and developed its own reception strategy, rooted in a socio-cultural fabric with longstanding left-leaning traditions – as recently recalled in the volume, published by the city of Livorno, *Qui nessuno è straniero*⁹.

Networking

Networking has also been significantly affected in recent years. While activity has continued at an institutional level – first and foremost through ANCI, the National Association of Italian Municipalities – political alliances among municipalities, nationally and transnationally, have lost strength.

The experience of the International Alliance of Safe Harbours and the civil society consortium *From the Sea to the City* illustrates this shift: the activity of this dual, transnational network has been re-oriented largely towards other European countries, reflecting both emerging priorities and the difficulty of engaging Italian municipalities. Where political networking with Italian municipalities does continue, it is often sustained less by the municipalities themselves than by the presence of a vibrant civil society (e.g. ARCI, *From the Sea to the City*) and, at the transnational level, by the capacity of political entrepreneurs to stimulate discussion and involvement.

⁶ <https://www.dire.it/16-04-2023/895514-migranti-documento-sindaci-preoccupati-da-proposte-governo/>

⁷ <https://www.collettiva.it/copertine/italia/manifesto-citta-accoglienti-immigrazione-sindaci-qkn873vx>

⁸ <https://sos-humanity.org/en/press/analysis-of-distant-ports/>

⁹ High-level event *Welcoming Cities*.

Here, former mayors turned MEPs – such as Leoluca Orlando and Mimmo Lucano – have played a bridging role. Beyond political networking, they also play a potentially crucial role in the development of new legislation – or at least in opening up debate – on the role of mayors in migration policy. A notable example is Orlando's recent proposal to grant EU mayors the power to issue temporary residence registration, which, if realised, would provide mayors across Europe, Italy included, with a new and significant tool¹⁰.

Despite the shrinking space for mayoral involvement in migration governance under Meloni's government, and the constraints imposed by the institutional framework highlighted in this brief, the continued advocacy of figures such as Orlando and Lucano underscores the capacity of local leadership to resist and adapt. Their efforts demonstrate that mayors remain uniquely positioned to balance humanitarian imperatives with community needs, and that innovative municipal initiatives can still shape European debates by forging new alliances and promoting a more open and humane migration policy.



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¹⁰ High-level event *Welcoming Cities*.