



By Laura Colini,  
Filippo Furri

# Bologna

## A pioneer of inclusive policies

### Inhalt

1. Abstract & Takeaways

2. Local background and context

3. Selected local approaches

3.1. WELCOME SYSTEM

3.2. Health & Social Services Integration

3.3. Independent grassroots organisations for  
social and cultural services

4. Advocacy and network activities

5. Update: What is new in 2023?

# 1. Abstract & Takeaways

## Key Takeaways

### 1

Bologna's local administration has long standing experience in designing inclusive migration policies dating back to the mid-1990s. This gave important roots to today's concept of a "solidarity city."

### 2

Citizen-led organisations have been an important and lively component of Bologna's social life. They help the public sector increase the impact of many innovative projects.

### 3

The politically leftist, self-managed, and autonomous Social Centres in Bologna provide crucial services to refugees through collective and volunteer work.

## What is unique about the city?

**A long history of pro-migrant policies:** The city has a long tradition of leftist governments and a pro-migrant agenda since the 1980's. Today, remarkable projects involve cooperation with neighbouring municipalities, especially on health-related matters; the civic-led medical clinic in the city centre, and the first LGBTIQ welcome centre.

## What is the focus of local migration policies?

**Aligning social services:** One of Bologna's most innovative policy approaches involved integrating different social services (access to housing, health, and social support) into one municipal agency. This made it easier to provide these services more effectively, especially for vulnerable and elderly people.

## What are the key factors?

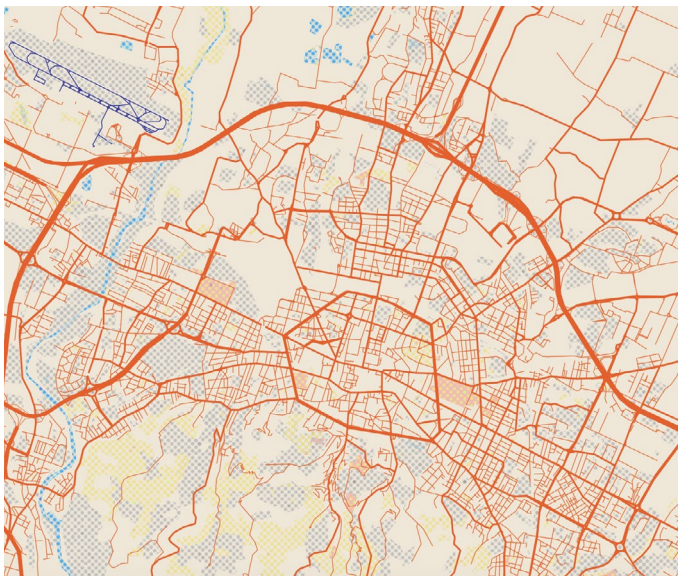
**City and civil society working together:** The collaboration between the public sector, private enterprise, and an active civil society is an ongoing characteristic of this city's governance. This collaboration was key to launching inclusive and innovative policies, especially in health and social services, and in metro Bologna's welcoming system.

## Political activities and advocacy beyond the city level?

An ad hoc inter-municipal cooperation with municipalities around Bologna helps share both competencies and knowledge in several fields, including refugee inclusion. On the national scene, the municipality took a more determined political position when opposing the anti-migrant security decree by former Interior Minister Salvini in 2018. Internationally, the city gained visibility between 2016 and 2018 through the “Welcoming Bologna” project, dedicated to capacity-building in the public and private sector for “creating welcoming cities for new citizens.”

**“Bologna has always been a progressive city and plans to stay this way. [...] For the future, we aim at living in solidarity and strive to work together “**

Virginio Merola, Mayor of Bologna



### Population

390.625

### Location

Bologna ist die Hauptstadt der norditalienischen Region Emilia Romagna.

### Mayor

Until 2021 Virginio Merola (coalition of centre-left parties)

## 2. Local Background and Context

*Bologna's administration has a long-standing left-wing tradition, with the Communist party playing a major role in the city government for over forty years. The leftist government made it possible to have public investments on migrant inclusion already in the 90's. However, it is thanks to organised civil society that Bologna can recognise itself as a solidarity city today.*

### A history of pro-migrant policies

The first public interventions on behalf of the migrant population date back to the mid-1980's, with the creation of an “orientation centre” and assistance to migrant workers. In the 1990's, migration flows toward Italy increased consistently. A centre-left coalition won power in 1995 with an open and pro-migrant agenda, reinforcing investment on policies favouring intercultural education, community mediation, and immigrant

1 Caponio, Tiziana: Grassroots multiculturalism in Italy: Milan, Bologna and Naples compared. In: Caponio, Tiziana, Borkert, Maren (Hrsg.): The Local Dimension of Policymaking. Amsterdam University Press, 2010.

2 Ibidem.

3 The Asylum Seekers and Refugees Protection System (Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati - SPRAR) constitutes a milestone in the creation of a "municipal" reception system of reception and immediate assistance. SPRAR was established in 2002 by the Italian Interior Ministry with funding from the Italian Fund for asylum policies and services (Fondo nazionale per le politiche e i servizi di asilo - FNPSA); it was characterised by the voluntary participation of local entities and by a strong collaboration with third sector actors.

4 In 2018, SPRAR was modified by former Interior Minister Matteo Salvini's decree into SIPROIMI (Sistema di protezione per titolari di protezione internazionale e per minori stranieri non accompagnati, International protection holders and unaccompanied foreign minors protection system), which excluded asylum seekers from the system.

5 In 2020, SAI (Sistema di Accoglienza e integrazione, Reception and Integration system) replaced SIPROIMI, returning to a similar format to that of SPRAR. It provided for two levels of services, one for asylum seekers (reception, health and psychological assistance, linguistic-cultural mediation and legal orientation) and one for international protection holders (more professional and training oriented) <https://www.piuculture.it/2020/11/sai/>

6 The development of the SAI reception system is associated with several cultural and social projects, such as the Vesta project. The migration of people seeking international protection is a social phenomenon which, in various forms, involves everyone. The Vesta project aims to offer municipalities and citizens a new opportunity to build increasingly integrated, innovative and safe communities. Vesta provides legal tutelages for foreign minors, organises cultural, leisure, and recreational activities with younger children, and helps foster unaccompanied foreign minors. [https://www.laimomo.it/sociale\\_post/accoglienze/](https://www.laimomo.it/sociale_post/accoglienze/)

participation in running social services. "The stated goal of public policy was that of building a multicultural society where cultural diversity should be not just tolerated, but positively integrated."<sup>1</sup> At that time, adequate housing was also a priority. This translated into "community centres," run by migrant associations and policies aimed at facilitating integration, such as through Italian language courses, training, and access to social services.<sup>2</sup>

## Milestones: From statistical analysis to a council of foreign and stateless citizens

From 1995 onwards, Bologna prepared a statistical analysis of the trends in its migrant population (residential, social, economic, linguistic, et al). The annual reports are a valuable source of information on the living conditions of foreigners and were invaluable in managing subsequent "migration crises.". The creation of the Council of foreign and stateless citizens of the Province of Bologna marked another milestone.

## Collaboration between Civil Society and the Public Sector

Bologna is also a good example for its implementation of the Bologna Regulation on civic collaboration for the urban commons. This involves the co-management of abandoned buildings and public spaces that can provide additional social services to the migrant population.

# 3. Selected local approaches

*The city of Bologna's migration and inclusion policy is characterised by two important and interconnected collaborations. First, there is an efficient inter-municipality collaboration between Bologna and its neighbouring cities for shaping common policies and actions; second, within Bologna, there are well-established social centres in providing complementary public services, representing a meaningful partner for the municipality.*

## 3.1 WELCOME SYSTEM: Regional Hub, gender-oriented hosting community centre and welcome centre for LGBTIQ+ refugees

*With "The Asylum Seekers and Refugees Protection System" (SPRAR<sup>3</sup> then SIPROIMI<sup>4</sup> and SAI<sup>5</sup>), the Italian migrants' welcome system has become more and more a municipal-related reception system, as municipalities directly dialogue with the Ministry (and its prefectures). Bologna has been successful in involving other neighbouring municipalities, creating a welcoming system not only at an urban scale but on a territorial scale through inter-municipal cooperation.<sup>6</sup>*

In June 2014, Bologna launched its first Regional Hub hosting asylum seekers under emergency conditions. The Hub, managed by the social cooperative Lai Momo, was a transit centre where primary judicial procedures and basic health screenings are carried out before the arrivals go to other welcoming centres in the region.<sup>7</sup> In the first 6 months of operation in late 2014, 2,580 people passed through the facility, normally staying for between 15 and 30 days.

## A regional hub for migrants

The Hub project was built on a regional scale as opposed to an urban one, as inter-municipal cooperation has always been a salient characteristic of Bologna and its neighbouring cities, both for inclusion policies and social services coordination. The European Commission funded the Hub after the city itself proposed the project. In 2019, the Prefecture ordered the closure of the regional Hub Mattei for refurbishment. In 2020, the Hub reopened as a CAS, but the centre does not respond with the resources necessary to adequately welcome migrants. There have been numerous protests since the reopening due to overcrowding, and lack of basic hygiene.

Another metropolitan area project is worth mentioning: the coordination among municipalities in welcoming the MondoDonna<sup>8</sup> project. It offers a variety of support for women for fighting against gender-based violence, and broadly supporting people with vulnerabilities.

## Community centres for vulnerable migrants

The Hosting community centre provides mother-and-child residential care for pregnant and single mothers, secret refuge shelters for women victims of domestic violence, and centres for victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation. There are also transition houses for people exiting the Hosting project and in need of job-oriented socio-economic support.

Another noteworthy centre is the first Italian reception centre (the second of its kind in Europe after Berlin) for LGBTIQ+ refugees fleeing their countries of origin due to persecution for their orientation or gender identity. The project is called “Rise The Difference - Accogli le differenze” and was commissioned by MIT (Transsexual Identity Movement), with the support of the Camelot Social Cooperative and LGBTIQ+ Resource Center.

## 3.2 Health & Social Services Integration

*The innovation of Bologna lays in the creation of the “Azienda Pubblica di Servizi alla Persona - Public Company for Services to the person” (ASP)<sup>9</sup>, a unique agency which brings together several of the oldest civic organisations in the city for the “organisation and the provision of welfare and integrated social and health services in favour of the elderly and particularly of those who are physically and/or psycholog-*

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.migrationschool.eu/why-bologna/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.mondodonna-onlus.it/english/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.aspbologna.it/home1/asp-citta-di-bologna/about-us>

*ically non-self-sufficient adults in need, to ensure a better quality of life.”<sup>10</sup> For people who do not have access to these services, there are a growing number of initiatives led by cooperatives, associations, and voluntary groups addressing people in vulnerable situations.*

ASP’s goals are achieved through a variety of projects on housing access, health, and social support. As local social workers report: “The advantage of the coordination at a metropolitan scale is in handling specific cases in an integrated manner. In the case of asylum seekers for instance—if a problem occurs in one municipality, the right support might be located in a nearby municipality. Therefore, it is fundamental to link to the proper department or service, through the ASP.”<sup>11</sup> Among other services, the ASP coordinates the national SAI reception system over the entire metropolitan area: “The new three-year call for the SAI territorial project, has developed on a metropolitan basis since 2017. The intent is to give municipalities more leadership and better tools for intervention, within the reception system, for an effective integration of international protection.”<sup>12</sup> In 2016, the city of Bologna additionally received support from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) through the EU Programme Urban Innovative Action (UIA), to develop a multi-functional space aimed at including migrants and refugees.

The historical Villa Salus in the peripheral Savena district was thus renovated and is now operational and open to the public.

### 3.3 Independent grassroots organisations for social and cultural services

*In Bologna and in Italian cities, social centres (Centri sociali autogestiti) have an important and well-established role in providing social services for all, and especially for the most vulnerable groups. Born out of leftist social movements, Bologna’s social centres have evolved over years of collective and voluntary work as complementary public services for people in the Bologna area.*

Some of these services specifically address migrants excluded from the national reception system. The services range from legal support in administrative and “emergence” practices, health care, education and training, and cultural or recreational activities. One example is the volunteer-managed health clinic “Laboratorio Salute Popolare” (LSP),<sup>13</sup> The LSP goal is to provide information, and self-training for accessing the national health system, and in particular for marginalised and less protected people.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.aspbologna.it/aspxigiovani/asp-citta-di-bologna/aspxigiovani/Inglese-progetti-asp>

<sup>11</sup> Interview december 2020 to social workers of the city of Bologna

<sup>12</sup> [www.bolognacares.it](http://www.bolognacares.it)

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.laboratoriosalutepopolare.it>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.yabastabologna.com/radio-welcome-refugees>

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.tpo.bo.it/progetti\\_tpo/](http://www.tpo.bo.it/progetti_tpo/)

#### Cultural Centres

The TPO (Teatro Polivalente Occupato, Occupied Polyvalent Theater, established in 1995), a recognised anti-fascist and anti-sexist sociocultural centre, also provides another inspiring practice. Today, the TPO hosts a migrant desk, a radio station, the Ya Basta! Association,<sup>14</sup> the Kallima Italian language school, a self-managed shelter,<sup>15</sup> and other cultural and sport-oriented activities.



Socio-cooperatives and associations also cover an important role in service provision, especially for disadvantaged people. The SOKOS Association, born in Bologna in 1993, offers free assistance to immigrants without a residence permit, homeless people, and to anyone living in a condition of exclusion in the Bologna area. SOKOS covers primary care and specialist visits, including gynaecology, dermatology, psychiatry, psychology, neurology, psychiatry, nephrology, orthopaedics, vascular surgery, counting on professional competencies on a voluntary basis.

## Street Lawyers Association

The Association Avvocati di Strada (Street Lawyers Association), active in Bologna since 2003, has published “Dove Andare per...” (“Where to go to...”), a guide for homeless people with useful information on where to find shelters in the city. In addition, the guide represents a tool for those working with social exclusion issues, as it provides a detailed map of public and community welfare resources.<sup>16</sup> A more recent version under COVID emergency service provision was produced in 2020<sup>17</sup>.

## 4. Advocacy and Network Activities

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.avvocatodistra-da.it/flash-mob-dove-andare-per-2020/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.avvocatodistra-da.it/dove-andare-per-bologna-emergenza-covid/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.thelocal.it/20181129/salvinis-anti-migrant-security-decree-becomes-law-in-italy/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.coalizionecivica.it/bologna-aleppo-bologna-citta-ri-fugio/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.coalizionecivica.it/bologna-citta-aperta-e-accogliente-solidarieta-a-mediterranea/>

<sup>21</sup> The outcome is a project toolkit available in Italian, English and French, divided into two parts and aimed at both municipalities and local authorities, as well as social workers, non-profit organisations and those who work to make cities more welcoming. [https://www.redattoresociale.it/article/notiziario/\\_welcoming\\_bologna\\_come\\_creatore\\_citta\\_accoglienti\\_per\\_i\\_nuovi\\_cittadini](https://www.redattoresociale.it/article/notiziario/_welcoming_bologna_come_creatore_citta_accoglienti_per_i_nuovi_cittadini) However, the toolkit is not available online (search Feb, 2021)

<sup>22</sup> [https://www.redattoresociale.it/article/notiziario/\\_welcoming\\_bologna\\_come\\_creatore\\_citta\\_accoglienti\\_per\\_i\\_nuovi\\_cittadini](https://www.redattoresociale.it/article/notiziario/_welcoming_bologna_come_creatore_citta_accoglienti_per_i_nuovi_cittadini)

<sup>23</sup> [https://corrieredibologna.corriere.it/bologna/politica/19\\_gennaio\\_05/migranti-prefetto-convo-ca-sindacimerola-punta-ricorsi-1e91aec2-10c0-11e9-b4d3-0a1438a53278.shtml](https://corrieredibologna.corriere.it/bologna/politica/19_gennaio_05/migranti-prefetto-convo-ca-sindacimerola-punta-ricorsi-1e91aec2-10c0-11e9-b4d3-0a1438a53278.shtml)

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.siproimi.it/english>

*Unlike other Italian cities, Bologna’s local government has been less vocal on the national and international public scene about “solidarity cities.” On the national scene, the Municipality took an apparently more determined political position when opposing the anti-migrant security decree by former Interior Minister Salvini, composed of a package of laws aimed at removing humanitarian protection and making it more difficult to obtain Italian citizenship<sup>18</sup>. The City Council has called Bologna a “city of refuge” in many cases, including in support of the population of Aleppo in 2016<sup>19</sup>, and in support of the newly created Mediterranean Saving Humans.<sup>20</sup>*

Internationally, the city gained visibility between 2016 and 2018 with the project Welcoming Bologna, co-financed by Cities Alliance with the support of UCLG (United cities and local governments). The project is dedicated to capacity-building in the public and private sector for “creating welcoming cities for new citizens.”<sup>21</sup> Welcoming Bologna (inspired by the Project “Welcoming America”) has created a metropolitan working group that has involved local stakeholders.<sup>22</sup>

### Opposing Salvini

In 2019, Mayor Merola declared that civil servants in the city of Bologna will abide by the new decree without agreeing with the national decisions: “I am the mayor, I remain in the government of my city and I will not fall into Salvini’s trap.”<sup>23</sup> Because of the decree, out of 971 migrants currently housed in the city through the SIPROIMI<sup>24</sup> (now SAI), 693 (437 asylum seekers and 256 holders of international protection) could suddenly find themselves sleeping rough. In December 2019, the mayor sent a letter to the Interior Minister to operate in derogation of the

Salvini decree. “The local reception structures organised by the Prefecture - reads the letter addressed to the Interior Ministry - are not in the condition of welcoming all asylum seekers and holders of international protection.” The Municipality therefore asked to be able to continue working with the reception system, namely providing the service to all 971 migrants.

## 5. Update: What is new in 2023?

---

- ◆ In Bologna, collective resistance arose in August 2023 against the Prefecture of the Province of Bologna, which planned to expel asylum-seeking migrants from the Reception Centre (CAS). As a result, left-wing parties in the city council, municipal authorities and civil society organisations joined forces and planned a protest in front of the prefecture’s building. The joint action emphasises the unity between municipal, political representatives, local authorities and civil society in advocating for the rights and welfare of migrants in Bologna.<sup>25</sup>
- ◆ Bologna’s mayor, in a joint **statement** by six Italian municipalities in April 2023, criticised the national government’s plans to abolish “special protection” in the laws protecting refugees. They oppose such changes to the reception system for migrants by declaring a ‘state of emergency’, as they curtail their basic rights and hinder their inclusion.
- ◆ In October 2021, Matteo Lepore (Partito Democratico, Democratic Party) was elected to succeed former mayor Virginio Merola. The strongest group in the city council is the centre-left alliance around the Social Democrats.

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.bolognatoday.it/cronaca/migranti-ordinanza-prefettura-espulsioni-cas.html>

---

The **Moving Cities** project provides an in-depth research of progressive cities in Europe, exploring their most inspiring and successful approaches to migration policies. Find more city reports at [www.moving-cities.eu/en](http://www.moving-cities.eu/en).

Read more about the project and how it is funded on the website: <https://moving-cities.eu/about>

---