

On the Frontlines of Fear: Migration and Climate Change in the Local Context of Sardinia, Italy

Giovanni Bettini

Lancaster Environment Centre, Lancaster University
g.bettini@lancaster.ac.uk

Nicholas Beuret

Essex Business School, University of Essex
nb17913@essex.ac.uk

Ethemcan Turhan

Department of Spatial Planning and Environment, University of Groningen
e.turhan@rug.nl

Abstract

Migration and climate change are hot topics generating widespread concerns and fears in European public opinion. However, a striking difference between them is the ‘efficacy’ of the fears that surround the two topics. For migration, the spectre of a looming invasion and similar narratives translate into immense impacts and a securitisation of the matter. For climate change, growing awareness over the prospect of a climate emergency only sporadically translates into urgent action. This article engages with this remarkable difference of great political relevance. While analyses of fear and securitisation of migration and climate have privileged inter-state politics and international discourses, here we investigate how fear is produced, mobilised, and contested in sub-national political arenas. Rather than on a spectacular case (as Lampedusa or a Pacific Island) we focus on Sardinia, an ordinary region that, for both climate change and migration, is not under the spotlight – there are no melting glaciers nor climate refugees. Drawing on focus groups and interviews with Sardinian local authorities, we detail how mayors and municipality feel on the frontline against both climate change and migration. However, rather than as security issues, both emerge tangled with questions such as austerity, *spopolamento* (depopulation), economic decline, and rural-urban dynamics. But while fears over migration translate into strong citizen pressure mayors feel compelled to react to, concerns about climate change instead lead to a sort of fatalism or deferral. We conclude the paper with reflections on the implications that this important difference has for broader debates on climate and migration.



Keywords

Climate change, migration; fear, local authorities, austerity

Introduction

Fear seems to proliferate when there are cracks and openings in a political landscape. Exemplary is the expansion of fear in the context of the profound crises that have shaken Europe. And nowhere can we see the transitions, tensions and crises that have agitated the continent better than in and around the Mediterranean. On its shores and in its waters are some of the most intense struggles and tragedies that are reconfiguring Europe. Settled postcolonial equilibria that structured the geopolitical order of the region were forcefully shaken by the Arab spring and the catastrophes that followed, including the foreign military intervention in Libya and proxy wars in Syria. The economic crisis has hit southern European countries with destructive violence and the austerity measures, through which the European Union responded to these challenges, have undermined its legitimacy as a space based on democracy and internal solidarity. Fear (often of some othered migrant, of terrorism, of the erosion of livelihoods and welfare) has been a key device through which populist right wing parties and alt-right political movements gained traction in many European countries. Notably, fear has been an omnipresent tone in the context of the ‘moral panic’ (Bauman 2015) that has dominated much of European debates on migration and refugees in the last few years.

The centrality of fear in contemporary political landscapes is hardly a new phenomenon. The now classic concept of ‘risk society’ describes a condition in which ‘being afraid’ and constantly alert to looming threats is one of the defining characteristics of civic life (Beck 1992; Douglas 1983). In risk societies, fear is a key device that supports and legitimizes the identification of threats, the sanctioning of a condition of (in)security, and the emergence of devices to govern it. However, this ‘old’ condition has reached new hyperbolic levels in recent years, with risk becoming catastrophe (Aradau and Munster 2011). Moreover, many have pointed to the eclipsing of ‘rationality’ and intersubjectivity in the production and justification of social and political ‘truth’, with a move towards more ‘emotional’ forms of veridiction (Brown 2015; Wodak 2015; Massumi 2015). While we are not mourning the loss of a fantasised arcadia of liberal democracy – a ‘golden age’ that never existed – the exacerbation of some tendencies in Western democratic regimes is evident. A further spectacularisation of political life is accompanied by the consolidation of fear as fundamental condition and political device, both key ingredients in the recent proliferation of rising authoritarian populism (Kinnvall 2018; Brown 2019).

Yet the shape that fear takes, the ways in which it is mobilised and, very importantly, the effects it has vary across cases and political fields. Fear does not necessarily lead to regressive/aggressive reactions. Fear can also inhibit action, it can be repressed, or it can ‘evaporate’ without leading to any consequences. Threats can fail to ignite fear. Problems are ignored or fail to rouse any response or produce any political affect. Here, climate change stands in sharp contrast to migration. While migration can produce fearful and mobilised publics, climate change would appear to either not be fearful enough (being something that, while happening, is not perceived as immediate threat) or, conversely, too fearful; paralysing rather than mobilising (Trombetta 2008; Dörries 2010; O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole 2009).¹

¹ Interestingly, in many cases the reverse stands – i.e. mobilization leads to a defusing of fear. For examples of this in the field of migration, see Della Porta (2018).

In this paper we are interested in examining a contrast between the fear of migration and the (lack of) fear of climate change. In particular, in contrast to the political efficacy of fears of migrants, we ask what makes European populations resistant to articulations of climate change as something to be feared? Or, conversely, when feared, why does fear of climate change politically demobilise people when fear of migration can tragically and horrifically mobilise them? By putting into conversation the distinct literatures on (fears of) migration and climate change, we contribute to the understanding of fear as a means of producing governable publics. However, fear does not automatically produce such publics. Rather, we will explore both how fear works and how it fails to work, under what conditions, and how these conditions shape fear. Complicating easy narratives of fearful publics and threatened social bodies, we set out how fear is side-lined at particular times and spaces while taken up wilfully in others; mobilised contrary to governability and put into tension between government and business interests.

This article explores political fear as it is contested and mobilised around questions of migration and climate change around the Mediterranean in order to examine the mechanisms and conditions of its efficacy as a political device. We will draw on insights from fieldwork in the Sardinia region, Italy, where we dialogued with local authorities in the context of the CLISEL (Climate Security with Local Authorities) project.² CLISEL is an EU-funded H2020 Coordination and Support Action that investigated the climate–security nexus from the perspective of local administrations and communities between 2017–2019, with a focus on Sardinia. The project’s vantage point is original in the context of scholarly investigations of the links between security, climate change, and migration, where the dominant angle has been the geopolitical. While there are case studies on the local dimensions of security (in particular, human security) in relation to climate change and migration, nation states and their sovereign power (or lack thereof) have been the point of reference for critical studies (Huysmans 2006; Boas 2015).

Notably, the EU funding call the project responded to had a strong securitarian flair. CLISEL aimed at turning such conceptualization of security inside out. By looking at local contexts and municipalities – rather than national and international arenas, CLISEL investigated how the impacts of migration and climate change on security are determined by processes taking place ‘down to earth’ in local contexts, cities, and at sub-national institutional levels. This approach contextualizes the two otherwise rather abstract processes of migration and climate change in relation to the tangle of social, political, cultural and economic relations within which both materialize. This approach is of particular importance for understanding how fear is mobilized, inhibited, and channelled (or not) into actions. The creation of publics and the modulation of affects we introduced above obviously does not take place only at the level of national and international discourse, both very important both for climate change and migration, but also in the situated life conditions, stories and struggles in which persons live.

In introducing our case study, we stress the ‘ordinary’ character of Sardinia in European discourses and politics on climate change and migration. While both processes impact on Sardinia, the island is not a hotspot in either case. While Sardinia’s ports have received migrants, these landings have for the most been planned and operated by or under the supervision of the Italian Navy and numbers have been limited. Put bluntly, Sardinia is not Lesbos, Lampedusa or Ceuta. It does not either have melting glaciers, nor it has come into media spotlight for any climate-related catastrophe. Borrowing from De Genova’s formulation (2013), Sardinia is not a stage in either the ‘spectacle of the border’ or that of climate change. It is definitively not one of the most emblematic or visual cases. Thereby, it offers insights on what happens in places outside media’s spotlight, in certain respects peripheral, which are arguably the vast majority. This also allows perceiving the importance of salient traits of the cultural

² For more information, see www.clisel.eu.

landscape, which powerfully enter into play in shaping attitudes towards migration, as well as in the role of local authorities in their community and their relationship with citizens.

While the generalizability of the findings obtained from a case study is of course limited, we aim to contribute to work exploring the socio-political processes modulating fear across individuals, the temporalities involved, the (non-)activation of fear. Drawing on recent work that link fear to negative anticipation and premeditation (Massumi 2005, 2015; Baldwin 2016), we investigate how fear operates (or fails to) as a device through which governable publics are produced. While offering insights on the actual discourses on climate change and migration, the comparison helps us complicating simplistic narratives of fearful publics and threatened social bodies.

Conceptualizing Fear

While it is commonplace to identify fear as one of the structuring elements of contemporary political landscapes, it is not always clear exactly what fear refers to, nor what should be new about contemporary so-called ‘politics of fear’ and the ways in which fear links to (in)action. Starting from a definition of fear as a form of *negative anticipation*, where a future harm comes to dominate our actions and beliefs in the present (Douglas 1966), this section delves into the social relationship between fear and its objects, and the future stakes at play in the mobilisation of fear – key aspects for the case study that will follow.

Among the several forms of fear that exist, we focus here on what Robin (2004) describes as ‘political fear’. We can describe political fear as a means of transforming negative private encounters and experiences (e.g. the micro-aggressions of the workplace and home, the slow violence of daily life) into fearful public expectations. This latter point is crucial: if there is not a body of negative private encounters or enabling channels that are amenable to being translated or articulated into a specific public affect, then the mobilization of a specific political fear is untenable. This subjective dimension does not configure fear as instinctive or natural reaction to general or diffuse threats. We contend that fear is, like danger and impurity (Douglas 1966), a very social ‘thing’. The links between fear and its object, between fear and the threat that triggers it are non-deterministic, social, cultural and political.

It is worth complicating further the causal nexus between fear and its object. Fear is often seen as a quasi-instinctive felt response to socially mediated threats: in this view the threat, however socially mediated, comes first sequentially, with fear the response that follows. We can reverse the order of terms however and suggest that fear – and specifically for our purposed political fear, fear as pertains to social collectives and imaginary communities (Robin 2004) – also comes first. We could suggest that fear operates socially by both setting out a negative future (a bad thing that could or will happen) as likely, and a cause of that negative future. That is, a fear is a social description of a threat and the cause of that threat. The production and management of fears then plays a critical political role in producing governable and manageable publics and workforces (Robin 2004; Tyler 2013).

The processes by which things come to matter is subject not only to existing discourses, practices, moral-ethical and identarian concerns, but also to material conditions (where someone lives, the work they do, how certain processes unfold such as climate change, etc.). We thus need to be attentive to the specific characters of different fearful objects. This has been well-explored vis-à-vis migration, in particular with regards to the reproduction of specific workforces (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013), nationalism (Hage 2003), governability (Tyler 2013) and illegality (Tazzioli 2015b; De Genova 2013; Pallister-Wilkins 2017) as well as specific security arrangements such as terrorism (Kundnani 2014). Climate change would appear to have a less closed, governmental constitution as an object of concern (Hulme 2017). While climate change has been incorporated to some extent into economic (i.e. Stern 2007), security (Chaturvedi and Doyle 2015), resource and environmental governance, and governance of migration (Boas 2015), it also operates as a limit to existing governmental and capitalist regimes. This

is not a simple opposition however, and while we could broadly suggest that migration is considered ‘excessively’ feared, and climate change not feared enough, we need to be attentive to the question for whom does fear work?

As a form of negative anticipation, fear extends into the future, enabling or foreclosing horizons. Fear can make futures seem more or less possible, a function Baldwin (2016) describes as premediation. In the case of migration and climate change, respectively, this takes contrasting forms. The futures ‘premediated’ or enabled by the fears of migration tend to be characterised by a ‘restauration’ of dominant historical and economic relations – in their support to nationalism, in their postcolonial and racist (under)currents, in the divided spaces (with the usual colonial binaries emerging) they envision. In contrast, fear of climate change tends to foreclose the possibility of a smooth continuation of existing socio-economic orders. When it becomes an object of fear, climate change tends to signal the need to go beyond current consumerism and towards some sort of self-restraint, planned downscaling and green austerity (e.g. Monbiot 2007). While fear of migration ‘restaures’, many have feared that climate change, as object of political concern, suggests a disruption of dominant relations. Whose interests are served by a specific fear is as critical to the mobilisation and production of political fear as the conditions of everyday life. In this sense, it is imperative to identify who creates ‘atmosphere’ around climate change (Kundzewicz et al. 2020), by which measures and for what ends. If negative anticipation works against existing socio-economic arrangements (i.e., neoliberalism), it is unlikely to be mobilised or supported by government or business actors – indeed, it may well be campaigned against as with climate change denial. In addition, some fears can produce tensions within the ruling class, as with anti-migrant rhetoric, resulting in confusing and contradictory articulations. Social and visual construction of fear, furthermore, serves to render spaces governable in particular ways by portraying those at the receiving end of climate impacts as ‘racialized, passive and helpless victims’ (Methmann and Rothe 2014).

We can then suggest that the political production and appropriation of fear is a process that must be continually worked in order to be applied to any social field, overcoming situated resistances and ‘uneven terrains’ rendering the making of both peoples and places (Robin 2004; Tyler 2013) incomplete and partial. A key aim of the use of fear is to produce and govern a population (Tyler 2013), both by articulating positive content to the social body and by delineating who/what is not included and thus to be feared. However, fear is also something in excess of governance – something to be contained or controlled – as well as something opposed to governance (i.e., grassroots nationalist movements or climate change denial)³. It does not make smoother uniform populations, but rather increasingly produces uneven and polarized social bodies (Davis 2006; Tyler 2013). The production and mobilisation of political fears is not limited to any one political actor or perspective, and as often as not, fear is as used to make populations ungovernable as it is to make them governable (Davis 1999) - to produce both governable conducts and counter-conducts. From the mobilisation of fears of terrorism by politicians to the xenophobia of far-right activist groups, from the articulations of climate change catastrophe by climate scientists and environmental campaigners to the denialism of industry PR agents, fear (or the lack of it), can be mobilised by varied and competing political agents. Negative anticipation also forms a contested terrain insofar as it is both resisted and articulated from contrary positions – i.e., by NGOs and other non-governmental actors seeking to produce negative anticipation (i.e., climate change) as a means of contesting how governance takes place as well as how publics are constituted.

³ Opposition to governance is not restricted to social or labour movements. Corporations, quasi-government and political party institutions, and other institutional groups including the military and security organisations.

Taking cues from these diverse and rich conceptualizations, we now explore the ‘fears made in Europe’ vis-a-vis migration and climate change in the following section before zooming into the case of Sardinia.

Fear in European Perceptions of Migration

In the following two sections we provide some context on perceptions of migration and climate change in Europe and, more specifically, Italy. Rather than fine grained data, the sections offer some background useful for the analysis of the Sardinian case study.

Much of the research around perceptions of migration in Europe focuses on three dimensions: cultural and economic impact, and national security, with the latter often examined through the lens of terrorism. Despite the variations across European public opinion, general trends include a concern for refugees and a fear of being overwhelmed numerically and culturally by migrants with whom many feel they do not have a shared cultural framework (Sides and Citrin 2007). European Social Surveys have consistently demonstrated that Europeans are unenthusiastic about high levels of immigration (Eurobarometer 2019). Italian respondents have been particularly unenthusiastic, with only 5% saying they wanted more migrants coming to Italy (Wike, Stokes, and Simmons 2016).

Majorities or pluralities in most European countries want fewer immigrants allowed into their country, and many believe that immigrants tend not to integrate culturally and that immigration increases the risk of crime and terrorism (Wike, Stokes, and Simmons 2016). Interestingly, and connected to the question of depopulation in Sardinia we consider here, around 80% of respondents in Greece, Spain, Italy and Hungary say that *emigration* is a big or moderately big concern (Wike, Stokes, and Simmons 2016). Survey data suggests that while perceived cultural impacts are fundamental to negative attitudes towards migrants, there is also a widely held belief that refugees and migrants in general are an economic and social burden, ranging from 86% of respondents (Esses, Jackson, and Armstrong 1998; Citrin et al. 1997; Lahav 2004) to 56% (Eurobarometer 2018), with Italians being more likely than the medium to perceive migrants as a burden (Wike, Stokes, and Simmons 2016). When specifically consulted about the idea that refugees and migrants take jobs and social benefits that would otherwise be available to European citizens, between 39% (Eurobarometer 2018) and 50% (Pouter 2016) of respondents suggested that they did. There are also persistent beliefs in the connection between immigrants and crime with 55% of Europeans believing immigration makes crime worse (Eurobarometer 2018). As with the notion of migrants as a burden, Italians are more likely to perceive migrants as more responsible for crime than ‘natives’ (Wike, Stokes, and Simmons 2016).

Here it is important to note that migration is often perceptually connected to (failures of) governance. There is a widespread opinion that the EU as a governmental structure is inefficient and out of touch with European citizens (ibid). In particular, Italian public opinion was less favourable to the EU in 2019 than it was 2018, dropping from 58% favourable to 48%, with 65% of Italians saying the EU doesn’t understand the needs of its citizens and 59% believing the EU does not promote ‘prosperity’ (ibid.), correlating with declining economic prospects within Italy and wide concerns with the future, particularly the future of younger generations (ibid). In addition, there is a widely held misconception on a numeric prevalence of so-called illegal immigrants (47% of respondents) over legal immigrants (39%), which contrast with available suggesting that those in the EU without authorisation comprised around 4.5% of the total number (Eurobarometer 2018). Europeans tend to overestimate – sometimes vastly – the number of immigrants living in their country (ibid), and 59% have neither declaring to have friends or family who are migrants (rising to 65% in Italy) (ibid). Similarly, in contrast to public perceptions, migrations have a low-to-no negative impact on wages, and an often a net positive benefit to national economies (Dustmann, Fabbri, and Preston 2005; Manacorda, Manning, and Wadsworth 2012; Nickell and Saleheen 2008).

In eight of the 10 European nations surveyed by the Pew Research Centre half or more of the respondents believed incoming refugees increased the likelihood of terrorism in their country, with 60% of Italians making this connection, 10% above the medium (Wike, Stokes, and Simmons 2016). A significant factor was the public perception of a link between migration – particularly refugees from Syria and the Middle East – and the increased risk of terrorism. This linkage – in public perceptions – is particularly strong in places that had experienced terrorist attacks (Avdan 2014; Schäfer, Scheffran, and Penniket 2015). Interestingly, younger people are significantly less opposed to migrants and migration and have less alarmist views on terrorism (TENT Foundation 2016). South European countries arguably assumed the role as ‘gatekeepers of Europe’ when the migration debate returned to the headlines as a hot topic after the onset of uprisings in the Mediterranean region. This positioning had definitively an important role shaping debates the turbulent politics of migration in Italy. Ambrosini (2014) argues that Italian views on migration have been oscillating between four dominant attitudes. The first is a form of passive tolerance, in which the phenomenon is neglected until it becomes impossible to ignore any further. The second is a ‘closure’ without alternative, referring to a full closure of borders with no tolerance clearly contiguous to and nurturing xenophobic sentiments. The third strategy was ‘protection without integration’, referring to an almost biopolitical approach to refugee reception that hinges on making live or letting die. The fourth and the final strategy, as identified by Ambrosini, is the ‘integration without protection’, referring to the channelling of migrants into precarious, often informal and exploitative economic sectors. All four of these strategies are somewhat intermeshed with the rise and demise of fear as a decisive, political category in domestic affairs.

These strategies are the result of multiple spatial contexts of bordering that emerged in the past decades. Several authors have highlighted how Italian coastlines have become the dispersed stages for a spectacularisation of bordering practices (Cuttitta 2014; Tazzioli 2015b; Proglia and Odasso 2017; Gualtieri 2018). Spaces such as Lampedusa have become the backdrop for diverse narratives and framings (as sites of humanitarian emergencies, death, victimization, violent border enforcement and militarization, humanitarian rescue, and seldom agency), which have been part of the production of new practices and logics of bordering and migration governance beyond those places (Tazzioli 2015a). The spectacularisation of borders helped catapulting fears of invasion and degradation as meta-narratives in media representations of migration in Italy (Bruno 2016). Creating layers of fear for multiple bordering practices across external, internal and cultural borders, these representations framed the migration debate in at least three ways: a) between legal locals vs. illegal invaders, b) between peaceful inhabitants vs. potential criminals/security threats, and c) between the culturally and religiously homogeneous “us” vs. culturally and religiously distinct “them” (ibid.). While these framings were characterized by the politics of fear (Colombo 2018), the securitisation of the migration debate through fear has been accompanied with inherent paradoxes such as an ideological functionalism of the migration debate between political opponents, unfit between the continuity of exclusionary policies and occasional eruptions of larger humanitarian rhetoric, and the discrepancies between nationalist rhetoric and occasional amnesties for the normalization of migrants’ status (Zincone 2006).

Fear in European Perceptions of Climate Change

Concern about environmental risks shifted dramatically over the 2000s. In 2002 the most worrying environmental risks for European respondents were nuclear power and radioactive waste, followed by pollution, natural disasters, and then climate change. By 2005 climate change had emerged as the main environmental threat. Concern with climate change reached a peak in 2009 around the international climate change conference in Copenhagen (COP15), coinciding with a climax of media coverage (Barkemeyer et al. 2017). After a brief dip following the failed 2009 summit, perceptions of risk have continued to increase. Climate change has been a persistent public concern across the majority of Europe for the past decade, with the overwhelming majority of Europeans seeing climate change as a

serious issue requiring strong government action (Eurobarometer 2015), although terrorism, immigration and economic issues are all rated as more important threats to European security. According to European Commission surveys, 93% of Europeans see climate change as a serious problem and 79% as a "very serious" problem (Eurobarometer 2019). However, there is considerable uncertainty as to its impacts and significance (Hagen, Middel, and Pijawka 2016).

While much media framing of climate change posits it as a future problem, many surveyed see climate change as a present threat. According to the Pew Global 2015 report, a median of 51% of respondents already believed they were being harmed by climate change, and a further 28% fear they will be harmed by climate change within a few years. This survey has been further confirmed (Steentjes et al. 2017), with 60% of respondents saying they thought climate change was already having an impact, and with most respondents saying they were at least fairly worried about climate change as an issue. However, respondents also said that while they were being affected, that the worst effects would take place elsewhere in other countries (Steentjes et al. 2017). It is also possible to speculate that the recent 'Greta Thunberg effect' might have played a role in raising worries on the topic further across different social groups (Sabherwal et al. 2021).

Within Italy, there is a strong belief that climate change is a very serious problem (84%, above the EU average), with 19% of those surveyed suggesting it is the most serious problem facing the world (below the EU average of 23%), representing a 12% increase since the 2017 survey (Eurobarometer 2019). The number of Italians reporting that they have taken action on climate change has increase as well to 52%. In addition, there is strong support for government action and initiatives to tackle climate change (ibid).

Fear in Local Migration and Climate Politics in Sardinia

The findings presented in this section draw on consultations carried out for the CLISEL project, during a series of five workshops with Sardinian mayors and local administrators organized in Cagliari in the spring 2017, as well as in interviews and focus groups conducted in the Sardinian territory in the same period. In total, we reached 58 participants, including mayors, council members and civil society representatives from across Sardinia (see Figure 1). The interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed, and/or notes were taken. The evidence is presented in anonymised form, with reference where necessary only to the location of the conversation, in order to protect the anonymity of participants.

In the section, we will explore how climate change and migration enter social and political discourse in Sardinian realities and how local authorities 'encounter' them. Both climate change and migration are mediated by a number of contextual processes and relations, which contribute shaping attitudes towards the two issues as well as the roles of fear in debates on migration and climate change, respectively. The analysis also reveals major limitations on the ground of the much acclaimed multilevel or polycentric governance ideas (Wurzel, Liefferink, and Torney 2019).

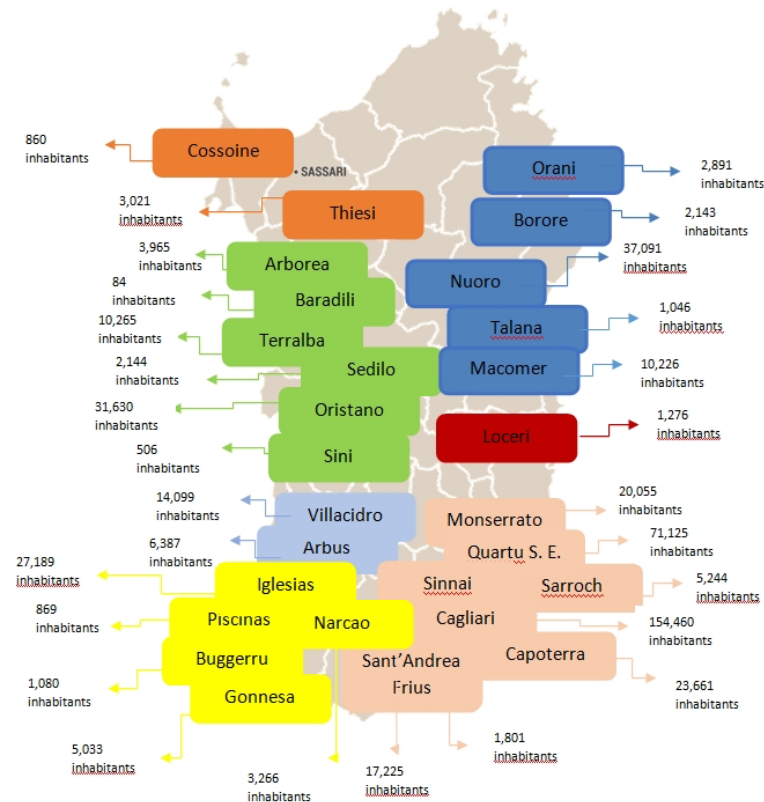


Figure 1: Map of Sardinia showing municipalities represented at the five workshops and their population. Source: CLISEL Case Study Final Report (D4.9), available from www.clisel.eu

Migration and Climate Change are Here

An important finding from the discussions with representatives of local authorities is that both migration and climate change are important in the local political debate. While most participants were not familiar with some of the lexicon of international debates on climate change and displacement, most shared a concern about the impacts of climate change as well as the critical role of migration-related matters in contemporary political landscapes in southern Europe. Global warming is perceived as a potential threat to the wellbeing and resilience of many territories and landscapes across the region. For instance, in the workshop that took place in Cagliari with 20 mayors and city council members from localities across Sardinia, participants were asked to provide examples of the most concerning impacts of climate change on their territory. Key issues highlighted included more frequent drought and its impacts on water availability and agriculture, intensification of extreme weather events intensifying existing hydro-geological vulnerability, coastal erosion linked to a rise in sea level. While these are existing vulnerabilities in Sardinia, numerous participants linked these to climate change and expressed concerns that global warming would exacerbate these threats in the decades to come. Another telling moment was a group interview in Ittiri, a rural region in Northern Sardinia, where we met representatives of local city councils. None of the participants appeared to have a specific ‘sensitivity’ to green agendas or climate change as a political issue. But nonetheless, vagrant weather patterns causing great threats for local agriculture and farming, for instance with more frequent winter frost episodes, were described as a result of climate change. While the attribution was in itself not supported by any scientific evidence, for sure it was symptomatic of the ‘presence’ of climate change in the local debates (which confirms broader tendencies in European public opinion).

Spopolamento, Economic Crises and Austerity

Climate change and migration are of course not the only issues mayors and representatives of local institutions face. These two issues are intertwined with several peculiar local problems and tensions, many of which have deeper roots in a place's history. While a comprehensive account of Sardinia's history and cultural landscapes is obviously beyond the scope of this article, it would be impossible to understand how discourses on climate change and migration are weaved into local political processes and discourses without even briefly introducing the complex dynamics between the island and the Italian state, as well as the importance of rural communities in regional imaginaries and identities.

In the final analysis, and not without simplifications, Sardinia's relation to the 'motherland' has been ridden by tensions, as for most regions in the Italian periphery. The roots of these tensions are deep and stem – not solely but importantly – from the process of 'unification' of Italy that took place in the 19th century. Contrarily to mainstream rosier accounts of *Risorgimento* (Isabella 2012), the unification entailed a process of state building also entailing violent annexation of territories and the establishment of an often oppressive state apparatus with traits that could be defined as forms of (internal) colonialism. This process encountered numerous forms of opposition and popular resistance in Sardinia, which the state often repressed violently both at a discursive level (e.g. through a criminalisation of dissent) and through brute force (Rocchetti 2011; Gramsci 1975). On top of these more visible and intense confrontations, the material and cultural violence exercised by the state contributed (re)producing widespread sentiments of hostility, antagonism and distrust in the populations, which still resurface in the political dynamics between Sardinia and the state apparatus and institutions. This historical lineage of violence, repression but also resistance has also contributed reinforcing local identities and their insular character (Sorge 2015a). There is a widespread attachment to rural and village landscapes in Sardinia's interior regions, and a strong sense of community, which at times takes the form of a closure to the 'outside world' (Sorge 2009). The famous *murales* in Orgosolo are of often read as expressions of these local identities, pride and resistance (Bill 2014). While such identities are not monolithic but rather fluid and undergo constant contestations and hybridization (Sorge 2015b), they still play an important role in cultural landscapes and in place attachments – which also means in visions about the future.

It is in this context that we should read one of the key signifiers in Sardinian politics - *spopolamento* (depopulation), which almost always recurs in discussions on the present and future of the island. In rural areas, a major problem has been the decline of the agricultural sector and its decreasing economic sustainability, which has created substantive outmigration. On top of the immediate consequences on the demography and labour geographies of the island, *spopolamento* is also perceived as a threat to cultural landscapes and identities, based on localised attachment to a village or area introduced above (Cocco, Ortu, and Fenu 2016).

These tensions also surface in debates on climate and migration. For instance, *spopolamento* strongly figures in discussion on migration as well as on the vulnerabilities that climate change is expected to exacerbate. We had a dramatic discussion on depopulation in interview in Macomer, in Nuoro Province, situated in central Western Sardinia. Once a flourishing economy and vivid local community, the area has undergone a long-term economic decline, with the dairy and textile industry once flourishing and now in crisis for the last two decades, leading to unemployment and an 'emptying of the town.' In Macomer and elsewhere, *spopolamento* enters views on migration in contrasting ways. For some, migration represents a great opportunity for countering the long-standing negative demographic trend, rejuvenating half-deserted towns and igniting fresh labour force into stagnating economic textures. For others, the arrival of migrants can exacerbate *spopolamento* – the concern being that the combined effect of austerity, economic stagnation and inflow of 'non-locals' could represent a fatal blow for the cultural identity of communities and landscapes in the region. According to others, *spopolamento* and migration are distinct issues that should not be addressed jointly. *Spopolamento* is

often mentioned also in relation to climate change as a factor contributing to social and economic vulnerability, in rural communities already affected by demographic decline and struggling agricultural and animal husbandry sector.

On the Frontlines But With No Voice and Fewer Resources

Representatives of municipalities strongly feel they are on the frontlines in the face of migration and climate change, as well as of other tensions and strains such as those linked to *spopolamento* and the effects of economic crises. They are the first point of call for citizens, not least as national and regional institutions have become even more distant with the shrinking of the Italian state's presence in many local contexts that has resulted from the 'rationalization' and cuts to which the state apparatus and welfare system have undergone in the last two decades.

However, local administrators feel they have limited means to respond to the challenges. A key theme emerging when introducing the issues of climate change and migration in discussion with mayors and other representatives of local authorities is a perceived lack of representation and voice, and a concern about being passive 'recipients' of decisions taken elsewhere. Their concerns over a lack of representation clearly resonates with the strong local component of identities in the Sardinian interior briefly sketched out above, the role of villages and local rural communities, as well as the hostility and scepticism against instantiation of central power. There are strong differences between larger, more affluent and in general, more industrialized centres like Cagliari and Sassari, and the interior (*entroterra* in Italian) rural parts of Sardinia, as well as more deprived areas. There are significant tensions between cities and the countryside, with a 'classic' centre-periphery dialectic, where the latter are concerned about the concentration of power in larger cities, in particular the 'capital city' Cagliari, where most regional decisional power is perceived to be located. In interviews with local authorities regards migration, many – more or less explicitly – vented concerns over the fact that decisions on migration and asylum governance are taken 'down in Cagliari', with smaller centres feeling excluded from substantive political and financial decision-making.

Such tensions clearly emerged concerning the allocation of quotas of asylum seekers to be hosted in each town, and more in general concerning the definitions of housing and integration strategies for migrants. Mayors met in the Sulcis area complained they felt to be merely the executors of decisions made elsewhere, over which they have had no say. According to trade union interviewees, mayors tend to adopt a 'defensive attitude' in relation to migration in order to avoid getting into potentially 'unmanageable' situations. Another difficulty mentioned in the interaction with 'centres' (which can mean either Cagliari or the central government) was a lack of clarity concerning the number of migrants. Some mayors stated that, while willing to accept some migrants, they did not wish to join reception schemes because of the uncertainty about the number of migrants, which in the last instance would be determined by the Prefect and the Ministry of Interior.

In the case of climate change, similar frustration was expressed about the disproportionate ability of larger centres to gain representation, attract funding for projects and infrastructure to enhance resilience. Small towns councillors lamented major difficulties to influence decisions taken at the regional level on integrated water management (key for agriculture and because of increasingly frequent droughts), energy policies and disaster risk management. Similar sentiments were also expressed for what concerns the relationship with the mainland, often described as a removed and at times semi-colonial power. Participants regretted the difficulty to influence strategies developed at other institutional levels such as the European Union and the national government in tackling climate vulnerability, in terms of determining specific priority, designing support schemes and tuning the mechanisms regulating access to resources.

Multi-Level Governance Down to the Ground

These tensions and perceived lack of voice were not the only frictions calling for caution about the emphasis made on the centrality of municipalities in multi-level or polycentric forms of governance (Bulkeley and Castán Broto 2013; IOM 2015; Curtis 2016; Kern 2019). Referring to broader changes in Italian and European political systems, some participants described what they see as a centralisation of decision-making and a disconnect between different levels of governance in Italy and Europe. According to these participants, decisions that directly impact local governments (including on budget cuts, institutional fragmentation, and austerity) are increasingly made by central governments and European institutions. The impact of this increasing centralisation is aggravated by the fragmentation introduced in the system by the high number of small municipalities – in 2019, more than 70% of municipalities had fewer than 3,000 inhabitants in Sardinia. As a result of these factors, many mayors do not feel included in the governance of climate change or mobility. For instance, although they participate through the National Association of Italian Municipalities (ANCI) and Council for Local Autonomies (CAL) in the Regional Table for Migration, small city councils still feel that decisions on migrants are imposed from other layers of government. The long-standing sentiments of scepticism or lack of trust in the central government discussed above most likely played a role in feeding these sentiments.

Participants stressed that networks (whose role is emphasised by polycentric governance discourses) could enhance coordination across governance levels and provide local authorities more influence on decision-making at the national and EU level. However, this remains an aspiration for many small municipalities: building connections and networks (e.g. linking city councils) is difficult because of the lack of resources and of institutional formats regulating the way such interactions can take place. Among existing initiatives, the Covenant of Mayors was found to be the most widely known initiative. Some municipalities were already parties and the Covenant had already proven to be useful for the drafting of the Sustainable Energy Action Plan (SEAP) at the local level. Great interest was expressed in the possibility of participating in other initiatives (especially relating to environment, education, health and social topics and for sharing of best practices), like the Parliament of Mayors. Participants stressed the significant role played by civil society, NGO volunteers and private actors in helping to manage migration. Essentially, the vertical governance is sided by an equally strategic, but separate, horizontal system of governance that, in the mayors' opinion is very important, and should be more accessible also to smaller municipalities.

We also encountered some positive accounts of successful experiences of network building at the local level. One example was, for instance, reported by members of the Union of Municipalities of Marghine (comprising the municipalities of Birori, Bolotana, Borore, Bortigali, Lei, Macomer, Noragugume, Silanus and Sindia), which decided to join the SPRAR system of '*accoglienza diffusa*' (decentralised reception). Nevertheless, while seen as a positive experience, interviewees stressed that the reaction of the population was not always positive (also because of a general lack of information from the institutions), and joining the initiative required brave decisions and long-term planning on the part of the involved mayors and local administrators.

Social Antagonism and Austerity

When discussing negative attitudes to migration, we encountered the usually complex picture in which xenophobia and racism, the impacts of austerity, and a perceived competition over limited jobs and resources are intertwined. For sure, the 'retreat' of the state has been exacerbated by policies of austerity and cuts to the state budget in response to the Italian debt crisis and the 2008 global economic and political meltdown. In urban and semi-urban centres, the process of de-industrialization that has taken place across many areas in Italy has taken a great toll, reducing employment and leading to a serious impoverishment in a number of areas, often with a sharp decrease in population.

When our respondents explained popular perceptions of migration and xenophobic sentiments in their communities, austerity, economic downturn and the retreat of the welfare state figured prominently, albeit in different articulations. These elected officials appeared much less prepared to discuss the racial (and racist) undercurrents of anti-migrant sentiments, tending to ‘absolve’ their citizens by pointing at economic factors. Emblematic is the case of Sulcis area, in the southwest corner of the island. Once an area of economic expansion, the vertical decline of the mining sector (which employed large shares of the population) has created large pockets of marginalization and poverty. In a group interview held in the area, representatives of various local administrations explained anti-immigration sentiments among their citizens population in relation to the impacts of economic crisis and resource competition with incomers, articulated in nationalistic tints and in opposition to the policies of ‘accoglienza’ (reception/integration) of the then centre-left national government. In other contexts, similar narratives were echoed in less virulent and more pragmatic tones. For instance, some mayors stressed the practical difficulties in managing migrant integration policies, especially when it comes to arranging housing and labour facilities for newcomers, on a territory already under strain, because of pre-existing shortage of housing and labour opportunities. These narratives mirror the findings at a European level (Eurobarometer 2018), not least concerning the widespread misconception for which migrants make no contribution to the community in terms of labour and, overall, drain on resources that could be used differently.

These themes emerged clearly also in our discussions with local representatives of the largest trade union, the Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL). In that context, the scarcity of resources to ensure access to welfare-related services was highlighted as one of the main causes of hostility towards migrants, fomented and fomenting the assumption of an ongoing competition. Often the neediest locals are concerned that the arrival of migrants may result in yet more limited availability of resources and services.

The Fates of Fear

The perception to be in the frontline is made more acute and daunting for mayors by the structural and macro character of both climate change and migration. While the impacts of climate change and migration are situated and contextual, several of the processes involved are epochal and international, when not planetary. While mayors are on the frontline and often called ‘to the rescue’ by their citizens, they cannot directly influence macro-determinants such as greenhouse gas emissions, or the political geographies of international mobility patterns. In this, climate change and migration show more similarities than differences. They are both symptoms of epochal, global or planetary phenomena in many respects beyond the reach of local authorities, and usually very difficult to handle even for state institutions and international bodies. In this sense, both climate change and migration are seen as serious present and future threats that leave mayors between a rock and a hard place.

It is at this point that the fates of the two phenomena start parting. Indeed, the presence and real character of climate change do not translate in a pressure exercised by the population on mayors to act, nor in the feeling on the part of mayors that they *must* do something. On the contrary, mayors feel compelled to react to pressure from citizens, who strongly vehicle their fears surrounding migration to local administrators. For those, not ‘acting’ is not an option, or is a very brave action. Elections are won or lost on migration. Citizens take to the streets to influence a municipality’s policies on asylum reception or welfare for migrants. Austerity and chronic economic crisis do contribute to fuelling such waves, with a common narrative being the (perceived) competition for resources between welfare for ‘locals’ and support for migrants, a competition only exacerbated (both at the level of public narratives and funding) by dwindling welfare resources. Therefore, we witness two very different outcomes in the face of many similarities between climate change and migration. The latter becomes an immediate issue for mayors,

on which they are held accountable for by their citizens, and around which fears mount and self-reproduce. In the former, however, the daunting character of the threat in local politics is deflated into a sort of fatalism – rather than into fear transforming into action.

How can such stark difference be explained? Our limited account of Sardinian citizens' as well as local administrators' perceptions allows us only to make very tentative hypotheses, simplifying processes that would require a fuller theoretical and empirical engagement. We can start to note that there are obvious differences in the societal discourses that surround migration and climate change at the national and European level, with migration more often gaining the headlines as a potential threat. However, this does not fully explain the startling difference in the ways fears are (or are not) ignited in the two cases. The conceptualisation of fear we developed in the first part of this paper can contribute providing a more articulated reading of this difference.

Several pieces of the puzzle have to fall right in order for political fear to be ignited. Societal discourses on migration and climate change, respectively, contribute to the modulation of reactions to threats. Another important component is the existence of perceived 'private encounters' – which are there in both cases as we have seen. Citizens encounter both migration and climate change. A key difference here lies in a third element, that is the degree to which the encounter is amenable to be translated in a public affect. Climate change appears like 'government' or 'economics', as real and present in its effects but inaccessible. Migration is instead perceived to be 'reachable' with actions in the everyday, as close to individuals and communities not only in its impacts, but also in terms of their (re)actions. Crucially, the combination of anti-immigration narratives, austerity and cuts to welfare systems makes migration a topic on which to engage in a competition over scarce resources.

The everyday grounds of the fear of migration means that, unlike climate change, the experience of scarcity and hardship can be connected to the visible arrival of migrants. The same cannot be said for the slower, painful yet more diffuse violence of climate change. By being both difficult to translate from a private experience to a public affect due to being diffuse, and because of the contradictory nature of the threat itself, it is difficult to produce a productive political fear around climate change. This has direct impacts on what citizens request from their local authorities. For migration, an illusion is created that mayors and local authorities are in the position to 'protect' their citizens from what is perceived as a direct, localised threat. We observe such process as 'illusory' in the sense that whether or not a small group of asylum seekers temporarily settles in a town will not determine the cultural survival of the community, nor their financial destiny, nor the international macro political economic processes that influence labour markets, the flourishing or decadence of economic sectors, and mobility.

Conclusion

In this paper, we engaged with the role of fear in debates on climate and migration at several levels. After elaborating a theoretical framing of fear and its emergence and dynamics in political landscapes, we went 'down to earth', exploring the ways in which mayors and local authorities in Sardinia understand and address migration and climate change, and the role of fear in their activities and relation to constituencies. We observe the prominent role of fear in maintaining local political institutions in flux, mobilizing the spectre of responsibility without influence or political 'power'. We also find that the 'pluralization of fear' across governance scales encourages diverse public actors to mobilize the spectre of danger, threat and insecurity in the face of macro-challenges such as climate change and migration as a means of securing influence.

Our findings and reflections confirm that the impacts of climate change and migration emerge in and through the mediation of contextual processes, histories and tensions. In the Sardinian case, migration and climate change are articulated in relation to salient political signifiers such as austerity, '*spopolamento*', economic decline, and rural-urban dynamics. When confronting climate and migration,

mayors often feel overwhelmed by such structural, macro processes. Mayors are on the frontline of migration and climate change, and yet fear impacts very distinct aspects of their work as representative of local authorities.

These findings complicate some widespread assumptions as they expose – in a ‘non-spectacular’, ordinary case – how climate change and migration are issues that share many similarities, particularly in how they are both macro level processes with global ramifications. Significantly, they also are very present in political discourse and in the activity of local authorities. It is how these issues translate into political mobilisation that is significantly different. On the one hand migration is an overly powerful mobilising force, dictating political debate and inspiring inhibiting forms of populist nationalism. On the other hand, climate change is unable to mobilise enough as a singular issue and is often side-lined in the political debate. For the Sardinian municipalities, its presence does not translate into a pressure exercised by the population on mayors to act on climate change, nor in the feeling on the part of mayors that they must do something.

How could this be changed? This is an important question for future research, with significance for those concerned with the current proliferation of ‘politics of fear’, in particular mobilized by right-wing movements and parties. An important theme to explore concerns the inverse direction of the relation between fear and mobilization, further exacerbated under COVID19 pandemic with more fears of the unknowns surfacing globally. While in this paper we primarily focuses on how fear leads to mobilization or a lack thereof, a direction for future investigations is to explore how mobilization and action can lead to a defusing of fear, which recent studies on reactions and mobilizations surrounding migration and asylum show to be very promising (Della Porta 2018).

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