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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Re-Bordering the State *Through* Asylum Governance: Securitarian Neoliberalism Along the Balkan Route

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Abstract

The article investigates the impact of border regimes and bordering processes in asylum governance on the institutional and political boundaries of nation-states. The research was conducted between 2020 and 2024 along the so-called Balkan route of migration. It highlights how neoliberal and securitarian approaches converge in the management of two reception centres situated in critical border areas, namely the Lipa camp in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Casa Malala in Italy. I define this blend of governance as securitarian neoliberalism and discuss how this mode of governance subjects people on the move to increasingly restrictive and discriminatory policies, simultaneously diminishing states' responsibilities for the violations that arise from these policies. This approach to managing human mobility relies on diminished legal and procedural safeguards, which ultimately results in the widespread violation of migrants' rights and freedoms, a reduction in democratic scrutiny, and the erosion of the rule of law.

Keywords: Asylum governance; Balkan route; Securitisation; Neoliberalisation; Nation-states

Introduction

Since the so-called 'refugee crisis' broke out in 2015, the Western Balkans have once again taken centre stage in the EU's political discourse, drawing significant media attention and financial resources to the management of migratory movements along what has come to be known as the Balkan route. In this evolving landscape, state boundaries both within and outside the EU have been fundamentally reconfigured. This shift is characterised by the hardening of territorial borders and the rise of securitarian politics, which prioritise national security and state sovereignty. Simultaneously, the boundaries and responsibilities of public institutions have become less clear, as both state and non-state actors engage in refugee management within a neoliberal framework. Examining the management of reception centres in two key border zones along the Balkan route – the Lipa's Temporary Reception Centre (TRC), located in the Una Sana Canton, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Casa Malala, in the Italian region Friuli Venezia Giulia – the article explores the evolving role of states in asylum governance through the integration of neoliberal and securitarian approaches. Although these trends may seem contradictory — with the former emphasising liberal economic principles and a state shifting its power from direct intervention to a steering role, and the latter involving a shift in politics towards state sovereignty and illiberal political values – the study shows a complementary and mutually reinforcing relationship between them, with their convergence leading to a weakening of democratic oversight and the rule of law.

Building upon an expanding body of research on illiberal governance (Cottiero et al., 2025; Enyedi, 2024; Laruelle, 2022) and authoritarian forms of neoliberalism (Biebricher, 2020;

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Bonanno, 2020; Bruff, 2014), and engaging with studies on asylum governance—specifically the interaction between security-oriented border policies and the outsourcing and privatisation of reception services (Bhagat & Soederberg, 2019; Darling, 2016b; Novak, 2019)—I employ the term 'securitarian neoliberalism' to describe a form of governance whereby neoliberal paradigms converge with overtly illiberal politics in the management of asylum seekers and refugees. Importantly, the term securitarian is preferred over illiberal and authoritarian - despite sharing many characteristics with both – because it emphasises the specific focus on national security and emergency policies in managing refugee movements.

What distinguishes this study from existing research is its shift from a traditional top-down analysis of the impact of asylum policies on migrants to a perspective that views specific modes of governance as a diagnostic lens into the governing bodies themselves; that is, what particular ways of treating asylum seekers and refugees reveal about the functioning of formal institutions. Asylum governance offers valuable perspectives for analysing how sovereignty is distributed among power holders (Sassen, 1996) and exercised over governed populations (Agustín & Jorgensen, 2016). Specifically, the article emphasises how nation-states, especially the agencies responsible for migration and asylum governance, manage legislative, operational, and financial constraints on their sovereignty by delegating protection and reception responsibilities to non-state and third-country actors, further distancing public institutions from service recipients. Yet, through this very process, they concurrently foster a discourse centred on national interests that justify strict, coercive control over migrants. By integrating neoliberal strategies with securitarian policies, these processes redefine the boundaries of national sovereignty towards forms of illiberal governance that undermine human rights protection and accountability mechanisms.

Although not a direct comparison between Bosnia-Herzegovina and Italy's reception systems, the juxtaposition of these two cases offers insights into similar patterns unfolding in two interconnected yet distinctly different realities. On the one hand, there is a non-EU context, historically a place of emigration, lacking adequate and efficient asylum institutions and infrastructure for third-country nationals, particularly at the onset of the 'refugee crisis.' On the other hand, the province of Trieste, part of an EU member state, has a long history as a transit and destination point for asylum seekers. By juxtaposing these two cases, the article reveals the pervasiveness of securitarian neoliberalism throughout the region. It also shows how this governance mode uniquely affects power dynamics both within and between EU and non-EU institutions. Notably, European institutions significantly shaped Bosnia-Herzegovina's migration policies by leveraging Pre-Accession funding conditions—a clear example of the EU's role as a "normative empire" (Del Sarto, 2021).

The article commences by delineating the research's scope, the research problem, and the theoretical foundations that underpin the analytical framework employed to interpret the empirical data gathered between 2020 and 2024, utilising diverse research methodologies, including participant observation, qualitative interviews[1], and document analysis. Subsequently, it details the empirical analysis of the two case studies, highlighting both similarities and differences. In conclusion, the article synthesises its findings and delves into the wider implications of this study for our understanding of states' sovereignty, questioning the mechanisms through which they exercise control over refugee populations and among a plurality of non-state actors.

Shifting boundaries of sovereignty

Over the past few decades, the methodological nationalism associated with the first generations of Refugee studies has been rescaled to offer clearer insight into the complex

[1] Interview excerpts were translated from Italian to English by the author.

system in which state and non-state, formal and informal actors collaborate, compete, and conflict over asylum management. (Ambrosini, 2021; Anderson, 2019). The rise of globalisation significantly contributed to this process, questioning the inviolability of nation-states' borders and questioning their centrality in plural and multilevel governance arenas (Pierre, 2000; Sassen, 1996).

This shift has prompted migration scholars to abandon government-centric approaches in favour of governance-focused perspectives (Geddes, 2022), better suited to highlight the multiplicity of sub-, supra-, non-, and third-state actors that intervene in asylum governance (Caponio & Ponzo, 2022; Gammeltoft-Hansen & Nyberg Sørensen, 2013; Guiraudon, 2000; Longo & Fontana, 2022; Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017). Specifically, the Venue-shopping approach posits that nation-states' responses to refugee movements involve the decentralisation of decision-making and implementation upwards to intergovernmental forums, downwards to local authorities, and outwards to non-state actors (Guiraudon & Lahav, 2000, p. 164).

Although it demonstrates a significant decentralisation of sovereignty, asylum management remains a fundamental domain through which governments assert authority, cultivate electoral support, and enhance geopolitical leverage. This is particularly evident in securitarian approaches that frame immigration as an existential threat to national security. By invoking a migration-security nexus and portraying migrants, including asylum seekers, as a security issue, politicians from across the spectrum have emphasised the political and economic risks associated with allowing irregularised foreigners to enter national territory. In doing so, they have brought the state's role in controlling human mobility (back) to the forefront. This has resulted in a resurgence of nationalist and sovereigntist movements, which regard "physical borders as sovereign prerogatives of the state and as the ultimate *limes* of rights" (Ceccorulli et al., 2025, in this Special Issue, p. 322).

Notably, the current Italian far-right government's election campaign heavily emphasised protecting national identity and economy from the perceived threat of immigration, often conflating refugee movements with so-called illegal or irregular immigration. The current Prime Minister, Meloni, has positioned herself as a defender of Italian culture against globalisation, advocating for stricter border controls to safeguard national security and traditional values, such as family and faith (Campisi & Sottilotta, 2022). Similarly, when transit through Bosnia-Herzegovina started increasing significantly, the President of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik of the nationalist and conservative Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), strongly refused to accommodate migrants in the Serbian entity, stating they would create "a serious pressure" on the local population and undermine their ethnic and religious identity (MONDO, 2018). Again in 2024, the President of the Service for Foreigners Affairs again defined migrants as "a real security threat", stating that "the European Union [had to] do something to help the countries along the Balkan route combat this growing violence and security threat" (ANSA, 2024).

In light of these considerations, a tension arises between the neoliberal pluralisation and hybridisation of asylum governance and a re-nationalisation of migration discourse rooted in illiberal values, such as ethno-nationalism and nation-centric sovereignty (Enyedi, 2024; Laruelle, 2022). Importantly, Laruelle's framework (2022) indicates that illiberal ideas are not external threats to neoliberal democracies, but internal products that enable their own regression. That is, liberal institutions can be (re)purposed to serve illiberal ends (Enyedi, 2024).

The following section explores how neoliberal approaches and illiberal securitarian politics coexist and reinforce each other in the management of reception facilities for asylum seekers and refugees in formally democratic countries. It offers a theoretical framework for the subsequent empirical analysis, arguing that the securitisation of asylum

is not in conflict with the neoliberal outsourcing and hybridisation of related functions. Instead, it can be understood as a specific manifestation of the potential and inherent illiberal tendencies within neoliberalism.

The state's ebb and flow

The shift from a predominantly state-centric framework to a governance-oriented model has been characterised by scholars as the neoliberalisation of asylum (Darling, 2016b; Novak, 2019). Understood as an intellectual and political project rather than a fixed economic doctrine or finished form of government (Biebricher, 2020), neoliberalism does not necessarily advocate for less government; instead, it facilitates a "transfer of operations" that creates a distinct mode of rule (Ferguson & Gupta, 2002, p. 989). This neoliberal governmentality operates through an assemblage of rationalities, strategies, and techniques that enable "governance at a distance" (Springer, 2011, p. 95). As the state maintains authority over non-citizens through the exercise of its power "by proxy" (Borelli et al., 2023, p. 2), this process not only reconfigures the delivery of services for refugees but also signifies a fundamental reorganisation of the state's institutional structure (Saad Filho, 2019) and a broader transformation of political authority (Darling, 2016b).

Neoliberalism utilises shifting narratives—rooted in race, gender, and class—to manage migration through seemingly contradictory lenses. As noted by Bhagat & Soederberg (2019) and Darling (2016a), asylum seekers are frequently framed as burdens on public finances to legitimise austerity and privatisation. Simultaneously, they are depicted as existential security threats that justify exceptional surveillance and coercive authority (Basaran, 2008). These portrayals are particularly visible regarding the young, racialised men making up a large proportion of those travelling through the Balkan route. Conversely, migrants may be cast as passive victims to justify paternalistic humanitarian intervention (Malkki, 2015). Despite their differences, these narratives converge on a singular orientalist logic (Springer, 2011): they frame the migrant as an undesirable outsider who is simultaneously "at risk and a risk, [...] a subject needing to be rescued and apprehended" (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015, p. 63). This logic is also prevalent in securitarian approaches, which develop policy frameworks and operational methods on the premise that unwanted foreigners pose an existential threat to the nation's identity, integrity, and sovereignty. Notably, Joppke (2021, p. 74) observes that neoliberal distinctions between desirable and undesirable foreign nationals "may differ in degree, but not in kind" from the fake or bogus refugees conjured up by nationalist parties and far-right movements. Such a security-oriented, nation-centred approach is, in reality, closely connected to the foundations of neoliberalism. Namely, Röpke (1950), one of the founders of neoliberalism, argued that a nation has the right to restrict movement in order to safeguard its biological and spiritual patrimony, thereby subordinating free movement to racialised cultural protectionism and national identity. Consequently, particularly during periods of economic hardship, neoliberal representations of refugees can galvanise public support for restrictive immigration policies that scapegoat foreigners—specifically racialised and impoverished populations—for domestic financial instability (Bhagat & Soederberg, 2019).

Concurrently, the securitisation of asylum—the framing of refugee flows as an existential threat to the nation—legitimises a climate of political exceptionalism that can easily result in the institutionalisation of extra-ordinary and illiberal practices (Feldman, 2018; Léonard, 2010; Salter, 2008). These trends have become increasingly evident over the past decade, with EU member states frequently declaring states of emergency and reintroducing internal border controls, while normalising detention as a means to address migratory issues from a national security perspective (ASGI & BVMN, 2022; Ceccorulli, 2025).

States of emergency grant authorities the ability to operate at the margins of the rule of law, using exceptional tools to address exceptional threats. Since emergency measures usually entail streamlining operational, bureaucratic, and legal procedures, this kind of "[r]uling by zones of exception" allows the state "to place itself outside the law" (Haid, 2017, p. 295). As Cardwell and Dickson note, "operating outside established frameworks, especially in 'crisis-mode', can lead to unpredictable outcomes and 'new style of discretionary governance'" (2023, p. 3124). The disturbing events occurring in the US as this article is being written, involving brutal, discretionary, and systemic violence against racialised individuals (both foreigners and nationals) by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, known as ICE, serve as stark evidence of the normalisation of this trend and the growing use of illiberal policies aimed at non-citizens being extended to citizens too.

Neoliberal and securitarian approaches to asylum intersect in their understanding of asylum seekers and migration management, but they also similarly impact the roles and functions of policymakers and implementers. While securitarian approaches to migration have gained support from both right- and left-wing parties, nationalist politicians with authoritarian and autocratic ambitions have extensively drawn on the trope of the foreign threat, portraying themselves as the only true defenders of the nation's ethnic and territorial integrity to garner consensus among an increasingly diverse electorate (Bello, 2022). Nonetheless, the same entities behind these narratives have facilitated or even driven the outsourcing of asylum-related management to a broader and more layered range of actors beyond the official boundaries of the state – whether it concerns the physical borders of Member States, as is the case with a supranational European agency like Frontex, or institutional boundaries, as seen with ICE, a "paramilitary organization" with executive power in federal law enforcement (Buchanan, 2026).

In this context, the concept of the "security-industrial complex" (Davitti, 2019; Jones, 2017) has been employed to describe the progressive delegation of state powers in matters concerning border and immigration control to the private sector. This type of assemblage contributes to the creation of "new geography[ies] of security" (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2010, p. 3), wherein networks of economic and political elites cooperate in security management. As such, private companies and international organisations contribute significantly to shaping the boundaries of asylum governance, both in form and substance. Terms such as 'migration management' and 'transit countries' owe much of their current usage and implications to international organisations such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). Concurrently, by providing technologies, personnel, and know-how for the militarisation and externalisation of asylum governance, their work has facilitated the institutionalisation and diffusion of securitarian approaches (Georgi, 2010; Lemberg-Pedersen, 2018).

The involvement of non-state migration service providers has introduced management models focused on "market competition, economic efficiency and dispersed responsibility" (Darling, 2016b, p. 231; Georgi, 2010). This markedly neoliberal approach, nonetheless, conceals a more ambivalent orientation. Although these non-state actors are taking on a more prominent role, they still operate within the framework of state interests and a nation-centric approach, demonstrating a form of governance where public-private partnerships support and even reinforce national sovereignty. As noted by Hess (2010, p. 103), while effectively embracing a neoliberal stance, migration service providers do not wish to leave migration issues to the free market, "because the free market does not care for the political consequences". Instead, they "strongly support an etatistic model of global governance" (Ibidem), and frame their role accordingly, providing "policy makers and politicians with the necessary groundwork needed to make decisions" (Ibidem) that reinforce their authority and electoral support. In accordance with these observations, Bonanno (2020) interprets the

increasing interdependence between the unchecked expansion of transnational corporations and the concurrent rise of protectionist, nationalist, and racialised ideologies promoted by far-right movements as a manifestation of "authoritarian capitalism".

Particularly since the 1990s, the growing influence of free markets and inter-, trans-, and supranational institutions in governance processes, as well as the increase in human mobility across international borders, have undermined the inviolability of national borders and sovereignty (Pierre, 2000; Pierre & Peters, 2021; Sassen, 1996, 2005). In response to these challenges, Governance scholars suggest that nation-states have restructured their institutional apparatuses to turn these constraints into opportunities. From direct providers of public services, states have transitioned towards regulation and coordination (Pierre & Peters, 2021), often referred to as "steering at a distance" (Stoker, 1998). Notably, Sassen (1996) observes that the current era of globalisation has fostered a hybrid form of authority—situated at the intersection of local, national, and global spheres—that blurs the distinction between public and private. Crucially, Sassen (2005) maintains that this denationalising process does not signal the state's decline; rather, the state acts as a primary architect in reconfiguring its own governance across these new scales. This steering role does not involve direct engagement in policy matters, thereby reducing exposure to public and judicial oversight and diminishing the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms. Instead, it focuses on the capacity to define the boundaries within which other (non-state) actors can operate, by establishing policy and legal frameworks, allocating or denying resources, and fostering partnerships with non-state, private, and informal actors. In this regard, Ferguson and Gupta contend that "the central effect of the new forms of transnational governmentality is not so much to weaken or strengthen states, but to reconfigure their capacities to spatialize their authority" (2002, p. 996).

Against this background, this study discusses how state institutions leverage the involvement of non-state actors in asylum governance to maintain indirect influence over migration management without bearing (too much) responsibility for it. In the following sections, I will show that, by delegating specific functions to non-state migration service providers, the Italian and Bosnian authorities have limited their direct and explicit involvement in the management of asylum seekers and refugees, and related violations of these people's rights, while reinforcing their political authority in increasingly illiberal ways. In this light, neoliberalism not only envisions and necessitates a role for the state, but it also contains the conditions that can lead to this role taking on authoritarian and illiberal forms (Biebricher, 2020; Bruff, 2014).

Securitarian neoliberalism along the Balkan route: from Bihać to Trieste

At the beginning of the EU 'migration crisis', between 2015 and 2016, transit through the Western Balkans was substantially unrestricted for migrants. Indeed, informal cooperation between the EU and regional authorities allowed the creation of a humanitarian corridor (Hameršak et al., 2020). It is important to emphasise that this context was undoubtedly shaped by humanitarian concerns more than security-oriented ones, but neoliberal rationales were also at work, seeking to allow the entry of a selected labour force into certain EU Member States. This arrangement nonetheless permitted asylum seekers to traverse the Balkan route without facing the obstacles they currently encounter. In 2016, the EU-Turkey agreement officially 'closed' the Balkan route (Weber, 2007), thereby shutting down the humanitarian corridor and the borders of several transit countries. Approximately 60,000 migrants remained stranded in the region (Astuti et al., 2020), exerting significant pressure on countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina, which lacked the infrastructure for large-scale asylum processing, while also adding to the challenges faced by arrival hubs at

the end of the route, such as Italy, which was already managing arrivals from the Mediterranean.

To analyse how this situation has been managed, the following sections detail the interactions between key actors and processes at the Bosnian-Croatian and Slovenian-Italian borders, specifically within the Lipa and Casa Malala reception facilities. At the time this research was conducted, these two places represented "the beginning and the end of the game[2]" (Interview with an activist in Trieste, 2021) – that is, how migrants along the Balkan route refer to their attempt to cross international borders to enter the EU. Interestingly, this relation dates back to the 1990s when the wars that led to the collapse of the former Yugoslavia forced thousands of Bosnians to seek refuge in Italy and other European countries (Bona, 2016). At the time, the city of Trieste mobilised to accommodate these refugees, developing a model of reception that would have inspired, in the early 2000s, the creation of the Italian national System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (SPRAR).

Governments' jacks of all trades: international organisations in Lipa

As a result of the EU-Turkey deal and related securitarian policies implemented since 2016 in South-Eastern Europe, the number of registered arrivals in Bosnia and Herzegovina surged exponentially between 2017 and 2018. At the end of 2019, just in the canton of Una Sana – centred in Bihać – there were at least 6.000 migrants, half of whom were hosted in official camps, while the rest lived in makeshift settlements and abandoned buildings (Brambilla et al., 2021). Residents initially showed empathy and solidarity, knowing what it means to leave home in search of safety (Camilli, 2019). However, Bosnian authorities' recurrent and persistent portrayal of migrants as a threat to security, coupled with their lack of coordination in managing the presence of these people, generated a sense of emergency in small communities still recovering from the trauma of the war (Hromadžić, 2020). Over the years, and with the increase in transit, intolerance towards migrants spread, and repressive and punitive approaches toward them gained increasing consent in the public and political debate.

In this context, the COVID-19 pandemic provided a pretext to further securitise the migratory phenomenon (Brambilla et al., 2021). Now seen as also a threat to public health, migrants in the Una Sana Canton were subjected to particularly restrictive policies. Authorities prevented those accommodated inside official camps from leaving these structures and persecuted those living outside them in the Una Sana canton. In August, a directive even prohibited acts of solidarity towards those living in informal settlements, under the pretext of preventing gatherings or disturbing public peace (Brambilla et al., 2021). This type of approach fostered the diffusion of anti-migrant and xenophobic mobilisations, which, in turn, incentivised the implementation of increasingly repressive measures.

The construction of Lipa's Temporary Reception Centre in March 2020 was intended to address this emergency situation (Clementi et al., 2021). The camp was largely funded by the EU through the so-called Instruments for Pre-Accession (IPA), financing mechanisms for EU candidate and potential candidate countries. The camp's management was organised through a multi-level partnership. The municipal government of Bihać, the administrative capital of the canton, was expected to prepare the land, build a fence, provide water and sanitation, and manage waste disposal. The cantonal government was tasked with relocating migrants from unofficial settlements and offering healthcare once the camp was ready. The EU and Bosnia's Ministry of Security – the state body most directly involved in

[2] 'Game' is how migrants along the Balkan route call their attempt to cross international borders.

asylum issues – agreed that the IOM and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) would manage the facility, providing qualified personnel and logistical support.

However, in the months following the camp's inauguration, local authorities exhibited a lack of engagement and collaborative spirit; for instance, water and electricity connections were never completed. IOM staff repeatedly complained about this situation, and EU institutions vehemently urged Bosnian authorities to fulfil their duties and provide adequate reception services for migrants. Local administrations, for their part, criticised the Sarajevo government for its lack of support, justifying their own inaction by citing insufficient government funding for migration management. This political impasse led to the IOM's decision to withdraw from the facility, citing the impossibility of conducting its work without the Bosnian authorities' collaboration (Kovacevic, 2020). The camp was closed on December 23, 2020, and on that same day, a fire destroyed the facility. Hundreds of people remained with no refuge in the midst of the freezing winter. In the following weeks, authorities allowed only limited humanitarian aid and prevented migrants from leaving the site to seek refuge elsewhere. Attempts to relocate these people were repeatedly thwarted by the local authorities and communities (Brambilla et al., 2021) and by a lack of coordination from the national government in Sarajevo, which only sent the army to set up an emergency encampment where migrants ended up staying for months.

Addressing this situation, in 2021, Amnesty International submitted an opinion to the European Commission on Bosnia-Herzegovina's application for EU membership ahead of the 2021 Enlargement Package. The report stressed that:

> "both state and local authorities continue to outsource their responsibilities to the international community and civil society, who have managed, or managed jointly with other authorities, five out of eight reception centres across BiH. [...] [In the meantime] Local authorities, particularly in Una-Sana Canton, doubled down on passing restrictive and discriminatory measures targeting migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees on their territory" (Amnesty International, 2021).

Within a year, the Lipa camp was finally reconstructed, primarily through EU funding. At this point, it was decided that the facility would be converted into an official reception centre directly managed by the Bosnian government. Still, the IOM maintained a key role, providing "technical support and on-the-job training to the Service for Foreigners' Affairs" (Interview with IOM)[3]. Particularly from 2021, IOM's staff have reported working "closely" with Bosnian institutions "to progressively transfer the management of TRCs to relevant authorities" (Interview with IOM). In other words, although formal responsibility for the camp passed to the Ministry of Security, the organisation not only continued to provide essential services but also to train the public officials working within the facility.

The IOM functions more like a private corporation than a humanitarian organisation (Georgi, 2010). Despite having acquired the status of a UN agency in 2016, there are no formal procedures for holding it accountable in front of the UN General Assembly (Bradley et al., 2023). Moreover, the organisation has no protection mandate (Amnesty International, 2003) and no normative authority (Betts, 2011). Instead, it operates through an accounting method inspired by business models, so-called projectization or activity-based costing. This implies that IOM is conducting "only those activities that will definitely be financed by guaranteed

[3] Despite my repeated requests for interviews with managers or field staff, the agency declined, offering instead to answer written questions submitted via email. I will cite this material as 'interview with IOM', although their responses consisted primarily of material already available on their website and in their published documents.

project contributions from concrete donors" (Georgi, 2010, p. 63). As such, the organisation's obligations lie predominantly with the governments that finance it and to which it provides services, rather than with human rights norms. Predictably, its involvement in asylum management has thus led to several violations of the rights of migrants and asylum seekers (Amnesty International & Human Rights Watch, 2002). However, precisely due to the IOM's hybrid public-private nature, its accountability mechanisms are weak and ambivalent (Georgi, 2010), severely limiting public scrutiny of its conduct. These features of the organisation have made it especially appealing to governments and institutions looking to enforce controversial asylum policies concerning border control, detention, and return.

Considering the above, the management of Lipa exemplifies a mode of governance we can call securitarian neoliberalism, which involves the institutionalisation, through neoliberal frameworks, of illiberal forms of governance that undermine individual rights and bypass the rule of law in pursuit of purported national security and ethno-national purity. The following excerpt from the solidarity group No Name Kitchen offers a compelling account of these processes in practice.

> "Functioning according to logics of profit, the camp benefits from the expansion of people on the move who are detained there. This logic is well reflected also in the language used by IOM personnel. People on the move are indeed referred to as 'customers' and the buses that transport pushbacked people are defined as a 'shuttle bus service' [...] Despite the high amount of money invested into it, however, residents at Lipa continue to lack the most fundamental services for a life with dignity. As part of the prison-industrial complex (PIX), Lipa camp exists for the economic interests of governments and private companies, but most of all for the maintenance of the racial borders of Fortress Europe. [...] Further investigations remain necessary to have a more encompassing understanding of Lipa Camp's management. In regard to our current understanding, however, it remains that the several forms of violence that are perpetrated within its fences are in direct contrast to the liberal self-representation of the EU as protector of human rights and fundamental liberties. The words and lived experiences of those who are constrained there provide evidence to this claim" (No Name Kitchen, 2022).

Living conditions for migrants in Lipa have remained degrading and humiliating to this day. Testimonies collected from human rights activists report about physical and psychological abuses, forced administration of psychotropic drugs, and meagre rations of food (No Name Kitchen, 2022, 2023). In this regard, it is worth noting that the absence of effective solutions to address critical situations is not only advantageous for service-providing companies—as it maintains demand—but, according to Biebricher (2020), it is also an intrinsic feature of neoliberalism itself. Neoliberal entities frequently issue various criticisms of the state and propose reforms concerning the nature of a more neoliberal society and democracy. This is evident in the many complaints and critiques the IOM has made about Bosnian institutions. However, these entities typically lack concrete and feasible strategies to achieve a 'better' state of affairs. "This almost eschatological view of politics – Biebricher suggests – is the final link between neoliberalism and authoritarianism because neoliberal thought has backed itself into a theoretical corner and needs authoritarian means to find a way out" (2020, p. 14).

Notably, in 2022, the European Commission earmarked €500.000 for the establishment of a detention unit in Lipa. The stated objective was to accelerate return procedures for individuals deemed unsuitable for international protection. The responsibility for constructing this facility was assigned to the International Centre for Migration Policy

Development (ICMPD), a private agency specialising in migration services, whose CEO is a former prominent figure of the liberal-conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), a party known for its robust anti-immigration stance. With this project, securitarian approaches and commercial interests have, once more, taken precedence over safeguarding the rights of migrant populations. Numerous reports, in fact, detail the inhumane and degrading conditions endured by the individuals within the detention unit (Frontline Defenders, 2023; SOS Balkanroute, 2023).

Governments' stand-ins: private companies in Casa Malala

A significant number of people arriving in Trieste have passed through Bihać, following the same path that Yugoslav refugees took in the 1990s in their quest for safety. Back then, Trieste became a key hub for these transits and a primary place of integration for those seeking protection in Italy. Amid an unprecedented migratory event, the city distinguished itself by effectively managing the situation in a manner that benefited both refugees and residents. This approach was notably different from the Italian government's strategy, which had been largely unsuccessful. The government focused on creating large, isolated facilities treated as temporary emergency solutions, outsourcing their management to the third sector and private entities, and rarely achieving the necessary and promised reception standards (Bona, 2016; Bona & Marchetti, 2017). Under the initiative of the Italian Consortium of Solidarity (ICS), a non-profit organisation providing support to asylum seekers and refugees, the city pioneered a system of so-called 'spread hospitality' (in Italian, *accoglienza diffusa*) that accommodates asylum seekers and refugees in apartments distributed throughout the city rather than big and isolated facilities. This strategy promotes smoother integration for foreign nationals and offers local communities economic opportunities by hosting refugees and leasing their premises. Building on this successful experience, Trieste's model was nationalised in the early 2000s, inspiring the creation of the SPRAR (Bona, 2016).

Despite the decades-long history of solidarity with migrants, Trieste has also traditionally served as a symbol and focal point of nationalist, sovereigntist, and anti-immigrant sentiments (Pupo, 2021). The city served as the birthplace of irredentism—a movement dedicated to Italian territorial and national unity from which Fascism would later draw extensive inspiration. Notably, Trieste was the city where Mussolini proclaimed the racial laws against Jewish people in 1938. Decades later, in 2017, far-right current Prime Minister Meloni chose Trieste to attend the conference of her Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia) party, presenting herself as a defender of Italian sovereignism (Sondel-Cedarmas, 2022). It is therefore not surprising that over the last two decades, the city has been predominantly and almost continuously governed by right-wing parties with a strong anti-immigration stance.

In this context, at the first signs of arrivals from the Balkan route, the Trieste administration responded with immediate alarmism, warning citizens of an impending invasion despite the fact that transit numbers were actually low and local asylum applications were even fewer. Namely, a public official from the Court of Trieste reported that right-wing parties began disseminating alarmist rhetoric long before any genuine migratory emergency materialised. Even with the increase in arrivals via the Balkan route starting in 2018, the local reception system continued to operate relatively smoothly until 2022-2023. "The challenges we faced back then", the official said, "weren't primarily practical; instead, they were largely fuelled by speculation and political wrangling, especially from The League and other centre-right parties" (Trieste, 2022).

The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic offered a further pretext for declaring a state of emergency, like in Bosnia. In May 2020, the Ministry of the Interior instructed the border

police to return irregular migrants intercepted along the border to Slovenia, without formalising their asylum requests (Astuti et al., 2022). Concurrently, public resources for the reception and integration of asylum seekers and refugees in Trieste were severely cut, and state-led services were progressively dismantled (Fortarezza, 2023). In the meantime, the national government in Rome declared a state of emergency to counter the pandemic and the 'closure of ports' to stop the arrival of migrants.

These political choices reflected an attitude shared by both national and local politicians and fueled by the introduction of the so-called Security Decrees in 2018. Promoted by the right-wing and sovereigntist party, The League, the decrees expedited the detention and expulsion of asylum seekers, fostering a hostile environment for foreigners and exacerbating social tensions and discrimination. The emphasis on security and depicting asylum seekers as threats also implied viewing support services for these individuals as a drain on public resources, thereby reflecting a neoliberal focus on efficiency and cost-cutting. De facto, the reform dismantled the SPRAR system (Terlizzi, 2020, p. 22) and substantially compromised the quality of state-led first reception for people who just arrived, making integration for asylum seekers and refugees even more challenging than before. Predictably, this has led to a crisis of the reception system (Centri d'Italia, 2022), then politically exploited to justify harsher anti-immigrant rhetoric and stricter asylum policies.

An important provision in the decrees was that access to the SPRAR system was restricted to those granted asylum, forcing asylum seekers to wait for application outcomes in Extraordinary Reception Centres, so-called CAS. These structures were introduced by Law 142/2015 during the long summer of migration to accommodate asylum seekers when primary and secondary reception centres are full. Initially intended as a backup solution for critical events, CAS has now become routine. According to the ministerial report on the functioning of the reception system in 2018, the first reception network comprised 13 government centres and 102 CAS, which hosted the majority of asylum seekers. CAS are typically large, isolated facilities with limited integration services, making them unsuitable for long-term stays. The overall responsibility for these facilities is with the Ministry of Interior. The Ministry of Interior's Department for Civil Liberties and Immigration sets standards for CAS facilities and services and oversees funding allocation. However, their day-to-day management is typically outsourced to private companies, cooperatives, and non-profit organisations. At the regional level, the Prefectures are responsible for implementing the system. Between 2011 and 2016, the left-wing municipal government in Trieste recognised the slow distribution of funds for CAS by the prefecture and thus committed to covering some of the costs themselves. However, when the centre-right regained control of Trieste's government, this measure was immediately revoked.

In light of this situation, the events surrounding Casa Malala are particularly significant. Casa Malala is a CAS located a few steps from the border with Slovenia and around 10 kilometres from Trieste's city centre. The building was originally a barracks of the Financial Guard. Funded by the state, Casa Malala was jointly managed by Caritas FVG and ICS from its establishment in 2016 until 2024. However, as the Security Decrees entered into force, the contraction of public funding for reception services fostered an environment conducive to the proliferation of private business (Global Detention Project, 2019). Market-oriented companies that prioritise efficiency and cost reduction over strict adherence to international standards have proven more competitive than charitable and non-profit organisations and have consequently secured the management of numerous reception facilities across the country.

In 2019, ORS Italia, a multinational company specialising in administrative detention – namely, private prisons for irregularised migrants – entered the tender competition for Casa

Malala. The ORS group manages reception and detention facilities for asylum seekers and migrants across Europe. The organisation has an Advisory Committee composed of several political figures, with the former Swiss Minister of Justice, Police, and Migration serving as its president. ICMPD's CEO is also a member of ORS. As the influence of ORS grew across Europe, several NGOs and activist networks started questioning the ethical implications of privatising asylum reception, citing concerns about profit motives, conflicts of interest, and a lack of transparency in ORS-managed centres. These criticisms have been linked to substandard living conditions and human rights violations within ORS facilities (Lethbridge, 2017). Hence, when ORS Italia submitted its bid for the Casa Malala tender, ICS and Caritas FVG promptly objected, questioning the company's lack of prior experience in the country and its questionable staffing and budgeting practices, such as a high reliance on inexperienced personnel and low-cost meal provisions for people accommodated in their centres (Liverani, 2020). Nevertheless, ORS secured first place in the 2019 tender selection process by offering a substantial 14% discount on the initial auction price (Ibidem).

This prompted ICS to file legal action against the Trieste Prefecture and the Ministry of the Interior, which eventually led to ORS's exclusion from the tender competition and to the subsequent reallocation of Casa Malala's management contract to ICS and Caritas FVG. Referring to these events, an ICS operator drew a line between ORS's economic interests and the Italian government's political aspirations, highlighting the convergence of neoliberal and securitarian modes of governance. "This seemed to be a politically motivated move, - he said - someone made the call". "Was it someone from the local administration?" I asked, and he replied:

> "No, it's more likely on a national level. This incident exemplifies a typical Italian scenario. ORS's references in Italy are notably obscure, and their political ties remain uncertain. However, they have participated in various tenders and secured the Temporary Detention Centre (CPR) of Macomer in Sardinia, as well as possibly a CAS in the same region. If you search for CPR Macomer online, for example in L'unione Sarda, you'll find numerous articles exposing their 'criminal' management. Further investigation into ORS's activities in other European countries reveals even more troubling situations: their involvement in sponsoring private prisons, for clarity" (Trieste, 2021).

Along the same line, the former director of Caritas FVG claimed that "the manner in which tender competitions [for reception facilities] are structured seems to be a legal loophole allowing questionable individuals to enter the system". In 2024, the management of Casa Malala was transferred to the Nova Facility cooperative, which had previously been responsible for the Lampedusa hotspot (Tagadà, 2021) and several CAS across the country (Merlini, 2020). This company, which originally specialised in installing gas pipes and solar panels (Bettin, 2021), won the bid with an unexpectedly low offer, undercutting the already tight baseline costs by about 18% (Consorzio Italiano di Solidarietà, 2024).

Securitarian neoliberalism: toward illiberal forms of governance

The cases of Lipa and Casa Malala elucidate how state institutions strategically adapt to international migration and the globalisation of governance processes by blurring their functions and roles with international and private non-state entities that, due to their statutes, possess elusive accountability mechanisms. Consequently, governments can uphold and continue to project their nationalist and sovereignty ambitions, rooted in an illiberal perspective that includes the restriction of rights and the coercive and discretionary

use of power, by delegating the implementation and operationalisation of the resulting policies, along with the (limited) legal responsibilities, to third-party actors that capitalise on such policies.

Securitarian neoliberalism represents a mode of governance in which the principle of the state's sovereignty coexists with the outsourcing, streamlining, and dispersal of its functions, specifically to safeguard its sovereignty and a purported national security. Neoliberalism produces "new assemblages of authority" between entities that were once exclusively public or private (Darling, 2016b, p. 231). It involves a "transfer of operations that produces a different mode of government" (Ferguson & Gupta, 2002, p. 989), that is, a "governance at a distance" (Springer, 2011, p. 95). By withdrawing from the direct management of asylum seekers and refugees, states create an opening for non-state actors to become involved in these processes, effectively taking on roles that public institutions would typically fulfil. Especially in the context of security policies and securitarian approaches, Abrahamsen and Williams note that the devolution of public functions to private and semi-private actors creates

> "new geographies of power [that] cannot [...] be reduced to a simple question of more or less state power, or a weakened domestic government. Instead, they demand an investigation of the production of new modalities of power through which the very categories of public/private and global/local are reconstituted" (2010, p. 179)

By combining securitarian and neoliberal approaches to asylum governance, states maintain their influence over asylum-seekers and refugees indirectly, exerting their control without explicit and official engagement. These processes raise fundamental questions about accountability, democratic scrutiny and the rule of law. As Gill contends, the neoliberalisation of asylum contributes to creating a system of fragmented accountability, in which "almost no one takes responsibility for the organisation as a whole" (2016, p. 33). Reliance on international organisations and private businesses, which are subjected to fewer monitoring and accountability mechanisms than public institutions, reduces the ability to scrutinise and sanction controversial behaviours (Crouch, 2011). Additionally, outsourcing government functions to non-state entities can create a system in which profits or cost reduction are prioritised over legal and procedural standards, making it harder to address violations of refugee rights (Rako, 2014; Riles, 2008). This leads to a weakening of democratic scrutiny that, as Novak argues, gears towards a "restructuring of the EU's governance architecture and the reconfiguration of member states' institutional apparatuses" (2019, p. 2). In this context, the securitisation of asylum exemplifies one of the illiberal trends this reconfiguration could adopt, with its obsessive focus on security and national preservation leading to the use of repressive and punitive measures even within formally democratic regimes, at the expense of people's safety and institutional accountability.

Overall, the research demonstrates how seemingly contradictory forces coexist and reinforce each other in asylum governance, affecting not only asylum seekers and refugees but also exposing how the institutions responsible for meeting their needs and protecting their rights undermine public and judicial oversight, while failing to provide any genuine solution to the situation. These patterns, already troubling in asylum governance, have implications that reach far beyond that specific policy area. Notably, as Sassen argues, "[i]mmigration is [...] a sort of wrench one can throw into theories about sovereignty" (Sassen, 1996, p. 67). This means that the way governments treat non-citizens can serve as a litmus test for various aspects of a society, including the (in)effectiveness of welfare systems, the underlying values and beliefs, the strength of the rule of law, and, ultimately,

the quality of its democracy. Notably, recent analyses have underlined the emergence of an "authoritarian neoliberalism" (Biebricher, 2020) or "authoritarian capitalism" in Western democracies (Bonanno, 2020, p. 20), suggesting a global drift toward authoritarian, autocratic, and illiberal forms of the existing neoliberal system. Building on these analyses, this study ultimately suggests that the spread of securitarian neoliberalism should not be seen merely as a move from democratic to authoritarian or from liberal to illiberal governance. Instead, the illiberal aspects promoted by today's global political elite are just one way in which neoliberalism's illiberal tendencies become apparent, as they are more openly embraced by those in power and, as such, more notably feared by both citizens and non-citizens.

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