



AT THE THRESHOLD OF SAFETY

Barriers and solutions on the path
to protection in Italy

International Rescue Committee | December 2025

Acknowledgements

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Front cover: 2023 - Lampedusa, Italy - A group of 40 people waits for the rescue team of a humanitarian vessel to hand them life jackets.
Photo by Ximena Borrazas/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images



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Foreword

Ten years ago this summer, millions of people arrived in search of safety in Europe—a number that, in a single year, has only been surpassed by the displacement caused by the war in Ukraine.

Persecution, conflict, climate change and economic instability continue to force millions of people globally—including children—to risk everything in search of safety. Many continue to arrive in Italy by boat, on foot, and in planes in search of safety. Past that initial threshold to safety, refugees must still overcome significant barriers to rebuild their lives.

When violence forced Abubakar to flee Nigeria in 2014, he took his school certificate with him. Securing a higher education was vital to him and he wanted proof of his studies. The document got wet as he traveled on an overcrowded boat from Libya to Italy and still bears the stain today. “Whenever I see it, the history comes back. It reminds me of the journey,” he says. For a long time, university felt like a distant dream as Abubakar faced isolation, language barriers, and a lack of access to information. But he persevered, learning Italian and connecting with local communities, which helped him integrate in his

new town. A turning point came when he discovered IRC’s Refugee.Info platform, and with its support Abubakar secured a scholarship to the University of Turin, graduating in 2024. Abubakar now works at a reception center, helping other asylum seekers learn Italian and navigate the complex asylum system. He dreams of becoming a lawyer to continue advocating for refugee and migrant rights. “I started from somewhere, here I am, and I know where I am heading to,” he says. “Being a refugee or being a migrant is not a limit to what you want to achieve.”

Indeed, asylum seekers arriving to Italy today face a string of barriers from efforts to prevent them from even touching Italian shores and pushing them back into danger, to practices that cause long delays in the registration process for asylum seekers, which leaves them sleeping on the streets for weeks or months. At the same time, the Italian government has taken important steps to pilot new approaches to protection, including education- and work-based pathways for refugees.

This report proposes ways the Italian government can effectively and humanely respond to the arrival of people seeking international protection through safe pathways, fair asylum processes, and long-term inclusion approaches that uphold rights and humanitarian protections while unlocking the potential contributions of newcomers to the Italian economy and society. Our recommendations come as Italy, and the EU more broadly, face several turning points. The EU’s new Pact on asylum and migration will be implemented in 2026 and temporary protections for people displaced from Ukraine are set to expire in 2027.

A decade since arrivals of people seeking safety and opportunity in Europe made headlines, solutions to expand safe pathways and durable solutions remain urgently needed.

Susanna Zanfrini
Director, IRC Italy



2025 – Battipaglia, Italy. Abubakar is in the classroom of the reception center where he is teaching basic Italian to people who have arrived to Italy by boat.

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1. Executive summary

Global forced displacement continues to rise to new historic highs, with more than 120 million people around the world forced to flee their homes. Among them are over 42 million refugees and 8 million asylum seekers, whose lives and communities have been shattered by persecution and conflict. The vast majority are hosted in neighboring countries. The need to uphold the right to seek asylum and provide safe routes for refugees has never been greater.

As migration pathways and trends in Europe have seen a significant shift since 2015, when migration made mass headlines in Europe, tens of thousands of displaced people continue to arrive in Italy by sea, land, and air in search of safety each year. Recently, the Italian government has adopted a series of laws and policies largely aimed at hardening border enforcement and limiting protections and support for asylum seekers with the aim of detering migration. Implemented at great financial and human cost, these measures have not halted migration to Italy and raise significant legal and humanitarian concerns. At the same time, the Italian government, despite deterrence measures, has been investing in some safe pathways for refugees through humanitarian corridors as well as education- and work-based schemes. And Italy, like other European Union countries, has offered temporary sanctuary to over 200,000 people fleeing the war in Ukraine.

The coming years represent a critical juncture for Italy's approach to refugee protection and migration management. As the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum is implemented in Member States starting from June 2026, Italy will need to implement rules and practices that will have profound protection implications for people seeking safety in Europe. However, as of December 2025, the Italian government has yet to publicly release a National Implementation Plan. Further, the temporary protection regime for people displaced

from Ukraine is set to expire in March 2027, with no clear pathway forward for people who cannot safely return to their country. At the same time, Italy continues to struggle with worker shortages that are not being met by current, outdated, labor migration pathways.

Informed by the International Rescue Committee Italy's reception and integration programs and decades of experience responding to humanitarian crises around the world, this report analyses lessons learned from Italy's current responses and sets out solutions-oriented recommendations for more effective, humane border and asylum processes and strengthened safe pathways for refugees. Specifically, the report urges the Italian government to:

- Facilitate swift access to the asylum procedure and adequate reception conditions in Italy, guaranteeing that people with specific vulnerabilities, such as children, people with disabilities, health concerns, including mental health, trafficking or torture survivors, and others are promptly identified, exempted from accelerated procedures and referred to adequate services.
- Publish Italy's EU Pact on Migration and Asylum's National Implementation Plan to ensure transparency and accountability, and set up a coordination mechanism with relevant national and international actors, including civil society organizations.
- Ensure that any existing migration partnership with a third country is strictly conditioned on full respect for fundamental rights, and is supported by robust, well-funded, and independent monitoring mechanisms with active involvement of EU institutions and civil society actors.





2024 – Catania, Italy. IRC Cultural Mediator, Abdu, stands at the port of Catania, one of the many places throughout Italy where disembarkations take place.

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Photo: Skye McKee for the IRC

➤ Expand safe routes—without placing limitations on the right to seek asylum—so that people fleeing persecution and conflict are not forced to risk their lives on increasingly dangerous journeys in search of protection.

The Italian government should move away from its costly and ultimately ineffective focus on preventing people from arriving in Europe and instead work to strengthen the fairness and efficiency of the asylum and reception systems while introducing and expanding safe pathways for refugees to reach the country. A stronger, more effective approach to refugee protection and integration in Italy will not only provide refuge to some of the world's most vulnerable but also create more opportunities for refugees to contribute to new host communities.

2. Introduction

Forced displacement continues to rise to historic levels. Worldwide, more than 120 million people are now displaced as a result of persecution, conflict, and human rights violations. This includes over 42 million refugees and more than 8 million people seeking the protection of asylum. The vast majority (67 per cent) are hosted in neighboring countries.

As the numbers and needs of people seeking safety in the European Union (EU) have shifted in recent years with changes in global displacement, major policy and legislative reforms will also soon take effect. Most notably, the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum (the Pact) will be implemented in Member States starting from June 2026. Within this dynamic scenario, Italy plays a crucial role. Italy is not only a primary entry point for asylum seekers to Europe but has become a testing ground for measures that will profoundly impact the protection and rights of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants.

In light of the Pact's imminent implementation, this report highlights pressing gaps in protection and reception systems for displaced people seeking safety in Italy. The report identifies best practices and recommends evidence-based solutions, including for national institutions implementing the Pact's provisions, so that the rights and dignity of people forced to flee their homes are upheld through fair and effective procedures as well as reception programs and durable solutions. In addition, the report suggests alternatives to address the upcoming expiration of temporary protections for people fleeing Ukraine and ideas on how to further develop safe pathways that can offer displaced people an opportunity to transition into more durable and long-term status and rebuild their lives in Italy.

The Italian government has taken important steps to address migration challenges, including efforts

to improve reception capacities and cooperation at the European level. Building on this, the government now has the opportunity to strengthen safe pathways, which are proven to be effective in managing migration in an orderly and humane manner and undermining smuggling networks. At the same time, investing in fair asylum and dignified reception would effectively protect the fundamental rights of those seeking safety in Italy, but also help fill workforce gaps and respond to demographic challenges. Compared to costly externalization agreements, such as the Italy-Albania deal, investing in inclusive and sustainable solutions offers far greater benefits for Italy's social and economic fabric.

The report's recommendations are drawn from the ongoing reception and integration programmatic experience of the International Rescue Committee Italy (IRC Italy) and decades of experience responding to humanitarian crises around the world. Since 2017, IRC Italy has been supporting people in Italy who flee conflict and disaster, focusing on the protection of the most vulnerable and advocating for a fair asylum system and for adequate reception conditions.

Key dynamics

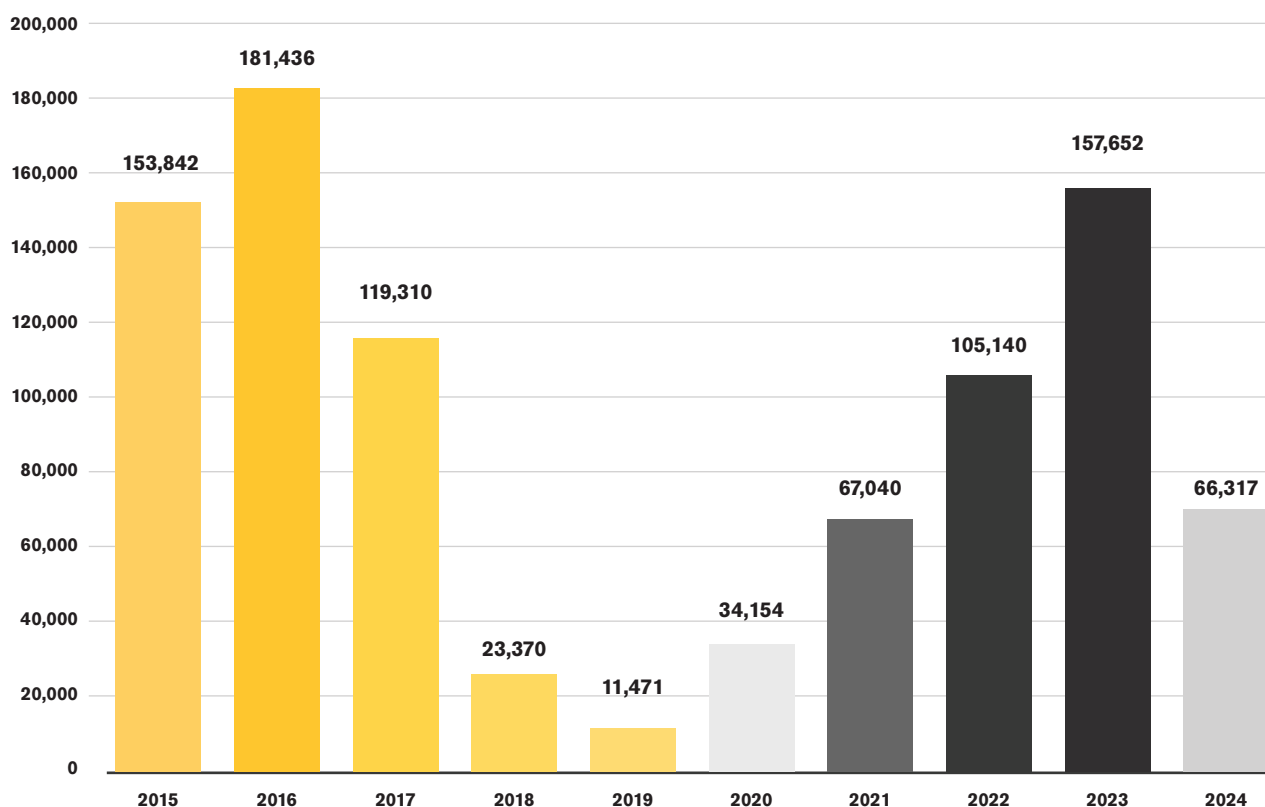
ARRIVAL AND ASYLUM TRENDS

Italy remains one of the main countries of arrival for people seeking safety and opportunity in Europe. Between 2015 and 2024, more than 900,000 people arrived in Italy, most by sea or via “the Balkan Route,”¹ through Italy's northern borders with Slovenia. Arrivals by sea have declined in recent years, but tens of thousands of

¹ The Western Balkan Route is one of the main migratory pathways via land. It typically involves crossing multiple countries in the Balkans, often starting from Turkey and moving through countries such as Bulgaria, Greece, North Macedonia, Serbia, and others in the region. Trieste, located close to the border with Slovenia, is one of the main entry points in Italy for people arriving from the Balkan Route.



Fig.1 Number of people arriving to Italy via sea, 2015-2024.



Source: Openpolis, Landings in Italy in the last 10 years; Ministry of the Interior, Department of Civil Liberties and Immigration, [Daily Statistical Dashboard](#), data as of 31 December for the years [2016](#), [2017](#), [2018](#), [2019](#), [2020](#), [2021](#), [2022](#), [2023](#) and [2024](#).

people continue to arrive by boat, on one of the world's deadliest migration routes. As of August 31, 2025, [42,640](#) people had arrived in the country by sea in 2025—a slight increase from the same period in 2024—with most having come from [Bangladesh](#), [Eritrea](#) and [Egypt](#).

Official Frontex data on people arriving through Italy's northeastern border suggests a sharp reduction in movements along the Balkan route;² however, data collected in [protection monitoring](#) by IRC Italy and Diaconia Valdese at the Italy-Slovenia border indicate a [much more limited](#)

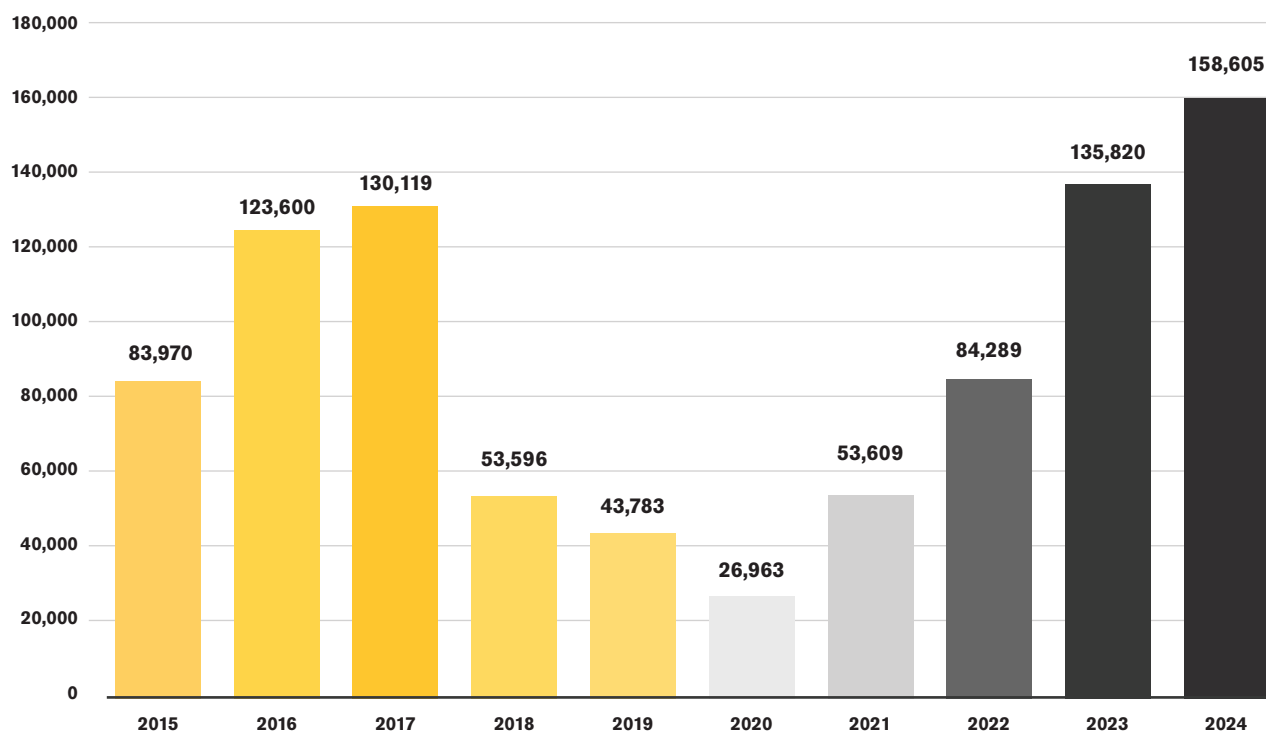
[decline](#), i.e. only by 16 percent. Our [data](#) shows that at least 13,460 people arrived through the Balkan route in 2024, mostly from Afghanistan, Turkey, Syria, Pakistan and Bangladesh and that these trends have remained [largely unchanged](#) in the first six months of 2025.

The number of asylum applications received by Italy has grown in recent years to [158,605](#) in 2024, with Italy now ranking third after Germany and Spain for the most [asylum applications](#) in the EU. This figure includes asylum seekers who recently arrived by sea, land, and air,³ as well as people

² Frontex reported a 78 percent decrease in 2024 compared to 2023, that is 21,520 irregular border crossings in 2024 compared to 99,068 in 2023. Meanwhile the Italian government cited a 48 percent decline in crossings at the Slovenian border since Schengen was suspended with 6,200 newly arrived people from October 21, 2023, to January 15, 2025.

³ People arrive by air mostly from [Peru](#), [Colombia](#), and [Brazil](#). They often travel through Spain, which they can enter without long-term visas. While many belong to the LGBTIQ+ community, numerous families with children are also seeking protection. They often settle in Italy in Rome and Milan, where there are well-established South American communities.

Fig.2 Asylum applications submitted in Italy, 2015-2024.



Source: National Commission for the right to asylum, [Asylum data for the years 2015-2020](#); National Commission for the right to asylum, [Asylum data for the year 2021](#); National Commission for the right to asylum, [Asylum data for the year 2022](#); Eurostat, [Asylum applicants by type - annual aggregated data](#).

living in Italy with strong personal and family ties in the country. In 2024, Italian authorities issued 78,565 first-instance asylum decisions, with a recognition rate of 35.9 percent (including refugee status, subsidiary protection and national protection currently named “special protection”).

ITALY'S REFUGEE POPULATION AND ITS UNREALIZED POTENTIAL

The approximately [307,000 refugees](#) living in Italy represent a significant economic and social asset. Refugees and migrants contribute substantially to the economy, comprising about one-tenth of the workforce and generate roughly [nine percent](#) of GDP. They are vital to key sectors like agriculture, construction, and care services, and [net contributors](#) to the national tax and social security

systems - countering Italy's demographic decline and aging population. However, this potential is often not fully realized due to underemployment and precarious work conditions. As a [2025 report](#) from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) points out, this “missed opportunity” stems from a lack of recognition of foreign qualifications, along with language barriers, limited access to professional training and discrimination. Beyond economics, refugees also play a crucial role in strengthening social cohesion through refugee-led organizations (RLOs). Founded and managed by refugees themselves, these groups provide vital peer-to-peer support based on first-hand experience and are widespread across the country. By fostering self-reliance and building resilient support networks, RLOs promote community integration and intercultural dialogue, ultimately strengthening the social fabric in Italy.

POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

The Italian government's approach to migration management has increasingly linked migration with security to justify restrictive measures. This has included laws aimed at containing irregular⁴ migrants, limiting regular stay, and expanding measures focused on enforcing returns. At the same time, Italy has pursued border externalization policies, both through bilateral agreements ([Italy-Albania](#)) and within the EU framework, that rush asylum procedures while limiting due process and other critical protections. In this context, with the impending implementation of the Pact, and its focus on accelerated processing and diminished protections for certain asylum seekers, there is a risk of entrenching the current shortcomings of the Italian protection system. However, Italy's National Implementation Plan, which was submitted to the European Commission by December 2024, has not yet been made public. With the extension of the Temporary Protection Directive regime for people displaced from Ukraine now set to expire in March 2027, the Italian government will quickly have to face the situation of nearly [170,000 people](#) (as of July 2025) legally residing and working in Italy who might find themselves undocumented if other solutions for legal stay are not adopted.

PROTECTION OUTLOOK, BORDER EXTERNALIZATION AND HUMANITARIAN CONCERNS

People seeking safety in Italy face many dangers and barriers in their pursuit of protection. They frequently have severe vulnerabilities stemming from abuses and violence suffered during their journey: both the Central Mediterranean and Balkan routes are extremely dangerous, with widespread human rights violations occurring. Practices such as the Italy-Albania deal and the [expanded use of accelerated procedures](#), often without proper identification of vulnerabilities, limit the ability of people forced to flee from their homes to seek protection and access the services they need. The Italy-Albania deal joins a series of EU-wide deterrence policies, including agreements with countries such as [Egypt](#), [Libya](#) and [Tunisia](#), that externalize EU border management and exacerbate humanitarian concerns for people seeking safety. But doubling down on deterrence rather than offering meaningful protection does not stop people from seeking safety—it forces many into [more perilous journeys](#), putting lives at risk and creating new profit streams for human smugglers. The challenges asylum seekers face do not end upon reaching Italy. When trying to apply for asylum, as a first step to rebuild their lives, asylum seekers often face practices and obstacles that prevent them from accessing their rights. The right to seek asylum is clearly established in the Italian Constitution, as well as in international legal instruments and EU norms transposed into the Italian legal framework.⁵ However, legislative reforms, the implementation of new accelerated and border procedures, and [limitations and delays in accessing the asylum procedure](#), seriously affect the enjoyment of this fundamental human right.

4 IRC Italy refers to [irregular migration](#), avoiding other dehumanizing terminology, as this focuses on the structures that force people to take irregular routes, rather than labelling the individual. Most importantly, it recognises the fundamental humanity and rights of all people, regardless of the way they claim asylum.

5 See, e.g.: Article 10, paragraph 3, Italian Constitution; Article 14 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948); 1951 Geneva Convention; [Directive 2013/32/EU](#) (Asylum Procedure Directive); [Directive 2011/95/EU](#) (Qualification Directive); [Directive \(EU\) 2024/1346](#) (Reception Conditions Directive).

IRC's work in Italy

Since 2017, [IRC Italy](#) has been providing essential safety, education, economic wellbeing and health services to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Our work addresses the needs of people seeking protection by offering direct support, collaborating with local organisations, and working alongside national authorities and institutions to enhance the asylum system and improve humanitarian conditions.

In Lombardy, Piedmont, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Lazio, Sicily and Calabria, IRC Italy addresses the needs of people seeking protection by offering direct support, collaborating with local organizations and working alongside national authorities and institutions. Our teams have reached more than 46,000 people arriving via the Balkan route in [Friuli-Venezia Giulia](#) since 2021, and over 40,000 people arriving by sea in [Sicily and Calabria](#) since 2024, with a focus on survivors of gender-based violence, victims of torture, trafficking and exploitation, and unaccompanied children. IRC Italy teams operate to strengthen the reception system, providing training and supporting reception centers staff to identify and respond to people's needs. Since 2018, our digital platform, [Refugee.Info Italy](#), has provided reliable, multilingual information to more than 675,000 users, with 16,000 people receiving one-on-one orientations on rights, safety, services, and integration.

IRC Italy produces [quarterly protection monitoring reports](#), which assess the protection situation of those we assist, capturing their profiles, vulnerabilities and protection risks across Italy. Data and information collected through programs are used to inform client-centered advocacy priorities. Since 2022, IRC Italy has contributed to discussions with institutional representatives to strengthen the asylum, reception and integration systems, at the local and national level.



3. Upholding access to territory for asylum seekers

To request refugee protection, people fleeing persecution and conflict must reach a safe country where they can submit their application for protection. Recognizing that refugees will often be unable to secure the proper documentation before fleeing, the [UN Refugee Convention](#) prohibits punishing asylum seekers for the manner in which they enter their country of asylum. However, Italy is increasingly erecting barriers to attempt to block people from reaching its shores through agreements with third countries to externalize border procedures as well as restrictive border

controls and readmission agreements. These policies aimed at [detering](#) people from reaching Europe are highly costly, have proven ineffective at halting migration, undermine the fundamental right to seek asylum by effectively limiting access to safe territory, and further exacerbate humanitarian concerns. The significant resources expended on these ineffective, harmful policies would be far better spent on strengthening the existing internal asylum system, reducing the current backlog of applications, improving reception conditions and fostering refugee inclusion.



2024 – Catania, Italy. IRC Project Team.
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Photo: Skye McKee for the IRC

Recommendations for the Italian government

- Ensure that any existing migration partnership with a third country is strictly conditioned on full respect for fundamental rights, and is supported by robust, well-funded, and independent monitoring mechanisms with active involvement of EU institutions and civil society actors.
- Establish thorough and transparent vulnerability screening procedures for people impacted by migration partnership with third countries. Such procedures should be carried out by trained personnel to ensure identification, protection and access to specialized services for people with specific needs, including survivors of gender-based violence, trafficking, and unaccompanied children.
- Guarantee that people transferred to third countries, where such cooperation meets all fundamental rights protections, can access the asylum procedure and receive State-funded legal and specialized support, including mental health and psychosocial support.
- Aim to eliminate the use of detention for migration purposes, limiting its use only as a measure of last resort, in line with the principles of lawfulness, necessity, proportionality, and for the shortest possible duration, and applying whenever possible community-based alternatives to detention instead.
- Allocate financial resources dedicated to migration management more efficiently, dedicating available funds to increase and provide specialized training to personnel involved in the asylum procedure and strengthening the reception system in Italy, instead of setting up costly and inhumane facilities in third countries.
- Foster stronger collaboration with civil society organizations, including by instructing Prefectures and Police Headquarters to set up technical working groups at the local level and promoting opportunities for training and capacity building for staff at the Ministry of the Interior and Police Headquarters.
- Publish the Pact's National Implementation Plan to ensure transparency and accountability, and set up a coordination mechanism with relevant national and international actors involved in its implementation, including civil society organizations.

A) CONCERNING EXTERNALIZATION AND THIRD COUNTRY COOPERATION PRACTICES

The deals that Italy has entered with third countries—non-EU as well as EU Member States—raise serious concerns about access to territory for people seeking protection. These often highly costly agreements have not halted migration to Europe and instead appear to push people to more dangerous routes. They limit the right to seek asylum and have resulted in pushbacks of asylum seekers, raising serious due process and human rights concerns. In responding to the humanitarian needs of people seeking international protection at Italy's borders, IRC staff regularly observe the physical and psychological harm suffered by people who have not been able to exercise their right to seek protection as a result of these agreements aiming to externalise

the asylum process. Cooperation on border externalization, returns and readmissions have emerged as principal features of "embedding migration in international partnerships" that the Pact promotes. Studies show that these policies do not achieve their declared objectives to "deter" migration; instead, they often result in increased risks for forcibly displaced people and deteriorated human rights conditions.

A.1) The Italy-Albania deal - cruel, costly and counterproductive

The border and asylum externalization agreement between Italy and Albania, implemented since 2024, jeopardizes the fundamental right to seek asylum and risks pushing people onto even more dangerous routes. While the Italian government had originally planned to transfer to Albania up to 36,000 people per year, the deal has been



applied, as of August 31, 2025, to 206 people. Repeated judicial determinations have found that the deal violates Italian and EU laws, and most people transferred to the detention centres in Albania have soon been brought back, following judicial decisions. Initially budgeted at €650 million over five years, total spending could reportedly exceed the €1 billion mark. Despite this significant budget allocation, the deal has failed to meet the Italian government's own targets. Further, procedures to identify and screen vulnerable individuals have proved ineffective, and independent monitoring has been limited. These failings also point to shortcomings in the Pact's provisions encouraging external migration management, expanded detention, and accelerated procedures.

Limiting fair access to protection

The Italy-Albania deal does not provide people who have fled persecution a fair opportunity to seek asylum. Under its terms, Italian authorities transfer certain asylum seekers and migrants to detention centers in Albania, outside the EU, where those seeking international protection are subject to accelerated asylum procedures. Initially intended to apply only to nationals of countries that the Italian government considers to be a “safe country of origin” who are intercepted in international waters, the deal was significantly broadened in 2025 to include the transfer of people detained in immigration detention centres in Italy. Italian authorities remotely process asylum applications filed in the centers in Albania, channeling them into a border accelerated procedure that allows for a very short timeframe for the asylum interview and decision (seven days) and for the process to appeal a negative decision (seven days). Remote hearings and the physical distance from Italy further undermine due process by limiting asylum seekers' ability to fully participate in their proceedings and core procedural guarantees, including access to information, legal assistance and representation. This externalization of the asylum process also creates barriers to essential support, such as psychological and humanitarian assistance, that

impact the fairness of the process. Italian courts, including the Court of Rome and the Supreme Court, have raised concerns about the deal's extraterritorial nature, the violation of the right to defense, and the concept of “safe country of origin,” calling into question its viability. The Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) has also questioned the deal's legal basis.

Inadequate vulnerability screening, limited monitoring

The deal overlooks fundamental protection-related questions, with particularly severe implications for people with specific needs and vulnerabilities. Rushed and opaque pre-screening procedures hinder the identification of invisible vulnerabilities, such as gender-based violence, trafficking, or mental health conditions. Screening procedures intended to safeguard vulnerable individuals and unaccompanied children from transfer to the centers in Albania have already proved lacking after the first transfers to centres in Albania, resulted in returns to Italy of people sent there. In IRC's experience, recognizing and/or disclosing such vulnerabilities requires time, adequate support, trained personnel, and specialized services to ensure safe referrals. Yet these essential safeguards are not mentioned in the Italy-Albania deal and are apparently absent from the facilities in Albania. Independent access to the centers to monitor and collect information has been limited due to challenges in obtaining authorizations from relevant authorities, and little information has been made publicly available. The lack of effective oversight mechanisms means that critical vulnerabilities may go undetected and thus people receiving inadequate treatment.

Box 1: The controversial use of the “safe country of origin” concept in Italy

The “safe country” concept has been a key component of the Italy-Albania deal in defining the population subject to transfer to Albania and in triggering the use of accelerated asylum procedures. Legal challenges to Italy’s application of the “safe country” concept and its application to people held under the Italy-Albania deal raise significant concerns about whether proper individual assessments of asylum applications can be ensured through these procedures and highlight the continued urgent need for effective vulnerability screenings, access to legal information and advice.

According to EU law, a “safe country of origin” is a country where generally a person can be returned to, without fearing persecution, torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, or violence due to armed conflict.⁶ The Pact introduces the possibility of a common EU list of “safe countries” and a new, complementary criterion for resorting to accelerated procedures that automatically applies to people from countries with an EU-wide asylum recognition rate below 20 percent. Asylum seekers from “safe countries” face severe procedural challenges that limit their ability to fairly request protection, including:

- a presumption of safety, which shifts the burden of proof to asylum seekers, who have to demonstrate that their country is unsafe in their individual case;
- use of the accelerated asylum procedure, which significantly reduces the time to prepare for asylum interviews and allows for administrative detention during assessment of applications; and
- shorter terms to appeal the asylum decision, i.e. 15 days for accelerated procedures and seven days for the accelerated border procedure, instead of the 30 days under the EU’s regular procedure.

In 2018, Italy adopted one of the longest lists of “safe countries” among EU Member States. It allowed countries to be listed even when certain categories of people, such as members of LGBTIQ+ community and human rights defenders, face risks, and where specific areas within the countries would not be considered safe. As of December 2025, the Italian government considers 19 countries as “safe:” Albania, Algeria, Bangladesh, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cabo Verde, Côte d’Ivoire, Egypt, Gambia, Georgia, Ghana, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Morocco, Montenegro, Peru, Senegal, Serbia, Sri Lanka, and Tunisia.

Decisions by the CJEU have called into question the legality of Italy’s use of the “safe country” concept, including as a core element of the Italy-Albania deal. In response to an October 2024 decision by the CJEU, clarifying that safety must be widespread in a designated “safe country” with no exceptions for certain areas or categories of people, the Italian government removed the exception for specific areas, but maintained the exception for certain categories of people. An August 2025 CJEU ruling reinforced the principle that a country cannot be designated as safe unless it is safe for the entire population and that effective judicial review of such designations is required. This ruling, which stemmed from a case brought by two Bangladeshi citizens detained in Albania under the deal, reaffirmed the need for case-by-case safety assessment.

⁶ According to Annex I to Directive 2013/32/EU, “A country is considered as a safe country of origin... if, on the basis of the legal situation, the application of the law within a democratic system and the general political circumstances, it can be shown that there is generally and consistently no persecution nor torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and no threat to life or person by reason of indiscriminate violence in situations of international or internal armed conflict.



A.2) Cooperation agreements with North African countries

The Italy-Albania deal is the latest in a series of policies that aim to externalize border management that have exacerbated humanitarian and protection concerns for asylum seekers. Under Italian and EU cooperation agreements with countries such as [Tunisia](#), [Libya](#) and [Egypt](#), EU Member States provide funding and expertise to third countries to strengthen border control capacities, including by supplying equipment and training to local authorities through a complex tangle of financial aid, technical assistance, and readmission commitments.⁷ The Italy-Libya agreement, signed in 2017, stands out for its impact on people attempting to seek asylum in Italy. Its implementation has effectively empowered the Libyan Coast Guard to intercept asylum seekers and migrants at sea and return them to Libya, thereby [outsourcing](#) Italy's border control and preventing many asylum seekers from reaching Italian territory. Once returned to Libya, people are commonly confined in detention centers that are extensively documented as sites of grave [human rights violations](#).

The drive to cooperate with third countries to externalize borders generates complex and specific needs for people trying to reach safety in Italy that require specialized support and protection to enable recovery. The dire condition of those arriving by sea is immediately evident to IRC staff at disembarkation points and reception facilities in southern Italy. People recount enduring arbitrary detention, recurrent pushbacks, gender-based violence, trafficking, and severe exploitation. Accounts of being sold or forced into exploitative labor in Libya are widespread.

Some people's bodies are marked by scars as a result of this mistreatment, including harms committed against them as children. *Efrem*,* who was 18 at the time when he spoke to IRC staff in 2024, said that he was kidnapped, stripped, tied up, beaten with sticks, and burned with an acidic substance in Libya that left his back covered in scars. *Amanuel*,* who was 18 at the time of his arrival to southern Italy in 2024, reported to IRC Italy that it took six tries for him to reach safety in Italy after repeated interception at sea and return to Libya, where he had been kidnapped, held in multiple detention centers, and cut repeatedly across his back leaving him scarred.

Through IRC Italy's humanitarian support services in southern Italy, staff frequently receive reports of recurrent interceptions and pushbacks that escalate the danger asylum seekers face and erect near-insurmountable barriers to accessing Italian territory. *Fatima*,* a 23-year-old woman who escaped violence by armed groups in Mali experienced gender-based violence after being intercepted at sea. She had embarked from Tunisia, where she worked as a housekeeper to save money to reach safety in Europe. She reported to IRC staff that the small, crowded vessel she was traveling on with 80 other people was intercepted, and she was handed over to traffickers who imprisoned her in Libya. There, she endured daily sexual violence. Fatima later managed to reach Italy, where she found safety at the Lampedusa hotspot and received support from IRC staff specialized in supporting victims of gender-based violence.

A.3) Tightened border controls and readmission agreement with Slovenia

The reintroduction of border controls at the Italy-Slovenia border and the use of [readmission agreements](#) have hindered access to asylum for

* Pseudonyms

7 The EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding, signed in July 2023 (with Italy playing a significant role in its promotion), included €105 million in immediate aid to support the Tunisian coast guard and border management. Concerning Egypt, Italy has been a key proponent of significant financial assistance, with a portion of the €7.4 billion EU package earmarked for migration control and border management, within the broader EU-Egypt Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership, signed in March 2024 European Parliament. In addition, Italy funded Tunisia autonomously through a specific Reward Fund established in 2019. See ASGI, [Legal strategies to combat externalisation policies](#) and Politico, [EU leaders ink €7.4B economic aid, migration deal with Egypt](#).



2024 - IRC Italy's Field Protection Officer provides information to people arrived to Trieste via the Balkan route.

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Photo: Francesco Pistilli for the IRC

people arriving via the Balkan route and resulted in chain pushbacks and people taking more dangerous routes to reach Italian territory.

Since the reintroduction of internal border controls in October 2023,⁸ police activity along the Italian-Slovenian border has intensified, preventing asylum seekers from reaching Italian territory and resulting in some being subjected to chain readmissions and pushbacks across borders. According to the Ministry of Interior, between October 2023 and January 2024, border police intercepted 1,600 people and denied entry to nearly 900 individuals. In some cases, people are refused entry instead of being allowed to apply for asylum in Italy and are handed over to Slovenian police. Slovenian authorities often transfer them to Croatia, where police have been documented pushing people back to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. This creates a chain of forced deportations, typically without due process or assessment of asylum

claims. People on the move consistently recount to IRC staff abuses committed by authorities, especially at land borders, ranging from violence and arbitrary arrests to abandonment in deserted areas. In 2023, the Court of Rome found readmissions to Slovenia⁹ unlawfully restrict access to Italian territory.

While official reports point to a significant decrease in people reaching Europe via the Balkan route in 2024, data collected by IRC Italy in Trieste suggests a much smaller decline that reflects the fact that people have been pushed into more perilous nocturnal journeys to avoid the risk of detection and return by authorities without opportunity to seek protection. These measures also increase fees that smugglers can charge and increase the risk that vulnerable individuals are not identified and supported by humanitarian actors to access asylum and protection.

8 Initially motivated by security concerns linked to instability in the Middle East, the controls have been extended through at least December 2025. The measure has been further reinforced by the 2025 Memorandum of Understanding signed by Italy, Slovenia, and Croatia, which provides for joint trilateral police patrols along Croatia's external border.

9 These readmissions are rooted in a bilateral agreement between Italy and Slovenia that was signed in 1996 but has never been ratified by the Italian Parliament. In 2021, the Court of Rome ruled the readmission procedures unlawful, as they violated the right to access the asylum procedure.

Box 2: Expanded challenges with the EU's response to secondary movements

Italy is not only a destination for those seeking protection but also a transit country for people going to other parts of Europe and, as a result of EU policies, a place of return from other EU states. For example, Trieste, where IRC Italy delivers humanitarian support to people on the move, has become not just a transit point, but increasingly a destination for people seeking international protection in Italy and for those returning after secondary movements within the EU.¹⁰

As the Pact introduces a more stringent framework on secondary movements, Italy and other countries of first arrival are expected to implement strict new procedures and potentially impose sanctions and other legal consequences on asylum seekers who move between Member States, in an effort to reduce such movements. While these provisions are positioned as “solutions,” in IRC's experience, such limitations have not stopped people from moving between countries, particularly to reunite with family, and increase humanitarian and legal needs to avoid vulnerabilities caused by the resulting social exclusion of people unable to access international protection systems.

People on the move, including asylum seekers, transit from countries of initial arrival to other EU countries, for a variety of reasons, including to join family and friends who can help support their integration, connect with communities who share their culture and language, and find better opportunities for work and social inclusion. At the same time, this internal transit can also subject people on the move to harm. People attempting to cross internal-EU borders, such as the Italian-French crossings at Ventimiglia and Oulx, for example, have been exposed to violations of fundamental rights, including pushbacks, and experienced difficulty in meeting basic needs.

Under the current legal framework, the Dublin Regulation, the first EU Member State an asylum seeker enters should, with certain exceptions, examine their asylum application. This means that a person who arrives in Italy but later moves to another EU country, can be transferred back to Italy for their claim to be processed there. In recent years, an increasing number of returnees from other EU countries have been registered in northern Italy (in particular in Milan and Trieste). But these returns have occurred informally, including for vulnerable groups, particularly women with children presenting trafficking indicators. Once back in Italy, people face significant challenges in (re)-accessing the asylum procedure, leaving them in legal limbo and unable to obtain adequate reception.

The Pact's more stringent framework on secondary movements raises additional concerns. It expands the use of the Eurodac database to track movements across Member States and implements a strict “first country of entry” principle, which is reinforced through new border procedures and legal responsibilities. With the new Asylum and Migration Management Regulation, in particular, the EU aims to curb secondary movements by extending the responsibilities of first countries of entry, which will be responsible for asylum applications for longer periods (Article 33). This is complemented by streamlined and faster procedures to return asylum seekers to the responsible Member State, reducing the possibility of autonomous movements within the EU. These policies are likely to impose even harsher penalties on asylum seekers and counterproductively further increase pressure on the asylum and reception infrastructure of Italy and other frontline States, which the Pact acknowledges as a major driver of onward movement. Whether the Pact's mandatory but flexible Solidarity Mechanism is sufficient to address these pressures will have a major impact on all asylum seekers in Italy.

10 From April to June 2025, IRC Italy's program in Trieste at the Italian-Slovenian border reached 1,977 newly arrived people. Of those assisted, 54 percent expressed their intention to seek asylum in Italy. Notably, 41 percent of Afghans now consider Trieste and Italy as their final destination.

4. Ensuring a fair asylum process and adequate reception for asylum seekers

Upon arrival in Italy, access to the asylum procedure and reception services are essential to ensure that people who express an intent to seek asylum and those with particular needs and vulnerabilities are identified and channeled to appropriate support. However, for too many people the challenges do not end when they reach Italy: whether they land on the southern coasts of Sicily, Calabria or Apulia, or whether they arrive in north-eastern Italy through the Balkan route, asylum seekers continue to grapple with severe difficulties to express their intent to seek asylum, receive proper screening, access adequate reception, and fulfill basic needs. The implementation of the Pact's border provisions raises additional concerns as accelerated border procedures expand at sea and land borders, increasing the importance of strengthened vulnerability screening. Asylum seekers also continue to face significant barriers and delays to register and formalize their applications for asylum with local authorities. A timely, accessible and fair asylum procedure is critical to effectively protect the fundamental rights of those seeking safety.

Recommendations for the Italian government

- Ensure that all individuals who express an intent to seek asylum, regardless of nationality, are promptly registered by competent authorities, in line with Italian and EU law.
- Issue a national circular to Police Headquarters with harmonized guidance on asylum registration

procedures, explicitly prohibiting discretionary practices such as informal phone checks, nationality-based refusals, or unnecessary documentation requirements.

- Provide clear, accessible, and regularly updated information on asylum registration procedures on Police Headquarters' websites. The information should be delivered in multiple languages, through channels that are widespread within migrant communities, and be specifically tailored to individuals with particular vulnerabilities.
- Ensure that individuals with specific vulnerabilities, such as children, people with disabilities, health concerns, including mental health, trafficking or torture survivors, and others are promptly identified, exempted from accelerated procedures and referred to adequate services. This includes providing training to border police and authorities at sea and land borders to identify less visible vulnerabilities, with the support of qualified cultural mediators and medical professionals.
- Establish an independent fundamental rights monitoring mechanism, in line with the [EU Agency for Fundamental Rights' guidelines](#), that is linked to national accountability mechanisms and reports remedial actions that the competent authorities take in response to its findings and recommendations. The monitoring mechanism should systematically involve on-the-ground civil society representatives through a dedicated technical working group or advisory committee.
- Increase the allocation of human and financial resources to Police Headquarters, Territorial Commissions and Immigration Court Sections, focusing on providing specialized training for staff and strengthening cultural mediation services.

➤ Increase the transfer of asylum seekers awaiting reception from Trieste to other Italian regions, with specific attention to vulnerable groups such as families and single women, to ensure the transfer of an average of 10 asylum seekers per day from December to May and 20 asylum seekers per day from June to November.

➤ Allocate financial resources to strengthen the reception system by prioritizing investment in the Reception and Integration System (SAI) to reduce reliance on Extraordinary Reception Centers (CAS), while ensuring adequate capacity and equitable access to legal aid, psycho-social support, and robust cultural mediation services across all facilities

THE ASYLUM PROCESS

1

EXPRESSION OF INTENT TO SEEK ASYLUM

A person declares the intent to apply for asylum at the Police Headquarters or Border Police. Although there is no formal timeframe for filing the application, this should be done as soon as possible. There are no formal requirements: the application can be filed orally or in writing.

2

REGISTRATION

The registration of the asylum application takes place at the Police headquarters and is composed of two phases:

- Identification: the Police record the applicant's data, take a photograph and fingerprints.
- Formalization: the asylum seekers, with the help of an interpreter, fills out the registration form ("C3 form") for applying for asylum. This form includes questions about the reasons why the person left their country of origin and contains a section dedicated to specific needs.

The Police, who cannot examine the merits of the asylum application, submit the form to the Territorial Commission.

3

ASSESSMENT BY THE TERRITORIAL COMMISSION

The Territorial Commissions are the first-instance asylum authorities located across the Italian territory. They are composed of a Deputy Prefect, functionaries of the Ministry of Interior, and an expert on international protection and human rights designated by UNHCR. They are in charge of interviewing asylum seekers in order to assess and decide the outcome asylum applications. Within the ordinary asylum procedure, applicants should be summoned for their asylum interview within 30 days from the registration of the asylum application, and decisions should be adopted within the next 3 days (extendable for various months in case of complex claims).

4

JUDICIARY STAGE

In the case of a negative decision, the applicant has the opportunity to present an appeal to the Specialized Section on Migration and International protection of the local Courts.

A) ACCESS TO ASYLUM AND RECEPTION

In the Italian legal system, the right to seek asylum is guaranteed through the international protection framework, which grants individuals from other countries who are in Italy the right to seek refuge if they fear persecution or serious harm in their country of origin. Proper identification of applicants and their vulnerabilities is essential to ensure their access to the asylum procedure and reception system. However, asylum seekers in Italy face barriers and delays to register their claim and enter the reception system, while the expedited nature of border procedures is not allowing for proper screening for vulnerabilities. This section focuses on such procedures and the challenges asylum seekers face to access the asylum process and reception system after arriving in the border contexts where IRC Italy's staff provide information, humanitarian assistance, and referrals.

A.1) Procedures and practices at southern borders

The Central Mediterranean remains a key route to Europe, with Italy being one of the major entry points for people seeking safety. People undertaking this journey often travel in unseaworthy and overcrowded boats, exposed to significant risks including exploitation, violence, abuse, and drowning. In southern Italy, IRC Italy partners with the UNHCR to provide vital support to the most vulnerable. Various teams of roving cultural mediators and protection experts in Lampedusa, Catania, Agrigento and Reggio Calabria, offer information on rights and asylum procedures to newly arrived individuals at ports, hotspots and reception centers. They focus on identifying specific needs, particularly among women, children, families, presumed trafficking victims, gender-based violence survivors, and referring them to relevant support services.



2024 – Catania, Italy. IRC Cultural Mediator conducts an information session for men, women, and children in a transit center.
© International Rescue Committee
Photo: Skye McKee for the IRC

People reach the Italian coasts mainly after Search and Rescue (SAR) operations carried out by the Italian Coast Guard or by NGO rescue ships, whose crucial and life-saving role is widely recognized. Rescue at sea has become more challenging since 2019, when the Italian government introduced the so-called “closed ports” policy, further reinforced in 2023 through Decree-Law No. 1/2023. This decree established a Code of Conduct for NGOs involved in SAR operations, imposing stricter obligations and administrative sanctions, including the potential confiscation of vessels. Under these rules, upon completing rescue operations, NGOs must request and proceed to a “safe port” designated by Italian authorities. However, the ports assigned are frequently located far from the rescue area—often in central or northern Italy—requiring several additional days of navigation instead of allowing disembarkation at the closer southern ports. For people rescued at sea, many of whom are shipwreck survivors, this results in longer delays before they can access Italian territory and receive urgently needed assistance and protection.

People who land are transferred to “hotspot” centers. The “hotspot approach” was introduced by the EU’s Agenda on Migration in 2015 to coordinate the reception and identification of people seeking asylum at the EU’s southern borders. As of November 30, 2025, hotspot centers in Italy are located on the island of Lampedusa, in Sicily (Pozzallo, Porto Empedocle and Messina), in Calabria (Roccella Ionica and Reggio Calabria) and in Apulia (Taranto). In these centers, identification and vulnerability pre-screening operations are carried out. Those who express their intent to seek international protection are channelled into the asylum procedure. People from “safe countries of origin” who apply for asylum are subject to potential administrative detention and accelerated border procedures. Under the Pact implementation, the number and percentage of people placed in accelerated border procedures will continue to grow.

A.2) Procedures and practices at the northeastern border

While most people seeking protection reach Italy via sea, many continue to enter the country via land near the city of Trieste, at the northeastern border with Slovenia. Trieste is the first safe place of arrival for thousands of asylum seekers from the Western Balkan route, which runs through Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Slovenia. People moving along this route arrive in Italy after a long and dangerous journey, often exposed to precarious conditions, malnutrition, physical and psychological violence, detention and violations of their rights, including pushbacks. Upon arrival, people have the right to seek asylum at the Immigration Office of the local Police Headquarters and access the reception system to finally find shelter after their journey. However, asylum seekers in Trieste are faced with a reality of practical barriers to asylum, legal limbos and lack of adequate reception.

Since 2021, IRC Italy has been operating in Trieste to address the lack of adequate monitoring and support for people arriving via the Balkan route. Over these years, IRC Italy’s multilingual Field Protection Officers have provided daily, on-the-ground assistance to 46,360 people. They have offered essential information on rights and legal options, facilitated access to vital services such as shelter and healthcare, and supported access to the asylum procedure. The team also identifies individuals with specific needs, responds to urgent requests, and refers them to specialized protection and assistance services. Through continuous presence at Trieste Central Station, the primary transit point in the city, and direct engagement with people on the move, IRC Italy has been collecting data in monitoring reports and snapshots, which serve as a platform to amplify the voices of those in need of support, and to design evidence-based programs and advocacy actions.

A.3) Challenges in access to the asylum procedure

Asylum seekers have reported to IRC staff a number of challenges to have their intention to seek asylum—the first step in the process—registered with the competent authorities.

Some people wishing to apply for asylum have recounted to IRC Italy that they were not permitted to formally register as asylum seekers based on their nationality. In addition, applicants do not have sufficient time in accelerated asylum procedures to understand their rights, seek legal counsel and gather supporting evidence for their asylum claims, hindering the disclosure of specific needs. Italy's SAR rules, which limit the ports where rescued people can be disembarked, exacerbate humanitarian needs, as people rescued at sea, many of whom are shipwreck survivors, experience longer delays before they can receive urgently needed assistance and protection.

At the northern border, Trieste has become not just a transit point, but increasingly a destination for people seeking international protection in Italy and for those returning after secondary movements within the EU.¹¹ Yet asylum seekers in the city often face significant barriers, including prolonged waiting times and discretionary practices—such as informal phone checks and requests for unnecessary documents by authorities—that leave them in legal limbo for weeks unable to register for asylum and access reception facilities. As a result they are dependent on civil society organizations to meet their basic needs.

Given these challenges at the initial registration phase, the implementation of the Pact's border provisions raises additional concerns with regard to vulnerability screening and accelerated border

procedures. The new border procedure under the Pact, for example, will be mandatory for asylum seekers from countries with an EU-wide protection recognition rate below 20 percent.¹² This will include some of the main nationalities of people applying for asylum in Italy—such as Bangladesh and Peru. The failure to properly identify vulnerabilities will have serious consequences, as asylum seekers will be channelled into border procedures that impose an accelerated 12-week timeframe for the asylum procedure and subject them to potential administrative detention.¹³ While the Pact's Screening Regulation prioritizes the identification of specific needs, Article 12's strict deadlines—just seven days for those arriving at external borders and only three days for those intercepted inland—are inconsistent with the time people often require to feel safe enough to disclose sensitive aspects of their experiences, such as those involving gender-based violence or persecution that members of the LGBTIQ+ community suffer. At the same time, the new obligations to carry out preliminary health and vulnerability checks will require Italy to fundamentally restructure its current system for managing access to its territory. Adequate facilities have not yet been established at sea and land borders to carry out screenings and border procedures. These screenings will also require the involvement of qualified medical staff and “specialized authorities trained for this purpose,” who are not currently engaged in pre-screening practices at either sea or land borders. Effective, human-rights-based implementation of the Pact's provisions depends on the establishment of functioning independent monitoring mechanisms to safeguard fundamental rights, but such mechanisms are not yet in place in Italy and must be established to ensure compliance with EU law.¹⁴

11 From April to June 2025, IRC Italy's program in Trieste at the Italian-Slovenian border reached 1,977 newly arrived people. Of those supported, 54 percent expressed their intention to seek asylum in Italy. Notably, 41 percent of Afghans now consider Trieste and Italy their final destination.

12 The border procedure will be optional in many cases but will be mandatory for applicants who: have misled authorities or destroyed documents; are from a country with a protection rate lower than 20 percent; or pose a security threat (Article 46 of the Asylum Procedure Regulation).

13 As per Articles 20-23 of the Asylum Procedure Regulation, people with specific needs should not be funnelled into accelerated border procedures.

14 See Article 10 of the Screening Regulation; Article 43 of the Asylum Procedure Regulation.



Box 3: Accelerated asylum procedures

Italian law includes accelerated asylum procedures, under which the Territorial Commissions that assess asylum cases are required to make decisions within nine days from the registration of an asylum application, leaving asylum seekers with an extremely limited amount of time to understand the process, consult with legal counsel, and prepare their cases. These shortened procedures are applicable, for example, to people held in administrative detention and to people from “safe countries of origin” who apply for asylum in a border or transit zone.¹⁵ This latter is the accelerated border procedure that requires Territorial Commissions to adopt a decision within seven days of the registration of an asylum application. Forcing Territorial Commissions to conduct interviews and issue decisions under extremely tight deadlines results in less thorough assessments of claims, limited time to obtain legal counsel and identify vulnerabilities, and inconsistent practices and uneven protection standards across different regions. A growing number of applicants—particularly from countries deemed “safe” such as Bangladesh, Peru, and Tunisia—are being channelled into accelerated procedures. People with specific needs and vulnerabilities cannot be channelled into accelerated procedures and have the right to specific procedural guarantees and adequate support and reception conditions, which makes the pre-screening phase even more crucial to safeguard the rights of the most vulnerable individuals arriving at Europe’s shores.¹⁶

A.4) Gaps in access to reception

Under EU law asylum seekers are entitled to reception support immediately upon expressing their intention to seek international protection. In Italy, reception for asylum seekers and refugees is structured into a two-tiered system: Extraordinary Reception Centers (*Centri di Accoglienza Straordinaria*, CAS) and the Reception and Integration System (*Sistema di Accoglienza e Integrazione*, SAI). The SAI is intended to be Italy’s main reception system, offering higher standards of support, including legal assistance, psychological support, language training, and vocational programs to promote integration. In practice, however, the CAS, managed by local Prefectures, have become the dominant model for asylum seekers due to the lack of long-term

reception planning. This shift has resulted in most asylum seekers being hosted in CAS facilities with uneven standards and only limited access to the services guaranteed in the SAI network.

IRC staff have observed that access to basic needs and adequate reception is compromised. Budget cuts affecting the CAS have led to reduced services, especially in psycho-social and legal support, resulting in staff shortages and limited cultural mediation. Without cultural mediation, essential needs, particularly related to health, often go unmet, and access to medical services cannot be guaranteed. This severely undermines the ability to identify and support people with specific vulnerabilities, which is further obstructed by inadequate screening and weak coordination among the different actors involved.

15 Borders and transit areas are those identified by a Ministerial Decree of 5 August 2019 and include: areas in the provinces of Trieste and Gorizia; the provinces of Crotone, Cosenza, Matera, Lecce, Brindisi; two areas in Sicily, one including the Provinces of Caltanissetta, Ragusa, Syracuse, Catania, Messina, the other including Trapani and Agrigento Provinces; and the Metropolitan city area of Cagliari (South Sardinia).

16 This makes the “[Vademecum on Vulnerabilities](#)” even more relevant. Adopted by the Ministry of Interior in close cooperation with European Agencies and International Organizations (such as UNHCR, IOM, UNICEF), this practical tool promotes coordination among actors involved in identification and support of people with specific needs to ensure their early identification, starting from the moment of rescue at sea and continuing through screening procedures in the hotspots and subsequent stages of the asylum and reception process.

The obligation to provide reception to asylum seekers immediately upon expressing their intention to seek international protection is not being consistently upheld in Trieste. In 2024, one-third of the people supported by IRC Italy belonged to vulnerable groups—such as unaccompanied children, families, and single women—many of whom were documented sleeping outdoors for days, exposed to serious risks of violence and exploitation. In mid-2024, reception practices improved as around 60 people per week were transferred to other cities in Italy with more reception capacity. However, since June 2025 this practice has sharply slowed, with transfers reduced by half during the summer, when the number of people arriving typically increases. The situation has been exacerbated by Law No. 187/2024, which prioritizes reception of people rescued at sea, while those arriving by land, through autonomous landings, or under Dublin transfers are admitted only if non-reserved spaces are available. As of December 2025, Trieste's reception system is once again overwhelmed. Despite calls to action raised by civil society over years, no effective structural planning and solutions have been implemented.

B) DELIVERING A TIMELY, FAIR ASYLUM PROCESS

Entering the asylum procedure represents a crucial turning point for people forced to flee their homes as they seek to rebuild their lives in safety. Italy has a well-established asylum system; however, asylum seekers continue to face significant barriers and delays to register and formalize their applications for asylum with local authorities, including the lack of consistent

practices across regions. IRC Italy monitors access to and implementation of the asylum procedure across Italy through protection monitoring as well as case management and referrals, in close collaboration with civil society organizations and other stakeholders.

B.1) Re-enforcing a solid asylum system under political pressure

Italy has worked to increase its asylum processing capacity and reduce the backlog of applications, including with support from EU¹⁷ and UN agencies. Since 2017, the asylum system has been strengthened and improved through reform of the Territorial Commissions and creation of specialized Immigration Court Sections, helping judges build expertise in this area. Italian asylum authorities have also developed referral mechanisms within the asylum procedure to quickly identify and assist people with specific needs, such as victims of trafficking or gender-based violence. More broadly, the asylum ecosystem—including NGOs, reception centers, and other stakeholders—has strengthened its capacity to support vulnerable applicants and improved local-level communication to provide support.

The Italian asylum system has long been under significant political pressure. It has been severely impacted by frequent legislation on asylum and migration, including five decree-laws adopted since 2023,¹⁸ introducing major reforms to asylum seekers' and refugees' rights, speeding up asylum procedures and reducing safeguards for applicants. These measures include the expansion of the list of countries of origin that Italy considers "safe," the extension of the scope of accelerated procedures,¹⁹ and provisions concerning the implicit withdrawal of asylum applications.²⁰

17 In particular, the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) deployed its staff to support the registration, administrative and judiciary stages of the asylum process. See the External evaluation of the EUAA-Italy operational plan 2022-2024.

18 Decree-Law No. 1/2023; Decree-Law No. 20/2023; Decree-Law No. 133/2023; Decree-Law No. 145/2024; and Decree-Law No. 158/2024.

19 For instance, the 2024 accelerated procedure is also applied to applications submitted—without a justified reason—more than 90 days after an applicant's "irregular entry" or the beginning of their "irregular stay." In these specific cases, applicants are not granted access to reception measures. Decree-Law No. 145/2024, converted into Law No. 187/2024 introduced this provision into Article 28-bis paragraph 2, letter e-bis, Legislative Decree No. 25/2008.

20 This applies if a person: (a) leaves a reception center without justification, or escapes from a hotspot or immigration detention center before



B.2) Continued delays and barriers to formalize applications

Access to the asylum registration procedure remains a critical challenge across the country. Under Italian and EU law, authorities are required to register asylum applications as soon as possible after an individual has expressed their intent to seek asylum, and within a maximum of 3 to 16 working days. Yet, as IRC Italy previously [found](#) in an April 2024 report on access to the asylum procedure, this legal obligation continues to be rarely met.

In major cities such as Milan, Rome, and Trieste, asylum seekers often manage to file their applications only after several weeks, sometimes even [months](#) of attempts with local authorities. Practices vary widely: Milan has experimented with digitalizing the procedure, while in Rome and Turin applicants must wait in long lines outside Police Headquarters from early morning. Admission criteria to enter Immigration Offices are often unclear and, on certain days, even seem to depend on discretionary decisions based on the nationality of the applicant. In Trieste, asylum seekers face systemic barriers when trying to access the Police Headquarters to register their asylum applications. They report troubling practices not required under Italian law, including demands for identity documents and proof of an address as a condition to apply for asylum, requirements to file reports when documents are missing, and informal phone checks conducted without interpretation or proper records. Many are [turned away without explanation](#), sometimes facing verbal intimidation at the entrance of the Police Headquarters' Immigration Office. These practices have led to discriminatory outcomes that local courts have [sanctioned](#) in class-action rulings.

The severe understaffing of Immigration Offices and lack of cultural mediators also contributes significantly to the challenges asylum seekers face in registering their asylum application. This shortage makes it challenging for governmental authorities to properly inform asylum seekers and ensure they understand the procedure, and in some cases, requires civil society organizations and local communities to step in to fill this gap.

their asylum interview; or (b) fails to attend their asylum interview after being properly notified. In such cases, authorities can close the case and issue a decision. Article 23-bis, [Legislative Decree No. 25/2008](#).

5. Strengthening safe pathways and integration solutions in Italy

In recent years, Italy has taken important first steps to pilot new initiatives to create and implement complementary pathways for refugees and to extend residency options for some people displaced from Ukraine with temporary protections. The government should further strengthen and expand these initiatives to provide safe alternatives to dangerous migration routes and more opportunities for long-term status and inclusion. These welcome policies, however, do not and cannot justify restrictions on the fundamental right to seek asylum.

Safe pathways to protection, tools designed to relocate people from a place where they are at risk to another country of relative safety where they can begin to recover and rebuild their lives, include humanitarian corridors, education and labor migration pathway, and sponsorship models. These pathways not only give people a chance to escape persecution and be welcomed into their new communities, but can also alleviate pressure on major refugee-hosting countries and provide a crucial alternative to dangerous journeys. Evidence shows that when people have access to safe pathways, they overwhelmingly choose them over irregular migration routes. The Pact provides a reinforced framework for cooperation on safe pathways through the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation and Union Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Framework, but, to date, a comprehensive, coordinated approach to develop these routes is still largely missing. IRC Italy urges the Italian government to take additional steps to formalize and expand safe pathways for more refugees.

The historic activation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) has provided protection in Italy to hundreds of thousands of people displaced from Ukraine. But now, with the TPD winding down in

March 2027, most are without a path to more permanent residency and integration solutions. The government took an important step in 2024 to open opportunities for work-based residency for people with TPD permits, but additional durable options for displaced Ukrainians in Italy are needed.

Recommendations for the Italian government

- Expand safe routes—without placing limitations on the right to seek asylum—so that people fleeing persecution and conflict are not forced to risk their lives on increasingly dangerous journeys in search of protection.
- Strengthen humanitarian corridors by establishing an institutionalized framework with transparent procedures and selection criteria, moving beyond ad hoc agreements.
- Scale up safe complementary pathways, including through education and labor schemes and sponsorship models, to provide protection to refugees and support sectors facing critical labor gaps;
- Facilitate access to longer-term protections for people displaced from Ukraine by making available pathways to other residence permit types, in addition to work permits, adopting flexible interpretation of eligibility criteria that takes into account the circumstances of individuals with temporary protection, ensuring individuals wishing to apply for asylum are notified of and have an opportunity to exercise their right to do so before temporary protections are terminated, and developing other durable integration pathways.
- Invest, in line with the Union Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Framework, in the establishment of a refugee resettlement and integration process with appropriate personnel in order to formalize existing ad hoc procedures.



A) INNOVATING PATHWAYS TO SAFETY: GOOD PRACTICES AMONG SYSTEMIC ISSUES

As the number of people forced to take dangerous journeys continues to rise, safe pathways are a key tool to ensure protection to those fleeing conflict, reduce the number of deaths at sea and prevent people from being exposed to violence and exploitation. Italy has launched several pilot programs primarily aimed at addressing urgent humanitarian needs of displaced people and creating pathways for refugees to enter the country to pursue educational and work-related opportunities. Indeed, Italy has become a global pioneer in labor migration channels for refugees. These models provide pathways to safety for displaced people while also helping to address Italy's ongoing labor needs that have not been addressed by the so-called "Flows Decree" ("Decreto Flussi") system.²¹ Individuals using IRC's [Refugee.Info](#) platform, including those outside of Italy, regularly [ask](#) about options to obtain [work visas](#) in Italy, and [information on pathways](#) to come to Italy (visa procedures, humanitarian corridors, resettlement and family reunification procedures, among others). This rising trend highlights both the lack of clear information on legal entry options and the urgent demand for accessible, protection-sensitive pathways to Europe.

To provide protection and opportunity for displaced people while also supporting Italy's national interests, the Italian government should formalize, expand and strengthen these and other safe pathways for refugees. As part of a comprehensive approach to safe pathways, the Italian government should also consider a formalized refugee resettlement program. The Pact's EU Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Framework should also be utilized to establish a more uniform and person-centered approach to resettlement to Europe. The

regulation sets common criteria for selecting people in need of international protection, with a focus on the most vulnerable and by establishing an annual EU resettlement plan.

[Humanitarian corridors](#) are safe pathways aimed at facilitating the entry to Italy of particularly vulnerable people, including single mothers with children, victims of human trafficking, and people with disabilities or medical conditions. In Italy, they are implemented through private sponsorship projects promoted by Italian faith-based and civil society organizations, in collaboration with the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Interior. Since the beginning of the implementation of the program in February 2015, humanitarian corridors enabled approximately [4,000 people](#) from Ethiopia, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya Niger and Pakistan to arrive in Italy, including [797 refugees](#) in 2024.

Humanitarian corridors operate through a structured, multi-phase process. Vulnerable individuals are identified in countries of first asylum and then transferred safely to Italy, where involved organizations provide crucial support for reception and long-term social inclusion. When people arrive in Italy through humanitarian corridors, they can apply for asylum. In many cases, their applications are considered "manifestly founded," which means they are given priority and their refugee status is recognized faster. Humanitarian corridors are not established under national law but through Memoranda of Understanding²² between Italian institutions and implementing organizations. With no official application procedure and non-public selection criteria, they remain dependent on political will and ad hoc agreements, underscoring the need for greater transparency and a stronger, institutionalized framework.

Italy has also explored community-based approaches to refugee protection, most notably

21 The "Flows Decree" is the only channel for labour migration to Italy. It is a Prime Minister's Decree by which the Italian government establishes annual or triennial quotas for non-EU citizens who can enter Italy for employment, self-employment, or seasonal work (Article 21, Legislative-Decree No. 286/1998).

22 See e.g. the [Memorandum of Understanding for the implementation of the humanitarian corridors/evacuations project for Afghanistan](#).



through [community sponsorship programs](#). Through these initiatives, individuals or groups provide financial, emotional, and practical support to help refugees settle and integrate in the receiving country. Community sponsorship is based on shared responsibility: while the government and civil society organizations oversee the process, local communities play a direct role in offering refugees the resources and support they need to rebuild their lives and fully participate in their new society. In this area, IRC Italy participates in the [GROWTH project](#), which works across Italy, Ireland, and Germany to expand sponsorship opportunities. The project develops strategies to recruit and retain sponsors, tests innovations to scale up community involvement, and strengthens program capacity to respond to crises. By addressing barriers and identifying what motivates individuals and groups to engage, GROWTH aims to unlock the significant untapped potential of European communities to welcome refugees.

Beyond humanitarian corridors and community-based initiatives, Italy has also developed safe complementary pathways through education and labour schemes. In the field of education, the [University Corridors for Refugees](#) initiative - led by UNHCR in partnership with Italian universities and civil society organizations - provides scholarships and tailored support, allowing refugee students from countries of first asylum to enroll in Italian universities and pursue master's degrees. These pioneering initiatives not only offer refugees a dignified way to rebuild their lives but also contribute to addressing Italy's workforce shortages. In the field of work, the [Labour Corridors for Refugees](#) program facilitates the recruitment and training of skilled refugees in third countries for regular entry into the Italian labor market. Launched in June 2025, this program will enable 70 refugees arriving via Colombia, Egypt, Uganda, and Jordan to reach Italy and work in different sectors.

Despite the set-up of programs aimed at addressing urgent humanitarian needs of displaced people and pathways for refugees to

enter the country to pursue educational and work-related opportunities, Italy's broader labor migration system still faces major challenges. The so-called "Flows Decree" often fails to meet the real needs of the labor market or to guarantee decent working conditions. Between 2023 and 2025, the government authorized 452,000 entries into the Italian labor market, and for 2026–2028 has approved an [additional 500,000](#). Yet the system has relied on a "Click Day," an outdated online application process where quotas have filled within minutes but have resulted in very low levels of job contracts finalized and residence permits issued. In 2024, less than [8 percent](#) of the quota spots were ultimately utilized to fill a job through the system. For the 2025 "Click Day," [Refugee.Info](#) users [reported](#) to IRC Italy that they were defrauded or were left without support upon arrival, and left exposed to serious risks of [labor exploitation and trafficking](#).

B) MOVING TOWARD A COORDINATED TRANSITION FROM TEMPORARY PROTECTION TO RIGHTS-BASED, LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS

As of July 2025, nearly [170,000](#) people displaced from Ukraine were legally residing and working in Italy under the TPD. With the TPD now set to expire in March 2027, they face an uncertain future if other long-term solutions are not adopted. In 2024, the government [authorized](#) holders of temporary protection permits to apply for [employment-based residence permits](#). However, data on the number of TPD holders who have obtained these permits has not been released, and many people displaced from Ukraine - the majority of whom are women, families and unaccompanied children - may not be eligible to benefit from this offer. Protection-based, longer-term solutions are needed to avoid those legally residing in Italy becoming undocumented or overwhelming the asylum system with applications.





2024 - Milan, Italy. Tetiana is from the Poltava region and had to flee Ukraine with her two kids when the war escalated. Tetiana has been dancing professionally for all her life. When she found out that IRC was looking for a dance teacher, she applied for the job and became an incentive worker teaching other refugees to dance in the Women's Center in Milano.

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Photo: Tamara Kiptenko for the IRC

Italy adopted the TPD in 2003. It establishes a framework for granting rapid, temporary residency to displaced people without the need for asylum applications. Since its activation following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 through June 2025, Italy's swiftly-adopted registration system has provided protection to over 200,000 people displaced from Ukraine.

Compared to the lengthy asylum procedure, the temporary protection framework has allowed for quick registration at Police Headquarters and the issuance of a residence permit application receipt enabling immediate access to basic rights such as healthcare, while awaiting the official permit. Beneficiaries have also been granted access to reception measures and the labor market from the moment their application was formally registered. This efficient system helped overcome delays that

would otherwise hinder access to essential services. However, it is this in stark contrast as to how asylum seekers with other nationalities are being welcomed.

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, IRC Italy has launched tailored interventions to address the urgent needs of displaced people, with a particular focus on women, children, and individuals with specific vulnerabilities. These included legal assistance, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), and the establishment of Women and Girls Safe Spaces (WGSS) in Milan, Trieste, Turin, and Rome, enabling survivors of gender-based violence to disclose their experiences and access specialized services. This experience has highlighted a number of pressing protection concerns. Psychological distress,

particularly among adolescents, has emerged as a key challenge. The trauma of displacement is compounded by procedural delays and social isolation, leading to heightened risks of long-term mental health consequences. Women face specific risks of gender-based violence, including intimate partner violence, which is exacerbated by economic dependence on perpetrators and limited familiarity with Italy's protection systems. Precarious labor conditions further expose displaced people to exploitation, with many working without contracts and therefore vulnerable to low pay, long hours, and unsafe conditions, often without awareness of their rights, and mark a challenge for TPD holders to convert their permits to more permanent, employment-based residency. In addition, structural barriers to inclusion, such as the requirement of official residency to access certain public services, systematically disadvantage newly arrived people and undermine prospects for durable solutions.

The implementation of the TPD has played a crucial role in ensuring immediate protection and easing pressure on asylum systems; however, a coordinated and forward-looking approach is now essential to move beyond emergency measures. For Italy, this means building pathways toward long-term solutions. The possibility to convert temporary protection permits into work permits is a positive first step in this direction. Moving forward, Italy should develop inclusive residency frameworks that reflect the integration of displaced people into society, while ensuring that new EU mechanisms for crisis response do not undermine safeguards for the most vulnerable.



6. Conclusions

This report illustrates how **current and forthcoming migration and asylum policies risk exacerbating the vulnerability of people seeking protection in Italy**, a key entry point to Europe. Practices of externalization and the creation of barriers at borders not only restrict access to protection but also render people on the move increasingly invisible. Their journeys are becoming more dangerous, hidden, and precarious, and many are at risk of being trapped in legal limbo even outside Italian territory or while accommodated in “hotspots” with limited access to services. Others experience a state of limbo due to prolonged delays in registering their asylum applications. This has a cascading effect, limiting the ability of asylum seekers to enjoy rights they are entitled to, such as access to work and safe reception measures. These delays also heighten their exposure to exploitation and social marginalization.

Time is a decisive factor for effective protection, and it must align with the experiences and needs of asylum seekers and refugees. However, the practices and policies described in this report appear to be moving in the opposite direction. Accelerated and border procedures sacrifice procedural safeguards in exchange for quick decisions, thereby hindering the possibility for asylum seekers to understand their rights and disclose vulnerabilities, undermining the quality of decision-making process and eroding the person-centered approach that once characterized the Italian system. The current trend towards speed and quantity across Europe jeopardizes fairness, individual assessment, and the capacity of the asylum system to respond to complex needs of those seeking safety and protection. At the same time, delays and barriers in accessing the asylum procedure leave people stuck in an asylum vacuum, without proper documentation, work or shelter, caught in a state of limbo that can last for

up to months. This waiting period puts people in a vulnerable and uncertain position, highlighting the pressing need for more efficient and compassionate procedures to ensure timely registration and support.

In light of the upcoming implementation of the Pact, navigating this challenging context requires a boost in the capacity of the **asylum system in Italy to provide accurate, timely, and accessible information to those seeking protection**. The majority of people seeking protection in Italy have less visible vulnerabilities, such as gender-based violence, trafficking, or mental health conditions. Identifying, informing, and referring individuals with these specific needs requires a person-centered approach. This requires trained personnel, adequate resources, and established safe referral mechanisms to specialized services.

A paradigm shift from building barriers to creating safe pathways is needed. Safe routes to Italy and other parts of Europe have to be further fostered and implemented. This would allow for the full enjoyment of the rights to asylum and prevent dangerous journeys and severe human rights violations, particularly for the most vulnerable. Once in Italy, the next step of the journey requires strengthening the asylum system's ability to balance the pressure for speed and quantity with effective protection. This involves collaborating with civil society organizations and communities. A balanced approach would allow Italy and Europe to respect their human rights commitments and build a system that is fair and sustainable. For Italy, introducing and expanding safe pathways is also in the national interest: it contributes to ensuring that migration takes place through orderly, humane and manageable processes, allowing national and local authorities to ease pressure on emergency systems and enable better planning, reception, and integration policies.

The IRC Italy's evidence-based approach, formulated through our direct presence at the borders, provides the basis for these considerations. We witness arrivals, identify the most vulnerable, and deliver assistance in partnership with public authorities, international organizations and civil society organizations. IRC's experience serves as the basis for and shapes our monitoring activities, advocacy efforts, and broader work to strengthen the system by addressing protection gaps. Based on the report's findings, it is clear that **in the coming years, the Italian asylum system must be supported, strengthened, and monitored to keep protection accessible and effective.**



FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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