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A Case of Bottom-Up, Slow, and Ongoing Political Integration? Naturalised Albanians in Italy

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Abstract

Based on fieldwork conducted with naturalised Albanian immigrants and key informants in the Italian city of Padua, this paper analyses the political integration of immigrants and their voting post-naturalisation. Departing from the predominantly quantitative research on this topic, the paper establishes through qualitative methods a link between memories of past political socialisation in the country of origin, the mode of integration, in particular the role of stigma, and immigrants' voting patterns. Even though previous research has pointed to common trends of political behaviour and voting of ethnic *groups*, we find that political integration and voting are closely linked to participants' personal biographies and social positioning in the country of immigration, political socialisation in and memories of life in the country of origin, and social and cultural capital. This last factor, in particular, played an important role in dissociating voting preferences from immigrant identity and stigma. These different political orientations appear to be furthermore affected by the 'stigma management' and its different outcomes for immigrants of an otherwise heavily stigmatised group. Thus, those voting for right-wing parties were more focused on their personal status in the country of residence, while those opting for left-wing political orientations were more considerate of their immigrant origin and the collective interests of minorities. The younger and more highly skilled, in turn, act more as 'objective' political subjects uninfluenced by their immigrant origins.

Keywords

political integration, citizenship, stigma, voting, Albanian immigrants, Padua

Introduction

Referring to analytical frameworks deriving from different disciplines, this paper seeks to study the political integration of naturalised immigrants living in Padua, Italy. Our focus is on the motivations behind voting preferences of naturalised Albanian-origin migrants, who can be considered as a highly stigmatised group in Italy (King and Mai 2008; Romania 2004). To date, in line with research on immigration in Italy more generally, no attention has been given to the political participation, mobilisation and representation of Albanians in the post-citizenship era.¹ We therefore investigate how Albanians position themselves as members of the political community after having obtained the Italian citizenship, by looking at the relations between political positioning and 'identity work'² (Snow and Anderson 1987) – in particular 'stigma management' (Hollander and Einwohner 2004; O'Brien 2011).

Offering an explorative study on political integration of naturalised Albanians, we first describe how they perceive and experience citizenship and associated political rights, and how these two dimensions intersect with the elaboration of stigma. In doing so we will resort to qualitative

¹ We use the term post-citizenship here to underline that our main target group participated in the research after obtaining Italian citizenship, hence we focus also on the relations between legal status and belonging/social positioning as well as political integration.

² Identity work refers to a range of activities individuals engage to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of their self-concept. It may imply a number of activities: (a) procurement or arrangement of physical settings and props; (b) cosmetic face-work or the arrangement of personal appearance; (c) selective association with other individuals and groups; and (d) verbal construction and assertion of personal identities (Snow and Anderson 1987).

methodologies – a different approach to the study of political participation and affiliations, which are mainly studied through quantitative instruments (de Rooij 2012). The main questions which this paper seeks to answer are:

- How do naturalised Albanians elaborate their political positioning and their voting preferences?
- Is political integration affected by the mode of integration of an immigrant group?
- How do they manage their political integration post-naturalisation in view of their stigmatised identities?
- Is stigma management connected to political positioning and voting, and vice versa, and how?
- Does past political socialisation in the country of origin influence political integration and voting behaviours?

This paper responds to calls by scholars both in North America and Western Europe to look at other aspects of incorporation/integration, such as feeling at home, access to the political arena (Mollenkopf 2013: 114-116) and at how citizenship impacts on the political views of migrants and on their political participation (Martiniello 2006: 64). We explore the interconnections between integration and citizenship, stigma management and voting preferences, enriching existing scholarship on the stigma management strategies of long-term immigrants. Considering the role of locality and regionalism in Italy in terms of integration policies, and of the strategies of immigrants and minorities (Perocco 2003), we focus on Padua, a city in the north-east of Italy, in the Veneto region, acknowledging at the same time the need for more research on the topic. In Padua almost the entire municipal campaign of 2014 was concentrated on the perceived security issues posed by immigrants (Mantovan and Ostanel 2015). For ‘native’ Italian voters, the Lega Nord (Northern League) and Movimento Cinque Stelle³ appeared as unique alternatives in 2014, compared to a struggling centre-left (Calise 2010) in relation to two priority issues: the economic crisis and the ‘emergency’ in relation to refugees arriving in Sicily and on the southern shores of Italy.

Through a multi-scalar (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2009) and intersectional perspective (Crenshaw 1989; Yuval-Davis 2011), we focus on the city context, by analysing the motivations, perceptions and behaviours of our participants, which are embedded in more than one dimension: local, regional, national, transnational and global. The paper is based on fieldwork conducted with ‘ordinary’⁴ immigrants and few key actors in Padua, while at country level we had the opportunity to

³ Up until recently Berlusconi – the leader of the right-wing populist party Forza Italia – dominated the political arena, and his opposition, the centre-left mainly, has been, for the most part, divided and ineffective. Berlusconi guided different coalition governments also with the Lega Nord, from 1994-2011, with some interruptions in between. After a technical, no-party government, was appointed by the president during 2011-2013, two centre-left governments, without elections, governed the country. When the primary elections of the Partito Democratico (Democratic Party) were won by Matteo Renzi, he was appointed prime minister in early 2014. He represents a controversial personality who is both appreciated and hated by Italians (Diamanti et al. 2015). In this political landscape in 2005 grew a new political movement led by the Italian comedian Beppe Grillo, called Movimento 5 Stelle – 5 Stars Movement, which is growing and mobilising people mainly through the online forum. Also Lega Nord recently has a young leader, Matteo Salvini. All the above-mentioned parties and movements tend to reproduce in a certain way the Berlusconi model, which Calise (2010) has called the ‘personalisation of politics’, supported by a daily and constant presence in both the traditional and new media. Renzi is the leader of the country and his appointment was in a certain way legitimised by the May 2014 elections for the European Parliament, won by the Partito Democratico. To know more on these data: <http://www.repubblica.it/static/speciale/2014/elezioni/europee/italia.html>

⁴ We use this term to differentiate those who are visibly involved in politics (community leaders, politicians) and those who are not.

meet several Italian and Albanian political leaders, in order to have wider and multiple understandings on the processes Italian society is undergoing concerning the political participation and representation of immigrants. The focus was both on individuals (for the main target group), and associations (for key actors).

Research on other countries and minorities in Northern Europe with a long tradition of immigration (Fenema and Tillie 2001; Jacobs et al. 2004; Morales and Giugni 2010; Togeby 1999) has linked the study of political integration of immigrants to their social capital and to civic infrastructures (Michon and Vermeulen 2013); but a similar methodology would be difficult to apply to Italy and Albanians. This is because, until recently, Albanian associations in Italy have not played a crucial role in the political mobilisation of this minority, and neither have they acted structurally and in a well-organised manner as vehicles for claiming a reformulation of social and symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Molnar 2002) in terms of access to political rights. This can be explained as a consequence of a hostile and unfavourable political opportunity structure (POS) in Italy (Cinalli et al. 2010; Pilati 2010). It is also interconnected to the fact that, as for other ethnic minorities, for their political mobilisation and in order to gain legitimisation, Albanians must mainly act through Italian associations (Lotto 2015). Additionally, as our research illustrates, for this stigmatised minority the first steps toward political integration were first and foremost focused on *the rehabilitation of their stigmatised identity*, which they achieved by being invisible in the political and public space.

The sections that follow will concern first the theoretical frameworks on which this study is based; then the methodology will be explained. In the central parts of the paper, we present and analyse our main findings, followed by a concluding discussion.

Framing immigrants' political integration

The scholarship on *political incorporation* and on the *integration* of immigrants has been focus of research in different disciplines and often is approached in strict connection to citizenship.⁵ Nonetheless, while in the United States systematic studies on immigrants' political incorporation⁶ started in the late 1990s (Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001), in the European context the issue has become a crucial one only recently (Bloemraad and Schönwälder 2013; Martiniello 2006). Pizzorno (1966: 236) defines political participation as actions of solidarity with others that aim to change or maintain the dominant structure. Solidarity is considered a distinctive feature of Pizzorno's contribution, whereas Cotta (1979) focuses on the meaning of *participation* itself; accordingly, participation has, not only in the political domain, two semantic attributes: to participate as *taking part* in a given act/process, and to participate as *being part* of an organisation, group or community.

Nonetheless, a first question that arises is how we can encapsulate the political integration of immigrants. In North America, political incorporation has been considered as one of the dimensions of citizenship (Bloemraad 2006) or as encompassing it (Bueker 2005). Bloemraad et al. (2008: 154) define political incorporation as one of the four dimensions of citizenship, while citizenship is described as a form of membership in a political and geographic community with four dimensions:

⁵ The term 'incorporation' is a common concept in North America, used interchangeably with integration. We prefer the term integration as Penninx and Garcés-Masareñas (2016) have defined it; as a process, rather than a situation, based on a two-way interaction between immigrants and the receiving society. Nevertheless in this paper we use both terms as used by the original authors.

⁶ In this paper we use the term immigrants even if we reject its attributed sense of permanent settlement that may not apply to all immigrants, and even if it reduces the different forms, status, and social stratification that people involved in migratory experiences may enact.

legal status, rights, political and other forms of participation in society, and a sense of belonging. Conversely, Bueker (2005) considers citizenship as one dimension of political incorporation among others such as voting. Voting represents one of the most fundamental political acts in a democracy (Putnam 2000), and more importantly it plays a crucial role in realising political incorporation since it allows ‘migrant groups to become political communities, that may in this way influence the political system, gain representation and influence the redistribution of resources’ (Bueker 2005: 107).

Therefore, conceptualisations and operationalisations of political integration differ significantly. Segura (2013: 265-266) maintains that there is an ongoing process of political incorporation when three conditions are met: 1) immigrants feel they belong to the (American) polity and see politics as a way to achieve goals; 2) they must have sufficient cognitive and economic resources to have political preferences; 3) there is no hostility towards the political engagement of immigrants in politics. Ramakrishnan and Espenshade (2001: 892) conducted in the United States the first national systematic study on immigrants’ political participation. Their results do not confirm traditional assimilationist theories, which explain adaptation as a straight-line process. On the contrary, they found that first-generation migrants were well integrated into social and political institutions. For the European context, Martiniello (2005: 2) provides quite a different definition of political integration:

In a broad sense, political integration has four dimensions. The first dimension refers to the rights granted to immigrants by the host society. One could say that the more political rights they enjoy, the better integrated they become. The second dimension is their identification with the host society. The more immigrants identify with the host society, the better their political integration. The third dimension refers to the adoption of democratic norms and values by the immigrants, which is often presented as a necessary condition for political integration. Finally, immigrants’ political integration involves political participation, mobilization and representation.

The previous definitions, in particular by Bloemraad et al. (2008) and Segura (2013), have in common with Martiniello’s definition the fact that political integration is seen as a social process, as the result of the interaction between structure and agency which, in a circular way, not only influences to some degree the structure again, but at the same time shapes other dimensions at the individual and group level, such as feelings of belongings (for Bloemraad and Segura), and identification (for Martiniello). Nevertheless, as we discuss further in the next sections, Martiniello’s definition seems controversial, in particular concerning the third dimension: the adoption of democratic norms and values by immigrants.

Impact of mode of integration and stigma on voting preferences

The scholarship on stigma and stigma management has a long-lasting tradition within social sciences (Link and Phelan 2001). After the seminal work of Goffman (1963), studies on stigma spread dramatically during the 1980s and the 1990s, even though not always was Goffman’s definition taken into consideration, in particular its relational dimension between an attribute and a stereotype.

Proposing the first revisited definition of this concept, Link and Phelan (2001) maintain that there is stigmatisation when the following five interrelated ‘components’ are co-present: labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination. At the same time, ‘stigma management’ scholarship has developed (Hollander and Einwohner 2004; Killian and Johnson 2006), even though there are definitions of de-stigmatisation strategies. Hollander and Einwohner (2004), for instance, in re-conceptualising *resistance* as an analytical concept, consider also *passing*⁷ as a ‘covert resistance’ strategy to cope with stigma since it has the function to protect the stigmatised group. *Passing* (or mimicry) was indeed a strategy for Albanians in Italy between 1991-2005 (Romania 2004; also see King and Mai 2009) and in Greece (Vogel and Trindafyllidou 2005). This paper therefore builds also on de-stigmatisation scholarship and aims to respond to Lamont and Mizrachi’s (2011) call for more research on ‘stigma management strategies’ from the worlds of stigmatised individuals/groups, and illuminates scholarship, mainly developed in the US (Welburn and Pittman 2012), which explores how individual de-stigmatisation strategies may forge social boundaries, group belongingness and voting behaviour.

A long tradition of research adopting political science methods on the study of voting has followed in the European context; for example, Togeby (1999) in Denmark; and Fenemma and Tillie (1999) on Moroccans, Surinamese, Antilleans and Turks in Amsterdam. Recently de Rooji (2012) explored the patterns of political participation of the immigrant-origin population in comparison to native population across Western Europe. One of the limits these approaches present is the fact that they look at participation ex-post; moreover, they do not say what the motivations behind political preferences are and how naturalised migrants elaborate them.

In this paper we focus on de-stigmatising strategies, sidelining the origins of stigma or stigmatisation processes, since a substantial literature has already examined stigmatisation and its effects (Phelan and Link 2001). For Albanians in Southern Europe, and in Italy in particular, several scholars have contributed illuminating interpretations (King and Mai 2009; Vathi 2012, 2015). Our data, furthermore, develops a focus on belongingness in order to understand the non-instrumental dimension of political action. We follow Pizzorno (1966) who maintains that people act not only strategically and rationally, but also for motivations grounded in their identification traits and on feelings of belongings to a group.

Political integration and voting of immigrants in Italy

While in most Western European countries scholars started to address the immigrants’ political subjectivities in the late 1990s (Martiniello 2006; Però and Solomos 2010), in Italy the issue of the political participation, representation and mobilisation of immigrants started to be addressed only in the last decade (Boccagni 2012; Lotto 2015; Però 2007). The 1990s were characterised by protests and claims channelled mainly through Italian trade unions and associations (Però 2005; Pilati 2010);

⁷ Kanuha’s (1999) work on ‘passing’ among gays and lesbians provides another empirical example. Successful passing requires an individual to avoid making some oppositional claim that would reveal his or her identity; however, Kanuha (1999: 39) argues that such behaviour is resistant because ‘the maintenance of a false performance was for the purpose of opposing those forces that would threaten or harm them in specific social encounters’ (as cited in Hollander and Einwohner 2004: 540).

however, we notice a vacuum in both academia and society (public discourses and systematic mobilisation of migrants) until the mid-2000s (Lotto 2015), except for a few isolated cases focused on local-regional scales.⁸ Concerning the forms of political participation, some studies have focused on extra-parliamentary forms of political participation, since other forms of direct political participation, such as the active/passive right to vote, are granted only after obtaining the Italian citizenship. As a result, these studies focus mainly on mono-ethnic, mixed (Italian-immigrants) and multiethnic associations or representative bodies within the Italian constituencies, trade unions and religious associations (Lotto 2015).

At the same time, following research developed in Western Europe, scholars in Italy have increasingly focused on the institutional, discursive and organisational opportunity structures for immigrants' political integration. Political opportunity structure (POS) refers to both top-down openness for participation opportunities (Della Porta and Diani 1999), and as aperture/overture at the local and the national level with a focus on power relations and party systems in involving immigrants (Garbaye 2004). Thus the study conducted by Cinalli et al. (2010)⁹ compares the POS in nine European cities, and conceives political integration as being part of the broader discourse on integration. Elaborating an innovative conceptualisation of the opportunity structure, they disaggregate it into four levels: individual citizenship rights, group cultural rights, specific opportunities grounded at the local level, and discursive opportunities undertaken by actors in the public space. They confirm what other scholars (de Rooij 2012) have found at the EU level, namely that political participation is higher among those immigrants with higher education levels, good language proficiency and of long residence, and in those cities where the institutional and discursive opportunity structures are more open (Cinalli 2010: 418). What they found is in line with previous research that underlines the role of the POS (Koopmans 2004) as predominant in terms of immigrants' political integration, beyond the effects of personal resources.

The importance of the city is particularly salient in the Italian context since cities and different regions are characterised by distinct local identities and often differ in terms of local politics (Borket and Caponio 2010). Looking at the POS, Pilati (2010) brings a broader elaboration of the model focusing on Milan and two levels of opportunities: institutional and organisational, where the latter means affiliation to a civic organisation that acts as a *bridging actor* (Putnam 2000) and provides people with multiple resources, information, time, etc. in order to participate and make their choice. In comparison to other European cities that were part of Pilati's research, Milan¹⁰ rated among the cities with the lowest level of immigrants' political participation. Her findings could be partially representative of the Italian context due to the impact that the citizenship regime has on producing the *cleavage* 'italiani-stranieri' (Italian-foreigners), which influences significantly the participative

⁸ A few very visible examples have been the violent protests against the illegal detention and inhumane conditions within CIE – Centri di Identificazione ed Espulsione – 'identification and expulsion centres' since 2005, and at the same time the issue of the workforce exploitation within the Italian labour market. In agriculture, in particular, two really violent riots have been those of Castel Volturno, 2008, and Rosarno, 2008-2010.

⁹ Their study was part of a comparative research conducted within the 'Localmultidem' project – Multicultural Democracy and Immigrants' Social Capital in Europe: Participation, Organizational Networks and Public Policies at the Local Level. It was funded by the European Commission, with the aim to study the political and civic participation of migrants in several European cities; for Italy the research was focused on Milan. The migrants included in this study had different legal status; undocumented migrants were also included.

¹⁰ In her study Pilati (2010) compared 13 extra-electoral political lobbying acts, among three different ethnic minorities in Milan: Ecuadorians (300), Egyptians (300) and Filipinos (300). She also had an Italian control sample (300). She did not find significant disparities among the three ethnic minorities, but she did find them between Italians and immigrants. Her study was also part of the 'Localmultidem' project mentioned above.

models at the local level. In other words, the fact that important political rights such as voting and being elected are linked to citizenship leads to serious asymmetries concerning political representation and participation of the ‘natives’ and the ‘immigrants’. Indeed, in line with other research in Europe (Koopmans 2004), she stresses that citizenship regimes directly influence the POS and the political integration of immigrants.

Furthermore, she concludes that, also in terms of political integration, Italy seems to follow an ‘assimilationist model’ due to the fact that the political incorporation of immigrants takes place mainly *following* the forms and organisational modalities that predominate in the receiving society. Being affiliated to an Italian organisation means having more possibilities to undertake political action than being affiliated to ethnic or mixed organisations; in particular, Italian trade unions emerge as predominant ‘bridging actors’ to convey immigrants’ political participation and representation in Milan. Additionally, among immigrants in her sample, the delayed citizenship attainment (waiting more than 10 years) seems to influence a kind of *habitus* toward non-participation. Immigrants appear to ‘get used to not feeling members of the Italian political community and as a consequence of not feeling recognised as political actors, so they do not participate’¹¹ (Pilati 2010: 277).

Cinalli’s and Pilati’s work demonstrates two limitations: the first one concerns all those studies that, by exploring the political and discursive opportunity structure, risk engaging in ‘structural functionalism’ by ignoring the role of the actors in the political processes and the situation on the ground (Mollenkopf 2013: 113), in other words seeing only one side of the story. The second point can be extended to other quantitative studies, that by measuring participation ex-post there is an important piece missing in the picture: the *agency*,¹² or motivations and meanings that derive from everyday interactions (Boccagni 2012), and last but not least *the voice* (Hirschman 1970) of the subjects we are talking about.

Nonetheless, as in the international scholarship (Però and Solomos 2010), within Italian academia representations of immigrants as bearers of *political subjectivity* are now arising. Immigrants are not seen only as a labour force or as passive victims – views already criticised in Italy and Europe by Martiniello (2005) and Mezzadra (2006: 197), amongst others. Indeed, Lotto’s (2015) critical review on the issue of the political mobilisation of immigrants in Italy invites researchers to reject categories such as a-political, proto-political, pre-political etc. (Bertho 2009). Even though distinctive features of the Italian context remain, such as the discontinuity of migrants’ mobilisation, and their persistent need of gaining legitimisation through collaboration with Italian associations, in the last decade, new forms of mobilisation and organisation are taking place. Moreover, as she maintains, the content of claims for which immigrants mobilise, seems focused on two main issues: legal status, and the interlinked phenomena of discrimination and exclusion.

Thus, we could maintain that, following Sayad’s (1966: 10) metaphor of immigrants acting as a *mirror* that clarifies and unmask what many prefer to ignore, mobilisation claims reveal what the most urgent issues for Italian society are today, and offer at the same time arguments on *why* mobilisation for political rights has been almost absent so far in Italy.

Methodology

¹¹ Translated by the authors

¹² Sewell (1992) defines agency as the capacity of social actors to reflect on their situation, devise a strategy and act on it, in order to achieve their goals.

This paper is part of a larger study on identities, belongings and political integration of naturalised Albanians in Italy and the UK. The sample for the Italian part of the research consists of a total of 40 participants and is made up of two target groups. The first one, the ‘main target group’, consists of 26 ‘ordinary people’, by which we refer to naturalised Albanian-origin immigrants who are not visibly and politically involved in Padua. Participants of this subgroup were expected to be: first-generation migrants; holding Italian citizenship; and not involved professionally in politics. For this subgroup, interviews consisted of life stories and broadly followed an open, conversational approach.

The second target subsample consists of 14 key actors; these participants come from different cities (5 Padua, 5 Rome, 2 Treviso, 1 Florence, 1 Milan). Within this subgroup, 12 are Albanians who are visibly involved in the political life of their localities; of these, nine hold Italian citizenship. The remaining two key actors are native Italian citizens.

The choice of having a heterogeneous sample and including the visibly involved was made in order to open a window onto other localities in Italy as well as to unpack the relations among the national and the local.¹³ With these key-actor participants we conducted more focused, semi-structured interviews.

The interviews lasted from 1.5 to 3 hours. All 40 interviews were recorded, apart from one interviewee who did not agree, and then entirely transcribed. Among Albanian-origin participants, only three out of 38 preferred to talk in Italian. All the participants of the ‘ordinary people’ group are cited by pseudonyms, whereas those in the key actor’s group are referred to by their real name, except for those who preferred their anonymity to be respected. All Albanian-origin participants, both ‘ordinary’ and those ‘visibly involved’, are first-generation immigrants, except for one key actor from Florence. For all the Albanians of the sample (38), the average age was 43 years, with a range from 29 to 63, equally distributed among men and women. Following the rebirth of attention on the class positioning of migrants (Friedman 1997; Van Hear 2014), the overall sample was formed to reflect the differences within this immigrant community, without overlooking the reality that many Albanian immigrants have experienced de-skilling and downward social mobility, particularly in the early stages of their integration process (King and Mai 2008; Vathi 2015).

Padua was an interesting research context since, in May 2014, when research for this paper was conducted, important changes took place in the city. The municipal elections were won by a centre-right coalition led by Massimo Bitonci, the representative of the far-right party, the Lega Nord. This was a radical change after 10 years of a centre-left administration in the city. The Lega Nord mayor, Massimo Bitonci, immediately gave a signal in relation to immigrants’ voice and representation in the city: at the first meeting of the new town council, held on 20 June 2014, there was no seat provided for Egi Cenolli,¹⁴ the president of the Commission for the Representation of Foreign Citizens. Moreover, the Commission, appointed after the elections in 2011, was not renewed for two years, and in May 2016 this important representation body was cancelled as ‘not necessary for citizens, who may meet the Mayor personally, since he is the mayor of all citizens’, according to the words of Bitonci while justifying this political choice.

At the end of 2014 Padua had 211,210 inhabitants, of whom 33,268 were immigrants living in the city with a permit of stay (Comune di Padova 2014). Albanians are among the largest non-EU communities with 1605 residents, after Moldovans (4865), Nigerians (2653), Chinese (2345),

¹³ By visibly and not visibly involved we also mean the social processes, depicting pathways from invisibility to visibility for our social actors who progressively gain visibility as political actors in the public and political space.

¹⁴ Albanian and one of the visibly involved participants in this research.

Moroccans (2001) and Filipinos (1941). However, Albanians constitute the second largest in the last three years in terms of citizenship acquisitions, with 128 acquisitions out of a total of 785. Citizenship acquisitions at local level converge with the national-level one: in 2014 in Italy 129,887 immigrants naturalised, starting with Moroccans with 29,025 and then Albanians with 21,148 naturalisations (Caritas/Migrantes 2015).

What meanings do citizenship and political rights have for Albanians in Padua?

Italian law on citizenship, based on *ius sanguinis*, requires 10 years of continuous residence in Italy for those who apply as long-term residents, plus the administrative procedure, which takes at least two years. It has been defined as a law 20 years behind in time, considering the recent demographic changes in Italy (Caritas/Migrantes 2013); other scholars have considered it a regime of ‘ethnic citizenship’ (Pilati 2010), ‘legal familism’ (Zincone 2006), or ‘ethnic segregationism’ (Statham and Koopmans 2000).

What does it mean to our participants to get the Italian citizenship? Similarly to Colombo et al. (2009) on second-generation Albanians and others in Italy, to our first-generation Albanian immigrants, citizenship encapsulates multiple meanings and feelings, even though for many it is a ‘must’ in order to be freed of a precarious legal status. For example, Albert (aged 38), who has been an Italian citizen since 2010 and a resident in Italy for 19 years, defined himself a *clandestino* even though he held the permanent residence permit before applying for the citizenship as long-term resident. His choice, as for others, seems motivated first by the really precarious legal status immigrants experience in the country. This situation worsened after 2001 when a new immigration law, known as the Bossi-Fini Law, entered into force, and which links the permit of stay to the working contract.

Albert (male, 38): The day that I completed the 10 years for the indefinite leave to remain, I brought my application to Vojsava [Albanian cultural mediator in the city council] ... I was looking forward to it with joy and anxiety, to finally have my right. Being discriminated when you don’t have documents (i.e. citizenship)... You cannot do this, you cannot do that, you cannot buy a car, you cannot get a mortgage ... It's also true that when you have documents [i.e. the passport] you also have more... you’re legally more controlled; like everything else, it has good things and less good things, but you cannot stay as a clandestine all your life!

Citizenship emerges as an ‘award’ after a long and difficult pathway; participants see it as a formalisation of their relationship with the state, both in terms of rights and of obligations (Lister et al. 2003). Nevertheless, a common pattern of participants’ narratives was a kind of naturalisation without recognition by the Italian society. As Skender, who has been an Italian citizen since 2004 and a resident since 1992, explains below, after a decade of being an Italian citizen, the Italians-strangers divide seems still there:

In your opinion, what do you represent to Italy?

Skender (male, 42): [silence] A normal person like others...that maybe...when he doesn’t have a job, is a problem; when he has a job and doesn’t speak up...is better. [...] The problem is that it is becoming normal that in times of crisis the foreigner is noticed, becomes visible. Maybe we feel it more, that we are still foreigners, not 100%, but still with that old mentality;

even though many years have passed, you have it inside you, this hurts inside you, ‘the foreigner’, even if you are white, black, red, Romanian, Moroccan, I don’t know.

In Skender’s words there emerges a rooted positioning imposed by the Italian society, as *straniero*¹⁵ – a stranger, when it comes to the media in particular, and how the representation of immigrants is constructed and instrumentalised by dominant discourses. In this profile the detachment from the country of residence seems exacerbated by the really heavy stigmatisation that this national-origin has undergone in Italy. The memories and current experiences of stigmatisation appear to be affected further by the tensions enhanced by the financial crisis in Italy. In the same discursive line with Skender is Anila Husha, an Albanian woman who holds Italian citizenship, and acts as the Vice-President of the Albanian-Italian Association ‘Occhio Blu’ in Rome:

Does anything change in the lives of the immigrants after they gain Italian citizenship?

AH: ...Hm, no because to the Italians you are always a foreigner; even though you say you have the Italian citizenship, you remain a foreigner. We know Albanians who are Italian citizens and live here for more than 40 years and they still call him *straniero*; it is not easy for the mentality of the Italians. It is us who feel we belong and consider ourselves Italians now (that we gained citizenship). This is my impression, and I work in Italian institutions; I know the situation from the inside.

Other times, as for Jeta and Kushtim, a couple who have resided in Italy since the late 1990s and have been Italian citizens since 2009 and 2012 respectively, citizenship was an emotional and important step. It encapsulates a plurality of meanings (Colombo et al. 2009), like being integrated, not feeling excluded, and being recognised as equals through the right to vote.

How did you experience it (taking the citizenship)?

Kushtim (male, 63): We were waiting for it anxiously; when I got it I was in tears; Jeta was there, in the town council with me...

Jeta (female, 60): a person who decides to make a ‘choice’, you’re integrated, when you think you will live here, it comes naturally [...] you do not feel excluded from society; even when we didn’t have it (citizenship) we felt like them...

Along with others, Jeta then talked more explicitly about the political dimension of citizenship and the voting rights attached to it:

Jeta (female, 60): ... for instance, when there were the primary elections (of the Partito Democratico) you felt increasingly left out ... thinking that all your life for who knows how many years you’ve spent your life here with friendships and with... all the problems that life brings, you feel a little excluded. We had the pleasure to... is something very exciting and how I can tell you... as a pleasure and a duty at the same time for a person. Me who lives here... I too have my rights, even if the blood is what it is, the origins are those that are.

¹⁵ Italian for ‘foreigner’.

According to our findings, citizenship means first and foremost a ‘right to have rights’ (Arendt 1973). The Italian citizenship emerges as the necessary gate that, once passed, the perceived structural and symbolic divide between strangers and Italians, ‘us’ and ‘them’, will disappear or may become more permeable, in particular in terms of political participation and the right to vote. The situation of Albanians in Padua pre-naturalisation, concerning the right to vote, resonated with what we call ‘frozen’ political subjectivities (Krause and Schramm 2011)¹⁶ – both concerning Albania as a country of origin, and Italy as the country of residence. In Italy, as already mentioned, electoral participation at all levels is strictly linked to citizenship status, while the government of Albania has not taken any action up to now to allow voting from abroad for its citizens who reside in another country.

A coherent element in the narratives of the ‘ordinary’ naturalised participants, however, is their high inclination to take part in elections and the high rates of voting. They appear to stay updated through TV, newspapers and social networks. Roland Sejko, an activist and film-maker living in Rome since 1991, maintains that the experience of living in a totalitarian regime may have had a positive effect on the political participation of Albanians in consideration to both those who live in Albania and those who live abroad. The memories of communist dictatorship emerge as an important and ongoing process of sense-making (Keightley 2010) and also as a positive push factor to trust in pluralistic and democratic systems and in desiring to have voice, in consideration to both contexts:

RS: I have a feeling that the Albanians in Albania participate more than Italians here. What does this mean? Perhaps a different awareness of democracy [...] in other words to have had citizenship rights denied for so many years, has imploded the desire to participate, the political alienation of the regime has turned into something positive [...] I think they participate at a good level, also concerning the right to vote here in Italy, because the passport [Italian] is the end of the journey.

In other cases voting means ‘making a contribution’; for many of our participants voting was a civic obligation informed by mainstream political debates and their own political convictions and values, as Doriana explains:

Doriana (female, 55): I felt it was a duty to go and vote. I’m really concerned about how things are going in Italy, and whatever my vote matters, together with others, I try to give my contribution so that the right person gets elected... Grillo no! Renzi...yes! I supported him; let’s see what he will do.¹⁷

Voting also emerged as an important watershed in the co-construction (native-immigrants) of belonging and identity work, as an act that plays both a symbolic and a substantive role (Zincone

¹⁶ Krause and Schramm (2011: 118-119) define ‘political subjectivities’ as ‘distinct from, yet closely connected to, the notions of belonging and citizenship. Over the last decade or so, the latter two terms have been expanded widely, so that their underlying distinction between emotional attachment and legal incorporation has become blurred. At the same time, the terms still transport older connotations – of primordial attachment in the case of belonging and a kind of instrumentalist (and state-focused) discourse in the case of citizenship. Inflating them to encompass each other therefore leads to analytical vagueness. When we talk about political subjectivities, we have two things in mind. First, we want to draw attention to the practices through which political subject-positions come into being. These entail practices of inclusion or exclusion (as they are often emphasized in citizenship debates), but also dimensions of longing and desire (as they are expressed in belonging)’.

¹⁷ To remind the reader: Grillo is the leader of the ‘Cinque Stelle’ movement, Renzi is the leader of the Partito Democratico and the current Prime Minister.

2006). The ritual act of voting (Papadopoulos 1995) itself seems to enact a feeling of being part of a political community (Pizzorno 1962 1986)¹⁸ and in a circular way to nurture social bonding (Bueker 2005; Marshall 2002). Nevertheless, it was not easy to make people talk about their voting preferences. Among ‘normal/ordinary people’, four participants said that voting is secret or that they have not decided yet. Below are some positions on this point:

Albert (male, 38): For the political orientation?... it may be the left or the right, who is in the list, maybe I’m not too much prepared, I don’t know but..

What would you say are the main 3-4 features the candidate as a mayor must have?

Albert: There is still time till 20-25 May (days of the municipal elections), we’re still in April, there will be a lot of posters in Padua and I’ll see who will convince me, I’ll see to whom to go near/approach... which political movement will convince me, and then at the end of the day what to ask? Even if I’ll ask: will this bring something to me? I’ll do my obligation, like a citizen. But for whom and why... by voting. I’ll not take the card of that party or become a committed and outspoken militant...

Marsel (male, 50): I vote for those who deserve it and who I trust will do something for the rights that interest me.

As the quotes above show, on the one hand, participants show awareness of their rights in relation to voting and its confidentiality. On the other hand, it appears that participants do not align neatly with any of the political parties in Italy, but see their right to vote as a prerogative that allows for *ad hoc* choices that suit their political preferences and individual interests in a particular moment. We found our ‘ordinary’ participants to have undertaken also other forms of political participation. Hence several of them have attended political meetings before the election turnout at all levels. Furthermore, as emerged for other participants, both the political socialisation in the country of origin and the re-socialisation in the country of residence influence political behaviours. Thus, political socialisation is a permanent and ongoing process (Sigel 1989). For the local dimension, the networks in which everyday interactions are embedded seem to have an important role as well. Hence colleagues, friends, and family members appear to play an important role. Nonetheless, the formal membership of political parties was low; in our sample only one man was enrolled in a political party.

However, even though immigrants are eager to vote and despite their participation and contribution, this does not correspond to how they are perceived by the Italian society, and how politicians in particular see them. Our research confirms previous research (Cinalli 2010; Pilati 2010) and goes more in-depth by displaying the co-construction processes underneath a peripheral political positioning of Albanians that in recent years is becoming increasingly visible and claims recognition also as political subjects. Marco Pacciotti, the coordinator of Immigration Forum, describes how the most progressive mainstream Italian party, the Partito Democratico, deals with the issue of immigration and that of political representation and involvement of immigrants in Italian politics:

¹⁸ According to Pizzorno (1986: 353), ‘people often vote for no reactive or expressive reasons – they participate in order to feel a collective identity’.

MP: Even within the party there is a difficulty in understanding a reality that is already modified, but which often also in the newspapers is represented as a possibility: ‘if one day it will happen’, while we already have 5 million immigrants. [...] So even in our work we are affected exactly by the difficulties that there are everywhere in the country... of understanding and accepting.

The situation so far indicates the difficulties that political agencies and their leaders have in order for them to be able to see, accept, and conceive immigrants as political subjects (Bloemraad et al. 2008; Però and Solomos 2010), and as electors and candidates. Indeed, another aspect that testifies to the difficulties Italian institutions have to consider immigrants as electors is the fact that nowadays in Italy there are no aggregate data on how many citizens born in a third country have the right to vote. In order to gather this information, a researcher should contact one by one all the constituencies that hold an electoral register. After several negative answers from the regional and national electoral offices in Padua, we had the information that, in the 2014 municipal elections, 289 Albanians had the right to vote in Padua. Out of a population of 211,210 residents, Albanians with a permanent permit of stay are 1605. While the electorate in the city of Padua amounts to 163,393, of this 289 are Albanian-origin immigrants with double citizenship.

The same difficulties we faced with political parties. We contacted Popolo della Libertà, Lega Nord, and the Partito Democratico(PD).¹⁹ Communications were abruptly interrupted when we asked if there were data on their inscriptions containing also information on the country of birth. The PD answer was that the state of birth was not required in the registration form, as this may appear as discriminatory act; thus they do not have this information. Anila Husha stresses how, on the one hand, the immigrant, even as an elector, remains an ‘other’, an ‘alien’, the outsider. On the other hand, she attributes the low engagement and mobilisation of Albanians in claiming their rights to the weak experience and presence of Albanian leaders within Italian parties and politics more broadly.

Another aspect worth mentioning is the link between the socio-cultural integration of immigrants as a prerequisite for the formation of their political agency and overall political participation. Below is the interpretation on the political representation of immigrants given by MP, a representative on immigration issues, from the PD (Democratic Party):

Are there factors that you think influence negatively or positively the process and what could they be?

MP: Of course. Firstly, not all political parties allow for the registration of non-Italians. We as the Democratic Party have allowed it for several years but the ‘Five Stars’ movement²⁰ does not permit the registration of non-Italian citizens, whether or not they are in the EU. This is a first filter, deriving from the fact that this is a recent immigration of the past 25-30 years, and the institutions are not yet able to grasp it and to give to the immigrants the means of direct representation. The second one is the migrants’ knowledge of Italian culture and history. We have a large number of foreign nationals who, despite living here for many years, are still

¹⁹ Popolo della Libertà–PDL (People of Freedom), Lega Nord (Northern League), Partito Democratico–PD (Democratic Party).

²⁰In 2005 this new political movement entered the political arena, as pointed out earlier (see note 3). The main points of its manifesto are: making political administration cheaper, more accountable and more transparent, such as a drastic reduction to the deductible expenses of members of Parliament; online participation of citizens to Parliamentary debates; more power to nationwide referendum proposals; and drastic reforms to Italy’s environmental and energy policies.

struggling with the Italian language and know little about the history and culture of Italy, which are two things that a person who is active in politics and has to relate to others, in this case to many Italian citizens, needs to know. This then leads to their inability to speak or to be leaders. They never intervene... Then there is the theme, in my opinion, of political representation, as I said before, that is, not being able to vote, nor being elected in the election, and the mentality, ‘Why do I have to be involved?!’

Another activist, Erida Perarla Cela, an Albanian association leader in Montegrotto Terme, a small town in the province of Padua, brings again our attention to structure, in her interpretation about the slow political mobilisation and organisation of Albanians in Italy, in comparison to their length of stay and to other countries in Northern Europe. She sees it as due to the fact that Albanians had first to invest in not being visible, and only in recent years after having reached higher levels of socio-economic stabilisation and credibility, have they allowed themselves to engage in political issues concerning both Albania and Italy. The social and cultural integration of immigrants, therefore, is further emphasised, this time pointing to the structural obstacles that Albanians have had to overcome in order to be recognised as an immigrant minority in Italy. More interestingly, the tendency towards assimilation of Albanians in Italy is also translated into attitudes towards individual political integration of Albanian-origin political activists/leaders.

How about the right to vote before gaining Italian citizenship, what’s your opinion on that?

Erida: This will take time. Firstly, this [Italian] state needs to recognise us as a community, as a cultural resource, and not treat us like an enemy! Because here we have the Lega²¹ and now it’s the financial crisis... we invite institutions to work with us, but they don’t do the same. Not just for us Albanians, all other immigrant communities. [...] There are some people who see beyond their individual history and would like to give their contribution to Italian politics, but it is not that the state has taken any initiative on this.

Thus, in addition to the findings of King and Mai (2009), which build on Gordon’s classic assimilation model²² for the Albanian case, we also find generally that political rights and integration are perceived by some of our participants as an upper or later stage of the integration process. However, among the youngest people in our interviewee sample, this seems not to be the case. For those who are aged under 45, and who are well-educated and middle-class, political participation and integration take place also before citizenship. As we will show in the next section, this group seems less influenced either by the memories of dictatorship in the country of origin or by stigmatisation in

²¹ The right-wing Northern League party.

²² For Gordon (1964) assimilation is designed as a process involving at least seven subprocesses: changes to cultural patterns (acculturation); developing full relationships with natives (structural assimilation); intermarriage; development of host-society sense of peoplehood or ethnicity; discriminatory behaviours stop; prejudice ends; and then the minority does not raise issues involving ‘values and power conflict’ with natives. In Gordon’s viewpoint, acculturation is likely to be the first kind of assimilation to occur and may take place also when other types do not, while structural assimilation is seen as the key point which other kinds of assimilation ‘naturally follow’. Starting from this model, King and Mai (2009) found rather a model of asymmetric assimilation of Albanians in Italy. By which they meant that, while Albanians nurtured a kind of *italophilia* towards Italian society, the sentiment was not reciprocal. Rather, Italians cultivated a kind of *albanophobia* toward Albanians. More recently, Vathi (2015) found that such assimilation patterns are also evident among the second-generation Albanians, i.e. a tendency of Albanian immigrants have ‘to embrace practices from the context where they live’.

the country of residence. There are multiple demographic and experiential dimensions that play a crucial role and may lead people to trust more one particular leader or a party than another one.

Strategies to cope with stigma, memories of dictatorship, and impact on voting preferences

Looking at the connections between stigma management as an important factor impacting on the mode of integration, and the voting preferences of ‘naturalised’ immigrants, enables us to see *if* and *how* the transformation of ‘formal boundaries’, referring here to citizenship status, affects social boundaries (Lamont and Molnar 2002), and vice versa, by analysing how *membership* is perceived, recognised and exercised by the members of the same immigrant group. The narratives of our participants show that, despite their mature integration as ‘labour force’ within Italian society and its institutions, the stigmatisation of immigrant-origin people is still rooted in Italian society. Maculan (2014) explains how stigma and the criminalisation of immigrants are interconnected processes that in Italy have had serious consequences for immigrants, especially those from ‘third countries’ in Eastern Europe.

What about the de-stigmatization strategies put in place in everyday interactions by immigrants themselves? We found several individual strategies, which, referring to a long tradition of research on ‘stigma management’ (Hollander 2004; O’Brien 2011), we organised under three umbrella concepts: *rehabilitation*, *resistance* and *recognition*. Each participant may mobilise more than one in the same interaction. The quotes below further elaborate on this point:

How were your first years in Italy, can you tell me about an episode?

Jeta (female, 60): Hard, really hard; the first thing that my neighbour used to say when I would greet her saying ‘good morning’ was ‘Have you seen what your co-nationals have done?’ [...] After a few times I answered ‘Are you responsible for all the stuff that Italians do? [...] And besides this is not the reality, that all Albanian are thieves’. [...] This is not in our culture, to be thieves; we are not thieves. We are people of our word; if I tell you you’re a friend, you remain a friend for life.

Albert (male, 38): I haven’t seen anyone, among journalists in particular, one to say ‘Well done to the Albanian that...’ There are many who do good things, many who study, why not make them visible? I know many good people that completed successfully their studies, who are doctors ... ‘Well done because s/he is the first of the school’; so far I haven’t seen anybody to say this!

In the quotes above we find the mobilisation of three kinds of strategies: (i) the *rehabilitation* and *reappropriation* of the label ‘Albanian’, (ii) *rejection of* generalisations about all Albanians being criminals, and (iii) claims for the *recognition* and visibility for positive examples. Moreover, differently from what Romania (2004) found for Albanians in the past, our participants do not appear to adopt mimicry or ‘passing’ strategies. Dealing with stigma is not only about ‘us’-‘them’ boundaries (Link and Phelan 2001) and interactions; it is also about elaborating it within a wider process, individual and social, of the re-elaboration of identity (Vertovec 2001). Moreover, the responses and reactions to stigma differ and are influenced by age, gender, social stratification and marital status (Killian and Johnson 2006).

From our findings it seems that there are three typologies concerning the impact and management of stigma: people who have internalised stigma and are still processing it within a kind of ‘disintegrated’ identity; people who have processed the experience of stigma and arrived at a more-or-less ‘integrated’ self-identity; and the youngest and more educated people of the sample who seem to reject or not be influenced by it at all.

In all three pathways, memories both of life in the country of origin – Albania – and of the stigma experience in Italy emerge as constructing meaningful relations between past and present (Keightley 2010), which in turn influences feelings of attachment toward both country of origin and of residence. We found indeed a positive elaboration and processing of stigma among those participants who had a positive relationship with the country of origin; whilst for those narrating a problematic relation with Albania it seems they are pushed toward an internalisation of both stigma and assimilationist discourses.

Even though not all participants felt confident about revealing their voting preferences or had a clear idea about which party to vote for, we summarise our main findings in relation to voting preferences at the local level – Padua – as narrated by our participants (see Table 1). As this table shows, the number of those not declaring how they vote is quite high; the two main motivations cited are having voted for different political parties on different occasions, or not having yet made their decision. Just one woman declared that she intended not to vote as a sign of protest against city’s administration that has not responded to her needs. However, this is a non-representative result that nonetheless tells us something different from the rather prevalent prejudice in Italian society, namely that people from the Eastern EU and former Communist bloc vote for the centre-right (Fondazione Leone Moressa 2015). This trend among immigrants converges to a certain extent with the voting of the native Italians at the national level. Concerning Italy, the last political map elaborated by Diamanti et al. (2015) shows an electorate of which more than 30% support Partito Democratico, followed by Movimento 5 Stelle with 27%, and then by Lega Nord with 14%, while the Forza Italia of Berlusconi (11%) is at its lowest value.²³

Table 1 Voting preferences of participants (n=38)

	Not declared or do not vote	Centre-left	Centre-right	Lega Nord
Women	4	8	1	1
Men	5	4	1	1
‘Visibly involved’	0	8	2	2
Totals	10	20	4	4

Source: Authors’ interviews

²³ For more detail, consult www.sondaggipoliticoelettorali.it

Nevertheless, several variables define voting behaviour; while stigmatisation as a group plays a role, socialisation with certain political values in the country of residence, memories of country of origin, social stratification or the social positioning one wants to reach appear to affect voting preferences. The fear and the imminent threat of losing the financial security constructed with such difficulty in Italy is also a common pattern throughout the sample, which seems to influence both those who support the right-wing and the left-wing parties. What nurtures these fears is the tough economic crisis that Italy has been undergoing for several years now, and also the public discourses concerning new immigrants, in particular the arrival of refugees in Italy in recent years across the Mediterranean from North Africa and Syria. A link emerges between the fear about a possible status downgrading due to economic crisis and new immigrants (Cingolani 2012) and voting preferences, that combined with stigma management may affect the participants' orientation towards populist or left-wing parties. The left or right orientation depends on how one perceives and positions oneself within Italian society: through positive management of stigma or a still-disintegrated identity. As Hena (female, 51) shows below, immigrants' appreciation of the situation in Italy shows, on the one hand, their particularly vulnerable position, but also their assimilation of the mainstream discourses on immigration, and their own propensity towards assimilation into Italian society.

Other countries are dealing with this [migrant crisis] differently. Here in Italy ... Where are all these people going? Where will they eat? My father was saying the same: 'If a guest comes to your house, you will host them for 3-5 days, and then you will have to go out of your house yourself!'. It is really worrying because we have tried this [migration] ourselves; but the way they keep coming here, can't the Italian state stop this through bilateral agreements with other states? But nothing is changing, it just keeps getting worse! What if all Africa comes here? Italy will go down; we too will have to go to Albania, running! [laughs].

However the political fluency and the basis for their voting preferences were articulated differently within the same group and between participants with different political orientations. Those who voted for the Lega Nord seem to have incorporated the discursive repertoires of the party about immigration.

Have you voted here in Padua? For whom did you vote?

Bardha (female, 39): So, I oriented myself also with the help of my husband, who knows something more about politics here and also through friends...that's all.

With which party have you sympathised?

Bardha: For Lega...yes I sympathised with Lega. But now we are a bit disappointed also with them, but sometime ago I liked their idea of Veneto as an autonomous region, and also I preferred their idea of the fact that only those [immigrants] who work and are legal can stay, the others should leave. Maybe they are a bit rude but I believe that I appreciated their reasoning on this...

Bardha's case shows a 'dis-integrated' identity due to her experience of stigma, even though, when it comes to voting, it seems that for her, and others who vote for Lega Nord in particular, their migratory and stigmatised experiences remain in the 'back stage' (O'Brien 2011). She chooses those who are the *deus ex machina* of the stigmatisation process of this group in Italy, and this region. In her case another dimensions seem to play a key role: being married to an Italian who votes for Lega

Nord. Voting, therefore, is an opportunity to somehow ‘officialise’ her assimilation into the ‘mainstream’ Italian society, even if it means voting for Italy’s most anti-immigration party!

Besim’s quotation below further articulates the immigrants’ support for the anti-immigration aspect of the programme of the Lega Nord, which he explains as really close to his values and to what Italy needs in this particular historical moment. Voting Lega shows, firstly, how some of the naturalised immigrants are embracing the political views of the right-wing parties and the regionalist discourse which has become quite prevalent in (Northern) Italy. Second, his action appears here also as a *strategic choice* based on his economic interests and his identification as a businessman. In his justification for voting Lega, he mobilises several other dimensions, all of which can be summed up in the sentence – ‘Italy must turn to Italians’.

Besim (male, 41): I voted for the Northern League – Lega Nord, because I believe that here it's time to take charge of the situation, and to ascertain that Italy belongs to Italians. If I'm Albanian and I'm a drug dealer, I have to go to jail, but not here, in Albania; if someone misbehaves with my wife in my house, there is no reason why he should stay in my house Each country belongs to the people who live in that country and do something good for the country. [...] I do not want to get into politics but just have the idea that it is time that Italy’s programme changes; what is produced here, should be spent here, what is produced in the Veneto region must remain in Veneto, what is produced in Padua must remain in Padua. If the Veneto pays 100% of these fees to Rome and only 32% of this comes back... it is not only Lega who says this, but everyone. Because part of this goes to Naples and not here; they have to enforce entrepreneurial energies there rather than send the money from here [to those places].

Participants’ narratives furthermore show that their voting behaviour is deeply rooted in their personal biographies and is also contextual. While both Bardha and Besim had a vivid memory of their immigrant identity and ‘stigma consciousness’,²⁴ from their profiles we see that they are still processing and elaborating their reactions to stigma. Moreover both experience a kind of dis-integration concerning memories of the country of origin and see living in Padua as the unique and best chance for the time being, as they live in the absence of possibilities for other better chances, while embracing regionalism. This may be a further element in explaining their positioning in favour of the very political camp that most actively does the stigmatisation.

In other cases the previously-mentioned variables – economic crisis and refugee emergency – interplay with disappointment for the left-wing party and former mayor Zanonato, leading some of our interviewees to be undecided, to have fluctuating voting patterns, or to prefer the centre-right, thereby showing the importance and influence of the local level for the political orientation of naturalised immigrants. Here is how Drita, who has resided in Italy since 1992, explains her choice, at this moment of her life:

Drita (female, 42): In the past I made the unforgivable mistake; I should cut off both my hands, because I gave trust to Grillo, I might kill him now... Grillo says ‘no, we change everything’,

²⁴ Stigma consciousness is defined by Link and Phelan (2001) as ‘the expectation of stereotyping – a mutually reinforcing mechanism’.

but in the meantime, what do I do? I have three children to keep, feed them and everything. And if you change everything in that way, you are the Hitler of the situation; indeed it makes me so afraid because all I see is Enver Hoxha.²⁵ ‘If you do not think like me, I’ll throw you out; if I could, I would put you in jail!’ But Beppe Grillo scares me, when I hear him talk; even the look, if you go to see the photos, he is the same, only that Enver Hoxha was more handsome ... [...] To me politics means that if you have the power, you do not do everything you can to block progress, but you do the most to encourage progress, so if I tell you to join my government because you will have voice, you do not say ‘it’s me or nothing’! Who are you, Enver Hoxha who stayed in power for 50 years?!

Despite her memories of growing up in a persecuted family during the socialist regime, Drita says she could have voted for the centre-left, even though, as she maintains, this is contrary to her inclinations. But since her expectations as an immigrant were disappointed, her economic interests prevailed in informing her political preferences. Whilst for Drita’s family business the centre-right policies seem more decisive for her voting, for those who are positioned as ‘working class’, often experiencing de-skilling compared to their position in Albania, the driver is a more ‘negational’ strategy. In other words, as Zhong et al. (2008) found for the previous round of Democratic Primary elections in the USA, a negational identity – ‘who one is’ vs ‘who one is not’ – seems to have played a crucial role in pushing Afro-Americans to vote for Barack Obama, while Latinos and Asians favoured the main white candidate, Hillary Clinton. For example, Dritan and Flutura, a couple who have been in Italy since the late 1990s and who naturalised a few years ago, are very clear about their opposition towards the Lega ‘... since it is against immigrants and Albanians thus we vote for the centre-left’.

The opposition of the Lega Nord towards immigrants is reflected in some local actions they took after they got into power; in June 2014 they refused to concede public gyms to the Moroccan Association of Padua during the period of Ramadan,²⁶ as was previously agreed with the former Mayor. The 2014 changes in the city policy also meant a retreat in terms of political opportunity possibilities for participation and representation in all its dimensions. Lule’s position nicely illustrates these worries: she perceives this change as the end of an era, the end of possibilities to be heard if you are entitled/have the right to.

Lule (female, 47): I voted for the (left party representative) mayor of Padua, Zanonato... He has always supported migrants, from what I have heard. Although I am not too involved... But I have always liked him... as they say, the system is made of people... Whereas now he has nothing in his power; no matter how much influence he may have, now it is Bitonci who has the power. It’s over!

Those who vote or have voted for other political groups, like the Movimento 5 Stelle, often do so because of their reactions to the economic and social crisis Italy is undergoing. The choice to vote for Grillo’s movement seems motivated by the need to create a change in Italy’s government strategy.

²⁵ Enver Hoxha was the socialist dictator who led Albania from the end of World War II until his death in 1985.

²⁶ See <http://mattinopadova.gelocal.it/padova/cronaca/2014/06/24/news/bitonci-ordina-lo-stop-alle-palestre-per-il-ramadan-ma-alla-giotto-si-fara-1.9481708> last accessed on November 2015

Drita (female, 42): Look, Zanonato is not so bad, but... has he ever maintained a promise? Never. For ten years he has been saying 'the foreigners should be granted the right to vote'; it never happened! Thus apart from the fact that I have had a very dramatic past [under the communist regime], when it comes to facts, the fact is that they do not keep their stated word... You may also say 'also the Right didn't maintain the promises' [...] but as far as my job field is concerned we got a push... instead of one shop, we said let's try with two and today we have 12 stores and it is going great.

In some cases voting behaviour does not seem linked to immigrant or stigmatised identities. The youngest and most well-educated participants of our sample sought to declare that they reject stigma, and their voting patterns and political affiliations seem more driven by genuine political affiliation to a party. As Neritan, who arrived in Italy in 1991, explains below, his political involvement started before naturalisation:

How did you become a member of a political party?

Neritan (male, 40): I became a member before I gained Italian citizenship. I was still Albanian when Fini²⁷ came to Padua for the first time; in 2006 I was the only Albanian registered in their computer. And I have met him after I gained Italian citizenship. 'Are you Albanian?', he asked me. 'Yes', I said, 'my family from my father's side has been a supporter of your party, too' [...] It's not really that I am a crazy fan, but the day they [the centre-right coalition] won, after many years that we were waiting to get rid of the left, I gathered with the others in the main square in town. One of my Albanian friends sent me a message – 'Fuck off!'. 'What's your problem?', I told her. It's not that I am supporting their anti-Albanian politics; they have it with the criminals; he [Fini] says the same thing for Albanians, the blacks, Romanians, because delinquency does not have a face. 'No', she said, 'it's just that they are right-oriented'.

Furthermore, within the same group of the young and highly skilled, some participants also revealed that their political orientation is in line with the one cultivated in their country of origin prior to migration. Agim who moved to Italy in 1999, was an example:

Agimi (male, 34): As a family we were always on the left, but left-European, not the radical left... When I was a student, I actively took part when there was the campaign for the promotion of the Albanian constitution, in '98.

Hence, voting preference is not only about rational choice but also about social positioning, social boundaries, perceived and recognised membership, and past political socialisation (della Porta 2010; White et al. 2008). Those who vote for the centre-right parties are driven by worries about their individual integration and goals achieved, while those who vote for the centre-left, symbolically think also about the positive goals of the group's origins or, to say it in other words, they link their experience to other immigrants.

Discussion and conclusion

²⁷ The founder of the right-wing party Alleanza Nazionale.

The findings of this paper show how the history of integration of an immigrant community does impact on their political integration and participation. The narratives of our participants show that the stigmatisation that Albanians endured, particularly in the early stages of their settlement in Italy, was translated into delayed political integration. This reflects on a somewhat tardy emergence of Albanian-origin leaders who also appear to replicate the strong individualistic and assimilationist approach towards integration that Albanians in Italy have demonstrated, even when compared to other Albanian communities in Europe (Vathi 2015). The findings also show that there exists a difference between the political integration of the older, working-class Albanian immigrants and the younger, more educated ones originating from the more affluent urban areas of Albania. Our evidence speaks to the importance of social and cultural capital for integration – this time not only social and cultural integration but, relatedly and contingently, also political integration.

As Bloemraad (2006) maintains, citizenship matters; for our participants, particularly in such a hostile and unfavourable context, citizenship becomes the *sine qua non* for full and substantial political integration, since it allows them to have more political voice. Accordingly, in the Italian context, for more and more immigrants of first, second, and future generations, citizenship will remain one of the ‘gates’ in order to feel recognised and integrated. Therefore it significantly constitutes ‘the right to have rights’ (Arendt 1973). Secondly, these findings illustrate how the voting behaviours of stigmatised minorities, in a hostile POS context, might express also individual ways of understanding and translating integration, which entails processes of boundary reconfiguration.

Thus the ‘frozen’ political subjectivities, meaning here the electoral forms of participation, are replaced/transformed by a kind of political resilience that naturalised Albanians have cultivated for decades. By entailing the right to vote, citizenship has the power to disturb what Perocco (2003) has called ‘the Italian apartheid’ – a process that strengthened in particular after the Bossi-Fini Law of 2002 entered into force, which aimed to reduce immigrants and their leaders to a mere workforce, by denying any human, social, cultural or spiritual aspect of their subjectivities. Participants’ narratives reveal them to be subjects eager to participate, yet who appear to have the same worries that Italian natives have: *il bene dell’Italia* – Italy’s ‘public good’. The choice for whom to vote displays a choice they mobilise in order to rehabilitate their stigmatized self/memory.

Local voting for participants emerges here with a double valency. On the one hand, voting, like other public rituals (Marshall 2002), has a decisive role in transforming membership into belonging and thus in fostering social integration. Referring to Marshall’s reformulation of Durkheim’s theory of rituals, political participation, in particular in its parliamentary form, entails a symbolic process of boundary transformation: from foreigners without voice to *citizens* who may influence, through their vote, therefore, governance of common goods. It seems, thus, that voting has a meaningful power to transform membership into belonging (Marshall 2002: 361), more indeed than citizenship itself. On the other hand, voting entails strategies for shaping/reproducing/reformulating social and symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Molnar 2002). We found three main types of voting related to stigma elaboration – two concerning the oldest participants of the group, and one concerning the youngest and the highly-skilled. Among the first group those who were still in the process of *stigma elaboration* and had a negative perception of their country of origin (Albania), opted for the Lega Nord, the very party which fosters discrimination. We call this *double political assimilation* or *strategic individualistic voting*, which tends to reproduce social and symbolic boundaries.

Those who have arrived at a more mature elaboration of stigma and hold a positive perception on their country of origin, opt for the main pro-immigrant party, the left-wing Partito Democratico.

This process entails a reproduction of social boundaries; people here position themselves with the ‘others’ in order to protect the ‘us’, even if they do not fully agree with the party programme. We call this *circular political integration*. As Nicholls (2013) maintains in his study of undocumented immigrant activists in France and the United States, by conforming to ‘national legal and moral principles’ in order to achieve legitimacy within the national political field, minorities’ leaders and individuals contribute to the ‘reproduction of the national citizenship regime’. In our case, we could also say that immigrants, as agents embedded in a specific social context, contribute to what we might call the *co-construction of a peripheral political positioning*.

In turn, the highly-skilled youth’s voting behaviours seem mainly driven by political affiliations elaborated *here* – in the country of residence, and *there* – in country of origin. This behaviour carries them beyond the state of stigmatisation or immigrant identity. These participants, when it comes to the time to vote or to influence the political system, position themselves primarily as political subjects; although conscious of their immigrant identity, this does not emerge as the prevalent one in shaping their political affiliation. We call this process *authentic political integration*.

Considering that other ‘visible’ minorities in Italy – the Moroccans – and other culturally distant minorities in other countries (eg. the Moroccans in Belgium and the Netherlands; Jacobs et al. 2004; Michon and Vermeulen 2013), are better integrated politically and have a stronger political representation, we can extrapolate that the assimilationist approach towards integration of Albanians in Italy has affected their overall political integration in terms of a delayed process of organising in parties and electing their candidates for the Italian parliament. However, in the past few years, a few cases of political mobilisation as a *community/minority group* are taking place, which are challenging the boundaries of accessibility and visibility in the political and public space. Examples are the protests for the Partito Democratico’s primary congress in Asti in 2013; Ismail Ademi’s support as a prospective parliamentary candidate in 2013; and the foundation of a Federation of Albanian Associations in Italy in 2014, which lobbies for political rights toward both Italian and Albanian institutions.²⁸

Nonetheless, this paper offers original findings relating to the immigrants’ voting behaviour which do not link exclusively to their ethnic group membership. Even though some of the participants choose to vote in a certain way because of their experiences of stigma due to their Albanian origins, the voting preferences are based on multiple considerations, such as their employment type and status, their political values and memories of political repression in Albania, their intimate lives and individual integration trajectories. For some of them politics is understood as a ‘dirty affair’ (Bordignon 2007: 465) – a conception affected by both the dictatorship experience in Albania and the political environment in the country of residence. In his research on the political participation in three countries of the former-socialist block (Hungary, Czech Republic and Poland), Bordignon (2007) found that the legacy of the former socialist regime was used as a lens through which to see/conceive the new regime, leading in this way to an erosion of trust in institutions and among citizens. Thus, our research, even though not representative of all Albanians with the right to vote, neither of all naturalised migrants, shows how theories about the creation of ethnic block votes – referring to a tendency of ethnic minority groups to vote for the same party (Martiniello 2006) – do not find confirmation in our participants’ narratives.

²⁸ More than 30 Albanian associations in Italy supported the election of Ismail (Isi) Ademi as an MP in the 2013 political elections. They mobilised Italian and Albanian intellectuals and launched a petition through the change.org website, in order to have as many signatures as possible. This petition was addressed to the leader of the Partito Democratico, but without any concrete result.

More attention should be paid instead to the in-group and out-group dynamics in consideration to intergenerational political socialisation, in order to see *if* and *how* political socialisation in the country of origin and through parents and other relatives interplays with other variables concerning the country of residence. But first and foremost Italy, its institutions and its politicians, need to be aware of the negative effects they and the Italian society will encounter if they continue to procrastinate in relation to the recognition of immigrants as electors. Mai (2003) analysed the denial of the Italian state to recognise itself as a country of immigration, pointing at how the newly-arrived immigrants, predominantly Albanian in the 1990s, initiated a discussion on Italian national identity. The same denial is omnipresent in the work of Italian political parties which rely on the activism of immigrants and increasingly on their vote but do not recognise them as equal members of the electoral body, and ultimately, of their society. Considering the relatively large size of the Albanian community in Italy and their strong tendency to integrate into the Italian society, inter-marry and apply for the Italian citizenship, Italian politicians may be missing an opportunity to mobilise this immigrant group.

Systematic data are needed in order to know or at least have a perception on *what* is going on in the country concerning the integration of immigrant minorities, and *how* its electoral landscape is changing. We agree with Kastoryano and Schader (2014: 254) who suggest that, in the global dynamic context where localities are interconnected, a reformulation is needed of both ‘the traditional understanding of integration as nationally bounded’ and the study of political integration, carried out so far mainly through the lens of ethnicity. Future research should opt for comparative approaches, both across states and across immigrant groups. Additionally, as these findings suggest, in order to grasp the meanings behind actions, more space has to be given to the bottom-up and qualitative studies, as well as to ‘quali-quant’ approaches.

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