

WORLD AT FIVE

# Abroad alone: what to do with the migrant children reaching Italy's shores?

NEW

Charities and the state alike are struggling to cope with soaring numbers of juveniles, with many falling prey to criminal gangs, writes Philip Willan





More than 67,000 migrants reached Italy last year — almost 9,500 of them unaccompanied minors  
REUTERS

Philip Willan, Rome Thursday January 06 2022, 5.00pm GMT, The Times

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“**N**ew year, new life,” the crew of the German rescue ship Sea-Watch 3 tweeted after disembarking 440 migrants in the Sicilian port of Pozzallo, the first this year. “We wish them all the best.”

Among the arrivals [starting a new life](#) was, in fact, a new life: a baby boy, about a year old. Nobody knew his exact age, because he had been thrust onto a boat that arrived in Lampedusa last month without his parents.

A rising number of children are being sent across the Mediterranean without close family: of the 114,584 people who [braved the crossing](#) last year to reach European ports, 10 per cent were unaccompanied children, many below the age of ten. What to do with them is a growing problem.



Right-wing activists in Italy see the migrants as a threat to the national identity; Mario Draghi, the prime minister, sees them as a valuable resource for a country faced with a declining population

“It’s shocking from a western point of view. I’ve got two children aged 20 and they are still at home,” said Enrico Costa, who heads a Catholic charity in Genoa that runs four reception centres hosting about a hundred unaccompanied minors.

Children arriving in Italy on their own cannot be rejected at the border nor, in normal circumstances, sent back to their country of origin. A 2017 law says they must be correctly identified and accommodated in special structures reserved for those aged under 18. The government encourages their placement in foster homes and guarantees their right to healthcare and education. It will also assist with voluntary repatriation if the authorities have succeeded in tracing the family.

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However, Costa acknowledged that Genoa had had problems in accommodating and integrating its youngest migrants. Some were highly motivated by money and easy prey for criminals who used them for minor crimes and drug dealing, exploiting the legal impunity of children under 14.

Many had been parked in hotels for long periods, neglected by social workers and educators, and had drifted into crime and vandalism, Costa said.





## World

Migrants toast their arrival in Sicily aboard the charity ship Sea-Watch 3

“Some centres have had to employ armed guards. If you keep people from the same ethnic background together they can form a mass and overwhelm the educators. With a little intelligence and planning you can avoid that,” Costa said.

Language training and professional skills were vital if the minors were to integrate into Italian society, eventually providing part of the labour force for a country with a declining population. “If they remain isolated, that breeds anger. When they feel welcomed and helped, able to express themselves, they are good people like anyone else.”

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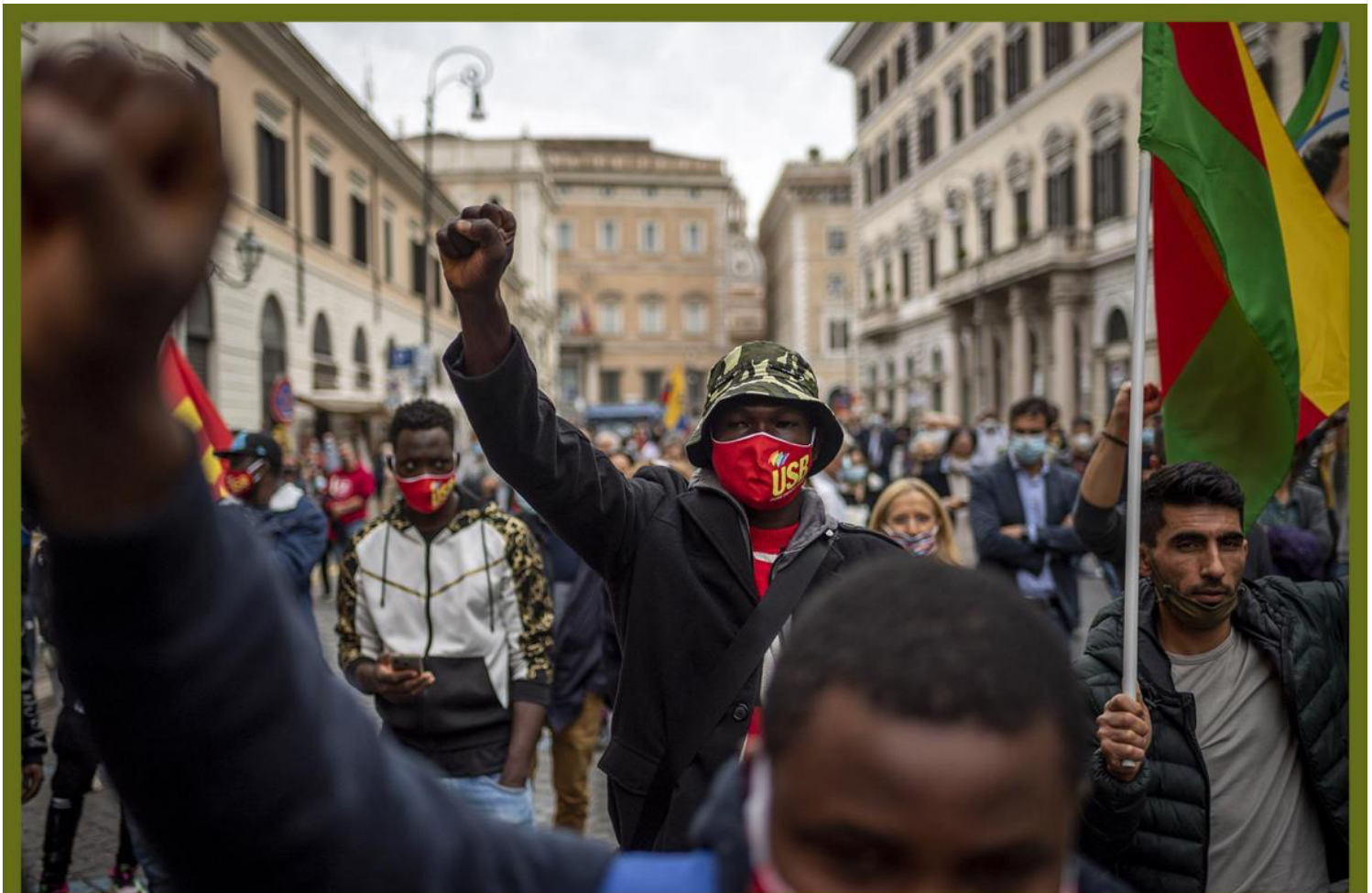


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In the long term, professional skills learnt in Italy could be useful for those who return to their country of origin. It's one way of "helping them at home," Costa said. "They would be able to return with their heads held high, something like the Erasmus scheme [for studying abroad in Europe]."



Campaigners have staged marches in Rome and other Italian cities to protest against the government's immigration policies  
ANTONIO MASIELLO/GETTY IMAGES

Ejaz Ahmad, who has worked as an intercultural mediator in Rome for the past 20 years, said the idea of

sending a child abroad was less shocking in their home countries, where individuals can be considered as adults at the age of 12. "At that age they are already working, and the girls can get married as soon as they start to menstruate," said Ahmad, who is originally from Pakistan.

The problem of what to do with the unaccompanied children grows with each new arrival. Last year, 67,000 migrants made it to Italian shores, 9,478 of them juveniles travelling on their own; twice as many as the previous year.

The cost of a child's journey to Europe is the same as for an adult: between £6,000 and £12,000 for the trip from Pakistan, for example, and it can take up to two years, said Ahmad. "The trip is organised by the family and it's not accessible to the poorest. The money amounts to a small fortune back home, and sometimes they have to sell a shop or a house to finance it."





Sea-Watch and other charities have organised protests across Italy to push for greater acceptance of migrants

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Ahmad, who has assisted numerous unaccompanied minors in their dealings with the Italian authorities, said they were keen to work because they were often being



pressed by their families to recoup the money. And they were determined to succeed because of the sacrifices that underpinned their journeys.

The migrants may have dreams of the riches that await them in the promised land of Europe, but they know little of the hazards along the way. “They have never seen the desert or the sea. They don’t know how to swim. There’s a lot of ignorance.”

The knowledge that the family is spending a fortune on the journey weighs on them. “They’ll sleep in the snow, but they don’t want to go back,” Ahmad said.



Guards in the Balkans often confiscate the shoes of migrants caught trying to cross international borders, meaning some arrive in Italy barefoot. For the luckier ones, a charity in Trieste supplies replacements

FABRIZIO VILLA/GETTY IMAGES

“One boy had his feet in ribbons when he got here

because he had been walking for hundreds of miles along railway tracks on the migrant route through the Balkans. The border guards confiscate people's shoes as a punishment when they catch them and send them back," he said. "There's a charity in Trieste that hands out shoes as soon as they arrive."

Covid-19 has pushed immigration off the front pages of the newspapers and changed public perceptions. A study published recently by Carta di Roma, an organisation that monitors coverage of immigration in the Italian media, found it was a priority for just 6 per cent of the population.

Much will depend on the success of efforts to integrate migrants into society and the work force. Mario Draghi, 74, the prime minister, has emphasised that migrants are a resource and not an enemy, promoting a non-ideological approach to the issue.



A young migrant waits to board a quarantine ship in Augusta, Italy, at the end of his long journey to Europe

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“I hear talk of defending our roots, of identity, but you do that by affirming the characteristics of our roots: solidarity and responsibility,” he told parliament last month.

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For Costa, his charges in Genoa represent the best of what Italy can be. “These kids are as brave as lions,” he said. “They set out with a certain degree of madness, but they are full of grit, which is a precious gift. They are the opposite of our ‘Neets’ [Not in education, employment or training]. They are determined to study and to work, and we shouldn’t let that go to waste.”

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**Philip Willan**



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