



Vulnerability and Contradictions in the Reception System in Sicily

Key Insights

- **The Italian reception framework consists of different stages**, but not always in one standard sequence. Following disembarkment as the initial point of entry, individuals can be placed in first reception centers, CAS (Extraordinary Reception Centers), or the Reception and Integration System (SAI), each of which provides a different level of service and protection and may support tailored integration pathways.
- **A strong contradiction** between the declared intention of the protection system to address and support situations of “vulnerability” and a system that operates in a different direction, ultimately contributing to the worsening of such conditions can be identified.
- **Vulnerability is produced and reproduced along the migration pathway**, often as a direct consequence of systemic shortcomings.
- **The reception system overlooks the intersectional experiences of vulnerability.** The system’s approach to vulnerability tends to rely on predefined categories, which are insufficient to capture the complexity and fluidity of real-life situations.
- **Palermo functions as a complex hub.** It is a place of arrival, but also of return, where individuals who have experienced unsuccessful migration trajectories elsewhere come back in search of new opportunities.
- **Through an ever-increasing restrictive reception and migration system, vulnerability increasingly becomes the last remaining threshold for accessing protection.** Yet, precisely because it functions as a selective criterion, it also risks excluding those who are unable to demonstrate or have their vulnerability recognized.

The Reception Framework

Disembarkation is only the beginning. It does not mark an endpoint, but rather the crossing of a threshold into a complex and often opaque system, characterized by uncertain transitions, implicit selection mechanisms, and trajectories that rarely unfold in a linear or predictable way. In Sicily — and particularly in Palermo — this process becomes especially visible. Here, arrival, settlement, and mobility overlap, blurring the boundaries between reception and integration and exposing the structural tensions that shape the Italian migration system.

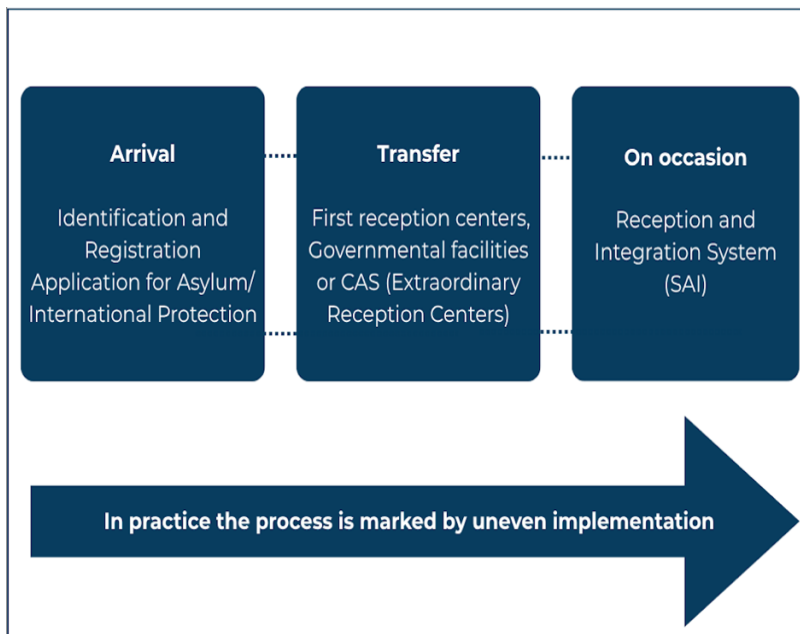


Figure 1: Italy's reception framework

Upon arrival, migrants are immediately inserted into an articulated reception framework. They are identified, registered and subjected to an initial health and personal assessment. For those seeking protection, this should also be the moment when the application for international protection is formalized — an essential step that determines legal status and access to rights. However, while the legal framework presents this phase as standardized, in practice it is marked by variability, delays, and uneven implementation.

Following this initial stage, individuals are transferred to first reception centers, including hotspots, governmental facilities or CAS (Extraordinary Reception Centers). These structures are intended to provide basic services — food, shelter, medical assistance, and legal orientation — while the asylum application is processed. In time, funds for the services provided have been significantly cut. Waiting times are often prolonged, information is fragmented, and the overall experience is characterized by a pervasive sense of uncertainty.

The transition to the second level of reception — the Reception and Integration System (SAI) — is theoretically designed to represent a turning point. Unlike first reception, SAI projects are meant to support individuals through tailored integration pathways, including language learning, job orientation, and access to local services. However, access to SAI is neither automatic nor guaranteed. It depends on the availability of places, the submission of referrals, and, crucially, the recognition of vulnerability.

In the Palermo context, entry into the SAI system is frequently perceived as a matter of chance rather than entitlement. There is no standardized progression from first reception to integration-oriented services. The mechanism is often bottom-down and randomic. Access is mediated by a network of actors — reception centers, social services, NGOs, healthcare providers — who submit referrals to the Central Service (Servizio Centrale) in Rome. Yet, the final decision is constrained by the limited number of available places within local projects.

In the absence of clear and uniform criteria, selection often occurs based on perceived vulnerability or simply on the chronological order of requests. This produces a paradoxical outcome: a system designed to ensure protection ends up functioning as a selective filter, granting access to structured integration pathways only to a limited portion of the migrant population.

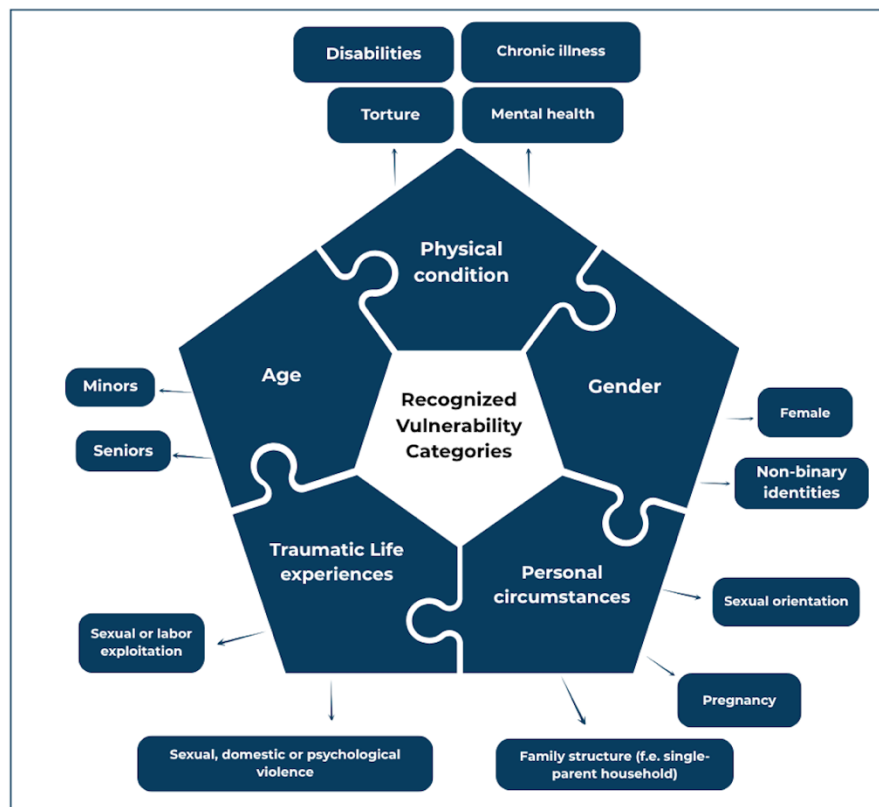


Figure 2: Recognized vulnerability categories

Given the lack of a clear and unambiguous legal definition of vulnerability at both national and European levels — understood as a condition in which an individual is more likely to suffer harm — vulnerability is currently framed through predefined and often stereotyped categories (see figure 2). These include minors, unaccompanied minors, persons with disabilities, the elderly, pregnant women, single parents with minor children, victims of human trafficking, individuals affected by serious illnesses or mental disorders, and persons who have experienced torture, rape, or other severe forms of

psychological, physical, or sexual violence, including victims of female genital mutilation (Directive 2013/33/EU).

Over the past decade, the Italian reception system has undergone significant legal and institutional transformations. Legislative Decree 142/2015 established the foundational framework for reception and asylum procedures. Later, Decree-Law 130/2020 (converted into Law 173/2020) reintroduced an integration-oriented approach through the SAI system, formally expanding access and reinforcing the role of municipalities.

However, subsequent reforms have progressively shifted the system toward a more restrictive configuration. Measures such as the “Security Decrees”¹ and the “Cutro Decree”² (see figure 3) have narrowed access to reception pathways, prioritizing beneficiaries of international protection while limiting opportunities for asylum seekers. Rather than enhancing coherence, these changes have

¹ The “Security Decree” (*Decreto Sicurezza*) refers to a set of legislative measures adopted in Italy, most notably through Decree-Law No. 113/2018 (converted into Law No. 132/2018) and subsequent amendments, aimed at strengthening public security, regulating immigration, and redefining aspects of asylum policy.

² The “Cutro Decree” (*Decreto Cutro*) refers to Decree-Law No. 20 of 10 March 2023, adopted by the Italian Government following a deadly shipwreck off the coast of Cutro. The decree introduced urgent measures on migration management, including stricter rules on search and rescue operations, changes to asylum procedures, expansion of detention for irregular migrants, and new provisions to regulate legal entry flows for work. It has been widely discussed for its impact on humanitarian protection and migration policies in Italy.

contributed to increasing fragmentation, excluding a significant number of individuals from structured integration processes.

At the same time, insufficient attention has been paid to the deep and structural shortcomings of reception centres — particularly CAS, which are frequently overcrowded, geographically isolated, and staffed by workers in precarious conditions. This reflects a system that struggles to provide adequate integration measures. Moreover, post-reception trajectories are often characterized by institutional disengagement, alongside social, housing, and labour exclusion, exposing individuals to significant risks of severe exploitation in the least protected segments of the labour market. Concerns have also been raised regarding the lack of transparency and the absence of systematic and effective evaluation of reception services³.

This article is based on more than ten interviews with social workers, healthcare professionals, psychologists, and other practitioners working with migrant communities in Sicily. It also draws on

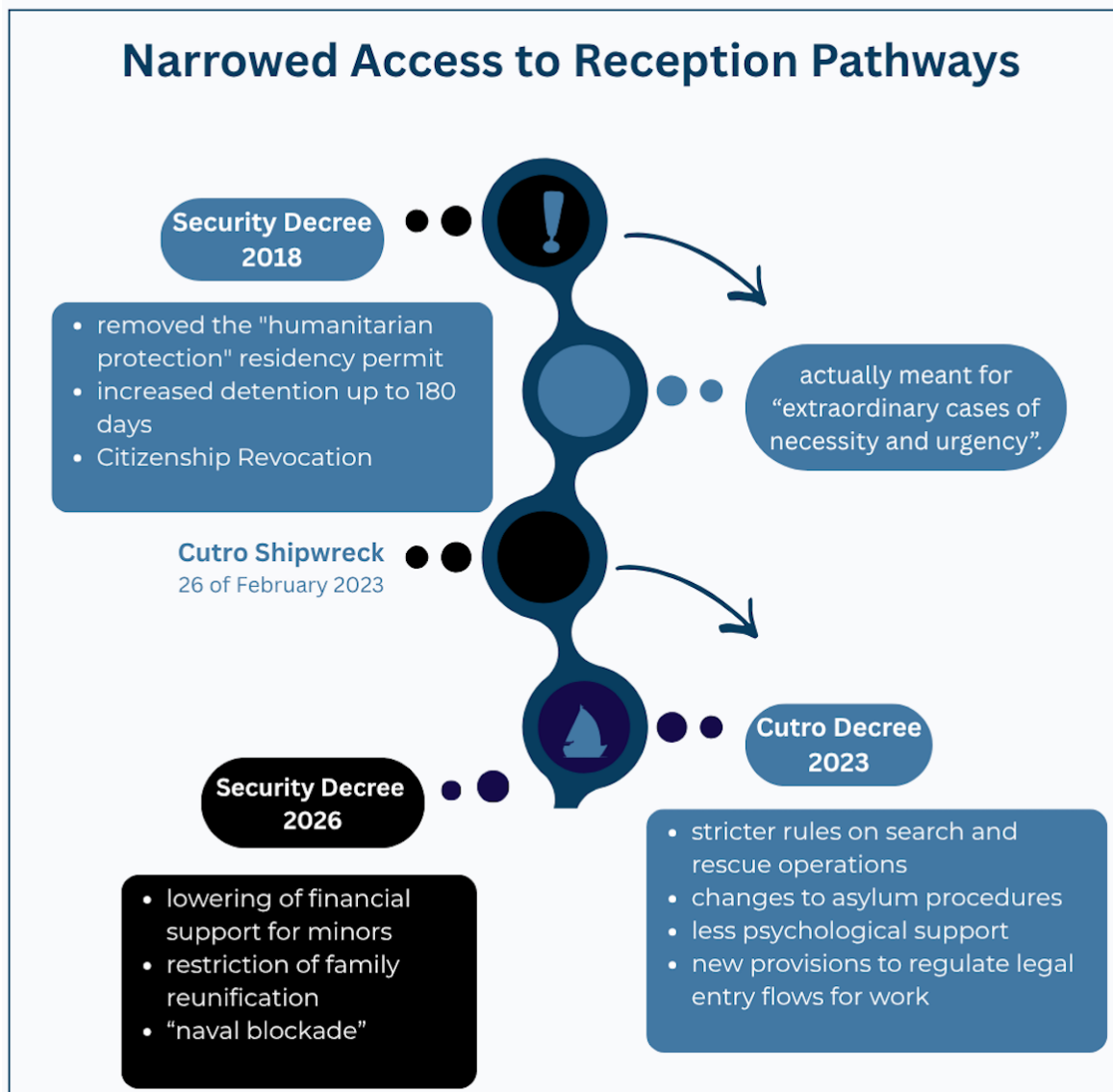


Figure 3: Restriction of migration through decrees

³ Vulnerabilities and the Italian Protection System: An ethnographic exploration of the perspectives of protection seekers, Dany Carnassale, Sabrina Marchetti | Ca'Foscari University of Venice 2022.

relevant legislation and official reports published by universities and public institutions. What emerges is the strong contradiction between the declared intention of the protection system to address and support situations of “vulnerability and a system that, in practice, operates in a different direction, ultimately contributing to the worsening of such conditions⁴.

Vulnerability as a Dynamic Condition

Within this framework, vulnerability emerges as a central — yet deeply ambivalent — concept. It is not merely a pre-existing condition linked to personal characteristics, but a dynamic and evolving dimension shaped by the interaction between individuals and institutional structures. Vulnerability is produced and reproduced along the migration pathway, often as a direct consequence of systemic shortcomings.

It affects those who wait months — or even years — for a decision on their asylum application, living in a prolonged state of legal and existential uncertainty. It affects those who lose their residence permit and, with it, access to employment, housing, and social protection. It affects those who, despite being employed, remain trapped in precarious or exploitative labor conditions, particularly in sectors such as agriculture, domestic work, and low-skilled services. The process of assessing an asylum application itself and interacting with the administrative system may also be experienced as a moment of violence or trauma.

Concrete cases illustrate how vulnerability is often inadequately recognized or addressed. Severely ill individuals transferred from a hospital to unsuitable reception facilities reveal the gap between formal rights and actual practices. Similarly, LGBTQ+ individuals fleeing persecution may encounter new forms of discrimination within reception centers before accessing specialized support networks. Administrative errors — such as incorrect registration — can prevent individuals from accessing essential benefits, further exacerbating their marginalization.

More broadly, vulnerability frequently arises at the intersection of legal, social, and economic factors. Individuals with mental health conditions may leave reception centers without adequate support and fall into homelessness. Workers may become “administratively trapped,” dependent on precarious employment to maintain their legal status. Women with children often face compounded challenges, having to balance caregiving responsibilities with language learning and labor market integration in the absence of adequate services.

The system’s approach to vulnerability tends to rely on predefined categories, which are insufficient to capture the complexity and fluidity of real-life situations. As a result, many individuals whose conditions do not fit neatly within these categories remain excluded from targeted support measures.

This approach not only excludes, a priori, those who fall outside such classifications, but also overlooks the intersectional experiences of vulnerability — those of individuals who exist “between” categories, who belong to multiple categories, or whose life trajectories do not fully align with any single predefined label and may even challenge these classifications in explicit or implicit ways. An example could be the case of a caregiver who arrives in Italy together with a relative suffering from a serious illness.

⁴ *ibidem*

More fundamentally, this framework contributes to rendering invisible the processes through which vulnerability is produced. These processes are social, cultural, political, and economic in nature, and notably include the protection system itself, which can at times exacerbate situations of vulnerability or even generate them.

The challenges of integration are particularly evident in three key areas: healthcare, employment, and housing. Although access to healthcare is formally guaranteed, in practice it is often fragmented and mediated by bureaucratic obstacles. Third-sector organizations play a crucial role in filling these gaps, but their involvement also highlights the limitations of the public system.

Administrative practices have become increasingly restrictive. Limitations on self-certification procedures, for example, have made it more difficult to obtain residence registration — a key requirement for accessing public services, healthcare, and social benefits. In this sense, the transformation of the system cannot be understood solely at the level of legislation: it must also be analysed through the everyday practices of institutions, where rules are interpreted and applied.

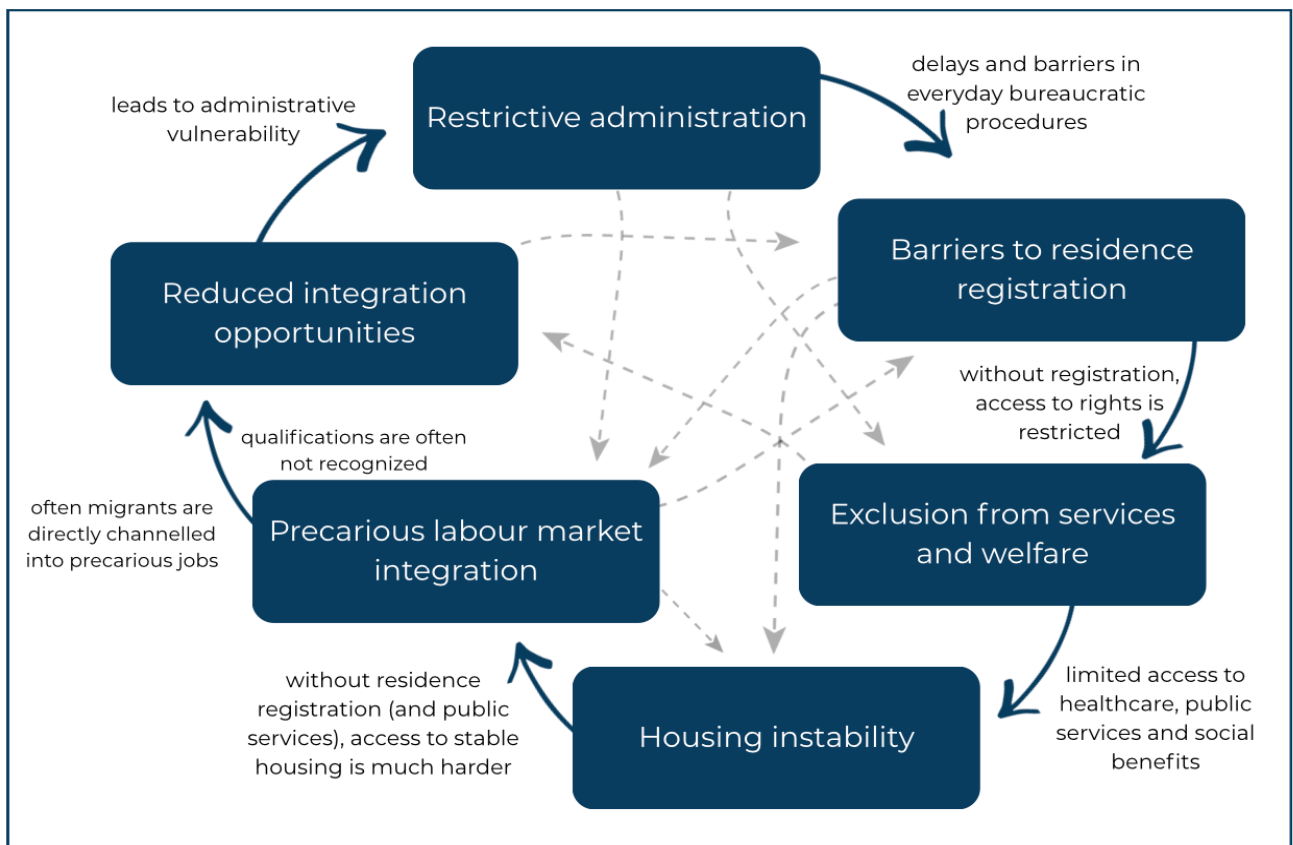


Figure 4: Vicious cycle of restrictive administration, housing exclusion, and labour market marginalization

In the labor market, migrants are predominantly employed in low-skilled and precarious sectors, regardless of their qualifications. Even highly educated individuals face significant barriers to accessing jobs that match their skills, leading to processes of deskilling and downward mobility.

Housing represents perhaps the most critical challenge. Without official residence registration, access to services becomes severely restricted, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of exclusion. Bureaucratic delays and administrative barriers further contribute to the instability of integration pathways (see figure 4).

Palermo as a Complex Migratory Hub



In this context, Sicily represents both a frontier and a space of settlement. As of January 2024, the foreign resident population amounts to approximately 184,605 individuals, representing 3.8% of the regional population. While lower than the national average, this figure reflects a stable and structured presence. The distribution is uneven across provinces, with higher concentrations in economically dynamic areas and urban centres such as Palermo.

The presence of minors—approximately 9% of the total — indicates that migration in Sicily is no longer limited to arrival dynamics but includes processes of family settlement and long-term integration. Palermo, in particular, functions as a complex hub: a place of arrival, but also of return, where individuals who have experienced unsuccessful migration trajectories elsewhere come back in search of new opportunities.

Palermo is also a place of return. Many migrants move towards France, Germany, or Northern Italy, only to return later to Palermo. This dynamic is closely linked to the specific characteristics of the local context: the city is marked by a dense and active network of non-governmental organizations, third sector actors, and both formal and informal groups that provide widespread support across the territory. This network plays a crucial mediating role between migrants and institutions, facilitating access to services, rights, and opportunities, and fostering processes of inclusion and social participation. As highlighted in recent research, these forms of civic and associative participation are not merely supportive but represent a key dimension of integration itself, enabling migrants to become active subjects within the social fabric. In this sense, Palermo's network can be considered both particularly strong and relatively unique, contributing to making the city a point of reference even within fragmented and uncertain migratory trajectories.

Conclusions

In recent years, the policy direction adopted by the Italian government has had a cascading effect on this system. Legislative interventions have increasingly emphasized control and containment, reshaping not only the legal framework but also institutional practices. Public officials and administrative actors tend to interpret regulations in a more restrictive manner, reducing access to rights even in cases where legal provisions might allow for more inclusive approaches.

Reforms have also affected procedural safeguards, expanding the use of detention and accelerating asylum procedures. Measures such as the extension of detention to new categories of individuals and the possibility of transfers to repatriation centres outside national territory reflect a shift toward a more securitized approach to migration management.

The debate on “safe countries of origin”⁵ further illustrates the tension between administrative efficiency and the protection of fundamental rights. While the government seeks to streamline procedures through broader categorizations, judicial bodies emphasize the need for case-by-case assessment, particularly in situations involving vulnerability.

In this context, vulnerability increasingly becomes the last remaining threshold for accessing protection — a residual safeguard for inalienable human rights. Yet, precisely because it functions as a selective criterion, it also risks excluding those who are unable to demonstrate or have their vulnerability recognized.

The Italian reception system thus appears as a hybrid structure, shaped by competing logics of inclusion and control. Legal transformations are not confined to formal frameworks but permeate everyday practices, widening the gap between formal rights and their actual implementation.

Sicily — and Palermo in particular — offers a privileged vantage point from which to observe these dynamics. Here, the contradictions of the system are most visible, revealing how vulnerability is not an exception but a structural condition.

Understanding migration today therefore requires moving beyond a focus on flows and legal categories, and instead engaging with the lived experiences of individuals — their waiting, their interruptions, and their often limited opportunities to build an autonomous life. It is within this gap between what is formally guaranteed and what is actually experienced that the true capacity of the reception system to uphold rights and foster inclusion must be assessed.

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⁵ The concept of “Safe Countries of Origin” is defined under the European Union Asylum Procedures Directive (Directive 2013/32/EU, Arts. 36–37). It allows Member States to designate certain countries as generally safe, meaning that nationals from these countries are presumed not to be in need of international protection. Consequently, their asylum applications are often processed through accelerated procedures and may be considered manifestly unfounded, unless the applicant can demonstrate specific circumstances that justify protection. This mechanism has been criticized for potentially limiting thorough individual assessment and raising concerns regarding compliance with the principle of non-refoulement.