

# “No one is looking at us anymore”

Migrant Detention and Covid-19  
in Italy





November 2020

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Francesca Esposito work is supported by the British Academy through the Newton International Fellowship Scheme [reference: NIF\R1\181103].

Cover Picture by Erica Tenca

Border Criminologies  
<http://bordercriminologies.law.ox.ac.uk>

Landscapes of Border Control  
<https://borderlandscapes.law.ox.ac.uk/>

Pictures at the beginning of each section by Lucia Gennari and Francesca Esposito  
Design and layout by Emilio Caja and Silvia Malcovati

ISBN: 978-1-9989946-0-1

**“No one is looking at us  
anymore”**

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To all those who are challenging borders

*The prisoners gained total control over the prison /  
They gained the upper hand /  
They could now express delight in victory /  
They could now look to each other and smile /  
Smile at the rules and regulations /  
At the oppressive system of governmentality /  
It seemed that the war had suddenly ceased /  
The rocks no longer flew overhead /  
The prison was silent /  
The atmosphere had entered a different phase /  
The colours had transformed.*

(Behrouz Boochani, 2020)

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# Lists of Abbreviations

ASCE	Associazione Sarda Contro l'Emarginazione [Sardinian Association Against Marginalisation]
ASGI	Associazione per gli Studi Giuridici sull'Immigrazione
ASL	Azienda Sanitaria Locale [Local Sanitary Public Company]
CAI	Centro di Accoglienza e Identificazione [Centre for Accommodation and Identification]
CARA	Centro di Accoglienza per Richiedenti Asilo [Centre for the Reception of Asylum Seekers]
CAS	Centro di Accoglienza Straordinaria [Extraordinary Reception Centre]
CDI	Centro di Identificazione [Identification Centre]
CIE	Centro di Identificazione e Espulsione [Identification and Expulsion Centre]
CILD	Coalizione Italiana Libertà e Diritti civili [Italian Coalition for Civil Liberties and Rights]
CPR	Centro di Permanenza per il Rimpatrio [Holding Centre for Removal]
CPT	Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture
CPTA	Centro di Permanenza Temporanea e Assistenza [Temporary Stay and Assistance Centre]
ECHR	European Convention on Human Rights
HRMLC	Human Rights and Migration Law Clinic
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MEDU	Medici per i Diritti Umani [Doctors for Human Rights]
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières [Doctors Without Borders]
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
SAR	Search And Rescue
SPRAR	Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati
TAR	Tribunale Amministrativo Regionale [Regional Administrative Court]
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees



## Overview

This report on immigration detention in Italy was conceived in the midst of the Covid-19 outbreak, which has resulted in unprecedented levels of turmoil and unpredictability around the globe. As fears and anxieties about the pandemic were taking over, together with many scholars and activists engaged with migration and migrant justice we were concerned about the impact of Covid-19 on migrant communities, particularly on those people with unsecure immigration status and those held in detention. Indeed, although mainstream discourses revolved around the idea that “we are all together in tackling this common enemy”, it soon became blatantly obvious that pre-existing structural inequalities, based on race, gender, class, and citizenship among others, deeply influenced the risk of being exposed to, and affected by, Covid-19.

In particular, enforced group confinement inherent in immigration detention, as well as in other forms of incarceration, exacerbates the risk of contamination. This situation is alarming, especially considering the fact that healthcare has consistently been proven to be rather poor in detention settings and sanitary provision has often been described as inadequate. On the other hand, in often overcrowded and squalid facilities, the use of solitary confinement as a way to allow ‘social distancing’ between detainees carried serious risk of psychological harm, while also being morally unacceptable.

Activists and scholars around the world, as well as international bodies (such as the [United Nation High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) and the [Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights](#)), have made repeated [calls](#) to close detention centres and release all people inside them. These calls have been ignored by the Italian Government. This is in spite of the fact that during the first period of lockdowns in Europe borders were mainly closed and deportations were therefore impossible; thus, making the legal justification for detention unclear and morally questionable.

These considerations and the urgency to ‘do something’ from our ‘privileged’ sites of lockdown, motivated and guided the drafting of this Report, which focuses on the period

between 9<sup>th</sup> March and 18<sup>th</sup> May, i.e., the period of the first national lockdown in Italy. And like almost everything that has been produced during the pandemic, this Report too was developed through online meetings and conversations – in this case across borders. While Francesca was based in the UK for most of the time, Giacomo was in Italy, and Emilio found himself, at different times, in Germany, the UK or Italy. Notwithstanding our geographical locations, all of us were driven by the belief that sites like CPRs (Centri di Permanenza per il Rimpatrio - Holding Centres for Removal), and the people confined inside them, could be forgotten during the pandemic and become more invisible than what they usually are. Therefore, we deemed it extremely important and necessary to keep monitoring what was happening behind the gates of these institutions.

This Report is also part of a larger project, ‘Immigration Detention in Italy and Greece: Safeguarding Human Rights at Europe’s Southern Frontier’ led by Mary Bosworth in collaboration with Andriani Fili and Francesca Esposito and funded by Open Society Foundation (grant number: OR2018-44698). This project was designed to assist civil society organisations, activists, and solidarity groups that work to safeguard migrant rights in Italy and Greece, and to collaboratively provide much-needed narratives to challenge the growing xenophobia that is corroding political discourse and practice in both countries. In particular, the main aim of the project is to ensure that what happens in sites of border control is not hidden from public scrutiny, that migrant voices are heard, and that activists and human rights defenders are given information and support to disseminate their evidence to a wider audience which is not limited to their national contexts but reaches out globally. To achieve this aim, an interactive map—the [Landscapes of Border Control](#)—was launched in the beginning of 2020. This map depicts Italy and Greece as they are experienced and shaped by migrants’ presence and their struggles.

We hope this initiative will challenge states’ attempts to invisibilise and spatially isolate migrants, while supporting local partners who are engaged in advocacy and strategic litigation. Initiatives like this one, which seek to provoke critical witnessing, are especially important within exceptional political contexts such as the ongoing global pandemic. Locking people up for immigration matters is a relatively recent practice. We don’t need to detain; this is a political choice. Given the robust evidence so many people have produced about its harms, inefficiency and financial costs, it is one that we should be working together to draw to a close.





## Acknowledgments

**T**his report has been possible thanks to the support of many people. First, we would like to thank Mary Bosworth and Andriani Fili, who reviewed a draft of this work and provided meaningful insights throughout its development. Without their support and encouragement this project would not have been possible. We would also like to thank Samuel Singler, who has meticulously revised and edited all the sections of the report, as they were written by us. His work has been of inestimable value. We would also like to thank the many people who have contributed to this work by providing first-hand information, as well as by sharing contacts and data. In alphabetical order: Carla Quinto (Be Free), Emanuela Roman (Human Rights and Migration Law Clinic, International University College of Turin), Enrica Rigo (Legal Clinic Roma3), Francesca De Masi (Be Free), Francesca Mazzuzi (LasciateCIEntrare), Fulvio Vassallo Paleologo (ADIF), Galadriel Ravelli (Tenda per la Pace e i Diritti), Gennaro Santoro (CILD), Gervasio Ungolo (Osservatorio Migranti Basilicata), Giovanni Annaloro (ASGI), Giuseppe Platania (Borderline Sicilia), Lorenzo Zauli (Data Visualisation), Maurizio Veglio (Human Rights and Migration Law Clinic, International University College of Turin), No Cpr Network Macomer, No CPR No frontiere FVG Assembly, Paola Andrisani (LasciateCIEntrare), Paola Petrucco (CILD), Philomena Wills (Oxford Migrant Solidarity), Sergio Bontempelli (ADIF), Stefano Galieni (ADIF), Ulrich Stege (Human Rights and Migration Law Clinic, International University College of Turin), and Yasmine Accardo (LasciateCIEntrare). Finally, we would like to thank Giuseppe Campesi and Giulia Fabini for their encouragement for this project and the feedback they provided on earlier drafts.

## Migration-related detention in Italy

The history of administrative detention can be divided into four phases, as recently [argued by Giuseppe Campesi](#): (1) institutionalisation and expansion (1998-2010); (2) consolidation (2011-2012); (3) crisis (2013-2014); (4) “reinvention” (2015 onwards).

The first phase began in 1998, when [Law 40](#), the so-called ‘Immigration Act’, finally came into force to provide a unified framework for the regulation of migration in Italy. Recovering and systematising the provisions enacted in the previous years, the Immigration Act ultimately [normalised the mechanism of administrative detention](#) in Italy. The centres established for this purpose – i.e., for detaining non-nationals when their deportation was not immediately possible – were named as Centri di Permanenza Temporanea e Assistenza (CPTA, Temporary Stay and Assistance Centres), with a special emphasis put on the ‘A’ of ‘Assistance’. The ‘A’, however, later disappeared, marking those centres only for temporary stay (CPT). Despite their [humanitarian façade](#), in these sites migrants could be deprived of their freedom for up to twenty days, extendable for a further ten days in exceptional circumstances (i.e., when it was foreseeable that the impediment to the execution of deportation would be overcome in the following 10 days). As Campesi argues, overall this initial phase was characterised by a rapid expansion of the Italian detention estate.

Over the years the detention system underwent several transformations. Notably, the name of these institutions changed over time: in [2008](#), they became Centri di Identificazione e Espulsione (CIE, Identification and Expulsion Centres); and, in [2017](#), they were transformed into Centri di Permanenza per i Rimpatri (CPR, Holding Centres for Removal). Other important changes regarded the length of detention and the categories affected by it. In

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*(3) crisis;*  
*(4) “reinvention”*

2002, the Bossi-Fini Law ([Law 189/2002](#)) increased the maximum term for detention from 30 to 60 days. While this law made detention an ordinary tool of migration control, it was also extended to asylum seekers, particularly – but not only – those applying for asylum at the same time as they were going through an expulsion procedure. In 2009, the so-called Security Package ([Law 94/2009](#)), which further strengthened the migration-security nexus, introduced the crime of irregular entry and stay, punished with fines ranging from 5,000 to €10,000. The same provision also raised the maximum detention period to 180 days. This period was further extended to 18 months in 2011, when another [Security Package](#) was issued in order to complete the implementation of the [Directive 2004/38/EC](#) and transpose the [Directive 2008/115/EC](#) ([Law 129/2011](#)). Overall, as noted by Campesi, this phase (2011-2012) was characterised by a consolidation of the detention apparatus, which also corresponded to an increase in the number of centres operating on the national territory: from seven centres in 1998, [to eleven centres in 2012](#) with a maximum capacity of 1,775 places (and two centres under renovation). Not surprisingly, these changes happened under the rule of right-wing governments in Italy (2001-2006 and 2008-2011), which based their consensus on the spread of a xenophobic and racist discourse and sentiment among the general population.

In the period 2013-2014, the Italian detention system entered a ‘crisis’. This was a period of [divestment](#) from administrative detention and a general decline in the reliance on this practice. As reported by Campesi, from 2009 onwards, and especially as a consequence of the economic crisis, Italy became less attractive to migrants, at the same time as other routes became more popular. The number of people holding work or family-related residence permits decreased significantly in those years, as well as the estimated number of illegalised migrants in the country ([Campesi, 2020, p. 392, Fig. 1](#)). Administrative detention began to be perceived as an inefficient tool for enforcing a return policy and its excessive costs were questioned in political debates. As a result, the focus of criticism moved to detention conditions and the compatibility of this measure with migrants’ fundamental rights. Thanks also to the struggles undertaken by detainees and activists, in October 2014 the maximum length of detention was reduced from 18 months to 90 days, or 30 days in the case of migrants who had previously served a prison sentence for three months or more ([Law 161/2014](#)).

Yet, the enthusiasm for these changes did not last long. In 2015 the [Legislative Decree 142 already marked a regression point](#) in this field, establishing that for some categories of asylum seekers who could be detained – such as those regarded as ‘a threat to public order and security’ or ‘at risk of absconding’, as well as for migrants who sought asylum in detention – the time limit could be extended up to 12 months in order to allow for the examination of their claims. The rationale behind this measure was to prevent the instrumental use of asylum as a means to delay or avoid deportation.

In 2017, administrative detention was brought back to the centre of the political agenda. With [Law Decree 13/2017](#) (later converted with amendments into [Law 46](#)), known as the Minniti-Orlando Decree, the Italian government, partly in response to pressures from the European Commission, [mandated the expansion of the immigration detention estate](#) in order to increase deportations. New detention facilities (CPRs), were to be opened in every Italian region, in order to reach a total capacity of 1,600 places. Finally, in 2018, the Law Decree on Immigration and Security (known as ‘Decreto Salvini’), later

converted into [Law 132/2018](#)<sup>1</sup>, turned administrative detention into ‘a key instrument in the current government of migration, with worrisome repercussions on the general system of protection of migrants’ rights’, [according to the National Guarantor](#). In particular, this law introduced the possibility to detain asylum seekers for identification purposes, i.e. to ascertain their identity and citizenship. This form of detention, which should take place in ‘special spaces’ within hotspots and governmental first reception centres, can last up to 30 days. If more time is needed to finalise their identification, asylum seekers can then be taken to a CPR, where they can be held for a maximum of 180 days (thus reaching a total of 210 days of deprivation of liberty). As for migrants not requesting asylum, detention was once again prolonged for up to six months, although, over the years, it has been shown that the duration of detention does not influence the likelihood of removal<sup>2</sup>. In their cases too, the range of places usable for administrative detention purposes was expanded, by [introducing the ambiguous category of ‘suitable places’ or ‘suitable facilities’](#) where non-nationals affected by a removal order can be temporarily confined (up to six days). It is noteworthy that no official list is available at the present of these so-defined ‘suitable sites’, furthermore this provision [violates the obligations deriving from article 13 of the Italian Constitution and article 5 of the ECHR](#).

At the moment of writing - September 2020 - seven detention centres are operational: Roma Ponte Galeria, Torino Corso Brunelleschi, Macomer (Nuoro), Gradisca d’Isonzo, Brindisi Restinco, Bari Palese, and Milano Via Corelli. In particular, the latter (i.e., Milano CPR) has become [operational on 28<sup>th</sup> September](#), amidst harsh opposition from [local political representatives](#) and, above all, [activists](#) who have long been [denouncing this plan](#). As we were collecting data and writing up this Report, during the period of the first lockdown (March-May 2020) and the summer, two centres were closed: Caltanissetta Pian del Lago ([closed on May 1st](#)) and Palazzo San Gervasio ([closed on the 25<sup>th</sup> of May](#)). Right before the outbreak of the pandemic and the first lockdown measures, in mid-February, the [CPR of Trapani Milo was closed](#) too. In all cases, and as often occurred since the [beginning of the establishment of the Italian detention istate](#), the facilities were closed as a result of detainees’ protests, which often led to the destruction of entire parts of the buildings making them unusable.

Since 1998 countless facilities have operated in Italy; it is impossible to describe them exhaustively in this work. We will therefore list below, in alphabetical order, the various centres that have existed in these twenty years. For each centre we also report sources for those interested in learning more: Agrigento, San Benedetto district (see [here](#), page

***At the moment of writing - September 2020 - seven detention centres are operational***

<sup>1</sup>As we are publishing this report, a new immigration law decree [is being issued](#) by the Italian Government. This measure, which is now in discussion at the Parliament in order to be converted into Law, introduces [several amendments](#), including on detention. On the one hand, it reduces the maximum time for detention to 90 days, extendable for further 30 days in the case of migrants coming from countries with which the Italian government has established bilateral repatriation agreements. On the other hand, however, the law decree makes it easier to prosecute detainees who engage in riots and protests inside the centres.

<sup>2</sup>It is worth noting that, according to [data published](#) by the National Guarantor, the deportations effectively carried out in 2019 concerned only the 46,28% of the detained population, [a percentage almost identical to previous years when the detention time limit was shorter](#).

133); Bologna (see [here](#), page 78); Catania in the airport space of Fontanarossa (see [here](#) and [here](#)); Crotone Isola Capo Rizzuto (see [Rovelli 2006](#), page 229; [Accardo e Galieni 2019](#), page 36); Lamezia Terme (see [here](#) page 117 and [here](#) page 14); Lecce San Foca di Melendugno (see [here](#), page 95); Modena (see [here](#), page 67); Ragusa (see [Rovelli 2006](#), page 241); Santa Maria Capua Vetere (see [here](#)); Termini Imerese, province of Palermo (see [here](#) and [here](#)); Trapani Chinisia (see [here](#)); Trapani Serraino Vulpitta (see [here](#), page 140); Trieste (see [Accardo e Galieni 2019](#), page 23).

In addition to this list of ‘official’ detention centres – i.e. those established and formally recognised as places of detention by the competent institutional authorities according to the regulations in force – over the years structures that could be defined as ‘hybrid’ have also appeared. A ‘hybrid’ is understood to be any detention facility whose legal status is uncertain and undefined, whose original nature was sometimes intended for reception, but which in practice happened to be used for detention purposes ([here](#), page 153; [Rovelli 2006](#), page 247; and [here](#)).

In order to better grasp the operation of the Italian detention system, it is also necessary to focus briefly on the role played by the entities who manage these centres and understand the historical evolution of the detention management model. The role of managing bodies has indeed been central to the increasing [political and public legitimisation of detention](#) in Italy. It is noteworthy that, between 1998 and 2000, the management of almost all the detention centres in Italy was outsourced by the various Prefects – through direct assignment following private negotiations – to the Italian Red Cross. At that time, and even if the managing body was the same, the disparities in terms of everyday life regimes in the different centres were striking, as also highlighted by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture in its [2003 Report](#).

In 2000, in order to address these concerns, especially after [the tragic death of six men in Trapani’s CPTA Serraino Vulpitta](#), and to create a more homogeneous regime across the centres, the Ministry of the Interior Enzo Bianco issued the [General Directive on Temporary Stay and Assistance Centres](#). In this Directive general instructions were provided for the establishment, operation and management of detention facilities, as well as the principles for the treatment of detainees. In doing so, this Directive strengthened a trend towards the outsourcing of detention centres’ management and service provision to private entities through ad-hoc agreements. It was only two years later, however, that the Department of Civil Liberties and Immigration issued [national management guidelines](#) for privatisation, also drawing up a scheme of agreement between Prefectures and managing bodies. This agreement outlined the services to be provided by the latter, such as healthcare services, as well as the minimum number of staff members (proportionate to the number of people detained). In addition, the management guidelines made a provision for the reliance on a tendering process for the selection of third parties managing bodies, based on a biennial contract framework. These bodies were usually humanitarian organisations already involved in the ‘migrant reception industry’, leading some scholars (see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)) to speak of a ‘humanitarian government of detention’, which was crucial in legitimising this practice in the eyes of the public.

Notably, beyond considering the competence, professionalism, and mission of the competing organisations, the tendering process also took into account the cost-

effectiveness of their bids, for the first time evaluated on a ‘per day/per person’ price basis (for an explanation see [MSF Report 2004](#), pages 11-13). This outsourcing mechanism, which fits well within wider socio-economic trajectories of neoliberal policymaking, has paved the way to the more recent entry of multinational companies into the Italian detention market, thanks to partnerships established with local humanitarian actors. For instance, Turin’s detention centre is currently administered by a consortium composed of an Italian cultural association ([Acquarinto](#), page 183) and a French company leader in the prison industry service management ([GEPSA](#), page 4 and [here](#), page 15). In Palazzo San Gervasio, Engel Srl won the tender for the management of the centre, despite the fact that in the past it was implicated in [reports](#) about the mismanagement of several reception centres and was also the subject of a [parliamentary inquiry](#). Finally, in Macomer the managing body is ORS Italia Srl, a branch of a multinational company whose main interest in financial speculation and profit has been [critically highlighted](#). In each case, the managing company won a public tender, which was assigned on [the basis of the most financially advantageous bid](#) (on this topic see [Report Lunaria](#), p. 48-55).

Finally, as this report shows, migrant detention in Italy has not been structured in an entirely top-down fashion. Militant journalists, human rights organisations, anti-racist movements and solidarity groups have engaged in actions, complaints and public mobilisations against the detention system. These groups have denounced the [violations of human rights](#) taking place inside these institutions – including the right to health, information, justice, protection from violence – while also highlighting the [non-reformability of the detention system](#) as such. On the other side of the wall, detention centres have often become the scenario of protests, hunger strikes, and riots undertaken by detainees, who have long been protesting against the unfairness of a deprivation of liberty based on administrative grounds and the poor living conditions inside these facilities. Faced with high levels of uncertainty and institutional violence, self-harm has also frequently been used as [an act of resistance](#). To support these struggles, activists have often gathered in front of the facilities to communicate with and offer solidarity to those detained inside, while also using independent [radio stations](#) and websites to amplify their voices (see [here](#) and [here](#)).



## Migration detention in times of Covid-19

In the past few months, a new and unexpected reality has turned everyone's lives upside down. It was immediately evident to the many of us engaged in this field as scholars, advocates, and/or activists that enforced group confinement inherent in immigration detention, as well as in other forms of incarceration, would significantly increase the risk of Covid-19 contamination. The conditions in these custodial sites, as [research](#) and [NGOs reports](#) have long demonstrated, are inadequate to guarantee detainees' (and staff's) right to health and a [dignified life](#) especially in the context of a global pandemic. Overcrowding, degraded facilities, poor sanitary conditions, scarce access to healthcare, and lack of information channels are only some of the problems in detention. This situation has given rise to serious concerns among scholars and activists, and led to detainees' protests. During the Covid-19 outbreak, this critical scenario was further complicated by the impossibility to deport people due to enforced border closures, thus raising questions about the legal and moral grounds for continuing this practice. These considerations, and the foreseeable [impact](#) of Covid-19 on migrants in or at risk of immigration detention, have led to the proliferation of [calls](#) by civil-society groups, as well as by national and international human rights bodies (see, for instance, [here](#) and [here](#)).

***Overcrowding,  
degraded facilities,  
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conditions, scarce  
access to health-  
care, and lack of  
information  
channels***

Unlike other countries (such as [Spain](#) or even [the UK](#)), in Italy the government did not take any concrete action to respond to public calls for releasing people in detention and closing these institutions. This is in spite of the National Guarantor, Dr. Mauro Palma, – who is also the reference person for the Italian National Prevention Mechanism – having expressed repeated concerns about the continuation of migrants' detention in times of a global pandemic (see, for instance, [here](#) and [here](#)). Just to give a sense of the background context, it is worth mentioning that in Italy the first death of a person who tested positive to

Covid-19 was [registered on the 20<sup>th</sup> of February](#), in Codogno (province of Lodi, Lombardy region). While the ‘state of emergency’ had already been [declared on the 31<sup>st</sup> of January](#), it was only on the night between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> of March that the President of the Council of Ministers, Giuseppe Conte, [established the lockdown](#) in a number of Italian regions. The lockdown [was extended to the whole country](#) on the night of the 9<sup>th</sup> of March and lasted until the 18<sup>th</sup> of May. It is in this context that the (mild) measures on immigration detention reported in a number of circulars (‘circolari’) issued by the Minister of Interior were adopted. Our report is set against this context.

The circulars issued required local Prefectures, and other competent local authorities, to monitor the enforcement of adequate measures by managing bodies to contain and prevent the spread of Covid-19 inside CPRs. The first circular, dated 5<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 ([circular no. 5587](#)), as well as [circular no. 3393 of the 18<sup>th</sup> of March 2020](#), urged managing bodies to adopt appropriate measures to prevent Covid-19 contagion. These included avoiding any form of assembly, even during the distribution of meals; delivering information in foreign languages (relying on the support of posters and cultural mediators) about the rules on compliance and hygiene standards; and providing sufficient PPE supply.

In the circulars no. [5987, 10<sup>th</sup> of March 2020](#), and [3567, 26<sup>th</sup> of March 2020](#), it was recommended that detainees’ body temperature should be checked before accessing the centres. In addition, in the event of new arrivals, ordinary medical examinations should be carried out and, where possible, new detainees should be placed in separate rooms for at least the 14 days of mandatory quarantine. Meetings with lawyers and external people should take place adhering to the 2-metre distance health rule. In this context, although the pre-existing prohibition for detainees to keep personal phones in their dormitories/living units was reiterated<sup>3</sup>, it was suggested that [managing bodies facilitated detainees’ phone contact with relatives and friends](#).

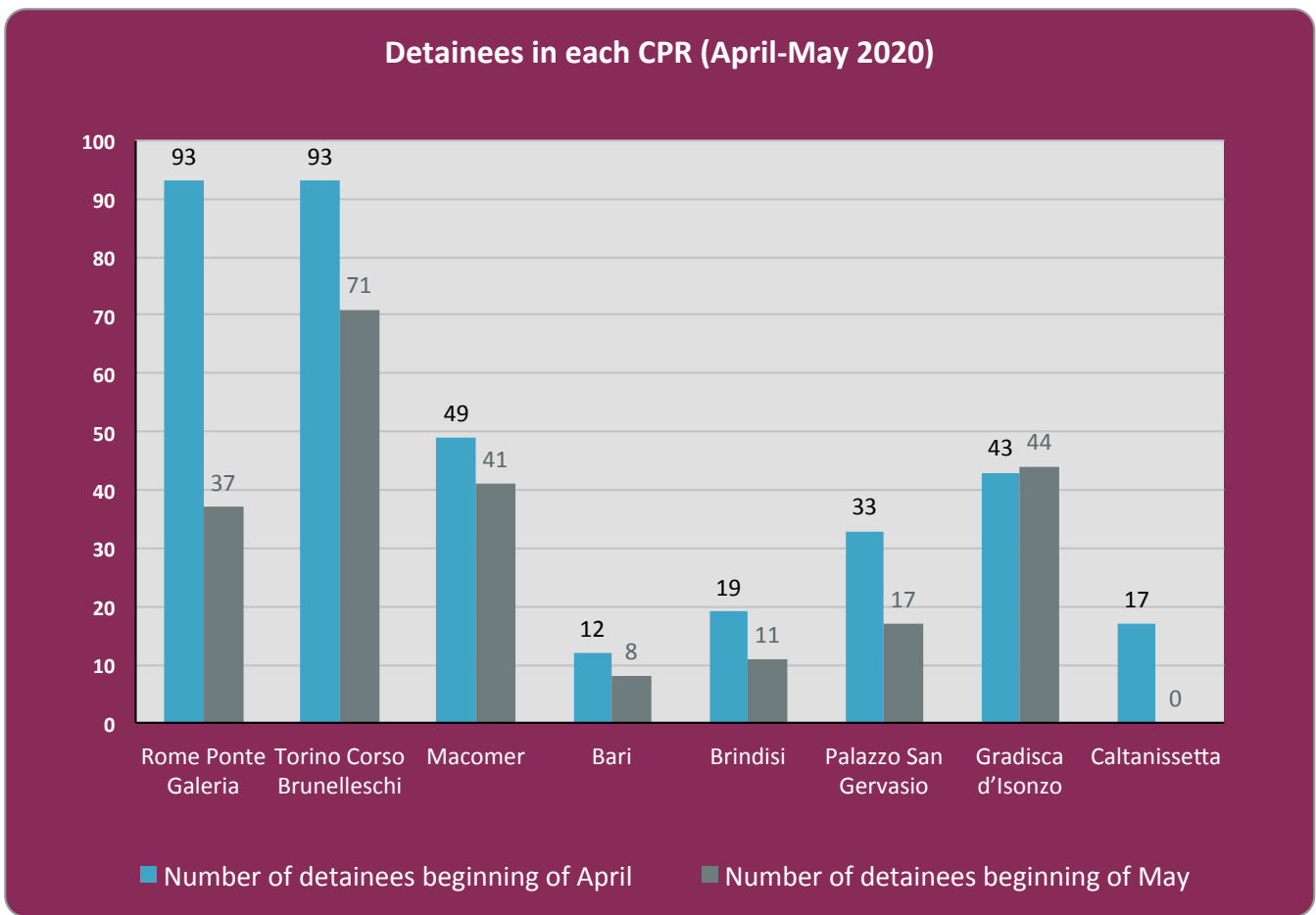
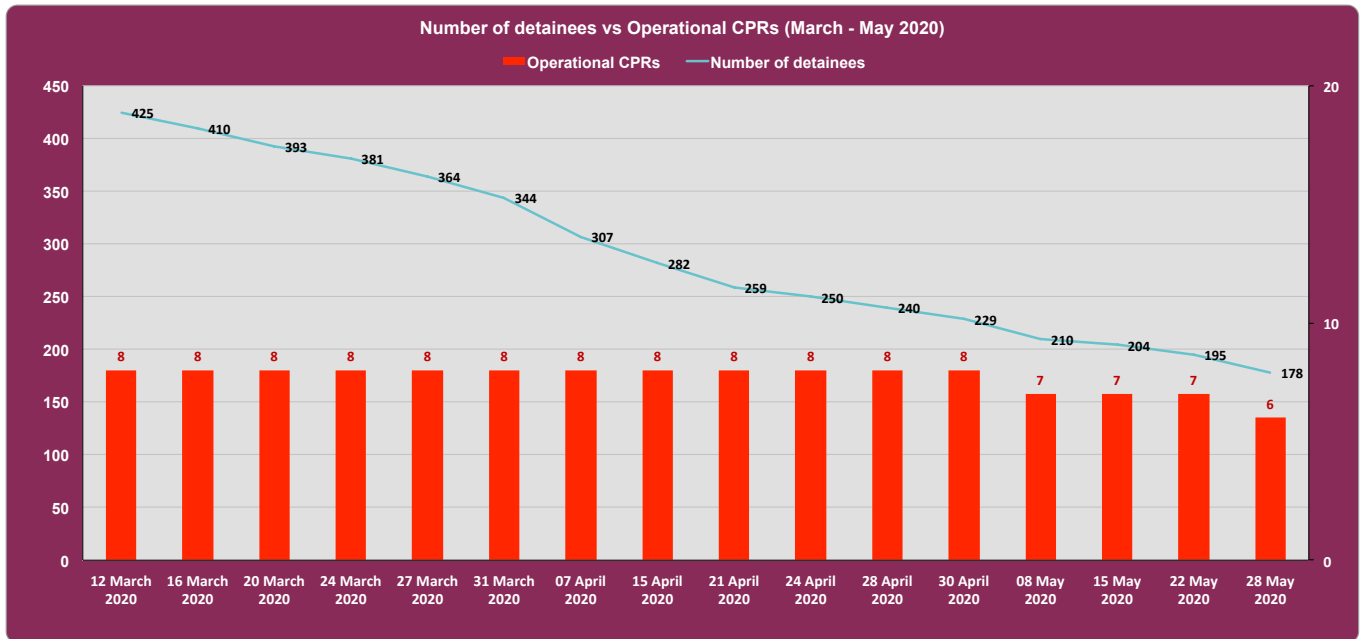
The last circular (no. [3728, 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2020](#)) reiterated the necessity for centres’ managing bodies to identify areas inside the centres, or dedicated modules, to use for those subject to health surveillance and isolation measures.

Yet, as this report shows and as the National Guarantor has denounced on several occasions (see [here](#) and [here](#)), these measures have not always been put in practice as, for instance, the provision of PPE to detainees, the observation of social distancing and hygienic standards, and the allowance of contacts with the outside have frequently been lacking.

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<sup>3</sup> Notably, since January 2020, phones were prohibited inside some detention centres through internal circulars (an exception is the women’s section in Ponte Galeria-Rome where women detainees have unlimited access to their phones which, however, have no video capabilities).





Since the very beginning of the pandemic, civil society groups have undertaken, both jointly and individually, a number of advocacy actions. Requests to stop arrivals in CPRs emerged right at the start of the health emergency. [Associazione per gli Studi Giuridici sull'Immigrazione \(ASGI\)](#), [Coalizione Italiana Libertà e Diritti civili \(CILD\)](#), [Antigone](#), [Progetto Diritti](#), [Legal Team Italy](#), the [Legal Clinic of Roma Tre](#) and [LasciateCIEntrare](#) sent a [letter](#) to the Justices of the Peace and the Judges of the specialised sections of the Courts inviting them not to validate or extend the detention of foreign nationals inside CPRs. This was brought even further by CILD, which sent a [letter to the Councils of the Bar Associations](#), sharing concerns about the management of the health emergency in detention facilities. These advocacy actions were also accompanied by constant monitoring of the decisions taken by judicial authorities regarding the detention of foreign nationals during the pandemic as well as of their treatment in sites of detention. Following CILD's letter, the National Bar Association sent a [letter to the Italian government](#) demanding measures to protect vulnerable groups, including asylum seekers and homeless people.

Similarly, the document [Covid-19 Emergency. The impact on foreign citizens' rights and the necessary protection measures: a first overview](#)<sup>4</sup>, signed by several Italian associations, highlighted the main challenges that foreign nationals – particularly asylum seekers – face in the context of a global pandemic. In light of these challenges, the document reported concrete proposals and demands, including the demand to stop any new arrivals to the CPRs and apply alternative measures to those already detained. Moving forward with their demands, activists, associations and members of the civil-society sent a [letter to the Minister of the Interior, the Prefects, and the Heads of Police Headquarters](#) soliciting the immediate suspension of any new arrival in CPRs and the progressive closure of all Italian detention centres. In addition, further advocacy actions were undertaken by some solidarity groups. For instance, the Legal Clinic of Rome, together with other legal associations, prepared and disseminated an online [form](#) to request the re-examination and termination of migrants' detention to the competent judicial authorities. ASGI also sent open letters to the ASLs (Aziende Sanitarie Locali - Local Sanitary Public Companies) located in the areas where CPRs were operating with the intent to solicit a thorough assessment of health conditions of detained migrants, the suitability of detention facilities, and the measures taken by managing bodies to prevent and contain the spread of Covid-19.

The activist campaign [LasciateCIEntrare](#) also sent a series of letters to national and local authorities demanding the protection of homeless migrant people (see [here](#) and [here](#)), to find a shelter for them, and to prevent their confinement into CPRs, which happened in several cases as also highlighted in our Report. Finally, local NoCPR groups have struggled to keep contact with those detained and provide public information on the situation inside the centres and the abuses perpetrated against detained migrants (see for example [here](#) and [here](#)). They have also organised [petitions](#) demanding the immediate closure of all CPRs, while also monitoring the situation and measures in other European countries - such as Spain, France and the UK - and the measures taken in them. Relevant

***Since the very beginning of the pandemic, civil society groups have undertaken, both jointly and individually, a number of advocacy actions.***

<sup>4</sup> Translation by authors.

in comparative terms was also the [Report on European pre-removal detention centers during the COVID-19 pandemic](#) published by the [Human Rights and Migration Law Clinic](#) of the International University College of Turin, which provided a view on the situation in Italy, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden and the UK.

It is finally worth mentioning how unofficial forms of migrant detention have started to proliferate in the context of the pandemic, supposedly for hygienic-sanitary reasons justified in the name of both migrants' and citizens' protection. Exemplary in this regard are the quarantine ships, which were introduced on the 12<sup>th</sup> of April with [a measure signed by the head of Italian Civil Protection](#). This decision came following the promulgation of the so-called '[Porti Chiusi Decree](#)', an inter-ministerial decree as a result of which Italy ceased to be considered a 'Place of Safety' for all the duration of the Covid-19 emergency. Following these two measures, all persons rescued outside the Italian Search and Rescue (SAR) area from ships flying foreign flags, or landed autonomously on the Italian shores, were no longer placed in hotspots but rather held in precautionary medical isolation on ships identified by the Italian Ministry of Infrastructure and Transports off the Italian ports. These ships, on which the Italian Red Cross has been tasked with providing health care and other basic services to migrants, began to function as '[floating hotspots](#)' (for more information, see [CILD's report](#) page 21-25). Sadly some people have already lost their lives on them, or trying to escape from them (see [here](#) and [here](#)).

In response to this situation, activists and lawyers have raised their voices. For instance, InLimine members underlined the [strong discriminatory character](#) of the use of quarantine ships, a measure which ends up criminalising those arriving in Italy by other means than the 'conventional ones', such as flights or cars. For the latter, the law provided that, in the absence of symptoms, they only had to communicate to the ASL their place of residence and place themselves in preventive confinement for 14 days. The National Guarantor has also expressed repeated concerns about the condition of limbo to which migrants on quarantine ships are exposed, recalling that this extra-territoriality condition cannot lead to exceptional treatment, such as the deprivation of certain fundamental rights of asylum seekers or the absence of protection for particularly vulnerable people (see [here](#) and [here](#)). Overall, different actors have raised concerns about the development of a 'carceral reception system', with deprivation of liberty becoming the default means to implement health measures (see [Bulletin no. 29](#)).



# Turin's Corso Brunelleschi detention centre

## Overview

*(currently managed by the French company GEPSA in partnership with the cultural association Acuarinto)*

Corso Brunelleschi [detention centre in Turin](#) opened in 1999 as one of the first centres specially designed for the purpose of detaining non-citizens awaiting identification and removal from Italy. Officially, it can hold up to 210 men. The effective capacity, however, is lower than that, as some detention units are (totally or partially) unusable due to damage caused during detainees' riots. At present 107 people can be held in the centre.

Located in the neighbourhood of Pozzo Strada, between Santa Maria Mazzarello street (where the entrance is located) and Brunelleschi avenue (from which the centre takes its name), Turin's detention centre is close to the historic centre of the city. As the Human Rights and Migration Law Clinic (HRMLC) noted, this institution is: 'geographically a bus ride away from the parks, piazzas and coffee shops of Turin, and yet still seems a world away'. The area where the detention centre lies was [a military area belonging to the Cavour barracks](#), more specifically a former firing range of the Genio Ferrovieri regiment. Initially, the centre was made up of [12x3x2.5 m sized containers](#), where both the dormitories of the detained migrants (men and women at that time) and the staff offices were located. In May 2008, following [criticisms raised about the inadequacy of the previous structure](#), the renovated facility, [with roughly the same architectural arrangement](#), opened its doors. As reported in different media accounts, the Turin centre currently looks like [a high-security facility springing up in the middle of a residential area](#).

The centre has historically been managed by the Italian Red Cross, which maintained its role until January 2015. Afterwards, the management was taken over by a consortium

composed of the French company GEPSA (a leader in prison industry service management) and the Italian cultural association Acuarinto, which also managed Rome's Ponte Galeria detention centre for a while.

The austere and carceral layout, where military officers guard detainees and stand in-between them and the staff, has recently been criticised also by the [Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment \(CPT\)](#), which has invited Italian authorities to reconsider the centre's emphasis on security ([paragraph 62](#)). The facility, surrounded by a high brick wall, is composed by a main building at the entrance – where administrative offices and services, such as legal advice, are located – and a large area protected by high metal fences where migrants/non-citizens are confined. This area consists of six detention units, each one composed of a dormitory and a common area used as a canteen, separated from the others by bars five meters high and corridors. The detention units, which are divided by a central football pitch, are named according to different colours: the Violet Area, the Yellow Area, the White Area, the Red Area, the Blue Area and the Green Area. Over the time, some of these areas have been [temporarily closed down or underused](#), because of the damages caused by detainee protests.

Notably, the living conditions inside the detention units are squalid (e.g. toilets are not separated from the bedrooms by any door or curtain) and detainees are not allowed to move to the main building where administrative offices and services, including legal advice, are located. In addition, staff do not enter the detention units, but only approach those detained from outside the fences. This architectural organisation, as the National Guarantor has [observed](#), 'sets out a dehumanizing context where access/exercise of rights, of which the detained persons are the holders, translates into the physical demarcation of the power relation between the Centre's staff and the foreign national detainee who is in a vulnerable condition' (page 10).

***'gives the impression of a zoo-like environment'***

Finally, a very problematic area is the one called Ospedaletto (literally, 'small hospital'). This area consists of a single building divided into twelve segregation cells, with a total capacity of 24 beds. Each cell, which can accommodate up to two people, has a fenced yard and, as [noted](#) by the National Guarantor, 'gives the impression of a zoo-like environment' (page 6). According to the management, the Ospedaletto is used for the purpose of medical precautionary isolation, as well as for detainees' 'personal safety', as in the case of LGBTQIA+ detainees. Yet, segregation for disciplinary or security reasons, reserved to detainees seen as 'troublemakers', seems to be a common practice, even though [no specific provision currently exists](#) to regulate the placement, duration, conditions, and safeguards surrounding the use of segregation units or cells inside Italian detention centres. Finally, it is worrying to note that, during his visit in March 2018, the National Guarantor accidentally discovered the existence of four 'holding cells' located in the ground floor and basement level of the main administrative building. The conditions in which he found these cells were deplorable (see his [Report](#), page 13).

Over the years, a number of abuses, inefficiencies and serious human rights violations have been reported inside 'Brunelleschi' detention centre. Different groups and individuals

have raised concerns about the poor living conditions inside the facility, the insufficient activities and opportunities for education and training, the scarce hygiene and, above all, the poor quality of health protection provided to detainees. The violation of the right to health for migrants confined inside Turin's detention centre was also the focus of a research [report](#) recently published by the HRMLC. The main points highlighted included: the lack of regulation and data-collection obligations regarding the healthcare of detainees; problems in the transmission of medical records from prisons and in the accessibility of these records by legal representatives; the excessive bureaucratisation and length of the healthcare process which involves multiple actors who usually lack ad-hoc training and do not efficiently communicate among themselves (i.e., the managing body, healthcare workers, immigration officers, armed forces); and, above all, the poor quality of the treatment provided to detainees. Sadly, two persons have also lost their lives in this dehumanising site. One is [Fathi Manai](#), a 38-years old Tunisian man who in May 2008 was found dead in his bed, probably due to pneumonia that was neither detected nor cured by the centre's medical staff. The other one is [Faisal Hossai](#), a Bangladeshi man who passed away on the night of the 7<sup>th</sup> of July 2019, after having been segregated in the Ospedaletto for fifteen-days.



Photo Credits Manuel Coser

This harsh environment, which has also included recurrent episodes of [police violence](#) against detainees (see also [here](#)), has given rise over the years to several protests, organised within and outside the centre walls. Detainees' voices and acts of resistance – which have included [fires](#), [escapes](#), [hunger strikes](#), and in several cases forms of self-harm, including [lip-sewing](#) - have usually been amplified and supported by local no border groups through [online news](#), [radio podcasts](#), and solidarity protests. In some cases even [videos](#) have been disseminated to denounce the very serious human rights violations taking place [behind the inscrutable walls](#) of the 'Brunelleschi' detention centre.

## During the Covid-19 outbreak: 9th March - 18th May 2020

Since the beginning of the health emergency, the Corso Brunelleschi CPR in Turin was the detention centre with the highest number of detainees, although during the lockdown period the detention population progressively decreased in this facility. While there were [103 detainees](#) held inside the center in early March, out of a maximum of 171 people, on the 24th of March the [Italian Coalition for Civil Liberties and Rights \(CILD\)](#) reported that 93 people were still detained, evidence that the centre was almost at its maximum capacity. The National Guarantor also confirmed that Turin's CPR has been the facility with the highest number of detainees during the Covid-19 pandemic, compared to the other detention centres in the country: [Bulletin no. 29](#) and [Bulletin no. 31](#), dated the 1<sup>st</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> of May, respectively report that 71 and 68 people were still detained in the centre at that time<sup>5</sup>. Notably, although the high number of people confined, [only three detention units were usable \(the Blue, Violet and Yellow areas\)](#) beyond the area of the Ospedaletto, so migrants have been concentrated in these spaces.

As reported by different sources throughout the pandemic, illegalised migrants have continued to be taken to the centre, including those stopped by police in the streets in Turin as well as in other northern cities. For example, on the night of the 17<sup>th</sup> of March several homeless people were stopped during a police raid in Bolzano as being unable to comply with the emergency rules of home isolation. Some of these people were found to be undocumented and, although Gradisca d'Isonzo was the nearest detention centre, they were transferred to Corso Brunelleschi. In light of this evidence, Alda Re, an activist of [LasciateCIEntrare](#), proposes a possible interpretation in an [interview](#) given at the end of April. She argues that Turin Police Headquarters's tendency to issue migrants with detention orders has made this centre a 'privileged destination' to which all illegalised people stopped in the northern regions of Italy could be directed. Interestingly, after the 1<sup>st</sup> of April, no arrivals of migrants taken from the streets were registered, but new detainees continued to arrive from prison institutions (see [CILD's report](#)).

[According](#) to the city Guarantor Monica Cristina Gallo, who entered the centre on the 26<sup>th</sup> of May 2020, upon arrival newcomers underwent a medical screening and a 14-day medical isolation period in the *Ospedaletto* (in compliance with the Ministry of Interior [circular](#) of the 26<sup>th</sup> of March)<sup>6</sup>. Yet, in her [interview](#) published almost a month before, Alda Re reports that new detainees were kept in medical isolation only for a few days and then placed into shared sectors with other migrants (this happened also in the case of those arriving from areas in the proximity of outbreaks and therefore at high risk). So, it is possible that, during the intervening month (i.e., May), the practice changed and more precautions were taken (potentially as a result of many denouncements from human rights group and activists). Furthermore, the city Guarantor Ms. Gallo [indicates](#) that only those migrants who had reached their maximum detention period (180 days) were released from the centre during the lockdown. For these people, no particular release or support procedures were put in place and, remarkably, orders to leave the national territory within

<sup>5</sup> According to the [CILD](#), the Guarantor of the city of Turin, Monica Cristina Gallo, reports that on the 26th of May, 62 men were detained inside the centre, being the CPR with the highest number of detainees at that time.

<sup>6</sup> With the exception of those who got tested before entering the centre (see [here](#) page 90).

seven days continued to be issued. When she asked detention authorities about this during her visit at the centre on the 26<sup>th</sup> of May, the Guarantor received no explanation on how released migrants were expected to comply with such orders, given the suspension of the majority of international flights at place.

Several critical issues and shortcomings with respect to life conditions inside Turin's CPR during the lockdown were also brought to light during the meeting of the [Legality Commission of the City of Turin](#), held on the [24<sup>th</sup> of March](#), which was attended by several experts, including the [city Guarantor](#), the [Piedmont representative of Amnesty International](#), an associate lawyer of [ASGI](#) and a member of the [HRMLC](#) of the International University College of Turin. In addition to the absence of appropriate measures for guaranteeing detainees' isolation and an effective prevention of Covid-19 contagion, the experts [pointed out](#) a reduction in healthcare and cultural mediation services provided inside the centre. Finally, the experts drew the attention of the Commission to the limited spaces available inside the facility (dormitories of about 50 square meters where seven people are held together), and how this physical layout made it [almost impossible to implement an effective social distancing](#).

Alda Re, in her [interview](#), also critically commented that at the beginning of the pandemic the different areas of the facility were not properly sanitised, and that during the first months no PPE was provided to detainees although the government had allocated specific funds for this. Notably, however, in his [Bulletin no. 26](#) of the 21<sup>st</sup> of April the National Guarantor reported that, in response to a questionnaire administered in the previous days, all CPR managers declared to have provided detainees with adequate information, in several languages, on the pandemic and the related health and sanitary measures to prevent the spread of the virus. In addition, the managers claimed to have carried out regular disinfections, ensured the premises' hygienic conditions, increased the number of personal hygiene kits, and made PPE available to detainees at release. In contrast to these statements, detainees' first-hand accounts published by [noborder activist groups](#) highlight a different situation. In particular, they reveal that, despite what was declared by the authorities, the hygienic-sanitary conditions inside the centre were totally inadequate to deal with a health emergency. As one migrant argued:

***The masks were given to us on the 17th of April, and that's it, and without changing them.***

***Without even the hand sanitiser that is required by law***

*The masks were given to us on the 17<sup>th</sup> of April<sup>7</sup>, and that's it, and without changing them. Without even the hand sanitiser that is required by law. We have never seen that here.*

It was only on the 26<sup>th</sup> of May, during her visit to the centre, that the city Guarantor [verified](#), at that time, the centre's areas were sanitised on a daily basis and the supply of personal hygiene products had been increased. According to detainees' accounts, the city Guarantor also confirmed that it was only at the end of April that face mask distribution came into place. This patchy information, with official statements in opposition to what reported by detainees, activists and monitoring bodies confirm, overall, what was claimed

<sup>7</sup> This information is corroborated by testimonies collected by the [CPR-Research Group of the HRMLC](#) which confirm that PPE was provided to detainees only on the 17th of April (see page 45).



by Alda Re in her interview, namely, that a veil of opacity has characterised the entire health management of the lockdown inside Turin's centre, with little information provided to human rights advocates about the real living conditions of detainees and the measures taken to protect their health.

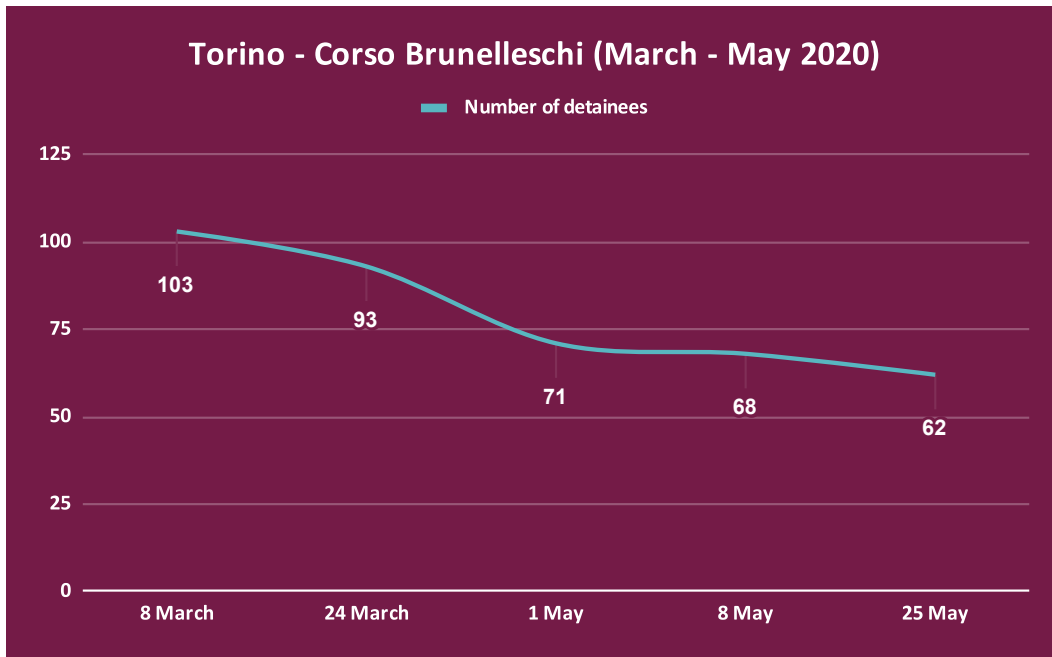
For instance, as far as particularly vulnerable individuals are concerned, the city Guarantor [reported](#):

*The spokespersons of the CPR manager, the Immigration Office and the Prefecture claim that there have been no particular cases involving vulnerable individuals. They have, however, intensified psychological counselling sessions for 'a couple of detainees', who were most disoriented and frightened by the health emergency.*

Yet, we are unsure about the effective impact of such a measure. This is particularly true in the face of the numerous concerns raised during the years by civil society organisations about the presence inside the centre of highly vulnerable migrants, including people facing mental health challenges, survivors of trafficking, violence and torture (see [here](#)), and, overall, the high rates of self-harm among detainees (see [here](#) and [here](#)).

Still on the subject of health, the National Guarantor in his [Bulletin no 26](#) stated that, based on what was declared by CPR managers in the questionnaires, health monitoring and screening programmes, especially for migrants subject to isolation, had been put in place in almost all CPRs early on, including in Turin's centre. On her visit, however, the city Guarantor did not mention any reference to these programmes and we were unable to find further information on this. The city Guarantor [reported](#), instead, that the managing body produced and handed out a handbook to detainees with the information provided by national health authorities. She also observed that the centre had restored its wire broadcasting system, which was used to repeat information on contagion prevention twice a day in different languages.

With respect to contact with the outside world and visits by family members, it should be noted that, since the beginning of January 2020, an internal policy of systematic seizure of mobile phones at the entrance has been implemented in the centre, as [reported](#), once again, by Alda Re. During the national lockdown period, the city Guarantor [confirmed](#) the continuity of this practice and added that detainees were able to contact friends and family only through the facility's communal phones (except for the Ospedaletto area where [no communal phones were provided](#)), and through letters sent by regular mail. It is worth noting, however, that during this period, mail delivery has been seriously slowed down and letters have arrived at their destination weeks after the original scheduled date. This evidence therefore raises questions about the effectiveness of this means of communications. It should also be added that since March all visits from external persons were suspended: the only face-to-face visits allowed were lawyers. Human rights advocates, psychologists and social workers could instead maintain contact with detainees only remotely. To enable this communication, the city Guarantor [reported](#) that an ad-hoc audio-visual equipment was set up on the ground floor of the facility while also being used for validation and extension hearings. However, when it comes to family



contacts, the use of this equipment has been allowed only in [cases of ‘extreme necessity’](#), such as that of dying relatives, which means that it has almost never been used (which means that it has almost never been used).

Given the high number of people detained inside Corso Brunelleschi, and the history of protests that has characterised this centre (see, for instance, [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)), it is plausible to think that acts of resistance have been taking place during the reporting period too<sup>8</sup>. Yet, given the [veil of obscurity](#) that characterises Turin’s centre in particular, and the Italian detention system in general, we do not have specific information about this. Notably, human rights advocates and activist lawyers [have long tried to get access to the facility](#), having usually been denied entry due to reasons of public order and security inside the centre, or for no reason at all (this evidence was corroborated by a recent sentence of the [Regional Administrative Court \(TAR\) of Piemonte](#), which accepted an appeal filed by ASGI in this respect). To break the silence around Turin detention centre, and allow detained migrants to communicate with the outside world, anti-detention activists organised a collection of phone-cards, which were distributed during a rally on the 20<sup>th</sup> of June. In a [press release](#), the organisers observed:

*In January 2020, a new internal communication was issued to silence the voices of the detainees, whose personal mobile phones were then confiscated. Result: zero contact with the outside world, therefore zero possibility to communicate the*

<sup>8</sup> At the end of June, detainees’ accounts on the situation inside the centre were published by Hurriya blog, thus confirming our hypothesis. According to them, [several hunger strikes](#) have been taking place in the lockdown period to voice against the poor sanitary conditions inside the centre. Some of the [collected testimonies](#) highlight a situation of dramatic abandonment:

*‘The masks were given to us on the 17th of April, and that’s it, and without changing them. Without even the hand sanitizer that is required by law. We’ve never seen that here.’*

*‘Then if a guy has a toothache, they don’t even give a shit about him, they leave him there to die. The medicine: there is no doctor, this one is just a psychiatrist, what he wants is that everyone sleeps, everyone with their mouths open, everyone, how to say, crazy.’*

*‘There are carabinieri, police, but no one is interested in seeing how we are, nothing, no one gives a shit about you.’*

*daily harassments, and the individual or collective acts of resistance. Zero chance to exist as a subject in the “outside” community. Without a personal phone (they have access to an internal phone booth and a 10 euro card for calling), without internet and messages, without access to information, today we believe that within the CPR, detainees would not know who to turn to in case of need or wish to report. Today standing in solidarity with those who are detained because they are undocumented means trying to give them back a voice which goes outside the walls.*



# Gradisca d'Isonzo detention centre

## Overview

*(currently managed by the social cooperative Edeco Onlus)*

The [Gradisca d'Isonzo detention centre](#), located near Gorizia, first opened its doors on the 7<sup>th</sup> of March 2006 (on the history of the centre see [here](#)). Initially, its official capacity was 248 places. However, frequent riots progressively reduced its size (see [here](#), page 12). After being closed from November 2013, the centre re-opened on the 16<sup>th</sup> of December 2019 with room for [150](#) people.

Located in the former 'Polonio' barracks, next to the Reception Center for Asylum Seekers (CARA), the Gradisca d'Isonzo detention centre resembles a prison. Known since 2006 as '[the Italian Guantanamo](#)', the institution appears to have further hardened its security regime. In December 2019, the Public Prosecutor of Gorizia, Massimo Marchesiello [commented](#): 'an innovative CCTV surveillance system has been introduced, counting nearly 200 cameras. As for the personnel, 50 soldiers and about thirty police units will be dealing with the facility security.'

When it first opened, the centre was managed by the Minerva Social Cooperative: this was one of the first times in Italy a detention centre was outsourced to an [entity which was involved in the provision of social-care services](#). From 2008 until 2013 the facility was managed by the Connecting People Consortium, located in Trapani. Yet, since its re-opening in 2019, the centre has been managed by the social cooperative Edeco Onlus based in Padova (for more information, see [here](#)).

The story of Gradisca d'Isonzo detention centre has always been marked by violence ([Accardo and Galieni, 2019](#)). For instance, in September 2007, a little more than a year after it opened, a group of detainees climbed onto the roof of the facility in an attempt to

escape. To discourage them and to repress their protest, the police threw tear gas; several migrants ended up being harmed, while an 8-month old baby in the adjacent centre for asylum seekers (CARA) with her mother was nearly suffocated.

Furthermore, in their [2013 report](#) on immigration detention centres in Italy, Doctors for Human Rights (MEDU) described their visit to Gradisca d'Isonzo detention centre as follows:

*The strong atmosphere of tension between detainees and managing authority staff, dominated by a constant and frankly obsessive climate of suspicion, appears particularly serious. Security measures are especially restrictive and have resulted in a deep sense of malaise among the detainees. Despite detention times being dramatically longer than in most other centres, there is a severe lack of recreational activities, a complete lack of NGO staff, and no legal aid. These last aspects contribute to making living conditions inside the CIE especially oppressive.*

This harsh regime did not take long to take its toll. Indeed, on the night between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> of August 2013, a Moroccan man named Abdelmajid El Kodra, known as Majid, suffered a serious head injury while he was trying to escape from the centre. Majid fell off the roof and consequently entered a coma that, eight months later (30<sup>th</sup> of April, 2014), led to his death (details about Majid and his experience in Italy can be found in Ottavia Salvador's [documentary](#)).

In 2014 a [complaint was](#) made to the Public Prosecutor's Office in Gorizia by the [Tenda per la Pace e i Diritti](#), the Campaign [LasciateCIEntrare](#), the [Melting Pot Project](#), and several other human rights activists and members of civil society. In the complaint, they denounced what happened at the Gradisca d'Isonzo detention centre from August to November 2013, the violence and inhumane conditions endured by detainees, and, particularly, what happened to Majid. However, the outcome of the investigation on Majid's death remains unknown. On the other hand, over time, several detainees have been [accused of damaging the facility](#).

Following extensive complaints by activists, lawyers, doctors, journalists, commissions, MPs and, above all, those held within this facility, Gradisca d'Isonzo detention centre was finally [shut down](#) at the end of 2013. Unfortunately this painful chapter of Italy's history was not yet over.

The Gradisca d'Isonzo detention centre [re-opened](#) in December 2019 with tightened security measures. Since then [protests and escapes](#) have been taking place on the part of detainees, many of whom were initially [transferred there from the Bari Palese detention centre](#), after a riot culminated in the fire of the majority of detainees' living units. These acts of resistance, as in the past, were violently repressed by police. And tragically, again like in the past, this harsh regime has already claimed victims.

***These acts of resistance, as in the past, were violently repressed by police. And tragically, this harsh regime has already claimed victims.***



Photo Credits Tgr

On Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> January 2020, [a 38-year old man died](#) in the hospital of Gorizia. While an [investigation](#) is currently underway, [early reports from activists](#) revealed that Vakhtang Enukidze was a victim of police brutality. In response to this tragic event, on the 19<sup>th</sup> of January, anti-detention groups [held a demonstration](#) in front of the centre in solidarity with the migrants protesting inside. The autopsy subsequently carried out on the body revealed that Vakhtang [had died of pulmonary edema](#). While institutional authorities claimed no responsibility for the occurrence, the local No Cpr assembly [argued](#) that Vakhtang's death was a consequence of the beatings he suffered at the hands of the police. To support their accusations, the activists relied on testimonies provided by Vakhtang's fellow detainees, with whom they established phone contact. Notably, five of these men have been deported right after Vakhtang's death. In addition, activists [denounced](#) that detainees' mobile phones were confiscated and inspected.

## During the Covid-19 outbreak: 9th March - 18th May 2020

The number of people detained in the Gradisca d'Isonzo CPR remained almost unchanged during the course of the national lockdown. On the [24<sup>th</sup> of March](#), the Guarantor reported the presence of 45 people inside the centre, underlining in Bulletins no. [26](#) and no. [28](#) how, in April, the facility has been operating almost at its full capacity (45 detainees out of 66). Similarly, in the [Bulletin no. 32](#) of 15th May, the number of people reported was 44, almost the same as the previous month. However, slight variation in numbers over time – 45 on the [24<sup>th</sup> March](#), 44 on the [1<sup>st</sup> May](#), 41 on the [8<sup>th</sup> May](#), 44 on the [15<sup>th</sup> May](#) – shows that, although overall detainee numbers remained stable, there were some releases and new arrivals in this period.

In light of the number of people held in the centre, the National Guarantor has expressed [repeated concerns](#), especially about migrants whose detention period was inevitably going to expire before the end of the pandemic. He emphasised that, in the absence of any reasonable prospect for removal, immigration detention represented for these people a mere deprivation of time and freedom, while also increasing their risk of contracting the virus. In putting forward this argument, however, the Guarantor focused primarily on migrants detained as a result of an administrative expulsion (rather than on those detained to comply with a judicial expulsion), ultimately reinforcing a differentiation between people with or without criminal records (see also [Esposito et al., 2020](#)).

According to this internal 'hierarchy of detention deservingness', asylum seekers were the first to leave the facility, as highlighted by [CILD](#). This was the case on the 18<sup>th</sup> of March, when, as [reported by Caprioglio and Rigo](#), the specialised section of the Court of Trieste refused to validate the detention of an Egyptian asylum seeker. The judge sentence argued that, after the [suspension of all interviews for asylum seekers](#) due to the pandemic, detention lost its main purpose - i.e., of being '[strictly functional to the timely processing of the international protection application and the subsequent and possible execution of the expulsion](#)'. On the other hand, however, the newspaper *Il Manifesto* [reported](#) the story of a Moroccan young man detained in Gradisca d'Isonzo whose brother, resident in Italy and documented, was willing to host him. Nonetheless, at the hearing of the 25<sup>th</sup> of April, which took place inside the CPR, the man's detention was prolonged by the Justice of the Peace in charge of assessing his case. A few days later the young migrant tested positive for Covid-19 and no one from the centre notified his lawyer, who heard this news from the man's brother. The lawyer consequently [lodged a complaint](#) to the Public Prosecutor's Office of Gorizia to evaluate '[the unlawfulness of his client's prolonged detention](#)'.

Sadly, this was not the first case of a detainee testing positive inside Gradisca d'Isonzo's CPR. The first person who contracted Covid-19 was a Nigerian migrant transferred to the CPR from Cremona prison on the 19<sup>th</sup> of March (see [CILD's report](#)). This evidence is also

***This is [the] CPR,  
this is [the] CPR,  
it makes people die.  
He has been left  
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for almost 10 days***

corroborated by the National Guarantor in [Bulletin no. 12](#). Firstly he was isolated inside the centre, however, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of March, due to the [worsening of his condition](#)<sup>9</sup>, the detainee was transferred to the Cattinara hospital. Yet, once his health was improved, he was taken back to detention, where he underwent a period of further isolation. This case raised much public debate and was the focus of two parliamentary inquiries presented to the Ministry of the Interior on the 30<sup>th</sup> of March ([On. Magi](#)) and the 8<sup>th</sup> of April ([On. De Carlo](#)).

Initially [kept in the dark](#) about the presence of an infected person, when they came to know the truth detainees [sprang up in protest](#) due to the lack of hygiene kits, face masks and gloves. As [reported](#) by local activists, several detainees also complained about chest pains, but were not allowed to be visited by a doctor. Already on the 24<sup>th</sup> of March the Friulian activist network NO CPR had published [information](#) about a hunger strike that had started the day before and motivated by: a) the poor quality of the food provided inside the centre which, according to detainees, caused them intestinal problems; b) poor hygienic conditions (e.g., no clean sheets or personal hygiene products); c) the fear of the spread of the virus inside the facility, amplified by the fact that new migrants continued to be taken to the centre even though it was already overcrowded. Overall, detainees demanded freedom. Freedom was not granted, but some change occurred in Italian CPRs. Indeed, about a month later, the National Guarantor reported ([Bulletin no. 26](#)):

*Almost all the CPRs' managers declared that they had regularly carried out disinfections to ensure the premises hygienic conditions. They all reported having increased the number of personal hygiene kits for all persons detained and making protective masks available to them at release. In addition, they have informed all detainees in multiple languages about the health emergency and instructed them on how to behave to prevent the spread of the virus.*

In the same [Bulletin](#), the National Guarantor also mentioned that the use of video calls inside Gradisca d'Isonzo had been facilitated and expanded. This system was used by detainees to maintain contacts with family and friends, as well as with their lawyers. Yet, according to the [data available](#), no social workers, NGOs or volunteers have been allowed to enter the centre in this period. The city Guarantor, Giovanna Corbatta, was instead able to continue her monitoring activities: she visited the centre and met detainees adopting the adequate protection measures.

Despite these apparent positive developments, however, detainees did not report significant changes to their everyday lives. For the entire period of lockdown, they continued to protest about the scarce hygienic conditions and the poor quality of the food provided, while ultimately demanding their release in the community. On the 27<sup>th</sup> of March, no border activists collected a [video-testimony](#) of a migrant in suspected respiratory or epileptic seizure taken away by personnel with virus protection, while surrounding detainees were without any PPE. At the end of the video a migrant [comments](#):

*Here comes the warden [centre staff member] who is on his way because people are dying. This is [the] CPR, this is [the] CPR, it makes people die. He [the ill migrant] has been left locked up like a dog for almost 10 days, always locked up.*

<sup>9</sup> See Murciano, Luigi (2020, 25 April). 'Quattro asintomatici al Cpr ma i migranti erano isolati', Il Piccolo (paper source).



*How's that possible? How's that possible? He wants to kill people?*

The activists also published another [video-testimony](#) of a detainee who, as they highlighted, had been beaten up by the police and then taken to the hospital. Apparently, the ‘reason’ of police intervention was an alleged revolt undertaken by the man. Once he returned to the CPR from the hospital, charges were also pressed against him. Following this case, activists [reported](#) that, on the night of the 29<sup>th</sup> of March, detainees started a protest and burned their mattresses: they demanded to be released in the community as soon as possible. In the days after the publication of these accounts, especially the one on police brutality, several migrants’ phones were requisitioned in order for the police to identify those ‘responsible’ for the leak of information, the same activists [claimed](#) (a practice already used in the [aftermath of Vakhtang’s death](#)).

In his [Bulletin no. 27](#), on the 27<sup>th</sup> of April, the National Guarantor reported five new cases of Covid-19 among migrants detained inside Gradisca d’Isonzo, although all of them were asymptomatic (swab tests were performed). The cases had been confirmed three days earlier, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of April. Four of these detainees, as the Guarantor explains, were [isolated inside the centre](#), while one was referred to the health authorities of his place of residence. This latter person had been released before the test result was available, and was then tracked down in Pistoia<sup>10</sup>. Centre staff were also tested, but [no information](#) on their health status was provided thereafter.

Following this episode, a [riot broke out in the centre](#) involving the burning of mattresses and plexiglas. Contrary to what had been reported by institutional actors, including the National Guarantor, the local No Cpr network claimed that infected detainees were not put in isolation, but instead they themselves had to [take their mattress out of the cell](#) so as not to infect their fellow detainees. In addition, as [noted](#) also by the same Prefect, the infected migrants had been detained in Gradisca for quite a long time. It is not surprising, therefore, that detainees claimed to have been infected from the ‘outside’ (i.e., by staff members and police officers), a thesis which was also [supported](#) by anti-detention activists. Notably, however, the perspective of the Mayor of Gradisca, Linda Tomasinsig, was [a quite different one](#). As she made clear in some interviews published in the newspapers [La Repubblica](#) and [Il Piccolo](#), her main concern was that once released from detention, migrants could remain in the city and its surroundings thus putting at risk local residents (as if detainees were ‘Covid-19 spreaders’).

***They freak you out.  
They ruin people,  
they do bad things  
to you***

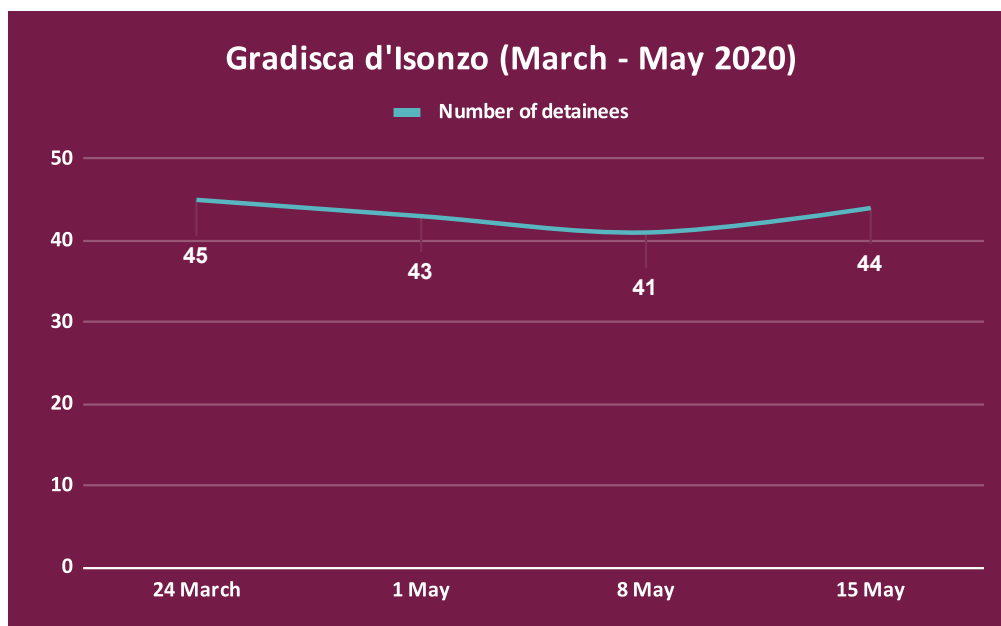
In the end, the concerns expressed by detainees and activists about the lack of sanitary precautions and possible spread of the virus inside the centre unfortunately became a reality. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of May the newspaper [Il Manifesto](#) [reported](#) that [13 people](#) were put in preventive isolation, most of them roommates of the migrants who tested positive on the 24<sup>th</sup> of April. It was also reported that people were put in cells two by two - positive with positive, negative with negative. In another area, however, some people were held in individual isolation, a form of [solitary confinement which has been criticised](#) for the serious risks of psychological harm it involves.

As a result of this harsh scenario, protests and hunger strikes continued even after the end of the lockdown. Detainees felt exhausted by the inhuman conditions endured. One of

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

them, speaking to anti-detention activists, [commented](#):

*They freak you out. They ruin people, they do bad things to you [...]. I see my mother on the camera and she cries, my partner and she cries, everybody feels bad for me. [...] All I see is bad now, I do bad things, I'm fed up, I don't have the strength anymore.*





# Rome's Ponte Galeria detention centre

## Overview

*(currently managed by the Social Cooperative Albatros)*

Ponte Galeria [detention centre in Rome](#) was one of the first centres opened in Italy, right after the adoption of Law 40/1998 (the so-called Turco-Napolitano law). Since then, it has been the largest Italian immigration detention centre. While initially its official capacity was [354 places](#), at present the facility can hold up to [210 people](#) (130 men and 80 women). Notably, Ponte Galeria is the sole Italian centre where women can be detained.

The centre is located in a southwest Roman suburb ('Fiera di Roma'), outside Rome's ring road and close to Fiumicino International Airport. No road signs actually indicate this isolated site, which is difficult to reach without private transportation. Adjacent to the 'S. Gelsomini' police complex on Portuense road, the facility was built where five large containers of the Italian Civil Defence had been placed to operate as a [first reception centre](#). Architecturally, Ponte Galeria resembles a [prison](#): it is composed of several buildings surrounded by high walls and fences, and there are CCTV cameras everywhere. Military personnel patrol the outside areas, while an inter-force police unit – composed of policemen, carabinieri and finance police – is in charge of maintaining order and security inside the centre.

Until February 2010, Ponte Galeria was run by the Italian Red Cross. Subsequently, several private sector organisations have been in charge of administering it, providing basic assistance to detainees (e.g., food, cleaning), psychosocial and medical care, legal advice, and cultural linguistic mediation. The organisations are: the Social Cooperative Auxilium (March 2010 – December 2014); the consortium composed of the French company GEPSA and the Italian cultural association Acuarinto (December 2014 –

September 2018); and the Social Cooperative Albatros (September 2018 – present).

Within the institution, men and women are detained in separate areas, located on opposite sides of the facility. Each living unit consists of several sectors with two dormitories and a [70-square-meter open-air concrete square](#). Sectors are also divided by a large central corridor and surrounded by fences that have been made higher over the years. In the men's unit, the fences are now covered with plexiglass to prevent escapes. Indeed, the men's living unit re-opened in June 2019 with tightened security measures, after being burnt down by the detainees in December 2015 during a [protest following an episode of police violence](#). These measures included the prohibition on men using their mobile phones, to prevent the organisation of protests, as well as further restrictions on their (already very limited) movements around the centre. Shortly after the men's unit reopened, new mass escapes and [riots have been taking place](#) as a result of this [harsh detention regime](#).

NGOs and solidarity groups contacted by the Border Criminologies team in May 2019 reported that, at that time, the majority of women detained were long-term Italian residents with criminal records and/or previous expulsion orders. There were also many women, especially those from Ukraine, Georgia and Russia, who had been working as cleaners and care workers in private households where they had often been exposed to harsh and exploitative working conditions. Overall, the majority of detainee women were victims of gendered violence, as previous [research](#) (see also [here](#)) and [reports](#) have highlighted. Yet, only a few had access to some form of protection. Exemplary in this respect is the case of the women survivors of trafficking who are frequently not recognised as such, but rather treated as “illegal migrants” and therefore deported in spite of the high risk to their life (see the [case of the sixty-six Nigerian women](#) detained at Ponte Galeria in the summer of 2015).

***“Hurriya”  
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detention.***

Since opening in 1998, Ponte Galeria has been the site of extensive violence and abuse. The first person to die in the centre was Mohamed Ben Said, a 39-year-old Tunisian man who, on Christmas night of 1999, [was found dead](#) after 14 days of confinement, presumably due to negligence in medical care and an excess dose of psycho-pharmaceutical drugs administered by the health staff of the centre. Then, on the 7<sup>th</sup> of May 2009, [Nabruka Mimuni](#), a 49-year-old Tunisian woman who had spent most of her life in Italy, decided to [hang herself in the toilet of her dormitory](#) to avoid her deportation to Tunisia on the next day. Two months earlier another death had shaken up the centre: Salah Soudani, an Algerian man, was found dead after [needlessly seeking medical attention](#). The obscure circumstances of his death have never been clarified by the authorities ([Galieni and Guido 2019](#)).

In addition to these tragedies, evidence has highlighted the recurring violations of rights taking place inside this site. These include: [inadequacy of the lawfulness assessment of detention and poor quality of judges' and lawyers' performances](#); scarcity of information concerning migrant's rights and procedures for enforcing them; [insalubrious living conditions](#); inadequate healthcare; [excessive security restrictions](#) (e.g., there is a ban on a vast number of items and all caps must be removed from the bottles); poor quality of

the food; [lack of activities and alienation](#); [neglect of situations of vulnerability](#) (such as [people facing mental health challenges](#) or with experience of torture and gender violence); and even episodes of [police violence](#). [Academic research](#) has also highlighted the oppressive and pathogenic qualities of Ponte Galeria's environment, showing that the scarcity of resources, activities, and information creates a distressing environment for detainees while also enhancing feelings of powerlessness and frustration in [professional actors willing to assist them](#).

Further compounding these issues is the lack of fair access to legal representation. Instead, detainees are provided with the contacts of a restricted number of lawyers, usually the same professionals. To address this situation, associations entering the centre have tried several times—unsuccessfully—to issue the detainees with a complete list of immigration attorneys. Despite being paid for by the State (*gratuito patrocinio*), evidence suggests that several lawyers ask detainees for money too.



Photo Credits Francesca Esposito

In the face of such a scenario, it is not surprising that protests, mass escapes ([265 people ran away in 2011](#)), acts of self-harm, hunger strikes, and riots occur regularly inside the centre. In December 2013, for example, several men from Maghreb [sewed their mouths shut](#) in protest at the length of their detention, as well as the lack of legal and health assistance provided. Women, on their part, have also used music, [paintings and graffiti](#) to challenge the depersonalisation of the detention environment. These acts of resistance have mostly been supported by no border activists, who often [gathered in the forecourt in front of the centre](#) to communicate with and offer solidarity to those detained inside. On some occasions, men climbed on top of the centre roofs to communicate with the activists outside, and their cry, “Hurriya”—which in Arabic means “freedom”—has become the main motto of the battle against immigration detention.

## During the Covid-19 outbreak: 9th March - 18th May 2020

Since the beginning of the pandemic and the subsequent imposition of lockdown and social distancing measures by the Italian government, the number of migrants detained at Ponte Galeria has steadily decreased. On the 17th of March, the National Guarantor reported that 95 men and 40 women were held inside the centre ([Bulletin no. 5](#)), while on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May only 37 people were still detained, the majority of whom were men (31 men and 6 women) ([Bulletin no. 16](#)). On the 5<sup>th</sup> of May, the Legal Clinic of Roma Tre on migration and asylum [reported](#) that the number of detainees had further decreased to 24 people: 20 men and 4 women; the latter were of Nigerian, Moroccan and Russian nationality. Notably, according to the [Italian Coalition for Civil Liberties and Rights \(CILD\)](#), Ponte Galeria is the detention centre with the highest number of releases—especially of asylum seekers—having registered a 2-people-per-day release average over the period 27<sup>th</sup> of March – 25<sup>th</sup> of April.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, this outcome has not been the result of a systematic national plan, as has happened in other countries such as Spain. Indeed, detainees—mostly asylum seekers and undocumented migrants without criminal records—were released as a consequence of ad-hoc [decisions taken, mainly, by judges of the specialised section of Rome Ordinary Tribunal](#). However, the overall trend for the Justices of the Peace has [been different](#), in line with their more conservative attitude [evidenced](#) in the past. As [reported](#) by the Legal Clinic of Rome, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May the Justice of Peace of Rome extended the detention of four migrants detained at Ponte Galeria. As noted by the National Guarantor on the 7<sup>th</sup> of April:

*The exceptional situation—and the impact on global mobility that resulted in the border closure and in significant reductions of international flight connections—is assessed differently when judicial reviews of detention measures are to be proceeded, which, nonetheless, continue to be ordered by the Public security authority ([Bulletin no. 20](#)).*

Conversely [the specialised section of the Ordinary Tribunal of Rome](#) has made different—sometimes opposite—decisions. For instance, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of March, a judge refused the extension of the detention period for a Bangladeshi asylum seeker who had been held in Ponte Galeria since the 8<sup>th</sup> of February, being transferred there from Brindisi detention centre. Interestingly, as noted by [Carlo Caprioglio and Enrica Rigo](#), the judge highlighted that (a) no motivation was reported on the extension of detention request presented by Rome Police Headquarters (Questura); and (b) there was no explanation of the alleged instrumentality of the international protection claim presented (i.e. to avoid or delay the applicant's removal). The judge noted instead that, given the claimant's background, as a long-term resident in Italy and previous holder of a working visa, his asylum claim could not be considered instrumental and he could rather be regarded as unexpellable according to Art. 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). More importantly, the

<sup>11</sup> On the 8<sup>th</sup> of June, 6 men and 5 women were confirmed by the [CILD](#).

judge's decision to grant release to the detainee was based on the acknowledgement of individuals' right to health in the face of a pandemic. In doing so, she underlined that a person's deprivation of personal liberty in a confined space, such as a detention centre, would make it difficult to comply with governmental health measures and that detention could not be followed by a removal due to [drastic reductions of international flights](#). A similar argument was provided by the [sentence](#) promulgated by the specialised section of the Ordinary Tribunal of Rome on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March, this time in favour of a Venezuelan woman. Recalling [Article 15 of the so-called Return Directive](#), as well as the recent [statement made by the EU Commissioner for Human Rights](#), the judge affirmed the illegitimacy of the woman's detention due to the lack of prospects for her effective removal from Italy. Notably, militant legal groups like the Legal Clinic of Rome and ASGI have played a crucial role by [advocating](#) for detainees' releases. For instance, the Legal Clinic of Rome, together with other legal associations, prepared and disseminated an online [form](#) to request the re-examination and termination of migrants' detention to the competent judicial authorities.

Even though releasing detainees is a positive outcome, the lack of a systematic national plan has created problems. The main problem was that people coming out from Ponte Galeria and other Italian detention centres did not always have access to appropriate accommodation, while also remaining undocumented in the majority of cases. For instance, on his visit at Ponte Galeria on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March, the National Guarantor reported the example of a woman who was being released but had no place to go. As the Guarantor explains, in this particular case the problem was solved by the centre manager who, in collaboration with the Rome Guarantor, contacted the Social Emergencies Situation Room (Sala Operativa Sociale) of the city of Rome ([Bulletin no. 13](#)). As far as we know, during the reporting period this was common practice: the centre manager asked detainees about their accommodation arrangements after their release and, if they did not have any, the manager alerted the local Social Emergencies Situation Room to find a solution. The National Guarantor also [stated](#) that all detainees released were provided with personal protective equipment (PPE) and with the health services card for foreign nationals temporarily staying in Italy (STP)<sup>12</sup>, which, however, lasts only six months.

Another important point to address concerns the measures taken to prevent contagion and safeguard detainees' rights to health in the context of the pandemic. According to the National Guarantor, already on the 17<sup>th</sup> of March, centre staff provided detainees with multilingual information on mainstream health rules. Extra cleaning procedures were also introduced in the centre, as well as the daily monitoring of detainees' body temperature (no swab tests were carried out) ([Bulletin no.5](#)). The [CILD](#) adds that 'By the 21<sup>st</sup> of April, it appears that the information provided also included updates on the health emergency and more specific instructions on appropriate precautionary behaviour to adopt.'

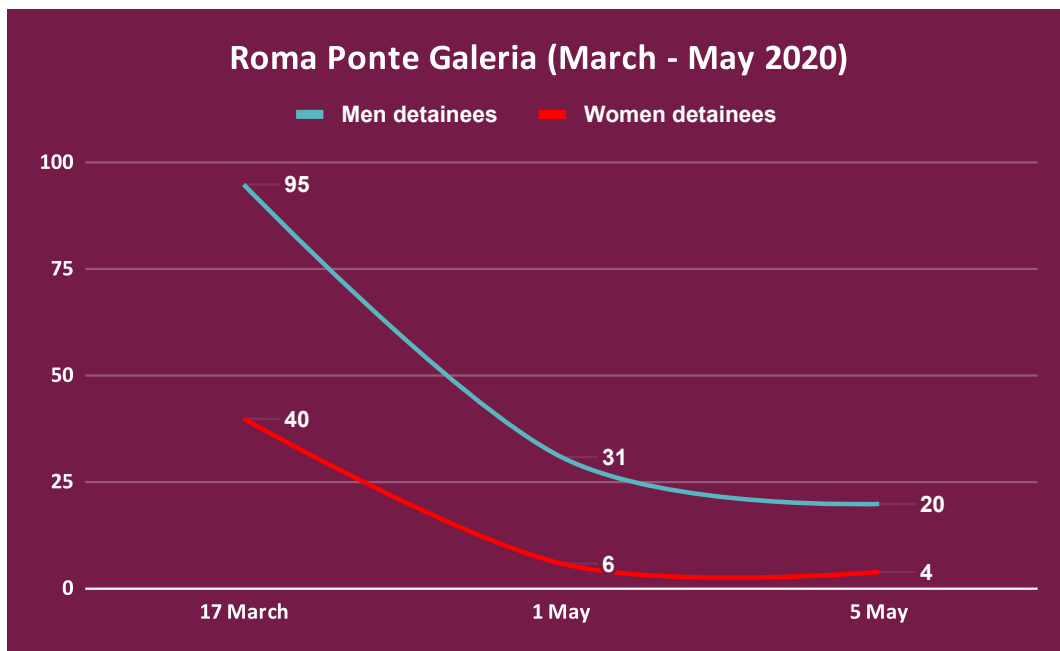
***We have crafted a written motion and protested peacefully because they don't want to listen to us. They (the police) came with their sticks (truncheons) and said to me: 'we are tired of your bullshit'***

<sup>12</sup> This is a card usually issued to illegalised migrants for them being able to access to national healthcare services.

According to [CILD](#), no new arrivals have been registered at Ponte Galeria since mid-March. However, the National Guarantor reports three new arrivals from prisons in the first half of March ([Bulletin no. 5](#)). To receive the new detainees, and in line with the Ministry of Interior [circular of the 26<sup>th</sup> of March](#), a separate ward was prepared for their precautionary isolation. However, as the Guarantor himself observes, this ward did not provide real isolation, as for such purpose single rooms would have been needed. Furthermore, a released woman provided a first-hand account to the staff of the BeFree Cooperative, which showed that to access this quarantine ward the new detainees had to pass through the women's unit, thus creating a risk of contagion. It is also noteworthy that no specific isolated space was available in case of detainees who might test positive to Covid-19: in this case, as [explained by the Guarantor of the Lazio region, Stefano Anastasia](#), detainees had to be transferred to external healthcare facilities. The managing body itself has complained about '[the lack of precise indications on the procedures to be adopted in the event of an episode of contagion in the Centre.](#)'

More generally, CILD reports that '[at the start of the health emergency, social spacing was one of the main issues of the centre.](#)' Detainees were sleeping in rooms of six or four people, eating together, and using the same bathrooms, making it impossible to keep the one-meter distance between them. According to CILD, following the decrease in the number of detained migrants, the compliance with social distancing requirements should subsequently be improved.

It is also worth mentioning that since the Covid outbreak the activities of volunteers, religious groups, and NGOs (including anti-trafficking associations) have been suspended. BeFree staff reports that the last time the Sant'Egidio community entered the centre was the 21<sup>st</sup> of March. Lawyers were also prevented from entering the facility at the beginning of the pandemic, but later became the only external persons allowed to enter the centre in order to visit their clients, in an ad-hoc space near the entrance of the building.





Notably, detainees' accounts from within Ponte Galeria tell us a different story of this difficult period. According to them, the health emergency exacerbated tensions already existing in the centre and worsened detainees' living conditions. A strong [fear of contagion](#) spread out among those confined, mainly because not all centre staff — at least initially — were wearing the necessary PPE. This shows that the danger of contagion in Ponte Galeria, as in the other custodial facilities, mainly came from the outside rather than from detainees themselves (on whom much provisions focused). Indeed, according to different accounts disseminated at the end of March (see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)), police officers and the centre's staff lacked gloves and face masks.

This evidence resonates with the testimonies collected by our team, indicating that not until April were centre staff provided with appropriate protective equipment. As a consequence, detainees often [reduced their already minimal moments of socialisation](#) to protect themselves, thus worsening the conditions of their already harsh confinement. Their social isolation was further increased by the suspension of visits from relatives and friends, as well as from external associations. Furthermore, while in other detention centres, like Gradisca d'Isonzo, Brindisi, and Palazzo San Gervasio ([Bulletin n. 26](#)) the use of video-calls was facilitated and expanded, in Ponte Galeria this did not happen and contacts with the outside mainly occurred through phone calls. While detained women were allowed to have their mobile phones and to freely use them, men were not, according to the tightened security rules implemented in June 2019 when the men's living unit was reopened. Detained men only had the possibility to call from the telephone boxes provided inside the sectors, and by using telephone cards they paid for. As reported by [Melting Pot](#), based on the account of the partner of a detained man: 'Now [the woman] can only talk to her partner by phone. [The detainee] has a calling card, that he pays, with which he's allowed to make a call once a day from a cabin inside the centre.'

In the face of this distressing scenario, different moments of individual and collective protest originated in the centre. The National Guarantor reported on the 17<sup>th</sup> of March that '[a feeling of anxiety](#)' arose inside Rome's CPR during the days of the uprisings in Italian prisons. For example, in mid-March, a Tunisian woman swallowed some bleach to call the attention of the managing body and the institutions to detainees' claims: they didn't feel safe in the centre and were tired of living in these precarious conditions. Furthermore, [from the 25<sup>th</sup> to the 31<sup>st</sup> of March](#), four women, including the one mentioned above, went on a [hunger and thirst strike](#) to demand the improvement of their living conditions and the immediate end of their confinement. Despite their strike having lasted for [6 days](#), it ended due to the [deterioration of the women's health condition](#) and, as far as we know, their demands were not accepted.

Overall, the opacity surrounding administrative detention centres has obscured these acts of protest and resistance, preventing them from being amplified outside the detention walls. One of the most serious episodes occurred on the [25<sup>th</sup> of April](#), the date on which the Ramadan period started, and was documented by a [video](#) taken by the detainees

involved. That day most of the detained men, who were Muslims, went to the centre manager to ask for a more abundant portion of food for dinner, as they could not eat during daytime. The police responded to detainees' protest by means of force, [repeatedly hitting two young men with their truncheons](#). As one of the detainees involved in the protest [reports](#):

*We are thirty in here, twenty of us are fasting for Ramadan. We have crafted a written motion and protested peacefully because they don't want to listen to us. They (the police) came with their sticks (truncheons) and said to me: 'we are tired of your bullshit'.*



# Macomer detention centre

## Overview

*(currently managed by Ors Italia)*

Opened on the [20<sup>th</sup> of January, 2020](#), the [Macomer CPR](#) is the first detention centre in Sardinia. The facility can hold up to 100 people subject to immigration controls.

Located in Macomer, an Italian town of 9,861 inhabitants in the province of Nuoro, the building where the immigration detention centre is operating used to be a maximum-security prison which was closed in 2014 [for not meeting the minimum statutory parameters envisaged for prison institutions](#) (Bottazzo and Bleggi 2019, page 103). The facility, where illegalised migrants are now held, has been remodelled in the last few years in order to [“guarantee its security as well as the security of the local population”](#).

Initially, another former prison, located in Iglesias, in the Province of South Sardinia ([Report Commissione Straordinaria per la Tutela e la Promozione dei Diritti Umani](#), 2017, page 16), was identified to place the CPR, but this was fervently [opposed](#) by the local mayor and his council. They declared that they had not been informed in advance, nor involved in this decision. Then the Mayor of Macomer came forward, proposing as a possible alternative the former prison in the industrial area of his town. On the 18<sup>th</sup> of January 2018 there was a [meeting in the prefecture of Nuoro](#), between the Mayor and former Italian Minister of the Interior Minniti, and an informal agreement was reached for the construction of the detention centre. On the mayor’s side, [guarantees were requested that in the future no CAS \(Centro Accoglienza Straordinaria - Extraordinary Reception Centres for people seeking international protection\)](#) would be built in the territory of the municipality of Macomer. It was also decided that [the opening of the CPR would benefit the local economy](#) (e.g., through the outsourcing of some services such as the canteen service) and provide the municipal administration with more state funding (e.g.,

for investing in services such as [public lighting](#)).

As highlighted by [Francesca Mazzuzi](#), an activist from the [LasciateCIEntrare campaign](#), in an article published a few days after the opening of the centre, “the opening of the CPR was presented by the regional government as an important choice to revive the (impoverished) local economy and an indispensable one to discourage the migratory flow of young Harragas from Algeria to the coasts of south-western Sardinia. This is a (migratory) route that has been active for almost fifteen years and through which around 750 people arrived in 2019.” This information is corroborated by a [parliamentary inquiry](#) presented by the MP Ehm Yana Chiara on the 7th of May, after a man detained at the centre attempted suicide (see following section 'During the Covid Outbreak').

For the first three years the centre will be run by Ors Italia, a subsidiary of the Ors Group, a multinational company operating in Switzerland, Austria and Germany and already involved in the [management of reception centres for asylum seekers](#). Ors Italia won the public tender promoted by the Prefecture of Nuoro thanks to their low bid offer, thus raising widespread concerns for their [interest in making profit rather than safeguarding migrants' human rights](#). The Ors has indeed been involved in various scandals, such as the one following a report by Amnesty International for the [bad management of the Traiskirchen centre in Austria](#). To address these concerns a [parliamentary inquiry was also presented on the 17<sup>th</sup> of January, 2020](#) by the MP Erasmo Palazzotto.

***the opening of the CPR was presented by the regional government as an important choice to revive the (impoverished) local economy***



Photo Credits Francesco Oggianu

In the recent [parliamentary inquiry](#) presented by the MP Ehm Yana Chiara, it is also reported that nurses working inside the centre have complained about the difficult

conditions endured inside the facility by both detainees and centre staff. These include injuries, assaults, episodes of self-harm, and suicide attempts (as demonstrated by the [recent case](#) of a man from Benin). As a result, it is not infrequent for the local residents of the town of Macomer to hear the sound of ambulances heading towards the detention center, especially during night-time.

Notably, opposition to this project was raised since its very beginning. In addition to local political actors, opponents included local residents concerned about their security, but also activists and civil society groups engaged in safeguarding migrants' rights. In particular, a group named '[No Cpr Macomer](#)' was created. They organised a [demonstration](#) in February 2020 to challenge the creation of the Macomer detention centre and, overall, to contest the Italian policies of migration control.

## During the Covid-19 outbreak: 9th March - 18th May 2020

As pointed out by the National Guarantor, although at the national level the number of people detained was decreasing, in Macomer detention centre it remained stable throughout the period of the national lockdown ([Bulletin no. 8](#)). On the 21<sup>st</sup> of March, he reported that there were 46 detainees in the facility, out of a total capacity of 50 people ([Bulletin no. 26](#)). Apparently, only from the beginning of May the number of detainees in the centre has started to decrease, arriving to 37 people on the 8<sup>th</sup> of May ([Bulletin no. 31](#)). In particular, accounts from activists of the [LasciateCIEntrare Campaign](#) collected by our research team highlight an inconsistency with respect to the decisions taken by the Justice of the Peace to release or extend migrants' detention: while some detainees were released one or two months before the expiry of the maximum terms (i.e. 180 days), for others detention was extended. The criteria that guided these different decisions are not clear and seem to vary from person to person.

The fact that the centre operated for at least one and a half months at almost full capacity had an impact on the living conditions experienced by detainees and on their right to health. In particular, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of April, the Guarantor denounced that the architectural features of the centre, which resembles a prison, did not allow the observation of the social distancing measures necessary to prevent the contagion ([Bulletin no. 26](#)). On a positive note, he noted that in Macomer (as well as in Brindisi's CPR) health screenings (i.e., a medical examination) were carried out by on-site healthcare staff upon the detainees' release, and that a drug treatment was supplied for five days. Yet, it is not completely clear what kind of drug treatment the Guarantor refers to as this seems to have been applied to all detainees leaving the centre, and not only to those who tested positive for Covid.

Overall, and in spite of the evidence occasionally provided by the National Guarantor in his Bulletins, the information on the measures undertaken to prevent the spread of Covid-19 and the everyday living conditions inside the centre remains vague. Notably, as highlighted by the M5S spokesman for the Chamber, Mario Perantoni, '[Sardinia is the only Italian region where a Guarantor for the persons subject to measures restrictive of their individual liberty was still not appointed](#)'<sup>13</sup>. The presence of an institutional figure at regional level capable of closely monitoring the situation in detention centres, amongst other custodial institutions, is in fact, as the parliamentarian himself notes, of '[pivotal importance in order to guarantee the fundamental rights of people confined](#)'.

Accounts collected by our team from anti-detention activists of [LasciateCIEntrare](#) and the [No CPR Macomer group](#) emphasised that the communication with people inside, already very difficult before the Covid-19 pandemic, due to the isolation of the facility and the prohibition for detainees to keep their mobile phones, was further exacerbated during this period. The only ones who continued to maintain contact with detainees were the lawyers,

<sup>13</sup> A monitoring body was established on the 29th of June 2020. However, this body seems to be independent from the National Guarantor and the National Prevention Mechanism. It is composed of several actors, including a Prefecture's official, a Regional delegate, a local councillor, and a referent for 'Ors s.r.l.' Macomer centre's managing body (see [here](#)).

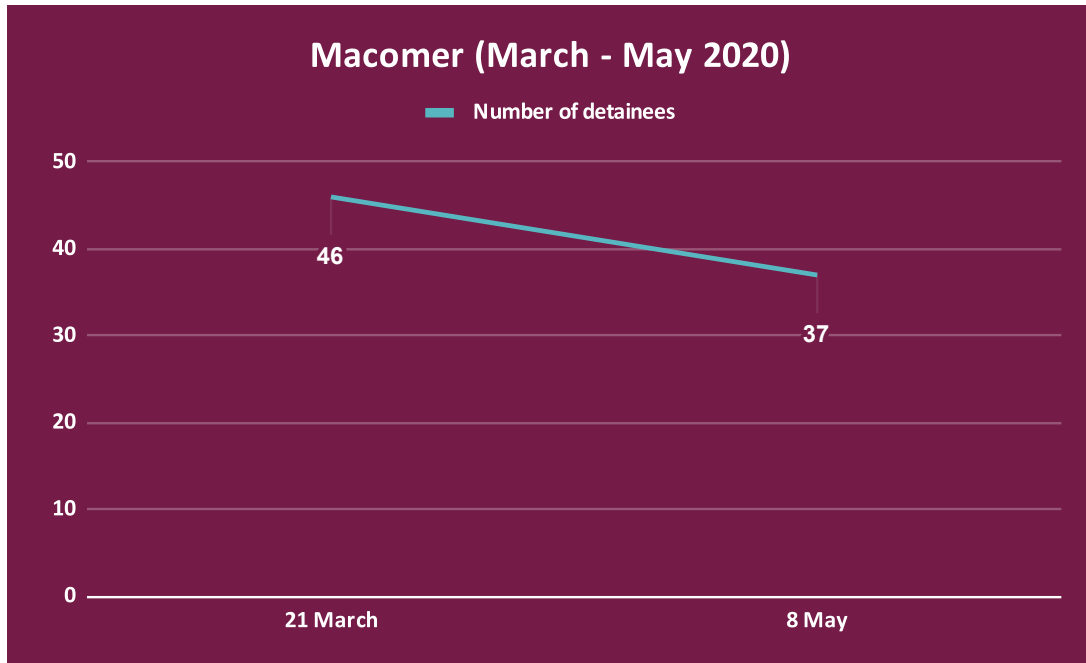
who however were only able to physically visit them after the end of the lockdown. As a result, the activists claimed to have piecemeal information about what happened in this period inside the centre. According to what they reported, to make phone calls detainees have to use common telephones, one at a time, relying on phone cards bought inside the centre with their pocket money. These phone cards, the activists added, are sold at a higher price inside the centre, similarly to other products such as sweets or cigarettes, thus generating a profit for the managing entity that sells them on-site. In addition to this, the activists argued that the healthcare provision inside the centre, where only an infirmary is available, is of poor quality. In particular, they mentioned that detainees often claimed to not have access to basic drugs, such as painkillers, and had to buy them themselves. Notably, the nearest hospitals with emergency rooms are in the cities of Nuoro and Sassari, both 45-minutes by car from Macomer. This evidence is particularly worrisome in times of a pandemic.

Yet, the silence surrounding the centre was broken at the beginning of May, when an article in SardiniaPost [reported](#) the attempted suicide of I., a 28-year-old man from Benin. As reported in the article, the man attempted suicide by jumping from a wall about 5 meters high. The man had been confined in Macomer since the 3<sup>rd</sup> of February 2020. The reason for his tragic act was the third refusal of his release by the Justice of the Peace at the renewal hearing, during which the extension of his detention was confirmed for a further month (after already 87 days spent in the centre). After being transported to the hospital by helicopter and given medical assistance, the man was returned to the centre, where he remained afterwards. Before the 3<sup>rd</sup> of February, the man had been informally ‘adopted’ by a family in St. Teresa, a local town, with whom he had created a strong emotional connection (strong enough for him to call them his ‘family’). It was these people, in the days before the hearing, who launched a petition to support I.’s release. Interviewed by the journalist of SardiniaPost, the family reported that, since I.’s detention, they had been able to communicate with him only through sporadic phone calls. I. arrived in Italy in 2015 from Libya, after [leaving Benin](#) in 2010. For four years he was an asylum seeker, held in two different CAS (Centri di Accoglienza Straordinaria - Extraordinary Reception Centres). He worked as a bricklayer and gardener, before his residence permit expired without possibility for further renewal. As [reported](#) on the information website Il margine.net, during I.’s hearing his lawyer provided the judge with an employment proposal for I., a lease for accommodation and a petition signed by several Italian citizens who have known him for many years.

*a space  
completely outside  
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hole where people,  
democracy and  
human rights  
disappear, in the  
heart of Sardinia*

In a [parliamentary interrogation](#) submitted by M5S MEP Ehm Yana Chiara on the 7<sup>th</sup> of May, in light of this tragic occurrence, a ministerial intervention was requested ‘to verify the social and health living conditions (inside the centre) and the respect for the “detainees” rights’. Ten days later, a local newspaper reported that two local representatives of the Northern League made a surprise visit to the CPR. In their statements about the visit, they denied the complaint made by the MP and commented: ‘[It was found that the safety and security of the guests \(euphemism commonly used to indicate the detainees\) is constantly guaranteed](#)’. They also argued that I.’s gesture should not be regarded as a suicide attempt, as his fall ultimately did not result in any injury. These statements strongly clash with

[other accounts](#) about the living conditions inside the centre and the dynamics of I.'s suicide attempt.



In this context, [mostly impenetrable to civil society organisations and activists engaged in monitoring the human rights of detainees](#), ASCE (Sardinian Association Against Marginalisation) and LasciateCIEntrare have launched an appeal ‘[Liberiamo i migranti dal CPR di Macomer, ripristiniamo democrazia e diritti umani](#)’ (‘Let’s free migrants from the CPR of Macomer, let’s restore democracy and human rights’). In the appeal, they describe the Macomer centre as ‘a space completely outside the law, a black hole where people, democracy and human rights disappear, in the heart of Sardinia’. The activists finally conclude by recalling that, in the absence of any reasonable prospect for removal, the ‘faltering’ reasons for keeping CPRs opened in a time of pandemic fail to exist. In harsh scenario, it is therefore not surprising that, a few weeks after the [activists’ appeal](#), [protests have flared up inside the centre](#). Some detainees climbed onto the roof to cry out against the inhumane living conditions endured, with one detainee even sewing his mouth in sign of dissent (see [here](#) and LasciateCIEntrare and ASCE [here](#)).





# Palazzo San Gervasio detention centre

## Overview

*(currently managed by Engel Italia ltd)*

Opened in April 2011 to accommodate around 600 Tunisians landed on Italian shores in the aftermath of the so-called ‘Arab spring’, [Palazzo San Gervasio](#) was [soon converted into a temporary Identification and Expulsion Centre](#) (21<sup>st</sup> of April 2011), the terminology used at that time to indicate Italian detention centres. The facility was closed in June 2011 thanks to [the reporting made by militant journalists and activists](#), but reopened in January 2018, after the entry into force of the Minniti-Orlando Decree (Law Decree 13/2017) which [mandated the expansion of the Italian immigration detention estate](#). Palazzo San Gervasio – currently called a Holding Centre for Removal (CPR) – can hold up to 150 detainees, although on the 15<sup>th</sup> of April 2020 its effective capacity was of 100 places (see the National Guarantor’s [report](#), page 205).

The facility is located on the Statale (highway) 168, four kilometres away from the village of Palazzo San Gervasio, in the province of Potenza (Basilicata) near the border with the Apulia region. The building is a former brick factory that was confiscated from the local mafia (the owner was a boss of the Sacra Corona Unita) and entrusted to the Council. From 1999 to 2009, the building, which was initially composed of a warehouse and a parking area, was used by locals to accommodate migrants who worked seasonally for the local agricultural market. Those migrants worked under very exploitative conditions (on the story of the centre see [here](#)). Thanks to the efforts of a local committee made up of civil-society actors and associations, and with the financial and material support provided by the Council, Province and Region, over the years various renovations have been carried out at the facility. Bathrooms, services, and water pumps were built, and tents were purchased to host migrants. Notwithstanding these efforts, and the funding allocated from 2000 to 2009, particularly by the Basilicata region (the last one of 190 thousand euros), in 2009 the Council decided to close down this reception camp. The

official motivation was that [it did not comply with existing sanitary regulations](#).

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of February 2011, the [Presidency of the Council of Ministers](#) declared the so-called ‘North-African emergency’ as a [‘state of humanitarian emergency’](#). As a response, the abandoned building was appropriated by the Ministry of Interior and immediately reopened as a governmental centre for the accommodation of asylum seekers (CARA), to house the numerous Tunisians who were disembarking in Lampedusa. Days later it was transformed into a ‘Centre for Accommodation and Identification’ (CAI), a new type of hybrid facility. In spite of its official name, migrants ‘accommodated’ inside the centre, which was actually a tent city run by the Red Cross, were not allowed to move freely and go out at their will. Finally, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of April 2011, the centre was officially [converted into a temporary \(until the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2011\) detention centre](#) by the [Prime Ministerial Ordinance no. 3935](#), which actually had a retroactive validity (detainees had indeed begun to arrive at Palazzo San Gervasio three days before, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of April). Within a few days a metal cage approximately 5 meters high was erected around the tents (hence the name ‘aviary’ often used to refer to the centre), and a three-meter wall was built externally.

The new detention centre was taken over by ‘Connecting People’, a consortium of social cooperatives already in charge of the management of other detention centres in Italy (such as Gradisca d’Isonzo and Brindisi-Restinico). Notably, the centre management was [outsourced through a private negotiation, and in the absence of a regular public tender](#) process.

In spite of the protests and mobilisations organised by solidarity movements and the local population, no one was initially able to access the facility, including human rights advocates, journalists, political representatives and even lawyers. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of April, 2011, the Minister of Interior, Roberto Maroni, with the [Circular no. 1305](#), had indeed prohibited access to migrant centres, including immigration detention centres, to anyone except the UNHCR, IOM, Italian Red Cross, Amnesty International, Doctors Without Borders, Save the Children, Caritas and all the associations with ongoing projects with the Ministry of Interior inside these same facilities. As a result, until June 2011, about sixty migrants were confined inside Palazzo San Gervasio and hidden away from the public’s sight. It was thanks to mobilisations by local activists as well as to a [journalist inquiry](#) by Raffaella Cosentino – who [remarkably managed to get access to the facility](#) and came into possession of [a video shot by the migrants confined](#) – that the unbearable living conditions to which detainees were subjected finally came to light. Because of this evidence, the [centre was cleared out](#) in June 2011, in order to be renovated and its security improved, while all the migrants were transferred to Bari detention centre or even deported back to Tunisia. Moreover, the Public Prosecutor’s office of Melfi opened an investigation into the case.

The removal of migrants silently took place on the eve of a demonstration in front of the facility, which had been organised by several groups and associations, including Cgil,

***Omar, a 24-year old from Niger detained in Palazzo San Gervasio in October 2019 despite being a vulnerable person suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and associated memory loss***

Arci, Legambiente, Forum of the third sector, Libera and Acli, who demanded the closure of the detention camp. Another protest had simultaneously been organised in the city of Potenza by the Basilicata Migrant Observatory.

After several years of renovations work, the centre was finally reopened in January 2018, upon the entry into force of the Minniti-Orlando Decree (Law Decree 13/2017). The facility began operating before its renovation was actually completed. Engel Italia ltd, based in Salerno, is the company dealing with the [extraordinary management of the facility](#) (for an overall value of 750k euros) while waiting for the conclusion of the European tender procedure establishing a contract for good and services provision worth 6,200,000 euros for three years. The group had already hit the news in December 2014, while managing a SPRAR centre housed in a hotel in Capaccio Paestum (Salerno). At that time a [journalistic inquiry](#) published a video testimony of some migrants welcomed inside the hotel, which denounced the inhuman conditions of the facility. Particularly, the migrants reported to be constantly threatened by the centre manager, who even used to show them a gun for intimidation purposes. Following the publication of the inquiry, a [parliamentary inquiry](#) was tabled to shed light on the matter in question.



Photo Credits Andrea Sabbadini

Recently, a new [journalistic scandal](#) led to the initiation of an investigation from the Public prosecutor's office of Potenza for several violations taking place inside Palazzo San Gervasio detention centre. Alleged violations included abuse of office and mistreatment. Unlawful acts, such as inappropriate administration of heavy psychotropic drugs (e.g., rivotril) and violence against the detainees, have been attributed to some staff members. A dramatic story is that of Omar, [a 24-year old from Niger detained in Palazzo San Gervasio in October 2019](#) despite being a vulnerable person suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and associated memory loss. He was repatriated in November to Nigeria - and not

Niger - because the Nigerian consulate recognised the man as a fellow citizen (although he had always declared to be from Niger, as was also reported in police documents, and he spoke Hausa and French). Activists from the [LaciateCIEntrare](#) campaign, along with Omar's friends, [launched a campaign](#) to denounce this event and, after several days of incessant searches, they were able to [find him](#) thanks to the family who went to Nigeria to bring him back home.

This story, however extreme in its tragedy, is the tip of an iceberg. Human rights violations and abuses are widespread inside Palazzo San Gervasio, but the majority of them do not escape the institution's walls and remain hidden to the public (see, for instance, [Diego's account](#)). For instance, detainees have reported that they are forced to buy basic items (e.g., cigarettes and instant coffee) with their pocket money, and that these latter are sold by the managing body at a higher price, even three times the real market value. Commenting about the centre in an article published early this year, [Gervasio Ungolo](#) overall notes that the CPR has strongly affected 'a small community (Palazzo San Gervasio) that for decades has been struggling to solve the problem of seasonal migrants working as tomato harvesters.' In his words, it has transformed this village in a sort of 'national human landfill.'

As our research shows, in no instance is people's containment in these facilities a smooth business as migrants display an extraordinary ability to navigate and resist the detention system. In [April 2018](#), the police repressed a collective escape attempt with tear gas and violence, but two of the fugitive detainees still managed to break out of the centre. Those who were captured, continued their protest inside the centre to cry out against the long period of confinement endured (some of them had been inside the centre for almost 9 months), the lack of medical assistance, and the overwhelming presence of the police (more than 80 officers on-site). Three detainees - a Syrian and two Tunisians - threatened to commit suicide, while another Tunisian man started a hunger strike. In all cases freedom was their final aim.

## During the Covid-19 outbreak: 9th March - 18th May 2020

The situation in the CPR of Palazzo San Gervasio, near Potenza, has been critical since the very beginning of the health emergency and subsequent lockdown, as protests were already taking place inside the centre before then. The earliest information on the number of detainees in the centre, 40 people, was published by [Melting Pot](#) on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March. Later, the National Guarantor reported a sharp drop in the number of detainees: from 33 people at the beginning of April to 17 on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May ([Bulletin no. 29](#)). Notably, on the 25<sup>th</sup> of May, the facility was finally closed as, according to the National Guarantor ([Bulletin no. 34](#)), renovations were needed. It is reasonable to believe that this decision was a consequence of the [various protests](#) springing up inside the centre before and during the national lockdown, which could have plausibly damaged detainees' living units. It is also worth noting that the day after the closing of the centre a news story was disseminated about [a centre staff member who had tested positive for the virus](#). The same news story also mentioned a case that had previously occurred in the centre, which was supposedly the source of the new infection, but we were unable to find more information about this.

The first protest inside the centre took place in the very first days of the health emergency, at a time when [riots in prisons were also spreading across the country](#). Between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> of March, the local police force deployed inside the CPR — supported by reinforcements from other cities—repressed a collective escape attempt by detainees. As a consequence of this event, [each cell was searched and braided ropes and handmade aluminum harpoons were found](#) — tools ready to be used by detainees. As a reaction, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March detainees started a [hunger strike to protest against the extreme living conditions](#). This protest was also supported by their relatives and friends outside.

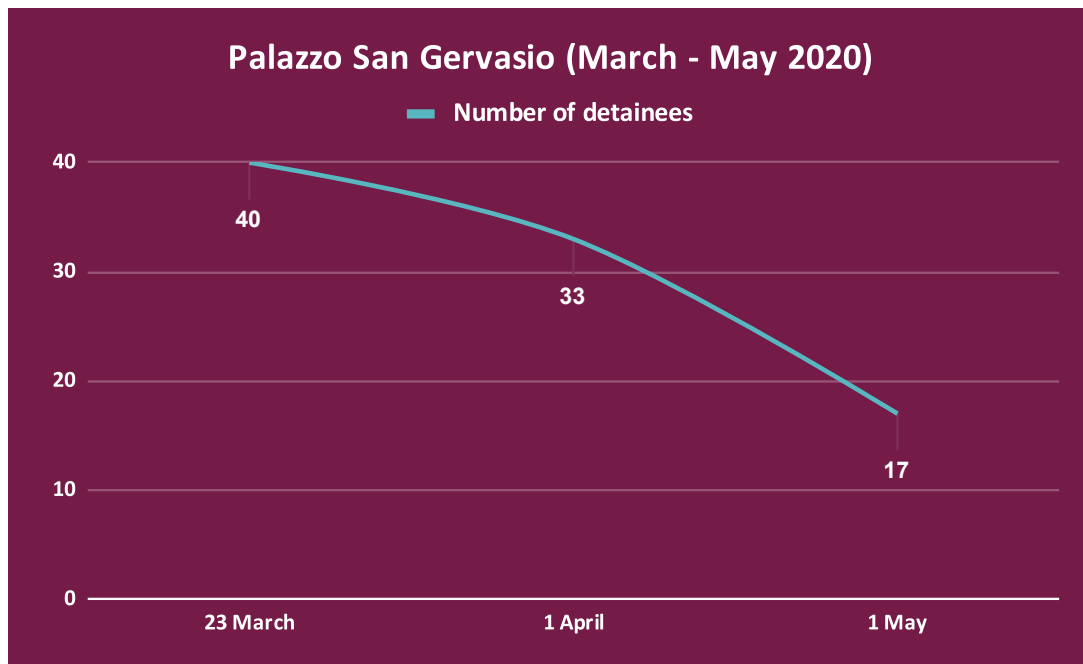
On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March, the local newspaper Il Mattino di Basilicata reported that the [detainees' hunger strike had been going on for a week](#). As highlighted in the article, detainees denounced a profound sense of uncertainty and confusion about their future, a situation caused by the suspension of all international flights and consequently of deportation operations, as well as by the absence of clear institutional information about the measures envisaged to safeguard detainees' health during the pandemic. Among the many concerns pointed out in the article, the lack of PPE for both detainees and centre staff was emphasised, a situation which highly increased the risk of contagion within the centre's walls. Another problem reported was the poor hygienic and sanitary regime inside the facility: no heating, no access to hot water, no regular change of blankets and clothes, and no regular disinfection of the environment. Moreover, in most cases detainees complained that they were not fully aware of the drug treatment they were taking and why they were administered it by the centre staff. The lack of healthcare provision during the lockdown was also emphasised by a detainee's account collected by the information website [fanpage.it](#). As the article reported:

***It's all dirty, they haven't come to clean for days, they give you a dirty blanket and that stays with you all the time here.***

*Those who came in with hernia disease were not treated because the doctor refused to operate them; those with fever and flu symptoms received antibiotics without being examined. ‘The policemen come and go every day without protection, there are already about forty of us but there are still new entries, yesterday they brought a non-EU citizen. It’s all dirty, they haven’t come to clean for days, they give you a dirty blanket and that stays with you all the time here. There’s no heating, no hot water, not even in winter. If you complain, you’ll get beaten up.’*

Another [account](#) collected by LasciateCIEntrare activists during the hunger strike also highlights the difficulties faced by migrants confined inside Palazzo San Gervasio when attempting to communicate with the outside world. The situation of social isolation, which was already present before the pandemic, significantly worsened after the Covid-19 outbreak due to the suspension of visits with family members and friends, as well as with lawyers (who had already been often criticised for the poor quality of assistance provided, especially in the case of legal aid lawyers). Furthermore, some detainees also [reported](#) difficulties in purchasing phone cards to use the public phones inside the centre, as their weekly allowance was not always distributed by the centre staff.

The only silver lining regarding this dramatic situation is mentioned by the National Guarantor, in [Bulletin no. 26](#) of the 21<sup>st</sup> of April, where it is noted that Palazzo San Gervasio is one of the three Italian detention centres where a video call service was introduced. This service allowed detainees to connect, albeit remotely, with their relatives and friends, while also guaranteeing the communication with their lawyers. Although this was certainly a positive improvement, we do not have detailed information on how this system actually worked in practice or regarding its effectiveness.



In order to amplify the voices of those inside the centre, [LasciateCiEntrare](#) activists published several [accounts](#), which overall depict a dramatic situation. The gravity of this situation is due not only to the aforementioned problems, but also to the ongoing presence inside the centre of people in conditions of heightened vulnerability, such as homeless people facing mental health challenges. As a [testimony published on the Melting Pot website](#) underlines:

*They're 'crazy' here and they shouldn't be here [in detention]. One of them tried to escape because he could not resist being confined. They grabbed him, he resisted and they beat him up. And he's crazy, what's he doing here?*

This situation, as highlighted by LasciateCIEntrare activists, is a reality which predates Covid-19, but worsened during the pandemic. This was also a result of closing the already limited services available for this population, who remained abandoned in the streets without a 'home to stay in' and being exposed to police control and repression, including detention (see also the section on Turin's CPR).



# Bari Palese detention centre

## Overview

*(currently managed by Social Cooperative Badia Grande)*

Specifically [designed for the purpose of detaining foreign national citizens awaiting removal](#), [Bari Palese centre](#) opened its doors in March 2006 with a capacity of 196 places. After being closed for a year and eight months between March 2016 – November 2017, the centre reopened with a capacity of [126 men](#). Yet, repeated riots by detainees (the [most recent one in December 2019](#)) have progressively reduced the capacity of the centre (the last update received by ASGI on the 14<sup>th</sup> of January 2020, indicates that only a detention unit operating at that time, with 18 men inside).

Located in the northern outskirts of Bari, in boulevard Gabriele d’Annunzio, the detention centre stands close to a complex run by the finance police known as ‘la cittadella della guardia di finanza’ (literally, the finance police’s small city), as well as to the international airport Karol Wojtyla. The area where the facility lies was used in the late 1990s as a temporary ‘emergency reception camp’, where migrants were placed in caravans while awaiting a response to their asylum claims (see [Rizzi and Accardo 2019](#)). On the 27<sup>th</sup> of July 2003, around one hundred no border activists decided to [peacefully ‘invade’ the camp](#), which was enclosed by iron gates, and speak with the migrants inside. They found out that most of the 80 people confined there, who came from a number of different countries, had requested asylum, but had been confined for about two months (or more). In other words, although the centre was regarded as a ‘reception centre’, it appeared to be operating as a detention facility where people were held in very critical conditions (see [MSF 2004 report](#), pages 163-170).

In 2006, the new detention facility opened. The centre was initially run by the ‘Misericordie d’Italia’, a Catholic Association. Yet, after one year, the management was



taken over by ‘Operatori Emergenza Radio’, a small NGO with no experience in the field of immigration, which maintained its role until 2013. Management was then taken over by the Consortium ‘Connecting People’, a key player in the Italian migrant detention and reception market. Connecting People was in charge of the centre’s management and service provision until March 2016, when the facility was closed as a result of a fire set by detainees to protest against the inhumane conditions of their confinement. When the renovated detention centre reopened in November 2017, the management was entrusted to the social cooperative ‘Costruiamo Assieme’, which was soon replaced by Badia Grande, the current managing body. As in the case of the other Italian detention centres, this organisation won the tender based on the most economically advantageous bid proposed.

Architecturally, Bari’s centre resembles a prison [‘where everything is thought of in terms of the risk of self-inflicted injuries or generalised violence’](#). The main building of the centre consists of a central hallway with five sections on each side. Three of these are used for administrative functions, while the remaining seven host the men detained. This whole complex is closely fenced by an unbreakable glass barrier, called an “emergency perimeter fence”. The area is also surrounded by a six-metre high security wall made of reinforced concrete, which obstructs visibility. Military personnel patrol the area 24/7. On the inside, the lodging complex is made up of seven units spreading out of the central hallway. Each unit is made of seven 279-square-foot rooms with four beds each, housing a maximum of 28 detainees and kitted out with shared lavatories, living rooms and courtyards. Detainees’ living spaces are decorated with no removable objects, and all mattresses, blankets and sheets are made of fireproof material. Decaying toilets and basic room décor are found in the rudimentary interiors, with tables and benches bolted to the floor and caged televisions hanging off the living room ceiling. As mentioned before, various units and areas were damaged over time due to detainees’ protests. For instance, in February 2016, two [subsequent revolts](#) led to the closure of the centre for a year and eight months.

***‘prison was much better’; healthcare, sanitary conditions and food were of remarkably better quality***

Activists, human rights advocates and detainees have denounced the poor living conditions, including the absence of any meaningful activity (see [here](#) and [here](#)) in this facility. The indiscriminate use of psychiatric drugs, the detention of minors (although prohibited by law), the lack of safeguards for people seeking asylum, the psychological and physical abuses inflicted all exacerbated people’s distress, while also fuelling their protests. Violation of human rights, abuses, and [degradation](#) have been structural features of Bari’s detention environment since its inception, evident also in [videos shot with smuggled mobile phones](#), as well as in the [acts of resistance](#) of those within. Dramatically, the [Migrant Observatory](#) reports that, ‘in just 2012, 59 hunger-strikes were recorded for demonstration purposes; 5 grave episodes of facility damages; 3 brawls among detainees and 50 acts of self-harm.’ These acts also spoke of the sense of abandonment felt by detainees, ‘thrown into a highly securitised and somewhat remote space, far away from the gaze and the attention not only of civil society, but also of the staff itself’ as Giuseppe Campesi [noted](#). Experiencing immigration detention as very afflictive, some people, like [Igor](#), convincingly argued that ‘prison was much better’; healthcare, sanitary conditions and food (among other things) in prison were indeed of remarkably better quality compared to the ones provided in Bari’s centre.

Thanks to these protests and the [initiative](#) of the association Class Action Procedimentale that brought a [popular class action lawsuit](#), in 2011 a civil court appointed an expert to ascertain the living conditions inside a detention centre for the first time in Italy. As a result, on the 9<sup>th</sup> of March 2014, Bari's court [ordered the renovation of the centre within the peremptory term of 90 days](#) in order to guarantee the minimum human rights standards. However, in the following months nothing changed, and the facility continued to operate as usual while the [detainees inside continued to protest](#). It was not until March 2016 that the centre was closed for renovations, and even then, the decision to do so was taken not because of the court's order but rather due to riots by those detained to denounce the unbearable living conditions they endured. In August 2017 Bari's civil court, following the popular class action initiated in 2011, recognised the [right to compensation for the damage to the image and historical-cultural identity of the Municipality and the Province of Bari](#) for the ways in which migrants were treated in Bari's detention centre. However, as noted by [Rizzi and Accardo](#), this ruling provided no response to the violations of human rights suffered by detainees nor to activists' demands to shut the centre down. In November 2017 the centre reopened again.



Photo Credits Giulia Lazzarotti

In August 2018, activists from the campaign [LasciateCIEntrare](#) managed to access the centre and monitor its conditions (see here for the [report](#)). Among the 79 men detained, they found people with serious healthcare issues and/or mental health problems left without proper assistance, asylum seekers whose legal rights had not been safeguarded, and even cases of people who should not have been detained (e.g., one man who was formally married with an Italian woman). Moreover, detainees reported difficulties in obtaining information about their rights, communicating with lawyers and, overall, accessing effective legal representation. Some of them were also found to be in a dazed state – with shining eyes, thickened lips and mumbling – raising questions about whether they had been administered psychiatric drugs. It was noteworthy that, over the past few years, LasciateCIEntrare has repeatedly reported episodes of [police violence](#) against detainees inside Bari's detention centre.

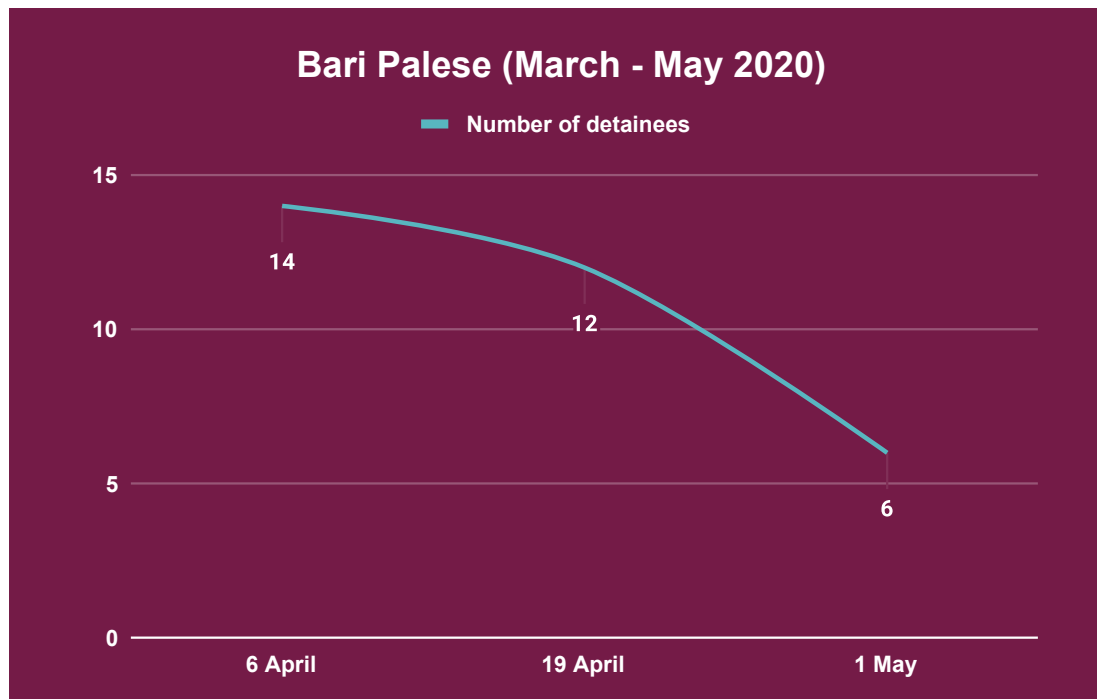
Following yet another [episode of protests and related police brutality](#) against detainees in December 2018, ASGI issued a [public notice](#) in which they argued that ‘the situation that has come about in Bari has determined an increased inadequacy of the CPR, to the extent that it is bringing about inhumane and degrading living conditions for all detainees.’ In the face of such conditions, a [new riot broke out in December 2019](#) and resulted in the fire of the remaining living units, which were the ones still in use. The majority of detainees were then transferred to the newly reopened CPR of Gradisca D’Isonzo.

## During the Covid-19 outbreak: 9th March - 18th May 2020

The only information we were able to gather about Bari Palese detention centre dates back to the week of the 6-12<sup>th</sup> of April 2020 when, according to testimonies collected by our research team, 14 men were detained inside the centre. According to the same sources, at that time the Justices of the Peace were continuing to validate and extend migrants' detention orders, although the overall number of people entering the centre had significantly decreased. According to the data communicated by the National Guarantor on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May 2020, by then the number of detainees in Bari Palese had progressively decreased to 12 and, finally, to 6 people ([Bulletin no. 29](#)).

Although we have tried to solicit further information, by also contacting the local and regional Guarantors, we have not been able to collect further updates.

*the Justices of the Peace were continuing to validate and extend migrants' detention orders*





# Brindisi-Restinco detention centre

## Overview

*(currently managed by HERA group and AGH Resort Ltd)*

Opened in 1999, [Brindisi-Restinco's detention centre](#) was among the first facilities created to detain foreign national citizens. Initially, the centre had a capacity of about [83 places](#), a sum that was often exceeded due to overcrowding. Closed between 2007-2008 and again from 2012-2015, the facility can now formally hold up to [48 men](#), but in practice a maximum of [34 men](#) can be confined in there (page 205; tab 2.22).

Located in an isolated site in the middle of the countryside, along the provincial road that connects Brindisi to San Vito dei Normanni, the detention centre sits between Restinco's train station and the barracks of the San Marco battalion. In their [2004 report on Temporary Stay and Assistance Centres](#), Doctors Without Borders Italy explained that, until the end of 2003, migrants held inside Brindisi-Restinco were placed in caravans and kept in degrading conditions (e.g., inadequate healthcare, lack of information and translation services, no contact with the outside world, lack of staff trained on immigration issues). In November 2007, after the publication of the [report](#) by the inquiry commission chaired by Staffan De Mistura, which overall recommended a radical overhaul of the Italian detention system, Brindisi-Restinco's centre was closed for renovation, and reopened in 2008 as a multi-purpose centre. Yet, in August 2009, and despite the [opposition of all local actors](#), an area of the centre was designated, once again, to operate as a detention facility to [confine people awaiting identification and removal from Italy](#). Since then, the detention centre has been located in the same area that houses a Centre for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (CARA), with which it shares the building where administrative offices are located.

The centre was initially run by the 'Comunità Emmanuel', a Catholic organisation. In

2003, the management was taken over by the Social Cooperative ‘Fiamme D’Argento’, a national organisation composed by retired Carabinieri with a local presence in Brindisi, which at that time [had no experience in the field of immigration just as the staff they relied on had no expertise](#). Brindisi-Restinco’s centre remained under the management of ‘Fiamme D’Argento’, later [turned into the Social Cooperative ‘La Fedelissima’](#), for about ten years. In 2008, it was taken over by the Consortium ‘Connecting People’, a key player in the Italian migrant detention and reception market, which managed the facility until 2012, when it was closed off as a result of riots by detainees protesting against the unfairness and inhumanity of their confinement. Since reopening in 2015, the centre has been managed by the Social Cooperative Auxilium (for an overview see also [here](#)). Finally, in November 2019, the contract was entrusted to a consortium composed by the [HERA group](#), which is among Italy’s largest multi-utilities corporations, and the AGH Resort Ltd, a local company involved in the market of migrants’ reception centres, which recently was the target of a [public inquiry](#).

[The architecture of the centre reflects its oppressive qualities](#) (page 28). Walls about five meters high surround the facility, which is also guarded by armed forces and monitored through CCTV cameras. Inside there are two macro-areas, one dedicated to the detention centre (CPR) and one for the reception of asylum seekers (CARA). The detention facility itself looks like a ‘cage’, according to [Erminia Rizzi and Yasmine Accardo](#), as there are:

*high walls and narrow corridors and then the blocks (where detainees are housed) surrounded by bars as well as by plexiglass, and closed up by a mesh. Asphyxia is the word that one thinks of while getting in and coming across the cement, the hot, the wall of the police.*

Detainees are housed in three blocks - A, B, and C - which are separated from one another and from the rest of the facility by a metal gate closed by a chained padlock. According to the June 2016 [report](#) by the National Guarantor of his visit, each block has an outdoor courtyard, surrounded by concrete walls and covered by a metal mesh [placed about 8 meters high](#). Each block contains three dormitories as well as a common area (defined in the tender specification as the ‘wellbeing space’), which is where detainees eat, watch TV, charge mobile phones, and where they spend the majority of their days struggling to kill time. The décor of this area is very unpleasant, with some concrete benches and tables bolted to the floor and flaked off walls. Even detainees’ beds are made of concrete with an iron canopy, and mattresses are of foam with fireproof blankets and sheets (similar to the other detention facilities). Beyond beds and mattresses, no room décor (e.g., tables, nightstands or chairs) is provided in the dormitories, which therefore appear very demeaning. Overall, as [journalists commented](#) about a visit made with some activists from the human rights campaign LasciateCIEntrare, ‘There is a sense of abandonment that we have never seen even in prison’.

***Asphyxia is the word that one thinks of while getting in and coming across the cement, the hot, the wall of the police.***

As in other Italian detention centres, migrants confined inside Brindisi-Restinco describe feelings of confinement, isolation, and oppression, which together generate a sense of being over-controlled. Remarkably, as the aforementioned [media report](#) highlights, neither recreational activities nor multi-faith prayer rooms are provided, and people thus struggle with idleness and isolation. As the National Guarantor notes in his [2018 report](#)

indeed: ‘Alongside the structural problems due to the lack of space, the police officers in charge of the security aspects of the Centre have a hostile behaviour, and tend to deny authorisation for any activity, for safety reasons’ (page 5). To cope with and survive in such a hostile environment, detained men play cards, chat, speak on the phones (which do not have video capabilities), and often [organise improvised prayer spaces](#) using towels or other personal items.



Photo Credits Dario Stefano Dell'Aquila

Degrading conditions and serious human rights violations have long been [denounced](#) inside Brindisi-Restinco's centre. Notably, human rights actors have reported difficulties in securing access to this site and, even when they managed to obtain permission, they could not take their mobile phones inside (which is why it is hard to get photographs of this detention centre). No Border activists too have [suffered repression](#) from the police for going outside the centre and trying to communicate with and offer solidarity to those detained inside. Indeed, since its opening, detainees' riots and various forms of resistance have been taking place. These included hunger strikes (see [here](#) and [here](#)), riots and fires (see [here](#) and [here](#)), and mass escapes (see [here](#) and [here](#)). The climate of neglect, abuse and exasperation has also facilitated over the years episodes of self-harm and suicide attempts, as in the case of [Harry](#), a 20-year-old Nigerian man who took his own life in the night between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> of June 2019. Harry should not have been locked up in a detention center, as denounced then by the activists of the campaign [LasciateCIEntrare](#), because he showed a serious mental distress. Also, he should have been closely monitored by detention health care staff. Another story brought to public attention by activists is that of [Adriana, a transgender woman of Brazilian origin](#), who at the beginning of 2017, and before being transferred to Caltanissetta's CPR, found herself confined in the male unit at

the Brindisi CPR, where she started a hunger strike to denounce the demeaning conditions of her detention. In addition to standing in solidarity with detainees' protests and advocating for their release in the community, local no border groups have also shed light on the deportation system operation. For instance, they showed the [active role played by the airline Mistral Air](#), owned by Poste Italiane, which operates forced deportation flights.



## During the Covid-19 outbreak:

9th March - 18th May 2020

The earliest data we have on the number of detainees inside Brindisi-Restinco's detention centre date back to the 17<sup>th</sup> of April, when 12 people were detained in the facility according to testimonies collected by our research team. Later, in May, the National Guarantor first reported that there were 11 men detainees in the centre ([Bulletin no. 29](#)). On the 15<sup>th</sup> of May ([Bulletin no. 32](#)), he underlined how, along with Gradisca d'Isonzo's CPR, Brindisi-Restinco was one of the two detention facilities where the number of detainees had remained stable. This is also because, as some interviewees pointed out, Justices of the Peace continued to extend migrants' detention.

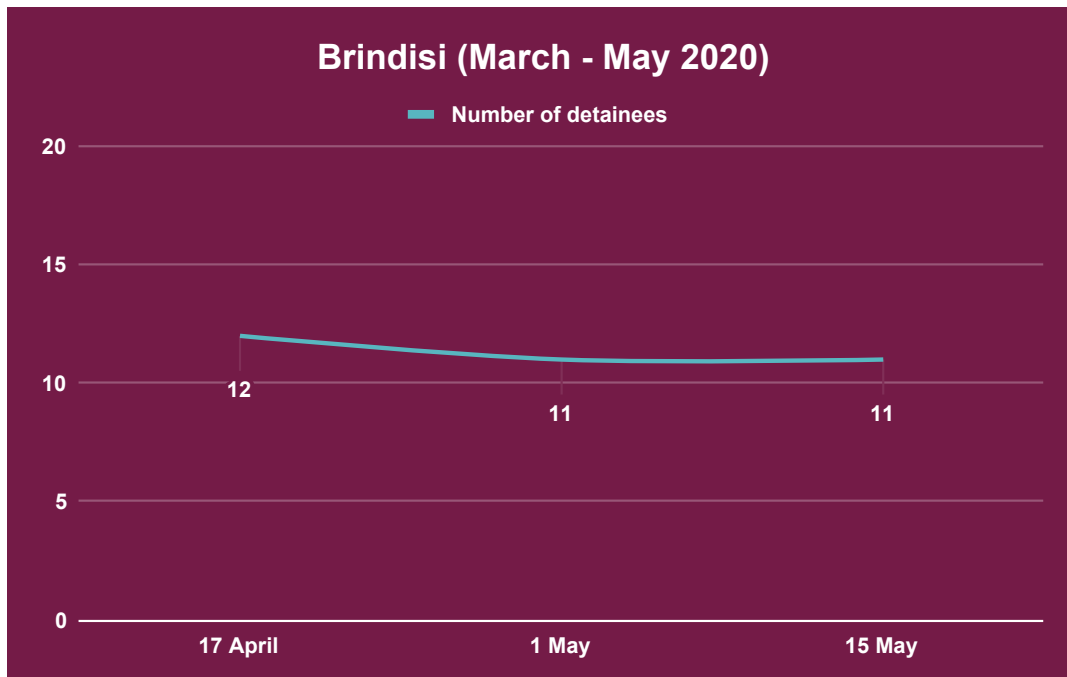
In his weekly monitoring bulletins, the National Guarantor reported that the use of video-calls was facilitated and expanded inside Brindisi-Restinco ([similarly](#) to Gradisca d'Isonzo and Palazzo San Gervasio's CPRs) to allow detainees to talk to friends and relatives, as well as to communicate with their lawyers and with other institutional actors (e.g., local Guarantors) ([Bulletin no. 26](#)). On a positive note, the Guarantor also [highlighted](#) that the centre management provided medical examinations to all migrants before release.

Yet, these measures were not enough to tackle the increased social isolation and other disruptions that the pandemic brought in. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of May, the local newspaper Brindisi Report highlighted [the news of a protest](#) that happened the previous night inside the CPR. Detainees had set fires in one of the centre's units (Lot C), and the police had intervened to quell the protest and support the law enforcement agencies operating within the facility. This protest followed the uprisings that occurred across several Italian prisons against containment measures put in place for the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet, the situation inside Brindisi-Restinco's CPR was critical well before the Covid-19 outbreak, which only exacerbated pre-existing problems inside the centre. This is how a Tunisian man, [interviewed by Radio Radicale](#) put it:

*With this coronavirus lately we've been experiencing an incredible anxiety, because they come in, taking turns, police officers, Carabinieri, militaries, finance police, they have contact with people outside [...] We are going through a moment of agitation, of fear, also because we are in the center, really like animals inside stables, no one comes to check up on us [...] As for the requests for deportation, our countries no longer want us, with this emergency and the Law Decrees that have come out the deportations have been stopped. [So,] I ask myself: "Why are we still here [detained]"<sup>14</sup>*

***We are going through a moment of agitation, of fear, also because we are in the center, really like animals inside stables, no one comes to check up on us***

<sup>14</sup> The interview transcription is also available on the blog [Hurrya](#).





# Caltanissetta Pian del Lago detention centre

## Overview

*(Temporarily closed on 1st May, currently managed by the Social Cooperative Essequadro and Ad Majora srl)*

The Caltanissetta detention centre was built [near the local stadium 'Pian del Lago' in 1998](#), following the adoption of Law 40/1998 (called Turco-Napolitano). The facility can hold up to [96 people](#), at full capacity; as of April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the effective capacity reported by the National Guarantor in its annual report was 48 detainees ([page 205](#), tab 2.22).

The CPR is located about six to seven kilometres from the city centre, inside a former military barracks, previously used during the 1990s in the Sicilian Vespers operation, aimed at fighting organised crime (see [Rovelli 2006](#)). [In the same complex there is a Reception Centre \(CARA\)](#), still operational, while previously there was also an [Identification Centre \(CDI\)](#). The detention centre is located within [a separate, fenced-in area](#), divided into three living units, each consisting of six dormitories, connected by a long corridor that leads to the common area with the bathrooms and showers. In another building there is the common canteen, a community space and a prayer area. A container located in the square in front of the building is used for private conversations, both with family and friends as well as with lawyers or other institutional actors.

The management of the structure was initially [assigned to the Italian Red Cross](#), the only association that in 1998 participated in the call for tenders issued by the Prefecture. Subsequently, however, in 2003, the contract was revoked because of the various scandals related to the management of funds and the administration methods adopted by the organisation. The management of the centre was then assigned to the Social Cooperative Albatros 1973, a newly established third sector entity, founded autonomously by the centre

staff members previously hired by the Red Cross. As a result, no substantial changes took place in the centre management board. Albatros maintained the management of the facility until October 2013, [when it was replaced by the Auxilium cooperative](#). Currently the management of the centre is shared by Social Cooperative Enterprise Essequadro along with Ad Majora srl, [which have been the heads of the administration since March 2020](#).

The CPR of Caltanissetta Pian del Lago was closed [for the first time in 2000](#), to carry out renovation work. Reopened shortly after, the centre was closed again in November 2009, [when a protest broke out](#). On that occasion, a group of detainees tried to escape from the centre by attempting to break the bars of the perimeter gates. Failing to do so due to police intervention, the detainees subsequently set fire to the mattresses, which spread throughout the facility. As a result of this episode, [the detention centre was closed because it was totally uninhabitable and detainees were transferred elsewhere](#). The Pian del Lago CPR remained closed for about three years, during which renovations were carried out, and it was finally [reopened in April 2012](#).

Since its first opening in 1998, NGOs and associations/entities which have been involved in human rights monitoring have highlighted numerous critical issues within the facility (see [here](#) and [here](#)), particularly with regard to [hygienic conditions](#). Moreover, the [2015 report](#) of the LasciateCIEntrare activist campaign emphasised the difficulties for civil society organisations to access the facility and talk to detainees, with the result that detainees' experiences remained silenced and obscured. This situation was also exacerbated by the limited number of cultural mediators and interpreters working inside the centre who were unable to attend to all detained migrants, having to cover both the detention centre and the adjacent CARA.

Five years later, at the beginning of 2020, [the voices of those detained](#) confirmed the critical situation of abandonment endured within the centre:

*We are treated like beasts. There are only 19 of us and no one takes care of us. They are always watching us threateningly and never respond to [our] requests for help. There are 80 people here as staff: they eat pizza and drink, but they don't think about us at all. Our beds are cold, made of concrete, with thin mattresses that are always wet. The blankets are dirty and insufficient and we don't know how long we will have to stay here.*

Sadly, it is not surprising that, over time this regime of abandonment has claimed its victims. The first person to die within Pian del Lago's CPR was [Amin Saber](#), in the summer of 1998, shortly after what was then known as the CPTA had come into operation. Notably, Amin's case was also the first death in immigration detention in Italy. There is not much information regarding his story, not even the precise date of his death. Anti-racist and solidarity groups, at the time, reported that he [died from a stray bullet fired](#) by a police officer in an attempt to quell an uprising. The second death occurred in the early hours of the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2006. [Medhi Ali](#), a Tunisian citizen, had been feeling sick the night before, after learning on the phone that a relative of his had disappeared. The medical staff of the centre initially tried to sedate him, calling for help only later, when the man

***Our beds are cold,  
made of concrete,  
with thin  
mattresses that are  
always wet***

manifested a second illness. When the ambulance was finally called, Medhi passed away while he was being transferred to the hospital.<sup>15</sup> The most recent death inside the CPR in Caltanissetta was on the 12<sup>th</sup> of January 2020, when [Aymen Mekni](#), a 34-year-old man from Tunisia, died inside the facility. Even in this case the real causes of death have never been clarified. While the police headquarters claimed it was a case of ‘natural death’, according to [his fellow detainees](#) he did not receive appropriate medical assistance. Following Aymen’s death, [several protests](#) broke out, which lasted for days, in an attempt [to stop deportations and obtain freedom for all detainees](#).



Photo Credits Francesca Bertin

Beyond collective protests that have been breaking out inside the centre, other individual and collective acts of resistance have occurred over time to condemn the inhumanity of the Italian detention regime. In February 2014, during a solidarity presidium outside the centre, [five detainees attempted to escape](#): three were caught, while two managed to get their freedom. Subsequently, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of March 2014, the local media reported [an escape attempt by 40 detainees](#) (half of the migrants inside the centre at the time): some [climbed the fence trying to escape, while the others protected them](#) with a pebble stone. Considerable damage was reported to the vehicles of the police which intervened to block the escape attempt, which eventually failed. Other attempts to escape also occurred in [August](#) and [September](#) of the same year.

Another meaningful episode of resistance, in this case of individual nature, is that of [Adriana, a transgender woman](#) transferred in April 2017 from Brindisi-Restinco to Pian del Lago's CPR, because of the death threats and violence she had suffered by her fellow

<sup>15</sup> In the night between the 29th and 30th of June 2008 there was a similar event, this time in the Identification Centre next to the CPR, where [Yussuf Abubakr](#), a 24-year-old Ghanaian man, also [complained of severe chest pains](#) but was not assisted before his death. This incident was also the subject of a subsequent [parliamentary inquiry](#).

male detainees. Inside Pian del Lago, Adriana began a hunger strike to denounce her protracted confinement and shed light on the condition of migrants confined in detention centres more generally. As she reported in an [interview](#) with no border activists:

*Even if a person has spent their whole life working in Italy, has paid more than 30 years of taxes, because their residence authorisation had expired for 15 days they ended up in a CIE [previous denomination for detention centres in Italy]. All this for lack of work.*

There is evidence of two other revolts, which broke out in [September](#) and [December](#) of 2017 and were led mainly by Tunisian detainees. Protesting against the frequent collective deportations to Tunisia, detainees set fire to underwear and clothes, sheets and tablecloths. Particularly, in December, [three pavilions of the facility were damaged](#): blackened walls, damaged floors and pieces of plaster fallen everywhere remained as the traces of the revolt. Finally, in February 2020, just before the outbreak of the pandemic, the police entered Pian del Lago's CPR to carry out the unexpected 'removal' of some detainees, who then started a protest. As activist [reports](#) highlight, the police again responded by means of force.

## During the Covid-19 outbreak: 9th March - 18th May 2020

At the beginning of the pandemic, on the 6<sup>th</sup> of March, Borderline Sicilia [reported](#) the presence of 17 people inside Caltanissetta's detention centre, despite the facility having broken windows and toilets, concrete beds with very thin and damp mattresses, and lacking adequate healthcare services. Denouncing the dramatic situation inside the facility, the Sicilian network No CPR, Borderline Sicilia, LasciateCiEntrare and other local activist groups launched [a petition](#) to immediately close the centre.

Yet, as the national lockdown was enforced, it became much harder to obtain information about life in this site of confinement, as NGOs and solidarity groups were not allowed to enter. A testimony from an activist of Borderline Sicilia, collected by our research team at the end of April, raises the hypothesis that migrants continued to enter the centre in that period, though in small numbers. This happened despite the [protests occurring in January and February 2020](#) had severely damaged the facility and drastically reduced its capacity. Moreover, as confirmed by the lawyer Fulvio Vassallo Paleologo, it is worth noting that the CARA situated near the CPR has been used during the first national lockdown to [quarantine people arriving in Italy by boat](#), filling the facility above its normal capacity.<sup>16</sup>

According to the information we collected, no sanitary nor hygiene measures were taken inside Caltanissetta detention centre in response to the Covid-19 outbreak. The environment was not cleaned regularly and no PPE was distributed to the detainees nor information provided on how to protect them from the contagion. Staff, however, did use masks and other protective equipment. As [reported](#) by activists of the LasciateCIEntrare campaign at the end of February:

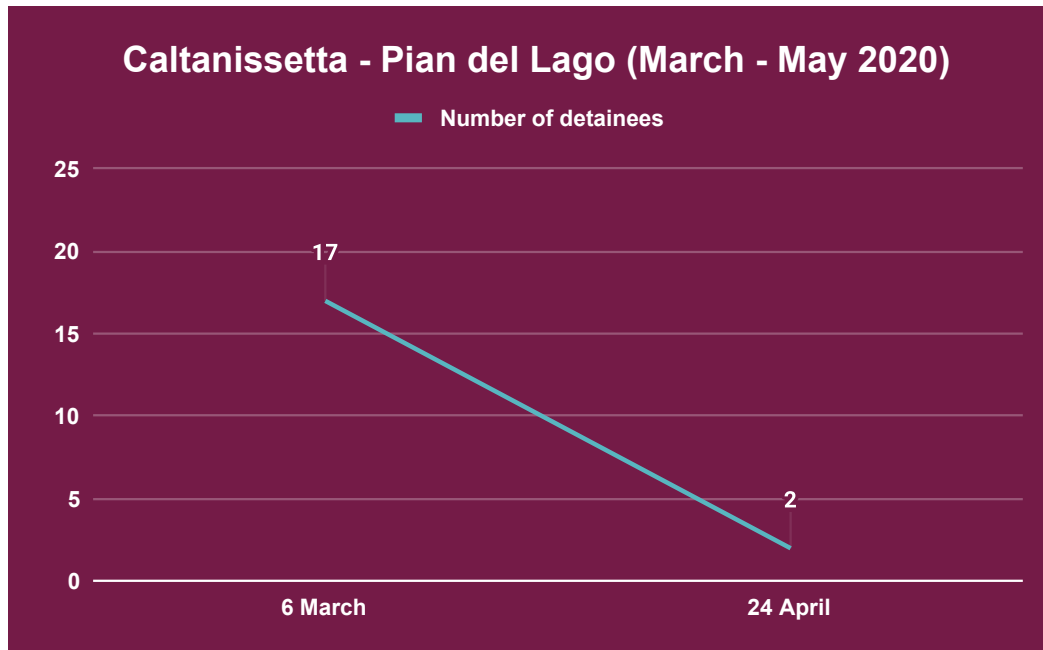
*In these days of attention to the coronavirus, the staff arrives with face-masks, but does not give any information to the detainees: 'they do not tell us how we must safeguard ourselves, what we must do. Imagine we are just beasts in the slaughterhouse for them. Weighed in gold. How much does your country spend on this infamy? Because then here the people [staff] are so rude and mean to us. The guy who fell because of the police is sick and yet they don't give a damn. He recently landed in Italy and they didn't even let him ask for asylum.'*

On the 21<sup>st</sup> of April ([Bulletin no. 26](#)), the National Guarantor finally announced the closure of Caltanissetta's CPR due to its inadequate conditions, as set out by the Ministry of Interior. Yet, three days later ([Bulletin no. 27](#)), two people were surprisingly reported

***they do not tell us  
how we must  
safeguard  
ourselves, what we  
must do. Imagine  
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in the  
slaughterhouse for  
them.***

<sup>16</sup> As lockdown measures were eased in Europe and Northern African countries, migration flows increased in July, especially from Tunisia. As a consequence, the CARA became increasingly overcrowded and massive evasions took place (see [here](#) and [here](#)).

inside the facility. It was only on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May that the CPR was declared empty ([Bulletin no. 29](#)). The CARA nearby has instead remained operative and continues to be used as a quarantine facility where migrants are held in very demeaning conditions, as declared by the same staff members in a [letter](#) recently published by Borderline Sicilia.







## Conclusions

Already before the Covid-19 pandemic, Giuseppe Campesi and Giulia Fabini contended that immigration detention in Italy was becoming ‘[a flexible control tool to manage what are perceived as the most problematic populations in urban areas](#)’. In putting forward this claim, they explained how migrant detention was actually being used on a day-to-day level as a policy of selective enforcement directed at those groups of migrants deemed particularly ‘undesirable’ because of their ‘social marginality’ or perceived ‘dangerousness’. Overall, their analysis<sup>17</sup> revealed the nature of immigration detention as a practice of social defence aimed at controlling ‘dangerous’ individuals.

These claims are corroborated by the evidence gathered in our report. Indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic seems to have functioned as an amplifier of pre-existing power mechanisms and structures, thus also making them clearer. Particularly, our analysis reveals that although the number of people in detention has slightly decreased in the period from March to May 2020, this reduction has been governed by selective logics of social control. These logics have ultimately established a sort of ‘hierarchy of detention deservingness.’

In line with previous [findings](#) by Francesca Esposito, which demonstrate how gendered and racialised notions of ‘vulnerability’ and ‘dangerousness’ shape the continuous (re) drawing of the line between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ subjects in detention, women and asylum seekers were the [first to be released](#) (this trend was common to other countries too; see [here](#) at 11 May, [here](#), and [here](#)). In other words, these were the first groups deemed somehow ‘worthy of compassion.’ Unsurprisingly, on the other hand, homeless people – many of whom also face mental health challenges – and foreign nationals with criminal records are the ones who continued to enter and populate detention facilities during this period. Notably, at this respect, the evidence collected on Palazzo San Gervasio, where

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<sup>17</sup> Their study was based on an analysis of 426 files relating to judicial hearings for the validation of forced return decisions and orders for detention (and alternative measures to detention) held during the first and fourth quarters of 2015 in Bari and Bologna.

activists from *LasciateCIEntrare* have disseminated [accounts](#) of detainees denouncing the presence inside the centre of people facing mental health challenges who were suffering multiple abuses. Another interesting case is that of Turin detention centre which during the period of the lockdown was used to hold [homeless migrants stopped on the streets](#) as well as people taken there [from prison institutions](#), after having served their sentence.

This evidence overall highlights the role of constructions of ‘social marginality’ and ‘dangerousness’ as main forces behind the selective enforcement of detention during the (first) lockdown period we analysed. It is also interesting to observe how these constructions, which predated the pandemic as demonstrated by Campesi and Fabini, were further modified by the [hygienic-sanitary logic of bordering](#) at stake in this period. As a result, it is the numerous migrant people without a ‘home to stay in’, and left in greater vulnerability due to the closure of the already limited health and social services available to them, that have become - together with former prisoners - a prime target of police control and the racialised politics of containment. Notably, most of these cases were assessed by Justices of the Peace who, even in the context of this global health emergency, have confirmed their [tendency to validate and extend detention measures](#) ordered by the Public security authority - in contrast to the guidelines usually adopted by the specialised sections of the Courts<sup>18</sup> (on this topic see also [here](#)).

***We are like horses inside the stables, closed, and no one is listening to us***

Another interesting evidence emerging from our report concerns the regime of everyday life and the strategies of power at play inside these institutions. What the accounts collected by our research team reveal is that, on the whole, detainees felt abandoned inside the centres while also being exposed to very precarious living conditions. Sometimes they (detainees) were not even provided with appropriate information about the virus or equipment to protect their health. These findings are not new and many [migrants](#), [activists](#), and [scholars](#) have already highlighted over the years the sense of abandonment which reigns in these remote sites, often kept far away from the public eye. It is this same sense of abandonment which is often mentioned to distinguish detention centres from other custodial institutions, such as prisons. Yet, we argue that the pandemic has rendered this dimension [acutely visible](#) (see similar [analyses](#) as applied to other national detention contexts).

In [previous work](#), we have examined uncertainty and unpredictability, rather than coercion or discipline, as specific modes of governing illegalised non-citizens held in Italian detention centres. While this analysis is still valid, what this pandemic has highlighted is the role of [abandonment](#) and [neglect](#) as crucial mechanisms of power in the everyday operation of these sites.<sup>19</sup> Making use of the [words](#) of a detainee interviewed by *Radio Radicale* at the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak:

*We are like horses inside the stables, closed, and no one is listening to us, no one of those, both the internal bodies here and those outside, i.e. the Ministry, the Quaestor. Because no one is looking at us anymore, because this is now a*

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, the [decisions of the specialised sections of the Courts of Rome and Trieste](#) on the detention of three asylum seekers at the CPRs of Ponte Galeria and Gradisca d’Isonzo.

<sup>19</sup> On how even centre staff often feel abandoned in these sites, see [here](#) and also [Esposito et al., 2020](#)

*national, international emergency.*

This situation has been aggravated by the increased veil of opacity hovering around these institutions due to the suspension of visits from relatives and friends as well as from external associations/groups. Furthermore, while in some centres (i.e., Gradisca d'Isonzo, Brindisi, and Palazzo San Gervasio) the use of video-calls was facilitated and expanded ([Bulletin n. 26](#)), in many others this did not happen and detainees were able to maintain contact with the outside world mainly through public telephones inside the sectors, and by using phone cards they had to pay for (women detained in Ponte Galeria are an exception).

To conclude: the pandemic has resulted in countries around the world closing their borders, which has largely impeded deportation enforcement; however, Italian police and migration authorities have continued to detain people. In doing so, detention has fundamentally confirmed its function as a containment measure used to [manage 'undesirable' and 'problematic' populations and hold them out of the public space](#), especially in times of national and global health concerns. Other countries, however, have shown a different approach. For instance, already in early April the Spanish Ministry of Interior declared the government's intention to release detained migrants and temporarily close all detention centres (there called Centros de Internamiento de Extranjeros-CIEs). This plan was ultimately completed on the 6th of May, when Spanish authorities announced that [all detention centres were completely empty](#).<sup>20</sup> Notwithstanding all the limitations associated with this process, and mainly the fact that the closure of the CIEs was a temporary measure linked to the Covid-19 pandemic and [now people have started to be detained again](#), we do believe this is a significant event. It shows that we can live without these carceral institutions. It also demonstrates that it is not too difficult to end migrant detention and let people freely move and live in our communities: it is a concrete, not a utopian scenario. It is a collective scenario, we argue, that we need to strongly advocate for in the near future.

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<sup>20</sup> The situation was different in the two Centers for Temporary Stay of Immigrants (CETI is the Spanish acronym) located in the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla: there, and especially in Melilla, the conditions for migrants did not improve, but rather worsened - ultimately leading to the transformation of Melilla CETI in a closed facility ([here](#) and [here](#)).

ISBN 978-1-9989946-0-1



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