Between borders and bars: Citizenship, othering and penal governance in Italy[1]

Simone Santorso is an Associate Professor at the University of Sussex (UK), and **Alvise Sbraccia** is an Associate Professor at the University of Bologna (Italy).

At the turn of the 1990s, Italy shifted from a country of emigration to a country of immigration, which changed the composition of the prison population. The lack of a concrete effort to integrate the newcomers, and the informal approaches adopted to manage migrations, have made them easy targets for the criminal justice system.[2] Without going into too much detail, Italian politics makes migrants alien bodies that frequently are physically present within Italian territory, informally engaged with the Italian society, but formally ignored by state agencies; this approach to the governance of human mobility further contributes to the disproportionate number of migrants incarcerated.[3] Data shows that despite making up about 11 per cent of the Italian population,[4] migrants represented almost one-third of all people incarcerated in 2024.[5] More specifically, over the past 30 years, non-Italian prisoners have comprised an average of 31.8 per cent of the prison population.[6] Additionally, the overrepresentation of migrants in Italian prisons is not equally distributed. For example, in the prison facilities of the industrialised northern regions, migrants can represent up to 60 per cent of the incarcerated population. In contrast, in the southern areas they represent, on average, less than one-fourth of the prisoner population.[7] These figures emphasise how migrants have become a deeply embedded part of the Italian prison system and, more broadly, of the country's penal landscape, especially in the northern regions.

By examining Italy's approach to migration management, we can observe a blending of administrative and criminal legal frameworks that has shaped national migration policy and control.[8] One of the key outcomes of this convergence is the erosion of criminal law protections for non-EU migrants, paired with repressive administrative measures such as expulsion procedures and non-criminal detention. However, scholars analysing the Italian case note that imprisonment often does not result in deportation but instead leads to a return to irregularity. In this context, the intertwining of criminal and administrative policies appears to push migrants into informal, rather than illegal, economic sectors. Yet these precarious trajectories undermine the emancipatory aims of migration, reinforcing conditions of extreme marginalisation and forms of social harm.[9] Importantly, this does not necessarily signal a policy of outright exclusion. Instead, it represents a model of subordinated inclusion, closely aligned with the core strategic functions of incarceration as instruments of migration control. These forms of marginalisation do not simply reflect exclusion from the legal system but reveal how legal status, and especially citizenship, functions as a shifting boundary within prison governance. In this context, citizenship becomes a

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1. Simone Santorso wrote sections 'The distinctive features of the current Italian prison system', 'The Prison Experience of Migrants: Othering, Deterrence and the Citizenship Line', and 'Conclusion'. Alvise Sbraccia wrote the 'Governance Practices and the Citizenship Line (Transfer, Radicalisation, Self-Harm)' section.
2. Quassoli, F. (2003). Migrant as criminal: The judicial treatment of migrant criminality. In K. Koser & R. Black (Eds.), *Controlling a new migration world* (pp. 150–170). Routledge.
3. Sbraccia, A. (2007). *Migranti tra mobilità e carcere: Storie di vita e processi di criminalizzazione.* FrancoAngeli.
4. ISTAT. (2023). P*opolazione quasi stabile grazie alle immigrazioni dall'estero.* Retrieved March 29, 2024, from https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/289080
5. Associazione Antigone. (2024). *I numeri della detenzione. Nodo alla gola – XX Rapporto di Antigone sulle condizioni di detenzione.* Retrieved November 19, 2024, from https://www.rapportoantigone.it/ventesimo-rapporto-sulle-condizioni-di-detenzione/i-numeri-della-detenzione/
6. See footnote 3: Sbraccia (2007).
7. Ministero della Giustizia. (2025). *Statistiche.* Retrieved April 10, 2025, from https://www.giustizia.it/giustizia/it/mg_1_14_1.page?contentId=SST1450708
8. I.e., Fabini, G. (2019). Internal bordering in the context of undeportability: Border performances in Italy. *Theoretical Criminology, 23*(2), 175–193.
9. Soliman, F. (2021). States of exception, human rights, and social harm: Towards a border zemiology. *Theoretical Criminology, 25*(2), 228–248.

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dynamic marker that structures access to rights, protections, and recognition, both inside and outside the carceral space.

Over the past two decades, efforts to produce qualitative sociological knowledge within the Italian prison system have brought researchers face-to-face with the core narrative threads of systemic transformation and adaptation. At the heart of this account is the emergence of an archetypal figure—one that has become predominant in many regions: the prisoner with nothing left to lose. This is most often embodied by the migrant, labelled clandestino,[10] and portrayed as a marginalised, socially disadvantaged individual who ultimately becomes the undisciplined prisoner, perceived as unable to 'do their time'. Their 'foreignness' includes a component of cultural disorientation and linguistic lack of proficiency, which can trigger discriminatory attitudes among fellow inmates, creating friction due to differences in communication styles and habits (such as food preferences, media consumption, etc.). These new subjectivities have gradually drawn the attention of those in the field, experts, and practitioners, primarily due to their potential threat to prison order.[11]

In the following pages, we argue that citizenship status must be examined alongside incarceration conditions to fully understand the prison experience and its uneven impacts. This paper aims to lay the ground for a theoretical framework in which the process of othering, particularly as it relates to citizenship and mechanisms of subordination, serves as a central tool of prison governance. Our aim is twofold: first, to offer a framework for examining how prison practices reinforce processes of othering and shape the lived experiences of migrant communities behind bars; second, to highlight how, within the carceral setting, citizenship, often positioned as a boundary between belonging and exclusion, generates trajectories of subordination that extend beyond prison walls. We seek to establish an analytical lens for exploring how citizenship status informs prison governance and the social dynamics within incarcerated populations—and, conversely, how carceral experiences reshape the meaning and lived reality of citizenship itself. We refer to this reciprocal relationship, where incarceration shapes and is shaped by legal status, access to rights, and social recognition, as the *citizenship line*.

The prison experience of migrants: Othering, deterrence and the citizenship line

As we will explore in the following pages, everyday interactions and governance practices within prison settings are deeply shaped by racialised dynamics.[12] Migrants, in particular,[13] are subjected to heightened surveillance,[14] spatial segregation, and, in general, to differential treatment.[15] They also face restricted access to entitlements, benefits and rehabilitation programmes, reinforcing their marginalised status within the carceral system.[16] This racialised mode of governance, shaped by social constructions of citizenship and national belonging, not only deepens systemic inequalities but also solidifies hierarchies that define forms of subordinated inclusion.

While the Italian prison system has become, thus, an essential space for the production and reproduction of borders, according to the crimmigration framework, these seem not to be centred on exclusionary strategies, but rather on forms of subordinated inclusion in which informal practices merge with formal rules and discretionary policies enforcement.

The increasing diversity within the Italian prison system, where multiple nationalities are forced to coexist in confined spaces,[17] reshapes classic notions of

> In this context, the intertwining of criminal and administrative policies appears to push migrants into informal, rather than illegal, economic sectors.

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10. A derogatory term used in reference to undocumented migrants.
11. Sparks, R., Bottoms, A., & Hay, W. (1996). *Prisons and the problem of order.* Oxford University Press.
12. Bloch, S., & Olivares-Pelayo, E. A. (2021). Carceral geographies from inside prison gates: The micro-politics of everyday racialisation. *Antipode, 53*(5), 1319–1338.
13. While this affects all migrants, North Africans and sub-Saharan are disproportionately impacted compared to Eastern Europeans and Balkan nationals.
14. Huhta, H. (2024). *Ethnicity, Race and the Prisoner Community.* Palgrave Macmillan.
15. Santorso, S. (2016). La città carceraria: spazio, comunità e processi di etnicizzazione. *Etnografia e Ricerca Qualitativa, 9*(2), 227–248.
16. Sbraccia, A. (2007). More or less eligibility? Prospettive teoriche sui processi di criminalizzazione dei migranti irregolari in Italia. *Studi sulla Questione Criminale, 2(1)*, 91–108.
17. The most represented nationalities are Morocco, Romania, Albania, Tunisia, Nigeria, Egypt, Senegal, and Algeria (Ministero della Giustizia, 2025).

prison hierarchy and group identity.[18] The intersection of socio-economic marginalisation and cultural essentialisation contributes to the construction of racialised hierarchies among prisoners, often organised around national identity and perceived belonging.

In navigating this fluid and heterogeneous environment, and in their efforts to maintain order, prison staff exercise significant discretion in the enforcement of entitlements and benefits granting. They often adapt their approach based on group dynamics, which not only sustains but also actively produces new internal hierarchies. This discretionary power allows prison administrations to calibrate both the intensity and quality of incarceration, thereby making it more tolerable for some groups while harsher—and thus less eligible—for others, usually the ones deemed to be potential troublemakers. In doing so, prison practices deepen existing social divisions and inequalities.[19]

This discussion builds on the premise that implementing a purely deterrence-based model, such as the *less eligibility* doctrine, is particularly difficult in the Italian context. This is largely due to the Italian Constitution, which enshrines rehabilitation as the primary aim of punishment (Article 27, paragraph 3). As a result, prison confinement in Italy may oscillate between functioning as a residual form of welfare and reinforcing segregation along territorially defined citizenship hierarchies.[20]

In this sense, we argue that citizenship serves as one of the selective levers around which the contemporary prison governance, and hence experience, are structured. Therefore, the management and organisation of migrants behind bars actively contribute to the dialectic between more and *less eligibility* principles. In prisons across Northern Italy, where migrants are substantially overrepresented and overcrowding is acute,[21] the social construction of migrant otherness has reshaped these institutions into microcosms structured around what we define as the

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citizenship line. This concept captures specific dynamics of prison governance, in which formal and informal mechanisms intertwine with national identity to regulate those perceived as 'unable to do their time' and as having 'nothing to lose'. The latter label carries significant institutional implications: individuals perceived as having nothing to lose are often treated as inherently ungovernable or unresponsive to rehabilitative interventions. This perception justifies more rigid control, intensified surveillance, exclusion from incentive structures, and frequent disciplinary transfers, while simultaneously absolving the institution from investing in their reintegration. Rather than being recognised as a result of structural deprivation, this status is framed as a behavioural disposition, leading to a governance logic that prioritises containment over rehabilitation. In this sense, the 'nothing to lose' classification functions as a shorthand for disposability within prison management, a way to rationalise neglect and differential treatment under the guise of risk management and institutional pragmatism. Defining an internal citizenship line means confronting how prison governance produces pathways of subordinated inclusion, particularly through differential assessments of dangerousness, the spatial distribution of convicted people, variations in wellbeing, and the allocation of scarce rehabilitative resources.

To conclude, by engaging with the idea of citizenship as a tool of prison organisation, we argue that interpreting the *less eligibility* principle solely as a mechanism for inflicting discomfort is overly reductive. Instead, our analysis of the Italian case reveals how this logic permeates the internal dynamics of carceral settings, operating as a mode of governance through the selective application of deterrence-like informal practices and policy enforcement shaped by the social construction of citizenship. Within this context, the citizenship line

18.   Jacobs, J. B. (1974). Stratification and conflict among prison inmates. *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology, 66*(4), 476–482.
19.   See footnote 15: Santorso (2016).
20.   See footnote 14: Huhta (2024).
21.   Santorso, S. (2023). *The Politics of Prison Crowding: A Critical Analysis of the Italian Prison System.* Routledge.

emerges as a hybrid of formal and informal governance strategies designed to differentiate, manage, and subordinate migrants' experiences of incarceration, with the ultimate goal of maximising order and guaranteeing systemic reproduction.

Governance practices and the citizenship line

The integrated regulatory mechanisms characteristic of the analytical framework we propose here follow the foreigner who experiences prison both in pretrial detention and following a criminal conviction. The effects of internal confinement, which resonate with the broader perspectives of border criminology, are partially defined by the specific function that prison assumes as an institution for containing non-native marginality. At the same time, however, they also stem from drawing distinctions within the single prison's governance. These distinctions take the form of specific practices for managing internal order.

However, it is not possible to limit the analysis of these distinctive strategies to their formal dimension, that is, to refer them solely to legal norms, policies and administrative provisions derived from written texts (laws, regulations, prison administration guidelines, etc.). These factors may vary in relevance, but they inevitably intersect with the governance arrangements that prison studies consistently link to informal methods of reproducing internal order,[22] mechanisms of negotiation and co-governance,[23] the reward-and-punishment logics that permeate closed institutions and, more generally, the operational dynamics of relationships between staff and incarcerated individuals. The interpretative difficulties that define the problem of prison order thus extend to the analytical attempt we are proposing. The issue can be framed in terms of a regulatory multiplicity that resists sociological generalisation.

Certainly, one could argue that, for example, in perfect alignment with the theoretical framework of crimmigration, the formal impossibility for illegalised

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migrants to access probation pathways produces a direct discrimination effect with evident material and symbolic consequences. Similarly, the irregularity of their legal status corresponds to a selective response that makes them more likely to be subjected to pre-trial detention.[24] As noted, the formal mechanisms of exclusion ultimately stand in stark contradiction to the principles of rehabilitation and social reintegration, which, within the legal framework of contemporary Italian migration policies, are not objectives to be pursued but conditions to be systematically denied. However, empirical research on confinement practices within this framework reveals ambivalent and often contradictory dynamics. In the following examples, drawn from empirical fields explored by the authors in recent years and selected here for their relevance in shaping prison order, we seek to account for these complexities.

Ethnic wings

Over the last quarter-century, the most evident materialisation of internal boundaries within the detention system has been the so-called ethnic wings.[25] This construct has now systematically entered the national penitentiary jargon. Sociological research on this form of institutional but entirely informal confinement presents a differentiated and ambivalent picture.

First, it is necessary to observe that such a criterion for allocating detainees is not universally adopted. Its implementation is predominant in regions where the foreign component is either the majority or otherwise significant. Even in these cases, however, its configurations vary, reflecting distinct needs. It is not always feasible (or deemed appropriate) for the governance of a given prison to establish an 'Italian wing'. In limited cases, the internal organisation aligns with a division based on citizenship. This is particularly true when it becomes evident that a generically 'foreign wing' could fuel variable-geometry incompatibilities, meaning conflicts shaped by the relative size of different groups. For example, the institutional perception of racism among Eastern European

22. Jewkes, Y., Bennett, J., & Crewe, B. (2016). *Handbook on Prisons*. Routledge.
23. Sozzo, M. (2022). *Prisons, Inmates and Governance in Latin America.* Palgrave Macmillan.
24. Sbraccia, A., & Vianello, F. (2017). Sistema penitenziario e discriminazione. In A. Alietti (Ed.), *Razzismi, Discriminazioni e Disuguaglianze.* Mimesis.
25. See footnote 14: Huhta (2024).

detainees toward African, South American, or Asian prisoners is common. These fractures are often addressed by creating white but mixed wings, where the prevailing concept is greater compatibility between Italian and Eastern European prisoners. The more consolidated form of the 'Maghrebi wing' may not be practised when intraregional conflicts, such as those between Tunisians and Moroccans, have been imported into the prison from competition in illegal economies. Similarly, Black (sub-Saharan) wings may present comparable management challenges, making the coexistence of North African and sub-Saharan detainees problematic.

Other transversal factors, such as religious affiliation, linguistic competence, and membership in structured criminal organisations, can also influence the overall allocation criteria. Within this framework, the boundary of citizenship is rearticulated discontinuously in relation to other elements of homogeneity. Nonetheless, a general tendency toward the aggregation of detainees of Italian nationality remains operational. To some extent, this also applies to individuals of Italian descent, considering the inevitable increase of second-generation detainees.[26]

This trend will likely further complicate the understanding of prison governance practices in Italy shortly. At present, we can highlight how the citizenship boundary significantly overlaps with a possible internal class distinction within the prison. Native detainees typically have greater economic and relational resources (such as family and friends in the territory), which undoubtedly allow them to mitigate the punitive effects of incarceration and face imprisonment under less severe conditions of social isolation.[27]

From an intersectional perspective, it is also evident that these dynamics correlate with racialised boundaries. Consider, for example, the substantial Romanian component of the incarcerated population. Identified as white (and Christian), they have benefited from Romania's entry into the EU, avoiding

deportability and stigmatisation reserved for undocumented non-EU migrants.[28] Their geopolitical status reflects broader inclusion prospects that partially extend to many Albanians (white) residing in Italy for decades. These groups' regularisation and relative occupational stabilisation generate deeper social ties in Italy, leading to a socio-economic approximation to Italian detainees.

Returning to penitentiary jargon, internal boundaries seem to distinguish between prisoners who have something to lose and those who have nothing to lose. This brings us back to governance, but once again, linear interpretations are not feasible. Ambivalence reigns supreme, and trends can at best be traced along two fundamental axes: security and solidarity, both shaped through research interactions with individuals holding directive roles within institutions (such as governors, prison officers' boards, prison NHS management, etc.).[29] These individuals must, in some way, justify themselves in the face of the ethnographic evidence of ethnic wings, which in themselves contradict the universalist principle that should characterise penal execution.[30] Alternatively, if they have chosen not to adopt a criterion of ethnic distinction, they may provide insights into the reasons behind their minority choice.

On the security front, conflicting narratives emerge: for the first group (the majority), homogeneous wings limit the problem of interethnic conflict and allow staff to work in a calmer and safer environment. For the second group (the minority), ethnic wings serve as a logistical and cultural support for the formation of homogeneous factions that will later clash, making the prison more insecure, especially in shared spaces dedicated to educational and recreational activities. Regarding internal solidarity among inmate groups— a key element of the 'convict code',[31] widely recognised as strategic by those who manage Italian prisons—the ambivalence remains: for the first group, solidarity has limited general significance and is strongly amplified by the

> The ethnicised concentration of material and relational poverty can only encourage the stabilisation of spaces and cultures of discrimination, simultaneously.

26. Associazione Antigone. (2024). *Stranieri*. Nodo alla gola – XX Rapporto di Antigone sulle condizioni di detenzione. Retrieved November 19, 2024, from https://www.rapportoantigone.it/ventesimo-rapporto-sulle-condizioni-di-detenzione/
27. Santorso, S. (2015). La perception de la peine d'emprisonnement entre privation et solidarité. *Déviance et Société, 39(2)*, 171–188.
28. De Genova, N., & Peutz, N. (2010). The Deportation Regime: *Sovereignty, Space and Freedom of Movement*. Duke University Press.
29. Sbraccia, A. (2016). Galere clandestine: la linea del colore. In Associazione Antigone (Ed.), *XII Rapporto sulle Condizioni di Detenzione*. Infinito.
30. See footnote 15: Santorso (2016).
31. Trammell, R. (2012). Enforcing the Convict Code: *Violence and Prison Culture*. Lynne Rienner.

convergence of habits and cultural, linguistic, and religious references that materialise through 'ethnic wings'. For the second group, the concept of solidarity must be traced back to a universalist and materialist framework, since solidarity is based on exchange, and under conditions of deprivation, it cannot materialise in wings where there are no resources to share.

These positions, naturally, assume an ideal-typical value here. As mentioned, the empirical observation of these governance models points to mixed solutions, gradual adaptations, and emergency responses. Additionally, these very approaches may change due to replacements of senior figures within institutions, as well as the turnover of managerial roles. Likewise, significant variations in the socio-demographic composition of prisoner population can lead to inconsistent management responses.

Despite these variables, in our view, the universalist and materialist vision of solidarity among inmates appears crucial in general terms.[32] The ethnicised concentration of material and relational poverty can only encourage the stabilisation of spaces and cultures of discrimination, simultaneously identifying desperate and conflict-ridden wings that will then be subjected to purely containment-focused interventions (either through force or pharmacological means). This strategy may align with a rationale for optimising the allocation of scarce rehabilitative resources, directing them toward convicted people housed in less deprived wings, thus exacerbating the discriminatory effects mentioned above.[33] A distinctive managerial logic, yet one that is geared toward selecting individuals on whom to impose an abnormal level of institutional violence. The implications of such an approach for the internal order, beyond any political evaluation, ultimately configure a dramatic horizon.

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most explicit manifestation of ethnicisation within the prison —something we conceptualise through the notion of the citizenship line. However, this can also be understood as a metonymic expression of a more pervasive selectivity embedded in prison practices, which further substantiates our argument. While a comprehensive discussion is beyond the scope of this section, we briefly outline those practices we consider most significant and deserving of further research: transfers, radicalisations, and self-harm.

Transfers

To address major challenges in the Italian prison system, a fundamental measure is the practice of transferring inmates —sometimes based on regional proximity, other times spanning hundreds of kilometres across the national territory.[34]

The first issue concerns the disparity in overcrowding rates, which tend to be higher in central-northern regions. These more industrialised regions, richer in opportunities and with a higher proportion of foreign residents, have also offered people broader access to illegal economies.[35] These dynamics have led to a correlation between higher overcrowding and the overrepresentation of non-Italian prisoners, a pattern that has been 'corrected' by prioritising their transfer to southern facilities as part of decongestion efforts. Over the past three decades, thousands of individuals have been relocated based on a problematic assumption: that the unemployed, the homeless, and those without social ties in a given area would suffer less from being uprooted. Empirical evidence, however, challenges this narrative,[36] instead highlighting how these individuals had social and emotional relationships within the territory—relationships that were simply unrecognised by institutions because they were informal. This was especially due to the precarious living conditions and legal status of these individuals. In this perspective, the effects of displacement are real and are

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32. See footnote 26: Santorso (2015).
33. See footnote 15: Santorso (2016).
34. Paoletti, E., & Costantini, M. S. (2023). *Sradicati. I trasferimenti delle persone detenute - Diciannovesimo rapporto sulle condizioni di detenzione.* Retrieved April 10, 2025, from https://www.rapportoantigone.it/diciannovesimo-rapporto-sulle-condizioni-di-detenzione/i-trasferimenti-delle-persone-detenute-e-il-lavoro-del-difensore-civico/
35. Foot, J., & King, R. (2001). San Salvario, Turin: the creation of a dangerous place 1990–99. *Liverpool Studies in European Regional Cultures, 9,* 206–230.
36. Verdolini, V. (2022). *L'istituzione reietta: spazi e dinamiche del carcere in Italia.* Carocci

produced to manage overcrowding rates across the national prison system in a discriminatory manner.

The second major issue concerns disciplinary transfers, which are closely linked to the internal order crisis previously described. This practice involves the continuous rotation of the most oppositional, unruly, and violent prisoners, who are placed, often for short periods, in the most restrictive wings of various facilities. Their perpetual movement between prisons has given rise in institutional jargon to the now-archetypal figure of the *camminanti* (walkers).

The effectiveness of this approach to managing disciplinary emergencies is highly questionable: while it may temporarily defuse conflicts, at a systemic level, it simply perpetuates the circulation of the most conflictual prisoners among different facilities. Unable to integrate into the reward-based mechanisms that sustain the fragile equilibrium of correctional institutions, these mobile prisoners are predominantly foreign. The confinement they experience takes on a rotational character, preventing any continuity in rehabilitative programmes and ensuring their placement in the most restrictive and punitive wings of the various prisons they pass through.[37]

Radicalisation

At the intersection of governance practices that emphasise strategies of allocation and distinction within prison spaces lie the policy frameworks shaping Italy's efforts to combat radicalisation, both as a broader political phenomenon and as a specific consequence of incarceration.[38] While we have addressed the contradictions of this dual purpose elsewhere,[39] we focus here on how these strategies combine formal legal frameworks with informal mechanisms, producing distinctive material and symbolic effects on foreign detainees.

Contemporary discussions on prison radicalisation often rest on a problematic assumption: that prisons are ideal spaces where already radicalised individuals encounter others deemed particularly susceptible,[40] thus creating fertile ground for proselytising and extremist recruitment. While this hypothesis holds historical validity, it requires closer scrutiny in light of insights from prison studies, such as the pervasive police control and intelligence operations enabled by institutional confinement.[41]

What is relevant here is how, even in Italy, these so-called 'dangerous encounters' are primarily associated with jihadism, leading to the overshadowing of other forms of radicalisation. This focus frames the issue within the citizenship divide, further fragmented along internal lines, with the primary concern in Italy being individuals of Maghrebi descent, alongside those of Middle Eastern and Sub-Saharan African origin,[42] who are seen as combining criminal and terrorist threats, in contrast to prison conversions to Islam observed elsewhere.[43] This process—undeniably ideological—seems to confirm an intersectional theoretical perspective: it highlights how religious identity, geographic origin, and racial classification decisively shape the 'non-Italian prisoner' that emerges from the citizenship divide. In effect, it grants immunity from suspicion to white foreign inmates of European descent.

In response to radicalisation, the Italian prison system has implemented high-security wings, with a portion for jihadist-linked individuals, where religious affiliation and geographic origin create an informal subfield to prevent proselytising. To monitor radicalisable individuals, a mixed strategy of increased surveillance and dispersal across prisons is used, often aligning with the informal ethnic-winging system, particularly in wings populated by North Africans, which contradicts the goal of limiting jihadist influence.

> Religious identity, geographic origin, and racial classification decisively shape the 'non-Italian prisoner' that emerges from the citizenship divide. In effect, it grants immunity from suspicion to white foreign inmates of European descent.

37. Torrente, G. (2016). Saper farsi la galera: pratiche di resistenza (e di sopravvivenza) degli immigrati detenuti. *Sociologia del Diritto, 1*, 109–133.
38. Khosrokhavar, F. (2016). *Prisons de France: Violence, Radicalisation, Déshumanisation: Surveillants et Détenus Parlent.* Robert Laffont.
39. Sbraccia, A. (2017). Radicalizzazione in carcere: sociologia di un processo altamente ideologizzato. *Antigone, 12*(1), 173–200.
40. Due to their social conditions and psychological makeup.
41. Hamm, M. (2013). *The Spectacular Few: Prisoner Radicalization and the Evolving Terrorist Threat.* NYU Press.
42. See footnote 20: Santorso (2023).
43. See footnote 37: Khosrokhavar (2016).

Scepticism surrounding prison radicalisation stems from the belief that religious practices have a calming, rehabilitative effect, and the perception that the criminal profiles of marginalised, petty criminals do not align with high-risk extremists.[44] While prison personnel's views often diverge from alarmist political and media narratives, security-focused governance strategies still reinforce distinctions that disproportionately affect foreign detainees, perpetuating a system of institutional containment both materially and symbolically.

Self-harm

In recent years, the Italian prison system has seen a significant rise in suicidal incidents, with foreign prisoners statistically overrepresented, while the broader issue of self-harm appears to be particularly alarming where foreign prisoners make up 50 per cent to 60 per cent of the incarcerated population.[45] In the absence of definitive references, a dominant institutional narrative among prison staff frames self-harming behaviours among North African prisoners as culturally motivated, encapsulated in the phrase 'It's their culture,' and suggests these actions are carried out for instrumental reasons, without a historical or anthropological basis. As a result, these behaviours are systematically ethnicised and essentialised: rather than being linked to harsher detention conditions or bleak and minimal life prospects, they are instead framed as acts of culpability—disrupting internal order, increasing staff stress levels, and straining institutional relationships.

A similar lack of transparency is evident in the field of pharmacological containment practices. With few exceptions,[46] accessing statistical data to confirm the hypothetical patterns derived from ethnographic descriptions and reports by social researchers remains highly challenging. The relationship between psychotropic drug distribution and substance addiction among marginalised prisoners reveals that these medications are often used not only for withdrawal treatment but also as an informal maintenance therapy

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to alleviate suffering and reduce conflict among poly-substance users. Given the intersection of street-level marginalisation and drug addiction, a significant proportion of foreign prisoners, often subjected to selective criminalisation, are notably persistent in requesting psychotropic medications, which are increasingly used to maintain order and pacify problematic groups.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have analysed how the Italian prison system functions not merely as a site of confinement aimed at punishing or rehabilitating people convicted of crime, but as a mechanism for managing political and social boundaries. This becomes particularly evident when observing the incarceration of migrants within Italian prison facilities. We have shown how prison governance engages with the imperative of maximising internal order through differential treatment, thereby contributing materially and symbolically to the reproduction of social control.

Practices such as the creation of ethnic wings, the racialised framing of radicalisation, the management of self-harm, and the widespread use of disciplinary transfers are emblematic of how incarceration is informally entangled with selective forms of deterrence. Rather than viewing these dynamics as reactive or coincidental, we argue that they are part of a rationalised governance framework that informally aligns with the principle of less eligibility. Within this logic, certain prisoners—those with Italian background, specific values or cultural proximity—are deemed more 'governable', while others are considered a threat to order and therefore, they are targeted for differential treatment. Citizenship status, in this context, becomes a powerful proxy for sorting individuals and shaping their prison experiences along racialised and socio-political lines.

Building on this premise, we argue that prison should not be viewed as a neutral institution, but rather as a space where national belonging is actively

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44. Ronco, D., Sbraccia, A., & Torrente, G. (2019). *Prison De-Radicalization Strategies, Programmes and Risk Assessment Tools in Europe.* European Prison Observatory.
45. See footnote 6: Associazione Antigone (2024).
46. Rondi, L. (2023). Il carcere sedato: Più di due milioni di euro all'anno spesi in psicofarmaci. Altreconomia. Retrieved April 10, 2025, from https://altreconomia.it/il-carcere-sedato-piu-di-due-milioni-di-euro-allanno-spesi-in-psicofarmaci/

negotiated and enforced. While existing literature has characterised the prison as a site where border-like dynamics of exclusion are reproduced, we suggest it operates as a liminal space in which national borders and citizenship are in constant interplay, mutually shaping one another. The coercive and confined nature of prison renders the distinction between exclusion and inclusion increasingly ambiguous, blurring the lines of national belonging. This, in turn, generates forms of subordinated inclusion and produces subjects who are particularly vulnerable to exploitation within illegal and informal economies.

Through both formal prison policies and informal practices, migrants, particularly non-EU nationals, are racialised, placing them in a liminal condition where their subordinated status becomes symbolically inscribed onto their subjectivities. This condition undermines their prospects of attaining full citizenship, yet as supported by existing literature and data, it does not necessarily result in deportation, thereby sustaining a precarious, in-between status that also affects their experience and perception of incarceration.

By briefly exploring the Italian case, we propose the notion of the 'citizenship line' as a heuristic tool to capture this dynamic. On the one hand, in contrast to other conceptualisations, such as the 'colour line', it foregrounds the interplay between the formal policy framework and informal enforcement practices. On the other hand, emphasising citizenship, rather than borders, allows us to highlight the distortions within Italian migration policies that lead to forms of subordinated inclusion, as opposed to outright exclusion or even deportation. While this remains an initial hypothesis, which we intend to explore further, it appears consistent with current literature on migration control in Italy. Finally, by testing this hypothesis, this study aims to shed light on the complex interplay between migration policy, penal governance, and the strategic deployment of informal targeted deterrence.