

Geographies of Hate and Hope: The Regional Determinants of Migrants' Educational Aspirations

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Anti-system and nationalist political movements have moved from the margins to the center of political competition across advanced democracies (Dijkstra et al., 2020; Florida, 2021; Lenzi & Perucca, 2025). A growing literature documents the spatial concentration of electoral support for these movements, identifying a “geography of discontent” shaped by local socioeconomic characteristics (Dijkstra et al., 2020; McCann, 2020; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). While substantial attention has been devoted to explaining where and why political discontent emerges, much less is known about its consequences within affected territories (de Haas, 2021).

This paper shifts the focus from the determinants of discontent to its local-level implications. We ask whether and how local political climates marked by political narratives and hostile attitudes towards ethnic minorities shape young people’s educational aspirations, and whether these effects differ by ethnicity. Educational aspirations are not merely individual preferences; they are forward-looking orientations that structure life trajectories, human capital accumulation, and intergenerational mobility (Agger et al., 2018; Appadurai, 2004; Berrington et al., 2016; Ray, 2006). In contexts marked by sociopolitical tension, hostility toward migrants may alter perceived opportunities, expected returns to education, and feelings of belonging (Assari & Najand, 2023; Carlana et al., 2022; Chykina, 2022; Dadras & Hazratzai, 2025). In turn, this may shape how individuals position themselves within their reference community, potentially reinforcing local resentment (Lenzi & Perucca, 2021) and affecting long-term individual and community outcomes (McNeil et al., 2023).

Our starting point is the observation that political discontent and social strain are spatially uneven. Regions experiencing economic stagnation, demographic change, or perceived cultural threat have displayed stronger support for populist movements (McCann, 2020; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), discriminatory attitudes towards minorities (Denti, 2022; McNeil et al., 2023), and a higher level of individual discontent (Lenzi & Perucca, 2021). A significant body of research argues that spatially concentrated migration has contributed to this pattern by intensifying perceptions of competition, identity threat, and institutional neglect (Chykina, 2024; Creighton & Jamal, 2022; Hainmueller et al., 2015). Yet this literature largely focuses on the reactions of the native majority. We argue that the same local dynamics that fuel resentment and hostility may also shape how foreign residents interpret their prospects within a locality (Brook & Willoughby, 2015; Schlenker & Leary, 1982; Steele, 1997), and influence their long-term educational and mobility strategies.

In territories where anti-minority sentiment becomes socially salient, young foreign residents may internalise signals about “their place” in society (Caso et al., 2025). Such signals can operate through multiple mechanisms. On the one hand, exposure to hostility may reduce migrants’ sense of belonging, increase perceived discrimination, and lower expected returns to education, thereby dampening aspirations (Chesters, 2015; Offidani-Bertrand, 2023; Olukotun et al., 2019). On the other hand, some individuals may respond with resilience and resistance, increasing educational effort and ambition as strategies to overcome exclusion (Chykina, 2022, 2024; Kao & Tienda, 1995). The net effect is therefore theoretically ambiguous and likely heterogeneous across migrant groups and local contexts.

Importantly for our investigation, polarised political narratives are not experienced exclusively by migrant youth. Native students are embedded in the same local social climate, which may influence their perceptions of their own opportunities, expected returns to education, and intergroup relations. By influencing peer interactions, social networks, and collective expectations about the future, polarised local climates may strain

social cohesion and alter the developmental trajectory of communities as a whole (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017). In this sense, hostile environments may generate not only electoral but also long-term socioeconomic consequences by influencing young cohorts' investments in human capital and aspirations (Pillai et al., 2025).

To investigate these dynamics, we examine Italy between 2012 and 2018, a period characterised by increasing social fragmentation (Denti & Faggian, 2024), and rising support for anti-system and nationalist parties. Our measures of youth aspirations are retrieved from administrative individual-level data from INVALSI, covering cohorts of secondary students (10th grade) in Italy for the period 2012-2018. We combine these data with information on their individual characteristics and contextual province-year information on political narratives, racial hate-related events and socioeconomic conditions.

Our data allow us to construct measures of tertiary education aspirations for both native Italian students and first and second-generation foreign students across provinces and over time (Buonomo et al., 2024; Minello & Barban, 2012). Additionally, the characteristics of our database enable us to perform multi-level estimations to detect the role of individual and local features.

Our preliminary results document persistent and widening gaps in aspirations between Italian students and foreign students, particularly among first-generation movers in places characterised by a strong anti-minority climate. Results suggest that foreign students living in a place with a high anti-minority climate reduce their long-term individual aspirations. At the same time, we find that parents' education and the type of school attended reduce the negative effect of anti-minority narratives. Conversely, Italian students are not affected.

Our results indicate that exposure to hate events is systematically associated with lower foreign residents' educational aspirations, though the direction and magnitude vary across groups. These heterogeneous effects highlight that foreign resident youth are not passive recipients of local norms but active interpreters of their social context. Additionally, local formal and informal institutions, such as family and school, influence the extent to which hostile political climates translate into reduced aspirations.

Importantly, our findings suggest that the consequences of anti-migrant hostility extend beyond immediate political outcomes. Hostile local climates can influence long-term educational trajectories and patterns of integration. In this sense, the geography of discontent does not merely reflect disaffection among "left-behind" populations (Lenzi & Perucca, 2021); it also contributes to unequal life chances for newcomers.

By bridging migration studies with regional political economy, this paper makes three main contributions. First, it shifts the focus from the determinants of anti-migrant sentiment to its consequences for migrants' future-oriented behaviors. Second, it demonstrates that political discontent has micro-level implications for human capital formation, linking territorial hostility to the reproduction of inequality. Third, it highlights the importance of examining heterogeneity within communities: even within the same province, different social groups may develop divergent perspectives and aspirations in response to the same local environment, generating fractured geographies of attitudes.

More broadly, our analysis speaks to debates about integration, social cohesion, and regional inequality. If hostile environments discourage migrants' educational ambitions, they risk entrenching disadvantage and fueling further socioeconomic divides. If, alternatively, hostility generates compensatory aspiration responses, this may come at psychological costs or exacerbate tensions within communities. In conclusion, this paper argues that the geography of hate is also a geography of life chances.

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