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The Politics of an Impossible Situation: Italian Parties Muddling Through the Migrant Crisis

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The Politics of an Impossible Situation: Italian Parties Muddling Through the Migrant Crisis

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Abstract:

Italy's geographical location in the Southern Mediterranean has long made it a popular European entry point for migrants arriving from Africa. During the 2010s, the issue of migration was catapulted into the center of Italian politics as hundreds of thousands of migrants arrived each year. Successive Italian governments enacted countless measures to securitize and externalize Italy's borders, from cooperating with non-state actors in Libya to criminalizing NGO ships providing aid to migrants at sea. However, while some policies have been successful in limiting the flow of migrants, Italy has proven incapable of cutting the flow off completely, and today, the number of arrivals is reaching a total as high as ever. While the policies towards migration enacted by Italy's different political actors may seem similar, examining the rhetoric of opposing political parties and their leaders exposes the various ways in which political actors justify restrictive policies. These justifications are becoming more crucial than ever before as Italy juggles competing forces of ethno-nationalism, demographic and economic stagnation, and increasing migrant arrivals.

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Introduction

Migration and the movement of people across borders will prove one of humanity's most formidable challenges to overcome as the 21st century progresses. People will migrate for many reasons, from conflict to climate change. While the number of migrants on the move is expected to rise in the coming decades, places like the United States and Western Europe are already struggling to manage their borders.

Since ancient times, the Mediterranean Sea has been a vector for transferring goods, people, and ideas between Europe, Africa, and the Levant. Today, one of the main migration routes into Europe is across the Central Mediterranean, with the most common crossing points coming from Libya and Tunisia into Italy. In 2022, over 100,000 people arrived in Italy using this route. However, the number of people who attempted the journey is undoubtedly higher as that total does not include those who died or were turned back before arriving on Italian shores. Between 2014-16, the height of the European Migration Crisis, over 150,000 people arrived in Italy each year by way of the sea, with a height of over 181,000 in 2016. Since 2014, over 20,000 migrants have died at sea attempting to cross into Italy.

This paper will explore the Italian state's response to this influx of African migrants arriving at its shores. I will specifically examine the period of the 2010s when the Italian response, while initially humanitarian in nature, quickly became one characterized by securitization, externalization, and an effort to prevent migrants from reaching Italy at all costs.

Methodology

To do this, I will start by examining the role of Libya, the main launching point for migrants during the 2010s. I will briefly summarize the history of Italian-Libyan relations, then

go into more detail about the inhumane conditions that migrants face on the ground in Libya due to years of warfare and European support of organizations such as the Libyan Coast Guard that have committed countless human rights violations.

I will then review the developments of Italian immigration policy throughout the 2010s, highlighting how the fates of migrants were increasingly put to the side as Italy moved further towards externalizing and securitizing their Mediterranean border. I will also examine the roles of different Italian political actors from the right, center, and left in forming these policies.

I will then examine the types of rhetoric different political actors have used to justify their policies toward migration. This will entail first examining the history of nativism in Italy and the rise of populist parties, and then analyzing the specific language used by key Italian politicians when discussing immigration and migrants. They include Matteo Salvini, Luigi Di Maio, Paolo Gentiloni, and Marco Minniti. I will conclude that although actors from the right, center, and left frame the issue of migration in different ways, they all result in the dehumanization of migrants and the stripping of their agency. This implicit dehumanizing of migrants can be seen as an enabling force for the restrictive, securitized, and externalized approach to immigration policy that successive Italian governments have taken.

I will conclude by examining the rhetoric and policies of current Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni. I will highlight how Meloni's fiery rhetoric against migrants arriving in Italy has seemingly begun to crumble against the practical realities of governance and Italy's current economic and demographic outlook. However, she is also seen to be continuing Italy's practice of externalization. We can then attempt to predict what this may mean for future developments in Italy's immigration policy.

Section 1: Libya

“Death in Libya, it’s normal: no one will look for you, and no one will find you.”

- Unnamed Migrant

Italian-Libyan Relations

With Libya sitting at the center of Italy’s historical sphere of influence in the Central Mediterranean and North Africa, forging strong links between Tripoli and Rome has long been a critical priority for successive Italian governments over the 20th and 21st centuries. The relationship between the two countries, which emerged from geographical necessity and colonial linkages¹, developed into one of deep cooperation and integration on issues ranging from economic development, tourism, and the handling of migrants.

With the discovery of oil on Libyan soil in the late 1950s, the Italian-Libyan relationship quickly became one driven by energy. Libyan crude oil became vital to Italian energy needs due to its volume, geographical proximity, and high quality. Libya, in turn, received guidance and expertise from the Italian government and Italy’s multinational gas giant Eni in managing its new role as a rentier state. Through today, one of Italy’s primary goals in Libya is the protection of Eni’s assets from interruption or expropriation.²

High cooperation in the energy sector naturally bled into other economic sectors. By the late 2010s, Italy had become the main pathway for Libyan investment into the European

¹ Libya’s proximity to Italy(247 miles), status as an ex-Roman colony, and possession by the weakened Ottoman Empire made it a prime target for Italian colonial expansion at the turn of the 20th century. The country was split into Italian Tripolitana and Italian Cyrenaica from 1911-1934. The two territories were combined into Italian Libya from 1934-1947. By the outbreak of WWII, upwards of 150,000 Italians were living in the colony.

² Monziali, Luciano, et al. “Fragmented Libya: Trying to Save the Italian and European Influences.” *Italy and Libya: From Colonialism to a Special Relationship (1911-2021)*, Taylor & Francis Ltd, London, 2023

continent. In 2010, “the Libyan Foreign Bank owned 67.5% of Banca UBAE, 7.5% of UniCredit Bank, and through the Libyan Investment Authority(LIA), 2% of Finmeccanica, 7.5% of Juventus Football Club, and 2% of Eni and Fiat.”³. Simultaneously, Italian investments and assets in Libya totaled nearly \$11 billion.

The Treaty of Friendship(2008)

Although it will be discussed further in this analysis, cooperation over immigration control has been a vital facet of the Italian-Libyan relationship and warrants a brief overview now. Libya has always been a popular departure spot for African migrants looking to enter Europe due to its geographic location in the Central Mediterranean. Although a few bilateral agreements concerning immigration had been signed by the two countries before 2008, the Treaty of Benghazi signed that year served as the most notable. Signed by Silvio Berlusconi’s and Muammar Gaddafi’s governments, the Treaty of Friendship (as it’s more commonly known) provided reparations for Italy’s colonial past in Libya and outlined key areas of future partnership between the two nations. Specifically concerning illegal immigration, the treaty resulted in “the approximately 200km of Libyan coastline (being) patrolled by mixed crews on patrol boats provided by Italy⁴... and the Libyan land borders (being) controlled by a satellite detection system jointly financed by Italy and the European Union”⁵. While concerns over human rights violations were raised, the treaty proved an effective measure to combat illegal migration into Italy. This, combined with other regional factors such as the relative peace throughout the Mediterranean, seemed to lend credence to the belief that new advances in

³ Fragmented Libya: Trying to Save the Italian and European Influences

⁴ This aspect of the treaty led to many raising concerns about possible human rights violations, especially in scenarios where migrants were captured in the Mediterranean Sea and subsequently returned to Libya, a country that never ratified the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees. This concern has only grown over time.

⁵ Ronzitti, Natalino. “The Treaty on Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation between Italy and Libya: New Prospects for Cooperation in the Mediterranean.” *Bulletin of Italian Politics*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2009, pp. 125–133.

cooperation across many sectors of governance would characterize the Italian-Libyan relationship in the 21st century.

The Arab Spring and the First Libyan Civil War

The Arab Spring, which hit Libya in early 2011, quickly shattered notions of a stable Mediterranean. Violent repressions of protests by the Gaddafi government soon sent the country spiraling into a full-blown civil war and subsequent humanitarian crisis. This culminated with a NATO-led international intervention, resulting in Gaddafi's overthrow. Eventually, the former dictator died at the hands of rebel militias after Libya had splintered into statelets. During the crisis, Italy's extensive interests in Libya, national security concerns, and competing desires to comply with both UN and NATO mandates led to an Italian response dominated by caution and hesitation⁶. Rome continued to push for a diplomatic solution well after they were the sole European voice doing so and held off bombing Libya for much longer than its European and American allies. This created a rift between Italy and other European nations, such as France. This rift subtly hindered European efforts to rebuild Libya following the First Civil War, helping contribute to the subsequent instability that has racked the country since.

The Arab Spring in 2011 and the First Libyan Civil War devastated Libya, leading to the structural instability and de facto failed state condition that plagues the country today. Among many things, Libya's inability to establish a unified government meant that it could no longer uphold its end of the Treaty of Friendship and control the flow of African migrants hoping to use its Mediterranean coastline as a launching point into Europe⁷. This played a massive role in the emergence of the immigration crisis that hit Italy in 2013.

⁶ Fragmented Libya: Trying to Save the Italian and European Influences.

⁷ Dottori, Germano, "Immigration as a Domestic Policy Issue: What Strategy to "Save" Europe?" *New England Journal of Public Policy*: Vol 30, Iss. 2, Article 8 (2018)

The present-day situation in Libya is highly complex. Though the two main sides in the Second Libyan Civil War- the UN-backed Government of National Unity and the Tobruk-based Libyan National Army- agreed on a permanent ceasefire in 2020, elections have been continually postponed. The current Prime Minister, Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh, refused to cede power in 2022 when the Parliament appointed a new Prime Minister. Various Islamist militias and tribal groups control different regions of the country, making any unified governance or leadership impossible. Even the Libyan Coast Guard, whose name gives it the semblance of a standardized and formal arm of the national government (and who receives extensive European funding), is little more than another militia with ties to human trafficking and human rights violations. The current state in Libya was described to me best by a researcher at Med-Or, a Rome-based think-tank focused on strengthening collaboration and initiatives between Italy and other Med-Or countries⁸. He quipped, “Do you know Game of Thrones? This is Libya right now”.

Human Rights Violations and Detention Centers

The endemic instability in Libya has created an environment where migrants are regularly subject to sub-standard treatment in abusive detention centers, threats of torture, sexual violence, enforced disappearances, extortion, and other abuses⁹. A 2020 study by the scientific research journal *International Migration* polled migrants who had successfully taken the Central Mediterranean migration route into Italy and found that “more than 70% of respondents experienced hunger, thirst, and illnesses, while more than 60% experienced maltreatment, violence and torture”¹⁰ throughout their journey.

⁸ The Med-Or Region spans the Mediterranean, the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and the Red Sea, as well as parts of the Near and Far East (www.med-or.org/en/the-foundation)

⁹ United Nations (2022)

¹⁰ Ortensi, Livia Elisa, and Lindsey N Kingston. “Asylum Seekers’ Experiences on the Migration Journey to Italy and Beyond; Risk Factors and Future Planning Within a Shifting Political Landscape.” *International Migration*, vol. 60, no. 1, 20 Feb. 2021, pp. 228–243

The epitome of the brutal conditions migrants face in Libya are the inhumane detention centers migrants are housed in if they are caught attempting to cross Libya's land or sea borders. Guards at these militia-ran centers often offer migrants freedom for a costly fee of 2,500 Dinars, or \$500. Suppose migrants cannot pay, which most cannot. In that case, they are held captive for an extended period of time, taking advantage of a Libyan law that allows unauthorized foreigners to be detained indefinitely¹¹.

The detention centers are often wildly over capacity and produce a laundry list of human rights violations documented by humanitarian agencies. Crimes include the rape of women and children, extortion, forced labor, physical and psychological torture, and human trafficking¹². According to the I.O.M., only 6,000 of the 15,000 migrants captured by the Libyan Coast Guard in the first seven months of 2021 were accounted for in designated detention centers at the end of that period. Given the LCG's connections to human trafficking and underground detention centers, one can only guess the fates of the remaining 9,000 migrants.

This is the world that migrants from all over Africa are encountering when they enter Libya. It is the world they so desperately try to escape from when they cram into wooden dinghies headed for European shores. And it is the world that Europe, spearheaded by efforts from Italy, is trying to send them back to.

European Aid to Libya

Italy has budgeted tens of millions to help outfit and upgrade the Libyan Coast Guard, an organization connected to human rights violations. The EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa,

¹¹ Law No. 19(Art. 6) of 2010 on Combatting Illegal Migration passed by The General People's Congress of Libya on January 28th, 2010

¹² Urbina, Ian. "The Secretive Prisons That Keep Migrants out of Europe." *The New Yorker*, 28 Nov. 2021

which ostensibly provides funding for aid and economic development in Africa, has been accused of providing financing for African nations such as Libya to clamp down on illegal migration. Under the Memorandum of Understanding signed between Italy and Libya in 2017, Italy agreed to provide funding for the interception of migrants at sea and operation of “safe” migrant detention centers- places where acts of murder, enforced disappearance, torture, enslavement, sexual violence, and other inhumane acts are ordinary¹³.

While European politicians vehemently deny that any EU funding has gone to the operation of these illegal detention centers, it is impossible for them to know that. Many believe that Europe is accepting of the human rights violations occurring in Libya if it means fewer migrants on their shores. To Salah Marghani, Libya’s Defense Minister from 2012-2014, the detention centers are the product of carefully planned and intentional steps taken by Italy and its European allies.

“Create a hellhole in Libya, with the idea of deterring people from heading to Europe”¹⁴.

¹³ Report of the UN Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Libya (2022)

¹⁴ “The Secretive Prisons That Keep Migrants out of Europe.”

Section 2: Italian Action to Limit Immigration

“We need to free ourselves from a sense of guilt. We do not have the moral duty to welcome to Italy people who are worse off than ourselves.”

- Former Italian Prime Minister
Matteo Renzi

Migration into Italy Pre-2010

At the start of the 1970s, a miniscule 0.22% of Italy’s population was foreign-born. However, this decade marked the beginning of a sharp rise in migration into Italy which continues through the present day. At the start of 2022, ISTAT reported that just over 5 million foreign-born persons were living in Italy, making up over 8.5% of the population¹⁵. This is a remarkable increase in little over half a century.

While most migrants today come from Africa and Asia, this was not always the case. Especially in the 1990s, many entering the country came from Eastern Europe and the Balkans. Fleeing political instability and war, migrants sought shelter in nearby Italy, taking low-skilled and low-paying jobs. However, as migrant inflows continued to rise, anti-immigrant and anti-outsider sentiments that already existed in Italian society began to feature more prominently in the agendas of populist and right-wing parties. In 2001, Silvio Berlusconi became Italy’s Prime Minister, leading a center-right coalition that included the post-fascist National Alliance party and campaigning on, among other things, tighter immigration controls¹⁶. Berlusconi kept his campaign promise by passing the Bossi-Fini Law in 2002. The law helped make it more

¹⁵ The Italian National Institute of Statistics

¹⁶ Immigration as a Domestic Policy Issue: What Strategy to “Save” Europe?

challenging for immigrants to acquire legal status in Italy and increased penalties for employers who hired workers without legal documentation¹⁷.

The aforementioned Treaty of Friendship signed between Libya and Italy in 2008 also helped tighten immigration into Italy. While migration crises still occurred in the Mediterranean during the 2000s, such as the Canaries Crisis in 2006 and the Aegean Crisis in 2010¹⁸, these were portrayed as jointly European problems and certainly did not affect Italy in any extreme way. It wasn't until Operation Hermes in 2011 and the subsequent catastrophic sinking of a migrant boat off Lampedusa in 2013 that Italy, and specifically migration into Italy from Libya, was thrown into the spotlight. It has remained there since.

The Early 2010s and Operation Mare Nostrum

With the chaos of the Arab Spring in North Africa, migrant arrivals into Italy exploded—just under 50,000 landed on Italian shores in the first half of 2011 alone. Operation Hermes was launched in response as a joint-EU operation led by Italy, with the goal of “detecting and preventing illegitimate border crossings to the Pelagic Islands, Sicily, and the Italian mainland”¹⁹. Then, nearly two years later, in October 2013, a boat carrying hundreds of migrants sank off the coast of Lampedusa, a small Italian island in the Mediterranean that has become the central landing spot for migrants from Libya. Over 300 perished in the catastrophe, which served as an eye-opening moment for many in Italy and across Europe.

¹⁷ Shi, M. (2023). An Exploration of the Reasons Why Right-Wing Populist Parties in Europe are Anti-Immigration: The Case of Italy. *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 15, 128–133.

¹⁸ In 2006, nearly 30,000 migrants reached the Canary Islands, a Spanish archipelago off the coast of Morocco. Then, in 2010, 48,000 migrants entered Greece through Turkey, with 7,500 arriving in just the month of October.

¹⁹ Perkowski, Nina, et al. “The Evolution of European Border Governance Through Crisis: Frontex and the Interplay of Protracted and Acute Crisis Narratives.” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2023, pp. 110–129

2013 also marked the beginning of a 5-year stretch where the Italian government was controlled by a coalition led by the center-left Democratic Party(PD). In response to the catastrophe, Prime Minister Enrico Letta initiated Operation Mare Nostrum²⁰, an enormous humanitarian and security operation that sought to save as many migrant lives in the Mediterranean as possible. Between 2013-14, it is thought that Operation Mare Nostrum assisted over 150,000 individuals, saving countless lives and helping with asylum claims²¹. It remains the most significant humanitarian mission in EU history and is a rare example of putting migrant safety and life above all else.

Unfortunately, almost as soon as it began, Mare Nostrum began creating domestic and international political problems for the governing coalition. One could be forgiven for saying that the operation was almost too successful- the seismic flow of migrants into Italy hit levels that the Italian reception system was unable and unequipped to process. In some instances, Italian authorities attempted to shepherd migrants through Italy into other European states, such as France, without processing them. This was a clear violation of the EU Dublin Regulation on asylum. It resulted in the closing of borders, temporary suspension of the Schengen Agreement, and increased diplomatic tension between Italy and its European neighbors²².

Inside Italy, opposition leaders increasingly called for Mare Nostrum's cancellation, arguing that the operation presented a pull factor for migrants to attempt the dangerous journey, incentivized migrant traffickers, and served as a "ferry" for illegal immigrants to enter Italy quickly. The operation also cost €9 million per month at a time when Italy's financial standing

²⁰ The name comes from the Latin phrase "Our Sea" and was what the Romans called the Mediterranean Sea.

²¹ Pijenburg, Annick, and Kris Van der Pas. "Strategic Litigation against European Migration Control Policies: The Legal Battleground of the Central Mediterranean Migration Route." *European Journal of Migration and Law*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2022, pp. 401–429

²² Immigration as a Domestic Policy Issue: What Strategy to "Save" Europe?

was less than perfect²³. Ultimately, Mare Nostrum was scrapped in October 2014 and replaced by Operation Triton, which was run by Frontex, the EU's Border and Coast Guard Agency.

Operation Triton and Subsequent Developments

Unlike the life-saving Mare Nostrum, Triton was solely concerned with border control and restricted naval patrols to smaller sea regions, notably cutting back on search and rescue missions²⁴. Efforts were also made to destroy migrant ships so that they were unusable in the future. It is estimated that this drastic policy change away from a humanitarian-centric objective resulted in the mortality rate of those attempting the crossing doubling from 1 in 50 to 1 in 23²⁵.

Less than two years after European leaders promised the October 2013 disaster off the coast of Lampedusa would never happen again, two shipwrecks that occurred within a week of each other killed over 1,000 migrants fleeing North Africa. Antonio Guterres, the head of the UNHCR, called for the EU "to restore a robust rescue-at-sea operation and establish credible legal avenues to reach Europe"²⁶. While Italian authorities were recorded as engaging in upwards of 30 search and rescue operations a day during the peak of arrivals in 2016²⁷, the ascension of Marco Minniti to the office of Interior Minister can be seen as marking a new stage in the Italian response to migrant flows, characterized not by search and rescue, but by externalization and securitization.

²³ "Strategic Litigation against European Migration Control Policies: The Legal Battleground of the Central Mediterranean Migration Route."

²⁴ Hoffman Pham, Katherine, and Junpei Komiyama. *Strategic Choices of Migrants and Smugglers in the Central Mediterranean Sea*, 12 July 2022

²⁵ Strategic Litigation against European Migration Control Policies: The Legal Battleground of the Central Mediterranean Migration Route

²⁶ The Secretive Prisons That Keep Migrants out of Europe

²⁷ Strategic Choices of Migrants and Smugglers in the Central Mediterranean Sea

Mid-2010's to Present: Conflict with NGOs and Cooperation with Libya

On December 12th, 2016, a new coalition government was formed, with Paolo Gentiloni, another Democratic Party member, taking over the role of Prime Minister in replacement of Matteo Renzi. Marco Minniti, a member of the Democratic Party²⁸, was subsequently named Interior Minister. This was a notable appointment, as the prior Interior Minister Angelino Alfano had been a member of the New Centre-Right Party, whose political leanings reflected its name. With nicknames such as “the Lord of Spies” and “the Minister of Fear,” Minniti was often referred to as the most powerful man in Italy while he was in office. Though he only served as Interior Minister for a little over 1.5 years, the radical measures he implemented to prevent the arrival of migrants into Italy ended up cutting migration from Libya by 80% by 2018²⁹. While this was a cause to rejoice for many in Italy, Minniti’s approach of increasing collaboration with the Libyan Coast Guard and other Libyan tribes and militias while simultaneously hampering, and sometimes outright fighting, the efforts of NGOs in the Mediterranean have created the conditions in which the journey through Libya and across the Mediterranean became the most deadly and dangerous journey for migrants on Earth.

Policy under Marco Minniti

Post-Operation Mare Nostrum, Italy’s framing of migration moved away from a humanitarian one and more towards securitization and externalization³⁰. Once taking office, Minniti began by eliminating all Italian-led search and rescue operations beyond 30 miles offshore. This left a humanitarian void that was quickly filled by NGOs. It is estimated that as

²⁸ The Democratic Party was the most powerful party in the coalitions of both the Renzi and Gentiloni governments

²⁹ Reynolds, James. “Marco Minniti: The Man who Cut the Migrant Flow to Italy”. BBC, 20 September 2018

³⁰ The notion that securitization of migration is a common trend in Italy is supported by the fact that it took place under Interior Ministers from both the right and the left, as well as under both center-right and center-left governing coalitions

many as 13 NGO boats were operating in the Mediterranean during the peak of crossings in 2016-17³¹. While these boats saved lives, they also faced similar criticisms in Italy as Operation Mare Nostrum, namely that they enabled illegal migration and served as ferries for migrants into Europe. In 2017, Minniti introduced what he coined the “Minniti Code,” an NGO Code of Conduct that exacted cumbersome limitations on NGO operations in the Mediterranean. Criminal proceedings were brought against NGOs and the captains of ships who brought migrants to Italy, and Italian ports were closed to boats carrying migrants. In 2018, “the EU Fundamental Rights Agency recorded 16 instances where vessels that had rescued people on the move waited at sea to be assigned a safe port for more than 24 hours”³². During this period, Italy was found to have violated the principle of non-refoulment and resorted to using civilian vessels to detain migrants at sea and subsequently return them to Libya.

Another example of Italy’s move towards securitization can be seen in the use of detention centers. Under the center-right Interior Minister Alfano, “Italy launched a policy of disinvestment in immigration detention; in 2015, only five out of eleven immigration detention centers in Italy were in operation.”³³ Minniti’s policy towards detention centers was quite different; he aimed to open a detention center in each of Italy’s 20 regions. Under Minniti, these centers were also outfitted with heightened mechanisms of border surveillance and technologies for filtering migrant flows.³⁴ It may seem contradictory that a left-leaning government securitized migration more than a right-leaning one. However, once we examine the rhetoric used by both sides in the following chapter, it may help to explain this more.

³¹ Strategic Choices of Migrants and Smugglers in the Central Mediterranean Sea

³² Strategic Litigation against European Migration Control Policies: The Legal Battleground of the Central Mediterranean Migration Route

³³ Ravelli, Galadriel (27 Sep 2023): Showcasing Italianness Through Migration Governance, Interventions

³⁴ Showcasing Italianness Through Migration Governance, Interventions

While trying to securitize and strengthen Italy's physical borders and migrant reception system, Minniti was also working with actors in Libya and other transit countries to externalize the migrant issue. Recognizing the complexity of Libyan politics and power dynamics, Minniti sought to forge connections with local tribes and militias, promising financial support from Italy and the EU should they work to curb illegal migration. The Libyan Coast Guard also began receiving training and funding from the EU. These efforts were formalized in early 2017 when Italy and Libya signed a Memorandum of Understanding, which served to revitalize the 2008 Treaty of Friendship. This agreement helped normalize relations between Italy, the Libyan Coast Guard, and Frontex- since 2018, the Libyan Coast Guard has been the sole entity responsible for search and rescue operations off the Libyan coast. This "outsourcing of search and rescue activities to the LCG resulted in not only delayed and dangerous rescue operations, but also increasing numbers of people on the move returned to Libya."³⁵ Research shows that when "European actors, including Frontex, spot boats in distress in the Mediterranean, they communicate with the LCG now instead of nearby commercial or NGO vessels"³⁶. As mentioned in the last section, the Libyan Coast Guard has been connected with various human rights violations, including running illegal detention centers for migrants in Libya that have been described as "hell on Earth."

The signing of the Memorandum of Understanding resulted in a drastic drop in migrant arrivals in Italy- this is mainly due to "a change in strategy of many Libyan militias, which started to detain migrants for a longer time in formal and informal detention centers"³⁷ as well as

³⁵ Strategic Litigation against European Migration Control Policies: The Legal Battleground of the Central Mediterranean Migration Route

³⁶ Strategic Litigation against European Migration Control Policies: The Legal Battleground of the Central Mediterranean Migration Route

³⁷ Fragmented Libya: Trying to Save the Italian and European Influences

engaging in increasingly “aggressive and presumably illegal behavior.”³⁸ There was a 34% reduction in migration in 2017 compared to 2016, and the first two months of 2018 saw nearly 66% fewer crossings than the same period from the previous year³⁹.

Policy under Matteo Salvini

In March 2018, general elections resulted in a hung parliament, and a governing coalition was formed that included the right-wing populist League and the populist 5-Star Movement. This meant that the position of Interior Minister fell again into the hands of a right-wing party member, this time the League’s Matteo Salvini. Belonging to a party whose anti-immigrant positioning forms one of its core tenets, Salvini came into office on the heels of Minniti’s notable success in limiting the number of migrants arriving on Italy’s shores. Salvini declared that Italy would no longer serve as “Europe’s refugee camp” and eagerly followed Minniti’s externalization and securitization approach to migration through a mix of internal and external controls. The Salvini Decree, passed by the Italian Senate in late 2018, included 42 declarations on Italy’s immigration policy. They included abolishing humanitarian protection for migrants, reducing barriers to stripping migrants of Italian citizenship, lengthening the naturalization process, and creating a fast track to deport “dangerous” asylum seekers.⁴⁰ Salvini also imposed fines of up to €1 million for NGO ships that ignored bans and limitations on accessing Italian waters. Sometimes, ports were closed, and vessels carrying migrants were barred from entering.

In August 2019, Salvini collapsed the government in an attempt to capitalize on the League’s substantial vote share and high rating in opinion polls. This move backfired; the 5-Star Movement and Democratic Party were able to form a new coalition without the League, and

³⁸ Showcasing Italianness Through Migration Governance, Interventions

³⁹ Fragmented Libya: Trying to Save the Italian and European Influences

⁴⁰ Dennison, James and Geddes, Andrew (2022) The centre no longer holds: the Lega, Matteo Salvini and the remaking of Italian immigration politics, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48:2, 441-460

Salvini was subsequently removed from the position of Interior Minister. However, migration into Italy had continued to plummet under his watch. In 2019, only 11,471 migrants reached Italy from the sea, down from over 181,000 just three years prior. It appeared that Minniti's and Salvini's policies had solved Italy's migration problem despite their heavy toll on the human rights of migrants. Notably, this had been achieved under the watch of both left and right-wing governments.

Years	Governing Coalition (Political Orientation)	Interior Minister (Political Party)	Migration Policy	Migration Trend
2013-16	Letta, Renzi (Center-Left)	Angelino Alfano (New Centre-Right)	It began as humanitarian (Mare Nostrum), became more securitized during the latter half	Sharp Rise in Migrant Arrivals
2016-18	Gentiloni (Center-Left)	Marco Minniti (Democratic Party)	Prosecution of NGOs, cooperation with Libya to block migrants, building detention centers	Sharp Decline in Migrant Arrivals
2018-19	Conte I (Center-Right)	Matteo Salvini (The League)	Continuation of many Minniti policies, increased prosecution of NGOs, limited rights of migrants attempting to gain asylum and citizenship	Continued Trend of Declining Arrivals

Post-2019

Yet, just as in the early 2010s, geopolitical events outside Italy's control threw the system into chaos once more. Fighting resumed in Libya in 2019 between the UN-backed government in Tripoli and the rebel Libyan National Army, severely limiting the nation's ability to control its

borders. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 threw in yet another wrench, and by 2022, the migrant flow from Libya into Italy was again on the rise. After campaigning on fighting illegal immigration, new right-wing Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni took office in October 2022 and attempted to revitalize the 2017 agreement between Italy and Libya. However, she found a drastically different situation in Libya, characterized by new launching points for migrants and altered tribal and militia power dynamics caused by the end of the Second Libyan Civil War. Matteo Villa, a researcher at the Italian think tank ISPI, explained how “the 2017 departures were super concentrated in a few places west of Tripoli. Today, this is not the case. People are also leaving from Eastern Libya. So, who do you talk to? In 2017, Italian intelligence knew the militia; now it doesn’t.”⁴¹.

Italy is facing a situation similar to that of a decade ago. Between January 1st, 2023, and July 22nd, 2023, nearly 73,500 migrants had reached Italian shores, more than double the same period in 2022 and more than the entire year of 2021⁴². In late September 2023, a migrant center in Lampedusa built to house 400 migrants was pushed to the breaking point after 10,000-12,000 migrants arrived on the island in just one week. Ironically, this came nearly a decade after the sinking of the migrant ship off the coast of Lampedusa that spurred Operation Mare Nostrum. By examining the rhetoric surrounding migration from both right and left-wing actors during the 2010s, we can contextualize the rhetoric from the Meloni government in the face of this updated crisis. This, in turn, will allow us to understand better its approach toward the increasing wave of migration and the potential future of Italian migration policy.

⁴¹ Balmer, Crispian, and Angelo Amante. “Italy’s Meloni Faces Reality Check as Migrant Flows Rise Relentlessly.” *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 13 July 2023

⁴² Italy’s Meloni Faces Reality Check as Migrant Flows Rise Relentlessly

Section 3: The Rhetorical Framings of Italian Migration Policies

“We must be wary of those who live with us and are not European.”

- Former Italian Prime Minister
Silvio Berlusconi

Nativism in Italy and the Rise of Populist Parties

We have now examined the past and current conditions in Libya, the Italian state’s response to the influx of African migrants over the last decade, and the resulting persistence of abuse, insecurity, and death that has characterized the migrant experience on the Central Mediterranean Migration Route. We have examined the policies enacted by Interior Ministers on both sides of the political spectrum while working under center-left and center-right governing coalitions.

However, one may notice that these aspects are all sums of factors- the results of processes both inside and outside of Italy. While it is important to understand what Italian migration policy has been and presently is, it is much more important to understand how and why this policy has developed. By understanding the rhetoric used by Italian political actors in framing the migration policies of the 2010s, we can understand their justification for the policies they enacted. This can subsequently allow us to understand better and predict potential Italian responses to the current migration influx of the 2020s. This chapter will seek to do just that, and an essential starting point is examining the existence of nationalism, nativism, and anti-immigrant sentiment in Italy. Before understanding and explaining the rhetoric used by populist,

right-wing, and left-wing political actors in Italy, we must first understand the greater cultural and societal environment in which they operate and the ideology behind their words.

The theme of native Italians juxtaposed against an outgroup has been a common one throughout the history of the Italian state. At the time of the Italian Unification in the mid-19th century, this role of the other was occupied not by migrants, but by Southern Italians. Northern Italians viewed the South as backward and barbaric compared to the increasingly industrialized North. This North vs South dichotomy still exists today and was a central part of the development of the Northern League in the late 20th century, one of Italy's most notable populist and anti-immigrant parties. The dominant view of Italian identity was white, European, and Catholic. Nativist parties have sought to enforce this identity in recent years.

Contributing to this identity is the fact that Italian national citizenship has been strongly based, and then codified, on the principle of patrilineal descent and ancestry⁴³. The current citizenship law, promulgated in 1992, bases Italian citizenship on the principle of *jus sanguinis*⁴⁴, making it easier for descendants of Italian emigrants to gain citizenship while simultaneously making it harder for those born in Italy to foreign-born parents. It is estimated that between 1.8 and 2.5 million people are excluded from citizenship despite being born or raised in Italy due to the stringent requirements they must meet⁴⁵ and the complex and cumbersome system they must push through. These people are often denied citizenship by Italian authorities the first time around⁴⁶. This fits a narrative pushed by many in Italy of “pure Italianness,” that being Italian is something you cannot become; it is something you are born with.

⁴³ Patriarca, Silvana. “A crisis of Italian identity? The Northern League and Italy's Renationalization since the 1990s.” *Crisis as a Permanent Condition?*, 2016, pp. 61-78

⁴⁴ Latin for “right of blood”, used to refer to countries who award citizenship based on descent

⁴⁵ According to Italian law, those born to non-citizen parents can acquire citizenship if they were born in Italy, have had uninterrupted residence until turning 18, and have submitted a statement of intent within one year of their eighteenth birthday.

⁴⁶ Testore, Gaia. “Italy: New Attempts to Reform Citizenship Law.” *European Website on Integration*

Promoting the protection of “pure” Italians has been a hallmark of the Northern League⁴⁷, which grew in prominence in Northern Italy from the mid-1980s on by “promoting an ethno-racial and exclusivist version of the national community”⁴⁸ at a time of growing discontent and change in Italian society⁴⁹. By promoting an “us vs them” discourse against Southern Italians, Rome, and then foreign immigrants, populist parties such as the League tapped into pre-existing feelings among native Italians (mostly Northerners at first). Notably, anti-immigrant sentiment has remained at around the same level in Italy over the last 30 years⁵⁰. However, immigration has become a much more publicized and aggressive topic in Italian politics over the same period, with anti-immigrant sentiment becoming increasingly popularized and acceptable in public political discourse. This can be attributed to the fact that parties promoting these anti-immigrant and nationalist values, such as the League, have gained both regional and national political power, therefore giving these values stronger legitimacy than in other European nations⁵¹. Additionally, the fortified anti-immigrant stance taken by these parties has forced the left wing of Italian politics to dedicate more attention to immigration as well, amplifying the issue’s visibility. This may help explain why the number of Italians who considered migration one of the top two issues facing their country rose from 5% in 2014 to as high as 40% in 2017⁵². While leftist parties do not share the League’s openly nationalistic standpoint, they have at times been

⁴⁷ Known as the Northern League for most of its existence, the party eliminated the word Northern and became just the League in 2017 in an effort to appeal to the whole country as a nationalist party.

⁴⁸ A Crisis of Identity? The Northern League and Italy’s Renationalization Since the 1990s

⁴⁹ The collapse of the post-war Italian party system in the 1990s, the increasing immigrant presence in Italy, rising unemployment, and the 150th anniversary of Italian unification in 2011 all contributed to growing nativist and nationalist sentiments which parties such as the Northern League were able to legitimize and then weaponize.

⁵⁰ Guglielmi, Simona. “Italians, first!” Unpacking the link between nationalism and immigrant discrimination”, *Quaderni di Sociologia*, 87- XLV | 2021, 37-64

⁵¹ A Crisis of Identity? The Northern League and Italy’s Renationalization Since the 1990s

⁵² The centre no longer holds: the Lega, Matteo Salvini and the remaking of Italian immigration politics

unwilling to express vastly different positions on migration due to the extreme toxicity of the issue electorally. By 2016, after years of anti-immigrant rhetoric by actors with legitimate political authority, “60% (of Italians) were concerned that refugees will increase domestic terrorism, 65% said that they will have a negative economic impact, and no less than 47% believed that they are more to blame for crime than other groups in their nation, a figure that is 15% higher than the European median”⁵³.

These factors and statistics demonstrate that some political actors in Italy were able to operate based on an ethno-racial idea of Italian identity and by exploiting several fears, which they exacerbated with their own. Now that we understand the ideology stemming from right-wing populists in Italy, we can examine the rhetoric they use to justify their migration policies. As stated above, it is crucial to explore the rhetoric coming from both the right and left, as restrictive and controversial immigration policies were enacted by both sides while in control of the government. As right-wing and populist parties are seemingly more vocal about the issue and draw more upon tides of nationalism, nativism, and implicit racism, we will start by examining them. Specifically, we will explore the rhetoric of the right-wing League and its leader, Matteo Salvini, and then the populist 5-Star Movement with its leader, Luigi Di Maio. We will finish by examining the rhetoric of the center-left Democratic Party and the language used by former Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni and former Interior Minister Marco Minniti.

Right-Wing, Populist, and Center-Left Rhetoric

Research has found that an effective predictor of negative attitudes towards migrants is the existence of the perception of threat, either real or imagined⁵⁴. Populist parties in Italy

⁵³ Gattinara, Pietro Castelli. “Mobilizing against ‘the invasion’: Far-right protest and the ‘refugee crisis’ in Italy.” (2018).

⁵⁴ Italians, first! Unpacking the link between nationalism and immigrant discrimination

recognized that positioning immigrants as a threat to Italy fit well into their established us vs. them style of discourse and resulted in higher levels of mobilization among their base and increased media attention. A study on right-wing political discourse in Italy between 1996 and 2015 found that “political interventions on migration have grown at a much faster rate compared to other policy areas in recent years” and that “unconventional forms of protest concerning issues related to migration increased fivefold after 2013”⁵⁵. A positive feedback loop thus emerged, whereby populist and right-wing parties recognized the increased emotional and electoral responses migration drew from the public and subsequently pushed these issues more, drawing more reactions and attention. The same study found that around 20% of the claims made by the Italian right wing over that period involved migration, the most significant percentage of any issue.

Right-Wing Rhetoric

Matteo Salvini rose through the ranks of the Northern League in the 1990s and 2000s, becoming Party Secretary in 2013 and Minister of the Interior in 2018. He quickly became one of the most notable and recognizable figures in European politics associated with populist and anti-immigrant rhetoric. By examining the language used by Salvini between 2014 and 2018 when discussing migrants, we can observe the views of migrants that were behind Italian immigration policy developments at the same time. We can do this by explicitly looking at Salvini’s posts on Facebook, an appropriate place to examine since social media has proven to be a powerful tool for spreading populist ideas, allowing leaders to interact directly with followers.

⁵⁵ Mobilizing against ‘the invasion’: Far right protest and the ‘refugee crisis’ in Italy

It can be observed that Salvini increasingly mentioned issues concerning migration each year from 2014-17, culminating in 2017, with around 25% of his posts mentioning the subject during that year. This should come as no surprise considering Salvini's posts concerning migration received, on average, more likes, shares, and comments than posts concerning other policy areas. This demonstrates the issue's salience amongst Italian voters and Salvini-specific followers' enthusiasm for his rhetoric on the subject⁵⁶.

The specific language used by Salvini reveals a strategy of positioning migration under the same ingroup and outgroup dichotomy that dominates nativist discourses in Italy. First, Salvini showed a higher-than-normal use of first- and second-person singular and plural pronouns, reaching directly to his base while simultaneously styling himself in a powerful position. This can be interpreted as a copy of a popular populist leader style of communication where the leader positions themselves as the protector of the ingroup they seek to represent. Salvini also makes extensive mention of terms such as "Italia," "Lega", "Milano", and "amico"⁵⁷- these are further manifestations of the development of an ingroup⁵⁸.

When discussing migrants and the rising number arriving from North Africa, Salvini made extensive use of alarmist and negative terms such as "illegale" (his most used word when discussing migration), "criminale", "invasione", "problemi", and "disgusto"⁵⁹. He also spread popular hashtags such as "#stopinvasione" and "#primagliitaliani"⁶⁰. It seems that Salvini's method for correlating immigration with negative and threatening emotions served many

⁵⁶ Sensales, Gilda, et al. "Representations of Italian Populism and Immigration on Facebook. A Comparison of the Posts by Luigi Di Maio and Matteo Salvini (2014-2018)." *Papers on Social Representations*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2021

⁵⁷ English translation- Italy, League, Milan, friend

⁵⁸ Representations of Italian Populism and Immigration on Facebook. A Comparison of the Posts by Luigi Di Maio and Matteo Salvini (2014-2018)

⁵⁹ English translation- Illegal, criminal, invasion, problems, disgust

⁶⁰ English translation- Stop invasion, the Italians first

purposes. First, it enforced the perception of threat, which has been proven crucial in cultivating anti-immigrant sentiment. It also increasingly connected immigrants with negativity in the minds of many Italians- this made it easier to galvanize public opinion against migrants when isolated instances of migrant violence or terrorism arose. Finally, it normalized and legitimized feelings of hate, racism, or xenophobia towards migrants that more extreme sectors of Italian society may have possessed but not had the prior cultural acceptance to push into mainstream political discourse.

Populist Rhetoric

The origins and politics of the League have already been explained. However, those of the 5-Star Movement(M5S) have not. The M5S was founded in 2009 and rapidly emerged as a purely populist party and a significant player in Italian politics during the 2010s, drawing support(and ire) from both the right and the left in Italy. Like other populist parties in Italy, M5S followed the playbook of positioning themselves as the defenders of Italy against an “Other”. However, this “Other” did not come from outside Europe- they were instead the powerful media, economic, and political elites that M5S believed were acting against the interests of ordinary Italians⁶¹. M5S has viewed many issues, including migration, through this lens.

The rhetoric of the M5S on migration is incredibly unique in the sense that migrants themselves go relatively unmentioned; when they are, they’re portrayed in a variety of different ways on the spectrum from criminal to victim⁶². As mentioned above, the M5S mantra of ordinary Italians fighting against a powerful group of elites is reflected in their stances on many policy issues, including migration. This can be seen in an analysis of the Facebook posts of

⁶¹ Representations of Italian Populism and Immigration on Facebook. A Comparison of the Posts by Luigi Di Maio and Matteo Salvini (2014-2018)

⁶² Repetto, Eric. “So Far, Yet So Close: Italian Parties’ Immigration Discourses During the Gentiloni and the First Conte Governments.” *Interdisciplinary Political Studies*, vol. 1, no. 7, 10 July 2021, pp. 199–239

former leader Luigi Di Maio, whose preferred rhetoric when discussing non-migration-related issues was highly similar to the rhetoric he used when talking about migration⁶³.

The main “elites” that the MS5 positions themselves against relating to migration are mostly NGOs, followed by the European Union and various members on both the left and right of Italian politics. Di Maio has specifically articulated a criminalized view of NGOs, stating in 2017 that he believed some NGOs helping migrants were, in fact, financed by human traffickers and that they pursued goals such as “destabilizing the Italian economy”⁶⁴.

Center-Left Rhetoric

Finally, we must analyze the discourse and rhetoric used by the Italian center-left, represented here by the Democratic Party(PD), which controlled the governing coalition and office of the Prime Minister under the Renzi and Gentiloni governments. However, it quickly becomes noticeable that there is an apparent disconnect and repositioning of the rhetoric used by the PD when they are in power versus when they are in the opposition. This disconnect does not exist within the rhetoric of either M5S or the League, who articulate mostly the same discourse regardless of their position within government.

When in power, as they were between 2013 and 2018, the PD predominantly used reified⁶⁵ images and portrayals of migrants. Both Minniti and Gentiloni often spoke of “governing migratory flows”. This terminology positions the migration issue as a problem of numbers, not people. Thus, “the migrant Other is dehumanized, and immigration becomes a technical issue of management, where ‘governing the flows’ does not elicit problematic

⁶³ Di Maio commonly uses phrases such as “they are”, “we/our”, and “Italy/Italian”. This helps establish a clear us against them framework that can be applied to a variety of political issues.

⁶⁴ So Far, Yet So Close: Italian Parties’ Immigration Discourses During the Gentiloni and the First Conte Governments

⁶⁵ Constructed as non-human objects or represented through numbers

associations with the humanity and individual biographies of migrants”⁶⁶. However, once in opposition in 2018, the PD rhetoric switched from pragmatic discourse supported by images of the reified migrant to humanitarian discourse backed by images of the victim migrant. Migrants were portrayed as the victims of not only human traffickers but also the policies of the right-wing and anti-immigrant parties in power.

The question of why this adjustment of rhetoric occurs is a puzzling one. On the one hand, many believe that the left’s pragmatic approach while in government is simply the product of the realities of governance. While the left’s default response is humanitarian, the realities of handling the migration issue mean that a pragmatic and numbers-based response is required. Another explanation could be that the center-left and left in Italy, when in power, do not want to position themselves too starkly against right-wing and nationalist forces on the issue of migration. As this essay has demonstrated, migration is an extremely sensitive issue in Italy and weighs heavily into electoral politics. In this case, going too far against the anti-immigrant parties who have been able to successfully parlay nationalist and nativist fears into electoral success could threaten the PD’s position in power.

Some have also hypothesized that the left’s humanitarian rhetoric is not the default; instead, it is simply a response to being in the opposition against a governing coalition that employs increasingly anti-humanitarian and radical rhetoric towards migration⁶⁷. When in opposition, more pro-immigrant parties will not have the same concern over losing a powerful position in government. In both kinds of rhetoric, just as in the rhetoric used by populist and right-wing parties, migrants are stripped of their agency and humanity.

⁶⁶ So Far, Yet So Close: Italian Parties’ Immigration Discourses During the Gentiloni and the First Conte Governments

⁶⁷ So Far, Yet So Close: Italian Parties’ Immigration Discourses During the Gentiloni and the First Conte Governments

Interpreting the Differences

When examining the rhetoric of Salvini and his right-wing colleagues, we can see the outgroup is being positioned as incompatible with the society of the ingroup. This can be mostly clearly observed around religion, where most migrants entering Catholic-dominated Italy were Muslim. Populist parties in Italy positioned themselves “as a bulwark of traditional (Judeo-Christian) European values and came to appraise Islam as inherently incompatible with the European culture”⁶⁸. Migrants were painted as being unable to integrate into Italian society or show respect for Italian customs and institutions, things that native Italians place highly when formulating what it means to be Italian. The League has gone as far as openly warning against the ethnic substitution of native Italians by migrants. The effects of this rhetoric can be seen in the comments of Italian far-right activists- one described African migration into Italy as “a project to destroy Europe, the old continent, and its traditions of Christianity and Greek and Roman culture”⁶⁹.

Salvini and the League repeatedly used rhetoric emphasizing their willingness to allow “deserving” and “real” refugees fleeing war into Italy. However, by constantly enforcing the image of the migrant as a criminal as well as the incompatibility of predominantly Muslim migrants with Italian society, the League has succeeded in blurring the line between the “deserving” and “grateful” migrant versus the “illegal” and “criminal” migrant⁷⁰. All migrants are stripped of their individuality and agency and placed in oversimplistic and often false categories.

⁶⁸ Mobilizing against ‘the invasion’: Far right protest and the ‘refugee crisis’ in Italy

⁶⁹ Mobilizing against ‘the invasion’: Far right protest and the ‘refugee crisis’ in Italy

⁷⁰ So Far, Yet So Close: Italian Parties’ Immigration Discourses During the Gentiloni and the First Conte Governments

At first glance, the rhetoric of the M5S may seem more favorable towards migrants than the rhetoric of the League. After all, migrants are not the subject of attacks or portrayed as criminals who are incompatible with Italian society. In fact, criminal images of migrants pushed by M5S(a small aspect of their migration-related rhetoric in the first place) often solely relate to their illegal status and do not push the notion that migrants are more likely to engage in delinquency or violent crimes once in Italy⁷¹. However, this type of rhetoric again serves to dehumanize migrants and strip away any agency they may have. By establishing the main actors in the equation as NGOs, traffickers, and European governments, migrants are positioned simply as pawns in a greater game, objects that can be controlled and moved at will according to the wishes of more important actors.

The rhetoric from the center-left results in more of the same. When in power, the PD and its politicians transformed migrants from people into numbers. The main enemy was the human traffickers who, in a similar vein as the rhetoric from M5S, were positioned as controlling migratory “flows”. When analyzing this rhetoric, it becomes clear that the policies pursued by Minniti were highly predictable in that they easily fall in line with this rhetoric. All of Minniti’s policies, from negotiating with Libyan actors to stop migrants before they reached Italy to the rapid expansion of detention centers across Italy, were centered around solving a problem of numbers and flows. Potential humanitarian concerns were either not considered or willfully ignored because migrants were not portrayed as individuals. Whether the PD’s default position is humanitarian or not is beside the point- there is no question that while in government post-Mare Nostrum, a humanitarian approach was not prioritized or desired.

⁷¹ So Far, Yet So Close: Italian Parties’ Immigration Discourses During the Gentiloni and the First Conte Governments

So, through this analysis, a central theme has emerged. While the rhetoric of immigration coming from left-wing, right-wing, and populist parties in Italy may seem highly varied, they all rely on the same rhetorical device: the dehumanization of migrants. This, in turn, can serve as justification for restrictive migration policies.

The right does it by portraying migrants as criminals and threats to Italian culture and society, and by placing migrants in categories such as “deserving” and “not deserving” to live in Italy. Through this lens, it is pretty easy to see how restrictive policies can be justified. Populist parties such as M5S do it by placing migrants as pawns of NGOs, European politicians, and human traffickers. Restrictive policies are therefore justified as part of the fight against these groups who do not have the interests of ordinary Italians at heart, with the role of migrants in the equation being forgotten. The left does it by labeling the migration issue as a numbers game where the primary goal is to govern “flows”, and then by labeling migrants as victims who require humanitarian treatment when it befits their political position. This apparent shifting, the PD’s apparently unwillingness to challenge the right wing on immigration for political reasons, and their choice to view the migration issue without considering the human aspect should be a clear demonstration that they do not have the best wishes of migrants at heart.

We can now turn to the present-day and the final section of this discussion. We may now contextualize the Meloni government’s discourse, rhetoric, and policies towards migration within these categories. This will allow us to attempt to predict the future of Central Mediterranean migration into Italy and the corresponding policies emanating from the Italian state.

Epilogue: Policy Under Meloni

“We cannot afford to become the refugee camp of the planet.”

- Current Italian Prime Minister
Giorgia Meloni

When Giorgia Meloni became the first female Prime Minister of Italy in October 2022, she did so leading the most right-wing government the country had seen since the end of WWII. Before her ascension to the premiership, Meloni was one of the most vocal politicians in Italy on the issue of migration. She argued that an effort was underway to replace Italians with ethnic minorities and supported similar measures to those enacted by Matteo Salvini while he was Interior Minister, such as the closure of Italian ports to migrants. Meloni even went a step further and proposed establishing a naval blockade to prevent migrants from arriving in Italy⁷². The belief that a Meloni-led government would “create a lot of negative impact on the lives of migrants”⁷³, voiced by migrant Mustapha Jarjou in the Sicilian capital of Palermo, was common amongst migrant communities.

However, any notions Meloni had that she would be able to curb migration once in office have been quickly dashed. From January to September of this year, around 130,000 migrants have entered Italy, more than double from the same period last year⁷⁴. Additionally, the Italian government recently announced it would issue over 450,000 new work visas⁷⁵ for non-EU nationals between 2023-25. However, given Italy’s family reunification laws, legal experts have

⁷² Barigazzi, Jacopo. “How Italy’s Far-Right Leader Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Migration.” *POLITICO*, POLITICO, 30 Aug. 2023

⁷³ Giorgia Meloni: Migrants’ Fears Over Italy’s New Far-Right Prime Minister.” *BBC News*, BBC, 22 Oct. 2022

⁷⁴ Williams, Megan. “Italian PM Touts Importance of National Identity While Asking for International Help on Migration | CBC News.” *CBC News*, CBC/Radio Canada, 21 Sept. 2023

⁷⁵ For reference, in 2019, Italy issued just 30,850 visas

predicted this may result in around 1.5 million migrants being afforded legal migration into Italy in the next decade⁷⁶.

While a Meloni government overseeing a sharp rise in both illegal and legal migration may come as a shock, many in Italy will say it is a pragmatic and necessary response to the current demographic situation in the country. This past summer, the government released a decree estimating Italy would need 833,000 new migrants over the next three years to fill a gap in its labor force. Since 2010, Italy's population has dropped by around 1.5 million, and in 39/107 provinces, there are more retirees than workers⁷⁷.

Despite these setbacks, Meloni has not given up on her campaign promises. Following a shipwreck off the coast of the small town of Cutro in Calabria that took the lives of nearly 100 migrants in late February 2023⁷⁸, the government passed the Cutro Migrant Decree, which vastly limited the special protection status that asylum seekers in Italy who are unlikely to receive full refugee protection status are given.⁷⁹ Supporters of the decree argued that it would help curb illegal migration, and it received widespread support inside the governing right-wing coalition. This was eerily similar to the Salvini Decree of 2018 which also abolished humanitarian protections for migrants. The decree also set the 2023 migrant quota at a number that was barely 33% of what the business sector had requested. Finally, Meloni has continued Italy's policy of externalization by recently announcing a deal with Albania to build two detention centers in the non-EU country that could house up to 3,000 migrants at a time.⁸⁰ While the details of the

⁷⁶ How Italy's Far-Right Leader Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Migration

⁷⁷ How Italy's Far-Right Leader Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Migration

⁷⁸ It was later revealed that, despite possessing boats capable of navigating the rough sea at the time, the Italian Coast Guard waited over four hours before initiating a rescue mission, which was a full six hours after the boat had been spotted and reported as showing signs of distress.

⁷⁹ ANSA. "Italian Senate Approves Cutro Decree, Squeeze on Special Permits." *InfoMigrants*, 24 Apr. 2023

⁸⁰ Horowitz, Jason, and Gaia Pianigiani. "Meloni Says She'll Send Migrants to Albania. Some Say Not So Fast." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 7 Nov. 2023

agreement are still unclear, Meloni has explained that “Italian officials would offload migrants to a center in the Albanian port of Shengjin, identify them, and transport them into another center inland, where migrants are expected to stay for about 28 days.”⁸¹ Still, plenty of questions have arisen concerning jurisdiction and the length of time migrants would be subject to stay in these detention centers, and the plan has drawn comparisons to the highly controversial attempt in the UK to send pending asylum seekers to Rwanda.

On the international stage, Meloni has mostly refrained from her vitriolic campaign trail rhetoric. In front of the UN, she declared that Italy and the EU must “put humankind and human rights back at the center of our action”⁸². In a speech opening the International Conference on Development and Migration hosted in Rome this past summer, Meloni emphasized the importance of not only allowing migrants legal entry but also helping them acclimate and thrive once in Italy⁸³. Finally, Meloni has sought to increase cooperation with European and non-European actors. She has shied away from more provocative acts taken by previous governments, such as shuttling migrants through Italy into its EU neighbors, choosing instead to strengthen ties over scoring easy political points domestically.

Meloni’s ability to continue juggling her coalition’s nationalist, nativist, and anti-immigrant sentiments, the need to cultivate European-wide cooperation on migration, and Italy’s economic and demographic situation will play a massive role in the survival of her government. While Meloni’s nearly 14 months in power may seem short, the Italian political system is one of the most volatile in Europe. Since the end of WWII, the country has seen 69 different

⁸¹ Meloni Says She’ll Send Migrants to Albania. Some Say Not So Fast

⁸² President Meloni’s Speech at the 78th United Nations General Assembly

⁸³ Meloni, Giorgia. “President Meloni’s Opening Address at the International Conference on Development and Migration.” *www.Governo.It*, Office of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, 25 July 2023

governments, averaging out to one every 1.11 years⁸⁴. There have been rumblings that Meloni may face a challenge within her right-wing coalition, with some believing she has become too soft on migration⁸⁵. The deputy mayor of Lampedusa, Attilio Lucia, a member of the League, recently questioned, “Where did the Prime Minister Meloni who was saying “naval blockade” go?”⁸⁶. Upcoming European elections will only intensify these calls from her right-wing allies, notably the League’s Salvini. Additionally, a recent shift of the PD towards a more progressive platform under new Secretary Elly Schlein has some wondering if the opposition will pursue a pro-humanitarian response to migration more heavily.

These factors will likely control Italy’s migration policies in the coming years. With it apparent that the rate of arriving migrants will not slow down any time soon, increasing pathways for legal entry seems like the best course of action. It’s a move not only supported by Italy’s business sector, but will also help address the country’s declining demographic outlook. Additionally, a stronger pro-humanitarian PD could help mobilize the Italian left to counteract the nativist forces from the right. Regardless, it is clear that the rights of migrants must be made paramount. If Italian political rhetoric begins to shift towards language that is more respectful of migrant humanity and human rights, then this will be a good sign that the Mediterranean may one day no longer be known as a “graveyard” for migrants.

⁸⁴ Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri del Governo Italiano

⁸⁵ Italian PM Touts Importance of National Identity While Asking for International Help on Migration

⁸⁶ How Italy’s Far-Right Leader Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Migration

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