

## Beyond the European Council: Domestic Politics Drives the Migration "Crisis" in Italy and Germany

by Gianni Bonvicini

EU migration policy emerged as the main bone of contention at the recent European Council meeting on 28-29 June 2018. Previously, when Emmanuel Macron gave his visionary speech on the future of the Union at Sorbonne University in late September, the Council meeting was billed as a key appointment on the long journey of European economic governance reform, with a common Eurozone budget meant to emerge as its centrepiece.<sup>1</sup>

Ultimately, following that speech, Macron had to wait many months until mid-June, as German political parties agreed on a difficult coalition government, eventually allowing Angela Merkel to prudently come forth and agree to some of the French

President's proposals.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, those weeks also coincided with a heightening of disagreements among the 27 member states of the Union on the future of EU migration policy, heralding a significant political crisis across Europe. So much so, that Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the EU Commission, felt compelled to call an emergency pre-Council summit on Sunday 24 June to seek common ground ahead of the formal Council meeting.

Two main reasons explain the present flurry of diplomatic activity surrounding the rather old and well-known deficiencies of EU migration policy: domestic politics in both Italy and Germany.

<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Macron, *For a Sovereign, United, Democratic Europe*, Speech of the President of the Republic at the Initiative for Europe, Paris La Sorbonne, 26 September 2017, <https://onu.delegfrance.org/For-a-sovereign-united-democratic-Europe>.

<sup>2</sup> See *Meseberg Declaration*, 19 June 2018, <https://archiv.bundesregierung.de/Content/EN/Pressemitteilungen/BPA/2018/2018-06-19-meseberg-declaration.html>.

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Italy's coalition government, made up of the far-right Lega party and the populist Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle*, M5S), quickly pushed the migration issue to the forefront of the country's, and hence the EU's, political agenda. Italy has been the landing point for a majority of migrants crossing the Central Mediterranean route and the new government is renewing Italy's requests for solidarity and assistance on this issue from its partners on the European continent.

Rome has recently adopted a harder line on migrant arrivals, with the country's new interior minister, Matteo Salvini, head of the Lega party and Deputy Prime Minister, announcing Italy's decision to close its ports to international NGOs involved in search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean sea.<sup>3</sup> One such vessel, the *Aquarius*, carrying 629 migrants, was prevented from docking in Italy, remaining stranded at sea for days until the new Spanish government agreed to accept the migrants, allowing the ship to dock in Valencia.

The second reason is that the migration issue is pushing the political entente between Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats and the Christian Social Union (CSU), which has been instrumental in supporting Merkel's chancellorship since 2005, to the brink. Tensions are even threatening to bring down the government.

<sup>3</sup> Sallyann Nicholls, “NGO Boats to Be Blocked ‘All Summer’ from Italian Ports”, in *Euronews*, 30 June 2018, <http://www.euronews.com/2018/06/30/ngo-boats-to-be-blocked-all-summer-from-italian-ports>.

In this context, the CSU seeks enhanced measures to prevent secondary movements of migrants and refugees, looking to turn back asylum seekers that have arrived and registered in another European country but are travelling to Germany through its southern border. Such a move would effectively reverse Merkel's 2015 open-door policy and weaken her political authority. More importantly, by acting unilaterally, Germany risks causing a domino effect across Europe with other states opting to do the same, essentially putting the survival of the Schengen area in doubt.

Strangely enough, official immigration figures cannot attest to this great urgency or alarm in both Italy and Germany.

Asylum applications actually fell by 44 per cent across the EU in 2017 compared to the previous year, as noted by a European Asylum Support Office (EASO) report.<sup>4</sup> In the first four months of 2018, applications dropped further, according to provisional data from EASO, with about 197,000 people seeking protection in the EU, a lower figure compared to the same period in each of the last three years, though still higher than the pre-crisis levels in 2014.

Eurostat data also shows that in the first quarter of 2018, 26 per cent of all first time asylum applicants in the EU – or 34,400 people – filed their request in Germany, followed by 19 per cent in France, 14 per cent in Italy, 10 per cent

<sup>4</sup> EASO, *Asylum: EU Consolidates Recovery from 2015-2016 Migration Crisis - Significant Decrease in Applications in 2017 Has Stabilised in Early 2018*, 15 June 2018, <https://www.easo.europa.eu/node/10353>.

in Greece and 7 per cent in Spain.<sup>5</sup>

Similar trends also apply to arrival figures in Italy. The Interior Ministry has noted how sea arrivals have decreased by 80 per cent in the first months of the year compared to the same period in 2017.<sup>6</sup> More generally, as of 1 July, data collected by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) shows that almost 45,000 migrants entered Europe by sea so far in 2018. The total number for the same period in 2017 was more than 100,000 and around 230,000 in 2016.<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, therefore, the present aura of crisis surrounding the migration issue in Italy and Germany is more reflective of domestic struggles and political agendas than a level headed analysis of reality.

In the case of Germany, Horst Seehofer, leader of the CSU and Interior Minister in the coalition government headed by Merkel, is gearing up for state elections in Bavaria this October. Fears that the migration issue will be exploited by the extreme right anti-migrant Alternative for Germany party (*Alternative für*

*Deutschland*, AfD) are driving his concern on this issue.

As for Italy's Matteo Salvini, the migration issue represents a powerful tool and rallying call to demonstrate his political influence, and supremacy, over the populist coalition government with the M5S. Recent opinion polls and the results of Italy's local elections on 24 June indicate that his cynical strategy of blocking NGO vessels from landing in Italian ports has translated into a huge political boon for his Lega party.

More difficult, in the case of Italy, is to understand the government's strategy to garner support from EU states for a radical reform of existing EU migration policies. Salvini's strategy vis-à-vis his European colleagues on this issue hardly makes sense, and may actually be self-defeating.

Salvini's proximity to Seehofer against Angela Merkel, or his admiration for Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Austria's Vice Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache, from the extreme-right Freedom Party of Austria (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, FPÖ), and even his public quarrels with Emmanuel Macron of France, are all contrary to Italian interests.

Recent episodes can illustrate the risks implied by such behaviour. Italy's government would do well to heed these warnings.

Back in September 2015, EU states committed to relocate up to 160,000 migrants who had landed in Italy and Greece across Europe within two years. By May last year only a few

<sup>5</sup> Eurostat, *Asylum Quarterly Report*, 15 June 2018, [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Asylum\\_quarterly\\_report#Where\\_do\\_asylum\\_applicants\\_go\\_to.3F](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Asylum_quarterly_report#Where_do_asylum_applicants_go_to.3F).

<sup>6</sup> Italian Ministry of Interior, *Cruscotto statistico giornaliero* (Daily Statistical Dashboard), 30 June 2018, <http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/it/node/1300>.

<sup>7</sup> IOM reports that 45,808 migrants and refugees entered Europe by sea in 2018 through 1 July, with just around 36 per cent arriving in Italy and the remainder divided between Greece (29 per cent) and Spain (34 per cent). See IOM, *Mediterranean Migrant Arrivals Reach 45,808 in 2018; Deaths Reach 1,405*, 3 July 2018, <https://www.iom.int/node/87731>.

thousand migrants had been relocated with a number of European countries, Hungary and Austria among them, refusing to take in a single migrant. The Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia have taken similar stances. In the end, the EU managed to relocate only 35,000 migrants before the quota system expired in September 2017, leaving no mandatory relocation system in place ever since.

For Italy, a country of first arrival for migrants and refugees, the topic of mandatory relocations across Europe is of particular importance, and Rome has long complained that other EU nations are not taking their fair share of the burden. Heaping praise on those same leaders and countries – Hungary and Austria among others – that are refusing to take in migrants therefore seems like a counterproductive strategy.

During the European Council meeting in June, Italy sought to press other European countries for a reform of the Dublin Regulation. The regulations stipulate that EU countries of first arrival are solely responsible for the wellbeing of migrants and the processing of asylum claims. Frontline Mediterranean states argue this places an unfair burden on them since they have become responsible for almost all asylum seekers (even though many of those who arrive on Greek or Italian shores see Germany or Sweden as their desired destination).

The conclusions of the European Council meeting in June included a proposal for the creation “regional

disembarkation platforms”<sup>8</sup> outside the European Union, possibly in North Africa, where officials could quickly differentiate between refugees in need of protection and economic migrants who would potentially be repatriated to their countries of origin. Even if EU leaders agree on such a proposal, the problem rests in persuading non-EU countries to host such structures. Libya’s recent refusal to host such platforms, outlined during a meeting held on 25 June between Salvini and his Libyan counterparts, demonstrates the complexity of such a proposal.

More in general, and not least in the light of the inconclusive results of the European Council meeting, the real weakness affecting EU migration policy is the lack of a functioning and convincing “governing system”.

Contrary to the Euro area, where convergence criteria, financial mechanisms and a European Central Bank have succeeded in curtailing the severe crisis of the last years, nothing similar exist for the migration dossier.

Europe needs much more than the *ad hoc*, fragmented measures approved at the Council. A deeper governance reform is necessary. For Italy, coalition building and careful, calculated diplomacy will be of the essence. Yet, the new coalition government in Rome seems to be aligning itself with those same countries that have long blocked calls for increased European solidarity on the migration issue.

<sup>8</sup> European Council conclusions, 28 June 2018, <http://europa.eu/!Tx99Dv>.

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Ultimately, Italian interests will not be advanced through the bad company of such leaders in Hungary, Poland or Austria. Rather, Italy’s traditional partners in Germany and France should emerge as Rome’s natural counterparts. While adaptations and some backtracking can be expected due to their own national interests and domestic politics, only such a coalition will be able to bring about a truly “common” migration policy in Europe.

Unfortunately, the recent European Council meeting seems to have pushed Europe further back from such an accord, ensuring that the migration issue will continue to define European politics, both foreign and domestic, for the foreseeable future.

*3 July 2018*

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