

Italy's Far-Right and the Migration Debate: Implications for Europe

by Julian M. Campisi and Cecilia Emma Sottilotta

Following the collapse of Mario Draghi's national unity government in July, Italy is set to elect a new parliament on 25 September 2022, the first general election since 2018. Grappling with a myriad of socio-economic and energy challenges, the next government will face significant hardship in turning the tide, with Italy widely expected to be governed by a right-wing conservative government at a time when all indications point to Italy moving into recession in 2023.

A conservative coalition of far- and centre-right parties, led by Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia* – FdI), the League (*Lega*) and Go Italy (*Forza Italia*) party, is expected to win a significant majority of seats in parliament. While Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing inflation and energy crisis have dominated the electoral campaign, other issues should not be overlooked, not least in light of their impact on domestic politics as well as broader Italy–EU relations.

One such element is migration. Traditionally an arena of significant tension with Brussels, the management of migration and the respect of international legal obligations for asylum and assistance have also emerged in the present electoral campaign. While the actual numbers of new arrivals do not justify alarmism or resorting to “crisis-mode politics”, one should not be surprised that the coalition of right-wing parties have sought to use migration as a wedge issue, building on the legacy of harsh anti-migrant rhetoric promoted in the past. Yet, other contenders, including the centre-left Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico* – PD), have not forcibly pushed back against such negative rhetoric. Instead, they have essentially embraced a similar securitised framing of the issue to that pursued by the right.

Migration: An enduring challenge

Issues related to the arrival and integration of migrants have become

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increasingly contentious in Italy and Europe over the past decade, as right-wing populist parties have made the issue a key element of their respective political platforms. Since the so-called EU migration crisis of 2015–16, much has been written on emergency resettlements, Germany's acceptance of Syrian refugees, Frontex's budgetary increases, the lack of EU-wide solidarity towards frontline member states or the absence of a broader strategy to tackle the issue in the medium- to long-term perspective.¹

While the COVID-19 pandemic led to diminished migration flows as a result of border closures and other public health measures, the problem has not gone away. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the waves of Ukrainian refugees momentarily revived the issue. Yet, the treatment and acceptance of Ukrainian refugees across Europe compared to those of African or Middle Eastern descent is by no means comparable. This exposed significant double standards at the heart of EU migration policy, harming its credibility in the process.

While some efforts have been advanced at the EU level – such as the 2015 Valletta Summit on Migration or the 2020

communication of the Commission on a New Pact on Migration and Asylum² – it is clear that short-term fixes still dominate Europe's approach to irregular migration flows. These have failed to respond to the multi-faceted challenges that influxes of migrants can bring to many countries of first arrival, as well as the underlying need to propose structural reforms capable of providing legal pathways for migrants to safely reach Europe.

Italy's migration conundrum

Fresh with confidence from recent polls, Italy's far-right parties once again framed the debate around migration in terms of "threats" and "security". Leaders such as Giorgia Meloni (Brothers of Italy) and Matteo Salvini (League) revived migrant-blaming and returned to old characterisations that criminalised migration during the summer electoral campaign (see also Figures 1 and 2).³

There is a precedent in this sense: during the 2018 electoral campaign, Salvini had promised to expel half a million migrants from Italy if elected.⁴

¹ See for instance, Güven Sak, "Building a Post-Pandemic G20 Agenda for Migration", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 21|13 (March 2021), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/12916>; Martin Ruhs, "Expanding Legal Labour Migration Pathways to the EU: Will This Time Be Different?", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 20|95 (December 2020), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/12525>; Roderick Parkes and Mark McQuay, "Ending the EU's Ambivalence to Free Movement in Africa", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 20|85 (November 2020), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/12368>.

² See European Commission, *A New Pact on Migration and Asylum* (COM/2020/609), 23 September 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52020DC0609>; Stefano Manservigi, "The EU's Pact on Migration and Asylum: A Tsunami of Papers but Little Waves of Change", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 20|88 (December 2020), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/12498>.

³ Marco Leardi, "La lezione della Meloni a Letta sui migranti", in *Il Giornale*, 8 August 2022, <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/retorica-parte-lezione-meloni-letta-sui-migranti-2057353.html>.

⁴ Holly Ellyatt, "Pack Your Bags,' Italy's New Leaders Tell 500,000 Illegal Migrants – But It'll

Figure 1 | Brothers of Italy's tweet calling for a "naval blockade" to "protect Italy's borders"



Source: Giorgia Meloni, "Le politiche immigrazioniste hanno gettato nel caos la Nazione", Twitter post, 27 July 2022, <https://twitter.com/giorgiameloni/status/1552212411662336001>.

With Salvini in government, the action never materialised due to the exorbitant costs of such an operation, the lack of bilateral agreements with the countries of origin and the clear infringement of international law such action would entail.

At the same time, during his tenure as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of

Cost Them", in *CNBC*, 4 June 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/06/04/pack-your-bags-italys-new-leaders-tell-500000-illegal-migrants--but-itsll-cost-them.html>.

Interior (2018–2019), Salvini sponsored the so-called "Security Decrees", two legal measures that profoundly changed rules on the reception of asylum seekers and assistance for refugees.⁵ The legislation was partly amended following the end of Salvini's time in government, but the former minister has now promised to revive his decrees during the 2022 electoral campaign. Meloni, meanwhile, adopted an even more extreme rhetoric compared to her allies on the right, promising to enforce a "naval blockade" to prevent migrants from reaching Italian shores⁶ (Figure 1). Such a measure is by and large unfeasible, as indeed eventually conceded by Meloni herself, in addition to contravening international and EU law.

Drifting "right" on migration

Italy's right-wing parties are not the only ones to have embraced a securitisation framework with respect to migration.⁷ A key role has also been

⁵ Some provisions of the security decrees, for instance the one precluding asylum seekers from access to civil registries, were later ruled illegitimate by Italy's Constitutional Court. See Annalisa Camilli, "La consulta boccia i decreti sicurezza e il governo ne rimanda le modifiche", in *Internazionale*, 10 July 2020, <https://www.internazionale.it/notizie/annalisa-camilli/2020/07/10/corte-costituzionale-decreti-sicurezza-modifiche>. In 2020 the legislation was amended, although the framework it introduced remained in place.

⁶ Valeria Forgnone, "Centrodestra diviso anche sui migranti: cos'è il blocco navale proposto da Meloni", in *Repubblica*, 29 August 2022, https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2022/08/29/news/cose_blocco_navale_migranti_meloni_fdi-363342682.

⁷ See for instance, Valeria Bello, "The Spiralling of the Securitisation of Migration in the EU: From the Management of a 'Crisis' to a

Figure 2 | A tweet by the League on keeping Italy "secure" from migrants



Source: Lega-Salvini Premier, “++ #Credo nell’Italia sicura: stop sbarchi!”, Twitter post, 12 September 2022, <https://twitter.com/LegaSalvini/status/1569380071877627905>.

played by the centre-left, the first to have approved restrictive measures to prevent new arrivals while entering into controversial agreements with third-country actors to prohibit new

Governance of Human Mobility?”, in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 6 (2022), p. 1327-1344, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1851464>.

departures from reaching Italian shores.

Indeed, during the centre-left government led by Paolo Gentiloni (2016–18), the PD would develop much of the groundwork for the securitisation of migration by introducing the “Minniti–Orlando Decree” (Law decree 13/2017). Aimed at curtailing “illegal immigration”, the decree expanded the scope of immigrant detention and facilitated repatriations. At the same time, Interior Minister Marco Minniti (PD) signed a deal with Libya aimed at preventing migrants from travelling to Europe, as well as approving a controversial code of conduct for international NGO’s active in search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean.⁸ Thus, rather than pushing back against the growing tendency to frame migration in security terms, the centre-left has quietly moved closer to these same restrictive policies, even setting important precedents later expanded upon by the right.

Such a framing of migration has now become “mainstream” not only in Italy but across large parts of Europe (and the US) as well. A major part of the problem is the lack of policy imagination and political will, with European member states still refusing to embrace a EU-wide migration policy based on the principles of solidarity, assistance and a limited sacrificing of national sovereignty. Instead, in Italy,

⁸ On the code of conduct for NGOs see, “Minniti Says Debate on NGO Code of Conduct Over”, in *Ansa*, 26 July 2017, https://www.ansa.it/english/news/2017/07/26/minniti-says-debate-on-ngo-code-of-conduct-over_b2000e3c-12fa-471f-ba63-42a60d4e231d.html.

like other frontline states, governments have mostly been limited to discursive platitudes and/or harsh criticism of the EU for failing to provide adequate financial support to such states.

Indeed, counternarratives about the need for Italy (a country still experiencing emigration and affected by a very low birth-rate) to actually allow and integrate migrants and workers in order to make the welfare state sustainable have fallen on deaf ears. The many appeals made by a past president of Italy's National Social Security Institute⁹ have failed to influence the political debate, including on the left. The hesitancy displayed by the PD in forcibly backing a number of successive proposals for a reform of Italy's citizenship law – from the *Ius soli* to the more recent *Ius scholae*¹⁰ – epitomises the self-censorship of the centre-left, unwilling to back such progressive policies out of fear of losing support to the right.

Implications: Double standards and fortress Europe

If the migration debate in Italy is full of contradictions, the one taking place at the EU-level as a consequence of Russia's invasion of Ukraine is also highly problematic. A UN-appointed

Special Rapporteur recently called out the double standards on Ukraine's war-displaced.¹¹ For example, in the winter of 2021, between 2,000 and 4,000 migrants of Middle Eastern descent were forced to camp out on the Belarus–Poland border for weeks on end, leading to multiple deaths.

While this was the result of a purposeful strategy that aimed to weaponise migration by Belarus and Russia, the treatment they – as well as third country nationals (especially people of African and Middle Eastern descent) – received when fleeing Ukraine, stands in stark contrast with the one granted to the millions of Ukrainian asylum seekers who were offered temporary protection by EU states in quick fashion, and with much praise from international media.¹²

Needless to say, no similar mechanisms were activated (or even debated) for migrants from other states, even in the midst of the so-called migration crisis of 2015–16. This double standard has fed into a narrative, widely embraced by Italy's right-wing parties, whereby it would be necessary and indeed desirable to distinguish between "real" (i.e. Ukrainian or European) and "fake" asylum seekers.¹³

⁹ See for instance, Alessandro Barbera and Nicola Lillo, "Boeri: 'Bisogna dire la verità agli italiani: senza immigrati l'Inps crollerebbe'", in *La Stampa*, 4 April 2017, <https://www.lastampa.it/economia/2017/07/04/news/boeri-bisogna-dire-la-verita-agli-italiani-senza-immigrati-l-inps-crollerebbe-1.34446387>.

¹⁰ This would allow children of immigrants born or raised in Italy and who have attended school for at least five years to obtain Italian citizenship.

¹¹ See UN News, *Top Rights Expert Questions 'Double Standard' on Ukraine's War Displaced*, 28 July 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/07/1123502>.

¹² See UNHCR Data Portal: *Ukraine Refugee Situation*, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>.

¹³ See for instance, "Salvini: 'Accogliamo gli ucraini in fuga, sono profughi veri!'", in *Repubblica*, 25 February 2022, https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2022/02/25/news/salvini_letta_ucraina-339233962; "Meloni

A sheer look at the numbers shows that the situation in the Mediterranean is far from being a "crisis" today: the peak of monthly arrivals in August 2022 was 20,898, while in October 2015 it was 222,800.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the continued politicisation of migration will pose challenges for domestic Italian politics and also for the EU. This will be particularly true if a right-wing government in Italy returns to the old tactic of blaming Brussels for migration while dismantling its internal reception capacities and purposefully allowing migrants to move northwards across Europe to reach other destinations.

Will the new conservative and right-wing government return to old harsh criticisms of the EU on the handling of migration – using this issue as a wedge to continue promoting their Eurosceptic objectives –, or will it be moderated by a need to reassure Brussels, particularly in light of the continued need for EU recovery funds?

Migration is not a passing phenomenon and will therefore continue to impact the political scene in Italy and Europe. With the economic outlook on the continent likely to worsen in the coming months, there is an urgent need to deflate the politicisation and securitisation of migration. Real, non-ideological reforms and a long-term migration policy will require an EU-level system to manage migratory

scalda piazza Duomo: "Immigrazione, si cambia", in *Il Giornale*, 12 September 2022, <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/milano/meloni-scalda-piazza-duomo-immigrazione-si-cambia-2065884.html>.

¹⁴ UNHCR Data Portal: *Mediterranean Situation*, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean>.

fluxes based on shared resources and responsibilities.

A transparent policy on different paths to permanent residency within the EU would be a good place to start. In absence of such a paradigm shift, Italy's upcoming vote is likely to further consolidate its status as an outpost of "fortress Europe" in the Mediterranean, with all that this implies for the EU's dwindling credibility in the Middle East and North Africa as well as the broader "Global South".

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