

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

IMMIGRATION IN ITALY BETWEEN TWO ELECTIONS

Myths and Reality

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July 2019



In both the 2018 and the 2019 electoral campaigns in Italy, migration and Europe were the key issues of public debate.



Since taking office, Salvini, as Italy's Minister of the Interior, has tackled migration through legislative measures and policy stances on such matters as the closing of ports, despite his lack of formal powers in this regard.



The new policy has raised many points of contention, especially from administrative and judicial points of view.

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1 INTRODUCTION

On 2 July 2019 Captain Carola Rackete, a German national, was released from house arrest by the judge for preliminary investigation in Agrigento. The judge dismissed charges brought against Ms Rackete of violence against an Italian military vessel and resistance to public officials arising from the alleged manner in which she entered the port of Lampedusa to land a group of about fifty migrants she had rescued some days beforehand. The judge considered that Rackete's actions were lawful because she had acted for the »fulfilment of a duty established by international law regarding rescue at sea of people in danger, which is not limited to taking on board castaways, but includes landing them in a place of safety«.

The case concerned a rescue operation involving the ship Sea Watch 3, which sails under the Dutch flag in the Strait of Sicily with the purpose of saving migrants in distress at sea. In June, the Sea Watch 3 had to remain at sea for 16 days awaiting authorisation to dock in a place of safety and land the people it had rescued. In the end, the Captain of the ship decided to defy an order of the Italian authorities forbidding her from entering Italian waters and made her way to the port of Lampedusa, where she collided with a ship of the Guardia di Finanza. Here, she was arrested and charged according to legislation passed just a few days previously.

The case of the Sea Watch 3 has almost monopolised media space in Italy and has attracted attention from all over Europe, for over two weeks. During this period Italian Minister of the Interior and Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini declared every day that no NGO would set foot in Italy to land migrants anymore, blaming Europe for its inaction.

This case is just the most recent in a long series since the current government took office. The attitude of Mr Salvini vis-à-vis such episodes can be explained only in the context of what is in effect an ongoing electoral campaign, starting with the parliamentary elections of 3 March 2018 and continuing through the 2019 European Parliament election.

There are a number of reasons why some of the most high-profile Italian politicians have kept campaigning over the past year and a half. First, after the parliamentary elections, the Five Star Movement, which won 32.7 per cent of the votes, took three months – almost a record for Italy – to find a government partner. This turned out to be the League, which ranked third in the March election (17.4 per cent). Until the new government took office on 1 June, however, early elections seemed extremely likely, thus keeping politicians in campaigning mode for at least three more months.

Second, it was clear from the outset that the leader of the League, Matteo Salvini, would not content himself with the role of junior government partner. He rapidly became the most vocal member of the government and the most visible of the two vice-premiers, especially – although not exclusively – thanks to his use of social media.

Third, since then, Salvini has seized any occasion to increase his visibility, measuring the results of his tactics in terms of popular appeal. He committed himself to campaigning in person for almost every one of the 4,627 municipal and five regional elections that have taken place, over 13 distinct election days, since he came to power.

The two government allies have engaged in permanent electoral competition, in which the Five Star Movement has relentlessly lost ground, month after month. The final stage of this saga was the recent European Parliament election, when the political scene as established in March 2018 was turned upside down. The League scored 34.3 per cent and the Five Star Movement only 17.1. Six million voters abandoned them, one in four turning to the League.¹

The key element of Salvini's strategy to gain that huge boost for his party over such a short time, has been to campaign against migration. Indeed, as Minister of the Interior he is responsible for this very policy area. It is indeed remarkable how effective the Minister has been in keeping migration at the top of the political agenda at a time when migration inflows have slowed down to a considerable extent and public opinion had begun to turn to other concerns.²

2 FACTS AND RHETORIC ABOUT MIGRATION 2018–2019

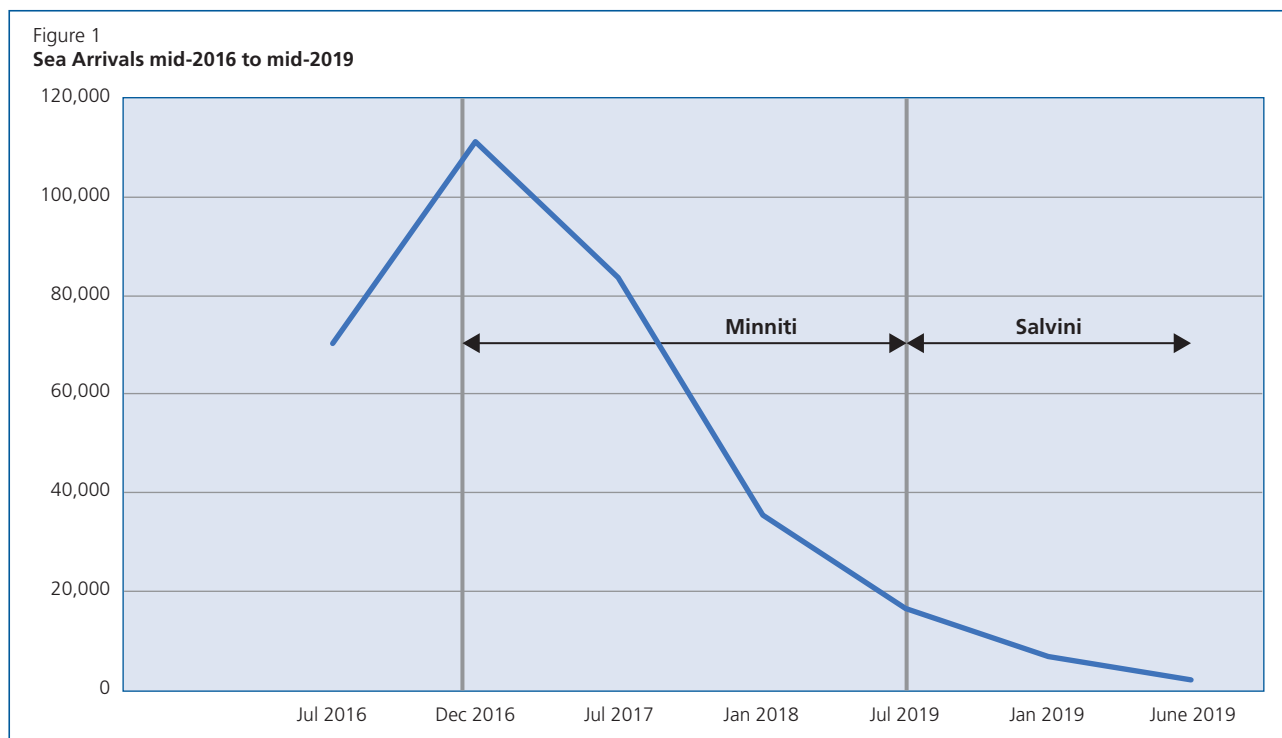
Migration from Africa has been among the most salient concerns in Italy, at least since the Lampedusa shipwreck of October 2013 and the League has been using it as a campaign issue for years. Many Italians, however, were proud of their navy's *Mare Nostrum* rescue mission in 2014 and then were moved by the images of Syrians arriving through the Balkans in 2015. A huge turnaround in the mainstream narrative about migration happened in 2016, a record-year for arrivals by sea. Then, the anti-migrant discourse grew much stronger, also in other political parties. The leader of the Five Star Movement, for instance, attacked the ships operated by NGOs, dubbing them »sea taxis«, implying that charities involved in search and rescue in fact work for profit in agreement with migrant smugglers.

The new government that took charge in December 2016, led by the Democratic Party, also took a much firmer, and controversial, stance on migration policy.³ Through the

1 Youtrend (2019), *Europee: I Flussi di Voto dalle Politiche 2018* <https://www.youtrend.it/2019/05/27/elezioni-europee-2019-analisi-bilancio/>

2 IPSOS (2018) »What Worries the World«, IPSOS VIEWS, May (ed. Michael Clemence) https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/publication/documents/2018-05/what_worries_the_world-2018.pdf See also More in Common (2018) »Attitudes towards National Identity, Immigration and Refugees in Italy« https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a70a7c3010027736a22740f/t/5b5852700e2e72de2784d45d/1532514941303/Italy+EN+Final_Digital_2B.pdf

3 Costanza Hermanin (2017) *Einwanderungspolitik in Italien, Probleme und Perspektiven*, FES Italien <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/rom/13987.pdf>



agreements Minister of the Interior Marco Minniti sought with Libyan state and non-state actors, the number of migrants landing on Italian shores fell from 181,436 at the beginning of its term of office (in 2016), to 16,566 in mid-2018, a decrease of more than 80 per cent. Repatriations have numbered around 9,500 in this timeframe, with a raising trend on previous years. Minniti also established a code for ships rescuing people at sea, to which most NGOs operating in the Strait of Sicily (with the exception of Médecins Sans Frontières) have since subscribed. But even though the data indicated that the migration crisis was coming to an end, Salvini was still able to rally a large proportion of the public behind a rhetoric centred on fears of invasion. In late 2017, the League managed to set the agenda of the forthcoming election to such an extent that the Democratic Party dropped one of the major reforms it had been pursuing for fear of appearing too »migrant-friendly«. The proposed reform of the citizenship law would have allowed access to citizenship for children born of long-term residents, or after completion of their education. Presently, children born of foreign parents can obtain citizenship only when they turn 18, a norm that, according to many, prevents the full integration of children of non-Italian parents.

In December 2017, the political climate was already such that virtually all the main parties had adopted the League's line, blaming Europe for a lack of solidarity with Italy on the management of migration. The hideous murder of a girl in Macerata at the hands of a Nigerian one month before the March 2018 election fanned the flames, even after an Italian male, a self-declared fascist, reacted to the murder with an armed attack that wounded six Africans.⁴

At the polls that year, the desire to beat »the establishment« (neglecting the fact that the League was in government during most of the Berlusconi era) prevailed over the choice of those with the most radical solutions against migration. The Five Star Movement, which came out as the winner in the March vote, did not focus its entire campaign on the topic of migration. Not openly racist, the Five Star narrative has targeted the governing »élite« and an »ungenerous« Europe allegedly hand in glove with Big Finance. Their key word is still »honesty«, with a scarcely veiled inclination towards a more severe justice system. The Five Stars have never discussed specific solutions to the migration crisis. Furthermore, while some have expressed satisfaction with charges brought against NGOs for taking part in rescue operations, others have firmly condemned them.

The 2019 European campaign, which ran in parallel with many local elections, was similar to the previous one, insofar as the negative narrative about migration and Europe were at the heart of it. Despite being government allies, the League and the Five Stars campaigned against each other. Both blamed Europe for austerity, albeit with different emphases.

First, the Five Star Movement celebrated the economic reforms for which, as government partner, they were mainly responsible. However, the spending measures adopted so far, besides being strongly criticised by Brussels, have not yet shown positive results. Italy is ranks last among European countries for economic growth, it has the second highest public debt and entered a technical recession at the end of 2018.⁵ Second, the Five Stars tried to put some clear blue water between themselves and Salvini on migration and judi-

⁴ James Reynold, »Italy migrants attack: Macerata shooting reveals a bitter national debate« 12 February 2018 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-43030951>

⁵ European Commission (2019), Winter Economic Growth Forecast, 7 February. https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/economy-finance/ip096_en.pdf

cial accountability. The left-wing part of the movement, in particular, distanced itself from the Interior Minister's harshest measures. This was a perplexing move as they had voted for all the reforms proposed by the League.

Third, and most important, Salvini's strategy has been much more straightforward. He has kept focusing on the EU, migration and security, promising a Europe of the Nations in which Italy is able to »take back control«. His social media reports almost daily about crimes involving foreigners to demonstrate the alleged need for the new measures he promoted during his first months in office.

Also at this time, the discrepancy between hard data and rhetoric has been striking. In early 2019, the influx of migrants to Italian shores was down 86 per cent compared with the previous year. Salvini claimed the credit for himself, but it is largely a consequence of the actions of the previous government.⁶

The same discrepancy applies to security data. One of Salvini's flagship policies, for some years now, has been the extension of the right to use weapons for self-defence. This project has found widespread support, even though crime data show a 40 per cent drop in murders and robberies over the past ten years.⁷

3 CHANGES IN PRACTICE AND IN LEGISLATION

When it comes to reforms, Interior Minister Salvini has been somewhat less active. Immediately after his appointment, he issued circulars intended to encourage asylum committees to be stricter in their assessment of protection needs. In the autumn, the government passed a Law Decree on Migration and Security, limiting the possibility to obtain visas, as well as the kind and amount of services that asylum-seekers are entitled to. In particular, this First Immigration Decree abolished a type of national humanitarian visa that Italy used to grant to about 20 per cent of applicants who otherwise would have no access to protection under European and international law. The decree also reduces the financial resources for migrant reception centres and abolishes the obligation to provide language, legal, and psychological assistance to asylum-seekers. Further, it establishes that they be hosted in large centres and not in the (more effective) small-size reception facilities, now reserved for visa holders. Last, the new law makes access to citizenship more difficult, taxes money transfers, expands the list of crimes triggering the loss of

refugee status, and extends the possible period of administrative detention.

The presentation of this Decree was accompanied by the slogan »la pacchia è finita« (the free ride is over), in line with the narrative that the state has been offering too much to passive migrants. The fact that migrants each receive 35 euros per day from the state has circulated widely in recent years. This is inaccurate, to say the least: 35 euros was the estimate of the maximum overall state contribution that reception centres can receive per person. However, the reality would have clashed with the League's slogan for the 2018 electoral campaign: »Prima gli Italiani« (Italians First). Also important is the fact that state expenditure on migrant reception fell recently following the reduction of asylum applications and an increase in rejection rates. Asylum applications numbered 123,500 in 2016, but only 53,600 in 2018, which means that Italy ranks fifth in the EU as regards number of applications (Germany ranks first with 162,000). Migrants hosted in Italian reception centres have fallen from 185,000 at the end of 2017 to 165,000 in mid-2018 and 135,000 in 2019.

Table 1

| | Total | Rejected | Refugee status | International protection | National protection |
|-------------|---------|----------|----------------|--------------------------|---------------------|
| 2015 | 83,970 | 58 % | 5 % | 14 % | 22 % |
| 2016 | 123,600 | 60 % | 5 % | 14 % | 21 % |
| 2017 | 130,119 | 58 % | 8 % | 8 % | 25 % |
| 2018 | 53,596 | 67 % | 7 % | 5 % | 21 % |
| 2019 (Feb.) | 5,335 | 83 % | 9 % | 6 % | 2 % |

Because of its strict provisions the opposition and civil society groups have dubbed it the »insecurity decree«. Their argument is that by restricting the possibilities to access legal status, obtain integration services and be hosted in smaller communities, the new measures make the inclusion of migrants much more difficult. Especially in a context in which the lack of repatriation agreements means that fewer than one in twenty expulsion orders are followed by a departure, the decree is likely to generate more people with no legal status and no shelter. In fact, the rejection rate for asylum applications rose from 58 per cent in 2017 to 83 per cent in the first months of 2019.

Non-visa holders (»irregular migrants«) in Italy are estimated to number around 533,000.⁸ The League frequently used this figure against the former government to stress their lack of efficiency. However, in April 2019 the Minister of the Interior surprisingly changed the figure he cites in public with reference to »clandestines«. He now mentions the figure of 90,000 people whose applications have been rejected over the past four years.

Other »promises« Salvini has kept include the approval of a new law on self-defence in early 2019, and a Second Immi-

6 Ministry of the Interior, Cruscotto Statistico Giornaliero <http://www.libertacivilimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/it/documentazione/statistica/cruscotto-statistico-giornaliero>

7 Milena Gabbanelli, »Data Room«, *Corriere della Sera*, 8 June 2019 <https://www.corriere.it/dataroom-milena-gabbanelli/sicurezza-reati-dimezzati-italiani-senso-insicurezza-armi-legittima-difesa/647419e6-89da-11e9-9b3f-2459a834d32d-va.shtml>

8 Fondazione ISMU (2018), *Ventiquattresimo Rapporto sulle Migrazioni*, Rome: Francoangeli.

gration Decree. This last measure, which was planned for the days before the European Parliament election, had to wait because of the pre-electoral fight with the League's government ally, in which both parties were trying to poach supporters from one another. Part of the Five Star Movement has tried to revive a more »leftist« and human rights-oriented approach, which characterised the first phase of the Movement.

The Second Immigration Decree targets the phenomenon that Minister Salvini defined months earlier: »Italy as the refugee camp for Europe«. In particular, the new law provided the Ministry of the Interior with formal competences to decide whether ships can enter national waters and dock if it believes their activities pose a threat to national security. It also establishes fines (10,000 to 50,000 euros, and seizure) for commercial and non-commercial ships if they do not respect the orders of Italian authorities concerning navigation, and a new fund for returns. This Act thus provides a legislative basis for the policy that Salvini has implemented in practice over the past year and which he has explicitly summarised under the slogan »#portichiusi« (closed ports). The aim is to prevent arrivals on Italian shores by deterring rescue activities in the Mediterranean other than those of the Libyan coast-guard.

Both acts and the way in which they have been advertised on social media have gained Salvini a lot of popular support. However, they have also given rise to many disputes, judicial, political and administrative.

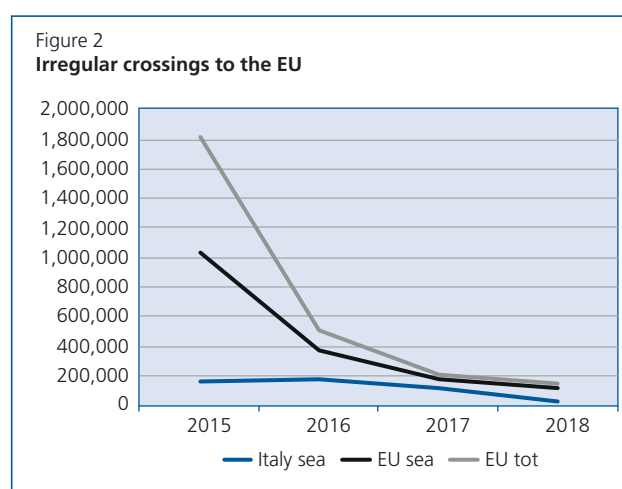
4 THE NEW MIGRATION POLICY: POINTS OF CONTENTION

The Minister of the Interior put into practice the »closed ports« policy immediately after taking office. The first case concerned the Aquarius, a ship operated by Doctors Without Borders and SOS Méditerranée, which rescued around 630 people in early June 2018. In this case, Minister Salvini declared that the Aquarius should be prevented from disembarking the migrants in Italy. At the time, he was able to act only by exerting political and media pressure because powers on ports were then in the hands of the Minister of Transport. This caused tensions between the two ministers. However, Salvini's influence was such that the ship had to sail for a further eight days before it was able to dock in Valencia, where Spanish Prime Minister Sanchez offered to disembark the migrants.

Many other, similar cases have followed, involving other boats owned by NGOs such as Lifeline, Sea Watch, Sea Fuchs, Sea Eye, Mediterranea and Open Arms. Most of the time, ships carrying exhausted people have been left on the high seas until obtaining reassurances that other European countries, or the Catholic Church, would voluntarily take over care of the migrants. The European Commission has had to broker most of these agreements, which, in the eyes of the public, have been Salvini's ultimate success over »Europe«. The

mayors of several Italian port cities, including Messina, Reggio Calabria, Naples and Palermo, have tried to defy the Minister, saying they would disobey him and welcome rescued migrants. However, their commitments have remained mere political statements without effect.

The courts have been another zone of contention. Since early 2017 – and thus already under the previous government – public prosecutors in Sicily have opened a number of inquiries into the alleged participation of rescuers in human smuggling networks. These inquiries have led to the temporary seizure of most NGO ships, but none of them has resulted in a conviction. All the charges have either been dropped by the prosecutors, or the judges have dismissed them before going to trial.

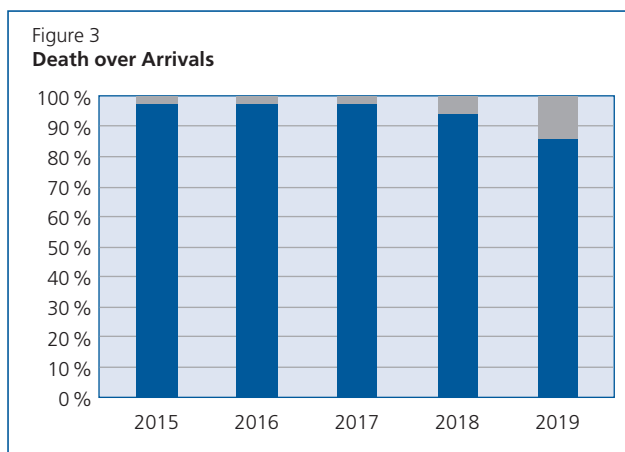


The most surprising case concerning the closed-ports policy, however, and involved an Italian Coast Guard vessel, the Diciotti, which had to wait ten days before disembarking the 180 or so people it had on board. In this case, the government prevented its own coastguard from docking in a national port. This action resulted in Minister Salvini being investigated on the charge of hijacking the migrants. For reasons of ministerial immunity, the Italian Senate had to vote to allow the inquiry to go to trial, but a majority of senators voted in favour of Salvini. The Five Stars had to resort to an online consultation of their members because their senators were divided over the vote.

The situation with the ports and some tense encounters with the Libyan coastguard have led most charities to abandon rescue activities. Also the EU's anti-smuggling mission, EU-NAVMED Sophia, has suspended the deployment of most of its naval assets, leaving the Channel of Sicily guarded almost exclusively by air surveillance. Germany, for instance, ceased its involvement in the mission in January 2019. On one hand, it claimed that its navy had been forced to deploy in areas without any transit, while on the other hand, it risked getting involved in rescue operations and then being prevented from docking in Italy.

In terms of data, Doctors Without Borders estimates that, during the past twelve months, over 10,000 people have been forcibly returned to Libya and 2,443 people have re-

mained at sea waiting for authorisation to disembark.⁹ As regards deaths at sea, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2018 and 2019 have been the deadliest years in terms of number of deaths in relation to the total number of those who successfully crossed the sea in the Central Mediterranean corridor.¹⁰ The death rate was 5.6 per cent in 2018, while in the first half of 2019 it was 16 per cent (around 343 people dead as against 2,144 who landed in Italy). In previous years the rate was between 2 and 2.5 per cent, with much higher absolute figures: 2,800 to 4,500 deaths per year and over 100,000 arrivals.



Other points of contention have concerned the First Immigration Decree. Besides reducing the number of visas issued, the law prevents migrants from seeking residency permits while they are waiting for their asylum applications to be considered, meaning that they cannot access services for which they need a legal address, such as health care and housing, sometimes even schools. Another group of mayors has threatened to refuse to implement the new law as it would entail having to manage groups of legally resident people who lack access to basic municipal services.¹¹ At the regional level, five governors have decided to refer the First Immigration Decree to the Constitutional Court, claiming that it breached their powers over the organisation of social services and health care. In the meantime, two first-instance courts have upheld the right of asylum seekers to obtain a residential address.¹²

For a good part of the electorate, Minister Salvini has delivered what he promised. His actions have obscured what the former government did on migration. For the rest of the electorate, the informal powers he has used, restrictions on rights and his »securitarian« approach amount to a threat to liberal democracy and integration. The first group, however,

considerably outnumber the second and this explains the League's enormous success in the 2019 European elections. Beyond national measures, however, Italy's actions on migration have not been significant. The Prime Minister, the Secretary of State and Salvini himself have not engaged in a strong diplomatic effort at the EU level or vis-à-vis third countries.

5 AFTER THE ELECTIONS: WHAT FUTURE FOR ITALY'S AND THE EU'S MIGRATION POLICY?

Strong criticisms of »Europe« have characterised recent major electoral campaigns in Italy. From the Democratic Party to the extreme right-wing and the left, all have used the European Union as their scapegoat. Some claims about migration are justified: the past two years have been marked by a lack of progression on redistribution. The extraordinary relocation scheme to which the Justice and Home Affairs Ministers agreed in September 2015, has been largely ignored, with only 12,700 asylum-seekers relocated from Italy – mainly to Germany and France – as against the 60,000 planned. There has also been little progress on reform of the Dublin Regulation, proposed by the European Commission but blocked ever since at the level of the Council of Ministers.

In terms of funds, however, Italy has been the second beneficiary among EU countries, after Greece, with 950.8 million euros allocated through national programmes and emergency assistance in the period from 2015 to 2019, although only 429 million euros have been paid as yet.¹³

In both the Council of Ministers of the European Union and the Parliament, the Five Stars and the League have not been able to pursue an effective strategy. Minister Salvini has not attended in person most meetings of the Justice and Home Affairs Council and has sought allies mainly in countries opposed to redistribution measures, such as Hungary. The Five Stars have adopted an ambiguous line on migration, especially when the European Parliament voted in favour of a reform of the Dublin Regulation that supported mandatory redistribution measures, which are clearly in Italy's interest. The Five Star MEPs have been part of the minority that voted against the EP legislative report. The League has limited itself to an abstention. The leaders of the Five Star Movement have justified this position by pointing to the fact that redistribution would not involve migrants who are job seekers. However, the legal basis of the Dublin reform proposals would in no case have allowed the EP to address economic migration. At the level of the European Council, Prime Minister Conte is spending most of his time trying to prevent the opening of infringement proceedings over Italy's budget deficit, leaving him less room to manoeuvre on migration.

9 <https://www.medicisenzafrotiere.it/news-e-storie/news/un-anno-dopo-valencia-le-politiche-europee-continuano-a-causare-morti-in-mare/>

10 See the Missing Migrants IOM database at: https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean?migrant_route%5B%5D=1376

11 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/01/03/italian-mayors-rebel-against-hardline-interior-minister-matteo/>

12 <https://www.ilfoglio.it/politica/2019/05/03/news/la-sentenza-di-bologna-e-solo-l-inizio-la-bomba-del-decreto-sicurezza-deve-ancora-esplodere-252673/>

13 https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/201905_managing-migration-eu-financial-support-to-italy_en.pdf

After the European elections, prospects of an increase in Italy's influence at European level are grim. Although the government coalition has sent to Strasbourg 42 MEPs out of 73, they will take their seats among some of the least influential parliamentary groups. The alliance between nationalist parties that Salvini has sought to build failed when Orbán, Kaczyński and Farage decided not to leave their current groups, respectively, the European People's Party, the Europe of Conservatives and Reformists and the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy. The League will therefore stick with its main ally, Marine Le Pen's *Rassemblement National*, in a parliamentary group which has just been renamed »Identity and Democracy«. Among the diverging interests of Orbán, Kaczyński and Farage, views on what Europe should do on migration play a major role. Before and after the election, the Five Star Movement has sought to rejoin groups other than Farage's EFDD. However, their electoral attempt to re-position the party towards the left has failed in both Europe and Italy. In Europe, where they sought to be part of a bigger group (EFDD would disappear with Brexit), Marine Le Pen has vetoed their membership of ENF. In Italy, the League's victory in the EP election implies a rapid turnaround in economic policy, with the likely adoption of a »flat tax« on incomes and revenues imposed against the threat of a government crisis. On migration, there are few reasons to change the political line held so far. Salvini's main task for the future is to seek readmission agreements in order to increase returns.

At the level of the EU, the veto power of Poland, Hungary and the rest of the Višegrad group in the European Council, which nowadays deals with most migration dossiers, leaves little prospect of evolution on this file over the next legislative term. On migration, the tense political situation in Libya and the rising number of arrivals in Spain testify to the fact that migration is far from fading as a major issue for the next European Commission. But what solutions can be found to overcome the deadlock? The sole proposal not considered so far is enhanced cooperation, in accordance with Article 20 of the Treaty on the European Union, whereby at least nine Member States can agree to cooperate among themselves through the structures of the European Union »to create a pathway through which a »vanguard« group of States can move ahead in achieving an »ever closer Union« in new policy areas«. ¹⁴ Such an agreement should cover both economic migration and asylum policy, because, as I argued for Italy, the two are largely interdependent. ¹⁵ This would imply, on one hand, opening common migration channels for legal migration, on the basis of actual needs, as the Commission experimented recently with a handful of Member States. On the other hand, it should involve States that agree to a redistribution of asylum seekers, starting from the five countries

currently taking in most of the people landing in Italy (Germany, France, Portugal, Luxembourg and Finland) and the four countries that need help (Italy, Greece, Malta and Spain). Of course, the agreement would also have consequences for the Schengen free-circulation regime that cannot be underestimated. At the time of writing, however, it seems the only possible solution.

¹⁴ Mattia Toaldo (2017) »Don't Close Borders, Manage Them: How to Improve EU Policy on Migration through Lybia«, ECFR https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/dont_close_borders_manage_them_7297#; Valentin Freilinger (2015) »Proposal to Use Enhanced Cooperation in the Refugee Crisis«, Jacques Delors Institute <https://www.delorsinstitut.de/en/publications/topics/institutions-and-democracy/proposal-to-use-enhanced-cooperation-in-the-refugee-crisis/>

¹⁵ Costanza Hermanin (2017) op.cit.

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IMMIGRATION IN ITALY BETWEEN TWO ELECTIONS

Myths and Reality



In both the 2018 and the 2019 electoral campaigns in Italy, migration and Europe were the key issues of public debate. The rhetoric of the leader of the Northern League (now simply »the League'), Matteo Salvini, drove all the main parties towards a securitarian approach on migration, although data were showing a large drop in arrivals from the Central Mediterranean Corridor.



Since taking office, Salvini, as Italy's Minister of the Interior, has tackled migration through legislative measures and policy stances on such matters as the closing of ports, despite his lack of formal powers in this regard. These measures have led to a substantial reduction in sea rescue activity and thus arrivals, not to mention the granting of visas. Integration measures have also been curtailed, with possible negative implications for public security. In the run up to the 2019 European election, the policy also spurred criticisms from a faction of the League's government ally, the Five Star Movement.



The new policy has raised many points of contention, especially from administrative and judicial points of view. The Minister has been under investigation himself, but so have many charities engaged in rescue activities. Local authorities have threatened to disobey Salvini's directives and some have launched formal judicial action against the immigration decrees. From the standpoint of a large part of the electorate, however, the new policy has been a success.