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An Ideological Divide? Political Parties' Discourse in Italy's Migration Cooperation with Libya and Albania

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ABSTRACT

Italy's migration agreements with Libya in 2017 and Albania in 2023 serve as crucial cases for investigating how political parties in Europe position themselves on immigration policy. By comparing parties across the Italian political spectrum, this research assesses whether they have articulated distinct stances on the externalisation of migration in the two selected cases. A qualitative analysis of parliamentary debates reveals two dominant logics in party discourse: a security logic and a rights-oriented logic. These two logics can cut across party lines, particularly in times of crisis, with frequent references to the European Union (EU) as both an arena for Italy's influence and a source of legitimacy.

KEYWORDS

migration; political parties; Italy; Albania; Libya

Cooperation with third countries has emerged as a cornerstone of European Union (EU) and national migration governance in Europe. Notable instances include the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement, the 2024 EU partnerships with Egypt (see European Commission 2024) and Mauritania (see ECRE 2024), as well as the 2023 migration pact between Italy and Albania. Conventional wisdom suggests that right-wing parties are particularly active in the outsourcing of migration controls to third countries. Yet, recent research shows that externalisation cuts across political parties (Abbondanza 2024; Cetin 2015; Rosina and Fontana 2024).

Although a certain degree of continuity is visible in externalisation trends, little is known about parties' *discursive* stances on the matter. This article thus asks whether traditional distinctions in parties' ideological positioning still hold in debates over bilateral migration agreements. How do ideologically different parties in Europe position themselves on the externalisation of migration? Relatedly, how do they construct the EU in such debates?

To answer these questions, this article focuses on the case of Italy and particularly on its recent migration agreements with Libya in 2017 and Albania in 2023 (IT-LY MoU 2017, IT-ALB Protocol 2023). Adopting a party-based level of analysis, it explores

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discursive ideological distinctions between the centre-left, populist right-wing parties (PRPs) and other populist parties.

Italy represents an important case study for this research. First, the country is a key actor in the Mediterranean due to its central geographical position, long-standing involvement with partner countries in the region and role as country of first arrival for many of the migrants travelling to Europe. Second, Italy is at the forefront of EU member states' externalisation efforts (with only France having more return agreements) (Fontana and Rosina 2024). Third, the recent migration agreements with Libya and Albania are crucial cases to unpack Europe's ongoing externalisation trend. While the 2017 deal with Libya has now become a (much-debated) cornerstone of EU migration governance, the 2023 agreement with Albania was the first of its kind, foreseeing the outsourcing of asylum processes to a third country. Importantly, these two agreements were signed by governments of different ideological orientations (Paolo Gentiloni's centre-left coalition and Giorgia Meloni's right-wing coalition, respectively), enabling us to compare the stances of parties hailing from different ideological camps on migration externalisation.

By analysing parliamentary debates concerning Italy's agreements with Libya and Albania, we find that two main logics feature in parties' migration discourse: a security-based logic and a rights-oriented one. Both logics may cut across party lines: while the agreement with Libya displays significant blurring of parties' discursive positions, the one with Albania shows more distinctive stances, with PRPs emphasising the link between migration and security, and centre-left opposition parties raising concerns for migrants' rights. Furthermore, we find that the EU is often portrayed as (i) an arena for the promotion of Italy's influence, where Italy can take a prominent role in migration cooperation with Mediterranean countries, and (ii) as a source of legitimacy, particularly to shield the deal with Albania from the opposition's criticism.

Considering the increasing externalisation of migration, as well as the growing electoral success of PRPs throughout Europe, this article's findings are of relevance beyond the Italian case. Not only do they demonstrate that parties of different political orientations can display surprisingly similar discourse on migration externalisation, but they also indicate that PRPs may leverage the EU to legitimise their domestic policies and international standing.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section discusses the existing literature on the relevance of parties' ideology for their migration policies. The analysis then focuses on the Italian context, dissecting the impact of major parties on migration issues and outlining the two main logics analysed. After providing methodological notes, the article turns to the analysis of parliamentary debates concerning Italy's migration deals with Libya and Albania.

Theoretical context

The externalisation of migration involves "exporting" migration control measures to third countries of origin or transit (Boswell 2003, 622). Recently, this topic has garnered attention driven by renewed academic interest and policy developments. Research has examined externalisation as an extension of the Europeanisation process, where migration controls are transferred from the EU to third countries (Boswell 2003; Lavenex 2007) and as a form of "securitisation" of migration policy (Léonard and

Kaunert 2022). Scholars have also investigated the policy instruments of externalisation (Longo and Fontana 2022; Fontana and Rosina 2024) and analysed externalisation as the intersection of foreign and migration policy (Dimitriadi 2016; Lavenex 2006).

While there is an extensive literature on EU externalisation efforts, emphasis has seldom been placed on national parties' positioning on the matter. This is particularly surprising when it comes to PRPs. Although the literature on "populism" quadrupled between 2010 and 2022,¹ little attention has been paid to PRPs' influence on migration externalisation.

The populist radical right (PRR) is at the centre of the discourse on immigration, given its trademark nativism (the belief that "non-natives" are a threat to the otherwise homogenous ethno-cultural nation-state). According to Cas Mudde (2007), the PRR blends nativism with authoritarianism (the focus on law and order) and populism (a "thin-centred ideology" pitting "the pure people" against "the corrupt elite") (22-3). These features underpin the PRR's typical anti-immigration stance: it champions the ethno-culturally homogenous nation, calls for law and order to stem migratory flows, and attacks the elites deemed complicit in aiding immigration (Griffini 2023a).

Within the fragmented and fluid nature of Italian political parties (Bordignon 2020), this article focuses on three ideological groups of parties that were in Parliament during the timeframe of our analysis (2017, 2019 and 2022): (i) the populist right-wing coalition, the majority of which is composed of the PRR *Lega* and *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI), and the rest by the populist moderate right *Forza Italia* (FI) (Taggart and Pirro 2021);² (ii) the centre-left, encompassing *Partito Democratico* (PD)³ and its leftist flank *Liberi e Uguali* (LEU) in the Gentiloni government, and *Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra* (AVS) under the Meloni government (Garzia 2022); and (iii) the 'ambiguous' populist party *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (M5S) (Taggart and Pirro 2021).

On one side of the left-right political spectrum, the PRPs, including moderate and PRR parties, saw the meteoric rise of FdI from a junior party in 2017, to the dominant member of the Meloni government in 2022. In terms of stances on immigration, while the *Lega* enacted a shift from anti-Southern to anti-immigrant sentiment in the early 2000s (Albertazzi and Vampa 2021), the latter has consistently been a trademark of FdI (Vampa 2023). FI instead has typically nurtured a pragmatic anti-immigrant stance, as exemplified by their behaviour in 2002, when they adopted the restrictive Bossi-Fini immigration law, while simultaneously implementing the largest amnesty for irregular migrants in Europe's history (Geddes 2008, 350).

On the other side of the left-right political spectrum, the PD has traditionally promoted pro-immigrant attitudes (Baccetti *et al.* 2022). In 2017, LEU emerged as a splinter party of the PD and held a typically leftist pro-immigration stance (Emanuele and De Sio 2018), which is conspicuous in AVS too. Finally, the M5S (occupying an ambiguous positioning on the left-right political spectrum) has been ambivalent on immigration matters, oscillating between anti-immigrant discourse and less restrictive approaches (Mosca and Tronconi 2019).

¹Based on https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=populism&year_start=2010&year_end=2022&corpus=en&smoothing=3&case_insensitive=false (accessed 6 September 2024).

²Centre-right *Noi Moderati* is also part of the parliamentary majority but lacks government ministers.

³At the 2022 elections, the PD ran under the name *Partito Democratico-Italia Democratica e Progressista*.

Political parties and immigration policy: does ideology matter?

Does party ideology matter for the type of policies that are pursued? Academic debates have explored this question in a variety of policy areas, including migration, EU integration and foreign policy.

Starting from foreign policy, research suggests that it is highly influenced by parties' ideological orientation (Rathbun 2004). While left-wing parties tend to pursue more inclusive and value-driven foreign policies focused on the promotion of human rights and liberal values, right-wing parties tend to favour more exclusive and interest-driven policies (Ibid). More recently, research by Franz Eder (2024) has shown that PRPs can indeed shape both the tone of the debate and foreign policies themselves.

On the contrary, the literature demonstrates that attitudes towards the EU are not necessarily tied to party positioning on the left-right political dimension (Brack 2020; Halikiopoulou *et al.* 2012). For example, Euroscepticism has characterised parties across the political spectrum, ranging from left-wing *Syriza* in Greece and *Podemos* in Spain, to right-wing *Rassemblement National* in France and *Alternative for Deutschland* in Germany. Moreover, research indicates that PRPs may use Europe as an “ideological resource”, by reframing their ideology through reference to the EU dimension in the pursuit of legitimacy and acceptability (Lorimer 2024).

When it comes to migration, the left's traditional focus on inclusivity and the right's concerns with security are expected to shape policy outcomes. However, recent studies suggest that this is not necessarily the case. In a large-scale project covering 21 countries between 1975 and 2012, Hein de Haas and Katherina Natter (2015) conclude that there is no clear association between governments' political orientation and migration policies' restrictiveness. In this Special Issue, Edoardo Bressanelli and Margherita de Candia (2024) argue that PRR parties such as FdI adopted a moderate approach at European Parliament (EP) level when voting on immigration matters in the 2019-24 EP term. Indeed, both left- and right-wing parties are internally divided on immigration affairs: while left-wing parties need to negotiate between unions (generally favouring restrictiveness) and liberal and ethnic-minority groups (supporting openness), right-wing parties must mediate between employers (favouring a liberal approach) and “cultural conservatives” (asking for more controls) (de Haas and Natter 2015, 4).

In the Italian context, existing research shows that, despite differences in parties' discourse, a significant degree of continuity characterises their immigration policies, particularly in their external dimension. Reviewing the impact of left-wing parties on Italian immigration policy since the 1990s, Elif Cetin (2015, 392) finds that “the boundaries between the centre-left and the centre-right become blurred when they come to power”. Gabriele Abbondanza (2017, 89) similarly underscores important continuities, the first of which is a generous use of regularisations, depicted as a *fil rouge* of Italian migration policies, with governments of all ideological hues having adopted them. More recently, Michela Ceccorulli *et al.* (2023) have argued that, while the 2018-19 Lega-M5S government displayed a confrontational approach in multilateral relations concerning migration (for instance, by refusing to ratify the 2018 Global Compact on Migration), it exhibited substantial continuity in bilateral relations (for instance, in the relationship with Libya). Recent research by Matilde Rosina and Iole Fontana (2024) maps the external dimension of Italy's migration policies over the last three decades,

demonstrating that it has constantly featured as a crucial priority for both left- and right-wing governments, particularly since the early 2010s.

Therefore, considerable continuities characterise Italy's left- and right-wing parties' immigration policies, particularly concerning the external dimension of migration policy. However, a gap may exist between politicians' discourse and policies on paper (Czaika and de Haas 2013). It is therefore important to unravel the extent to which different parties put forward a distinct discourse on the externalisation of migration, and how they depict the EU within this context by using it as an ideological resource. Beyond the Italian case, understanding this dynamic is crucial to shed light on whether a discursive convergence of traditional parties' stances is occurring and whether this is reorientating traditional party positioning on immigration matters. This is particularly the case considering the increasing number of seats that PRR parties have obtained across Europe, in both national and European elections (*Al Jazeera* 2024; Silver 2022). To this end, in the next section we explore the two logics underpinning migration debates.

Debating immigration: Between security and rights

The debate on migration in Europe often pits a security-oriented stance against a rights-oriented one. While the former prioritises the interests of receiving countries and the impact of migration, the latter emphasises the need to safeguard migrants' rights and to respect international law.

Starting with the security-oriented logic, migration has been regularly associated with security threats in multiple ways: from crime and terrorism, to health and economic threats. This takes place through what the literature calls the "securitisation" of migration, namely the "social construction of migration as a security question" (Huysmans 2000, 752). The core idea at the roots of the securitisation thesis is that immigration is presented as a security issue in need of a security response (Ibid).

The immigration-security nexus is articulated around several dimensions. Most frequently, migrants are associated with crime and terrorism. This is exemplified by regular associations between foreigners and criminality, both in discourse (Karyotis 2007) and in legislation (Rosina 2022). This discursive connection is also illustrated by the emphasis on migrants' "illegal" (rather than "irregular") status, a term that depicts migrants as dishonest and worthy of suspicion (UNHCR 2018). The Italian PRR, for instance, has compared migration to "barbaric invasions" (Griffini 2023a, 77).

Since 9/11, the link between migration and terrorism has been strengthened (Karyotis 2007), as shown by Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's assertion that "migration turned out to be the Trojan horse of terrorism" (cited in Brunsten 2017). The reference to migrants as a "Trojan Horse" for foreign threats is however not new, as politicians in 1930s France already referred to foreigners as a potential "Trojan Horse of spies and subversives" (Rosina 2022, 278).

Beyond crime and terrorism, migrants are often depicted as a menace to receiving countries' national identity and cultural homogeneity, as an economic threat to citizens' jobs and wages, and as abusing the welfare system (Griffini 2023a; Karyotis 2007). Covid-19 has exposed how immigrants have also been linked to health-related threats, although

this trend long predates the pandemic, with foreigners having been “historically [...] stigmatized as carriers of disease” (O’Brien and Eger 2020, 11).

As the above examples suggest, the securitisation of migration often emphasises a sense of urgency and emergency. Castelli Gattinara (2017) calls this a “logic of exceptionality”, indicating that Europe’s approach to migration is fundamentally framed by notions of urgency and emergency.

Contrasting this security-oriented logic, migration discourse can also be centred on a rights-oriented logic, building on human rights and humanitarianism. This is typically articulated along the need to respect international and human rights norms, the moral imperative to save lives, and the desire to show compassion for migrants. This has often been studied through the lenses of “humanitarianism”, with the term “humanitarian” encompassing both the human condition and the humanness that is exhibited towards others (Fassin 2011, 2). An example of applying a humanitarian lens to discussing migration is the shift in the framing of smuggling and trafficking not only as criminal activities, but also in relation to their humanitarian consequences (Cuttitta 2014, 25).

As argued by Paolo Cuttitta (2014), since the turn of the century, humanitarian concerns and logics have been increasingly embedded in public and political debates on migration. In the EU, the origins of the “humanitarisation” of borders can be traced to the 2004 Cap Anamur case,⁴ which sparked discussions on boat arrivals through the lens of loss of life and “human disasters” (European Council, cit. in Ibid, 23). In Italy, they date back to 2002, when immigration laws were amended to include more severe penalties for smugglers in cases where migrants were subjected to inhumane treatment (24).

Humanitarianism may be a double-edged sword, however, as it is worth questioning whether such compassion is genuine or a strategic tool to appear morally acceptable to the electorate. Concerning Mediterranean immigration, Didier Fassin (2005) has highlighted the frequent use of compassion as an emotional appeal deployed by politicians to portray themselves in a self-redemptory way as humane, empathetic and endowed with a saving mission. Cuttitta (2014, 36) similarly notes that humanitarianism acts as a “fig leaf” to cover restrictive and exclusive immigration policies. Despite this critique, a focus on human rights, international law and humanitarianism has the potential to represent a departure from security-oriented debates, and lead to more inclusive practices (Ibid).

Connecting the above distinction between a security-logic and a rights-oriented one to the Italian case study, conventional wisdom suggests that PRPs typically privilege the former logic, while the left favours the latter. On one hand, the literature has indeed repeatedly noted the relevance of (in)security and crisis for PRPs’ discourse. As argued by Thorsten Wojczewski (2020, 6), populist parties’ discourse regularly relies on “a politics of fear, urgency, and exceptionality”. Similarly, for Bohdana Kurylo (2020, 128), securitisation is “inherently embedded” in PRPs’ discourse, particularly through a focus on the security of the people against the elites. Yet, studies have found that left-wing populists also exploit the insecurity logic (Bonansinga 2022). Hence, we might

⁴In 2004, the Cap Anamur ship saved 37 migrants in the Mediterranean, but was forbidden from docking in an Italian port. After declaring a state of emergency and landing, the ship was seized and officials were detained on human smuggling charges (Cuttitta 2014).

expect this logic to be potentially adopted by the centre-left parties too, through the co-optation of PRPs' discursive themes.

On the other hand, one may expect left-wing politicians to be the political actors principally relying on a rights-based logic, in line with their traditional ideological orientation. Several authors have argued, however, that PRPs have increasingly co-opted the language of rights and presented themselves as the "ultimate defender" of human rights (Hamilton 2023; Megret 2022, 240-1). This is exemplified by populist right-wing actors presenting themselves as supposed defenders of some women's rights while demonising Muslim communities (Ibid).

Overall, the literature generates contrasting findings and expectations concerning the positioning of political parties along the security and rights-oriented dimension. We will return to this issue below, after presenting our methodology and sources.

Methodology

To investigate the stances of major Italian parties on migration externalisation to Libya and Albania, we apply qualitative text analysis to parliamentary debates at critical junctures, namely the adoption and renewal of the 2017 Italy-Libya Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) (and the ensuing maritime mission), and the ratification of the 2023 Italy-Albania deal.

Parliamentary debates are often used to explore political parties' positioning. Their analysis can provide insights into the complexity of parties' ideological stances and the heterogeneity of views within parties. Compared to party manifestos and social media, parliamentary debates also capture deeper ideological nuance, insofar as they are subject to less public scrutiny and are, thus, less concerned with putting forward a coherent image of parties (Gianfreda 2019).

The examination of parliamentary debates through qualitative text analysis allows identifying nuances, divergences and convergences within and across parties. While coding the texts with NVivo, we constructed discursive categories in two ways: (i) deductively, by building on the existing literature on how parties frame migration as related to the macro-categories "security" and "rights"; (ii) inductively, by formulating a category that emerged during the analysis: namely, the EU as an arena for the promotion of Italy's influence and a source of legitimacy. While many scholars have documented the relationship between PRPs and the EU concerning immigration, little attention has been paid to the two-fold logic of the EU as a source of legitimacy and an arena for Italy's influence.

From early on, the lack of transparency surrounding Italy-Libya relations (also documented by Vari 2020) presented an obstacle to finding suitable sources concerning the 2017 MoU's adoption. No MoU-related parliamentary debate was found in the months immediately before and after the signature of the deal, showing that the parliament was neither informed by the government about the agreement, nor asked to ratify it (see also below). The 2020 renewal of the MoU provided more material, prompting us to adopt a longer timeframe for data collection.

Thus, through a keyword search of the term "Libya" in the repository of Italian parliamentary debates, within the chronological framework January 2017-July 2021, we identified two sets of documents as making up the central corpus of debates on Libya:

(i) the parliamentary debates preceding the 2020 renewal of the Memorandum (Parliament 2019/249; Parliament 2019/253), and (ii) the parliamentary debate concerning the 2021 extension of the maritime border control mission in Libya based on the MoU (Parliament 2021/541). Other parliamentary debates falling within this timeframe and discussing migration matters related to Libya were used as complementary evidence for the analysis. Data collection for the Albania case, instead, involved a keyword search of the term “Albania” within the chronological framework 01/10/2023-31/12/2023. 15 documents were directly relevant to the deal, pointing to a significant numerical difference with the Libyan case discussed above.

Overall, the deals with Libya and Albania are crucial examples of Italy’s increasing attempts to involve third countries in the management of migration. They are also indicative of the EU’s broader move to externalisation, exemplified by other member states’ special interest in Italy’s recent deal with Albania.⁵ With this in mind, we now move to the analysis of the parliamentary debates surrounding the agreements with the two countries, starting from the one with Libya.

Party positioning on migration externalisation: security, rights and the EU

Italy-Libya cooperation

Context

Italy’s cooperation with Libya is well-established, dating back to 2000 and covering a variety of aspects ranging from visa schemes and border control, to training, trafficking and smuggling (Rosina and Fontana 2024). Between 2000 and 2016, 13 external migration instruments were adopted between Italy and Libya, including the 2008 Treaty on Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation sealing a special friendship between then FI Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and Colonel Gaddafi.

It was in this context that, on 2 February 2017, Italian Prime Minister Paolo Genitiloni and Libyan Government of National Accord President Fayez Mustafa Serraj, signed a MoU to cooperate in the fight against irregular migration, trafficking and smuggling. The memorandum was adopted against the backdrop of increasing migration to Italy: 2016 saw the highest number of arrivals via sea since 2012, with 181,436 people landing on Italian shores (MoI 2017).

The MoU foresaw growing support to Libya in the control of unauthorised flows. Importantly, Italy committed to providing technical support to the Libyan Border Guard and to finalising a satellite detection system for Libyan Southern borders (Art. 1, 2). Italy and the EU also agreed to financially support migrant “reception centres” in Libya and to train staff in such camps (Art. 2). The financial contribution to Libya was expected to amount to USD 240 million in 2017 (Nakache and Losier 2017).

The MoU was heavily contested for both substantive and procedural reasons. From a procedural viewpoint, not only did the Italian government fail to submit the deal to the parliament for ratification, but the provision of vessels to Libya was said to represent a displacement of development and cooperation resources for what were ultimately migration-control purposes (ASGI 2018).

⁵Including Denmark, Austria, the Netherlands and Germany. See ECRE 2023b.

However, behind the heavy criticism that the deal attracted were more substantive concerns about the treatment of migrants. These stemmed primarily from Italy's funding of detention centres in Libya despite the country's instability and the abuses faced by migrants in these camps (UNHCR/UNSMIL 2016). Moreover, because Libya is not a signatory of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, refugees' rights could not be guaranteed in the country⁶ and the corruption of the Libyan Coast Guard raised substantial concerns (Avvenire 2019). Despite such criticism, the Memorandum was not only implemented but also renewed on 2 February 2020.

Party positioning: the blurring of the ideological divide

Throughout the documents analysed, PRPs gave centre-stage to security concerns, articulated in a variety of ways. Multiple PRP MPs, for instance, referred to “clandestine” migrants, the abuse of humanitarian permits and the presumed link between migration and terrorism (for example, Senate 2017/791). This was illustrated by FI-PdL MP Lucio Malan's claim that the money migrants pay to smugglers often ends up financing “terrorism and other dirty traffics” (Senate 2017/791). Furthermore, PRPs portrayed immigrants as a threat to the security of the ethno-cultural nation, the economy and society (see also Griffini 2023a). The following statement by MP Lucio Tarquinio (affiliated with *Direzione Italia*, a splinter of FI) testified to the economic and social anxiety constructed around migrants: “[Immigration] is almost a kind of invasion, which can lead, and has led, to serious issues. My worries are about the social cohesion of the country, which has already been weakened by economic issues” (Senate 2017/852). Finally, parliamentary debates showed the frequent repetition of the word “security” by several FdI MPs (for example, Galantino in Parliament 2021/541), which is a reminder of the PRR's emblematic focus on a strong state, protecting its citizens' security.

While PRPs mainly highlighted the security aspects of immigration, they were not unconcerned with human rights. FI MP Marco Marin, for instance, expressed compassionate humanitarian concerns about dealing with the increased number of migrant deaths, and FI-PdL MP Malan argued that interventions in the countries of origin would “save several thousand lives in Africa” (Senate 2017/791). One can wonder whether this was a strategy to win the hearts and minds of the electorate, by conjuring up a moderate version of the otherwise radical nativist ideology. As noted by the literature, this *façade* of moderation is a strategy often deployed by the PRR to appeal to the largest electorate possible (Halikiopoulou *et al.* 2013). Beyond such concerns, it is relevant to note that, while PRP MPs regularly emphasised security concerns (as per our initial expectations), some also leveraged a rights-based logic.

Shifting our focus to the left and the M5S, we find that the logic of security and emergency extends beyond PRPs. Several MPs from the PD emphasised the link between migration and security. While Nadia Ginetti highlighted the need to guarantee more “security, order, and legality” when dealing with migration, Emma Fattorini praised the integration of migration and security matters, and Giuseppe Lumia stressed the requirement to fight migration when it involves individuals who turn into “mafiosi” and “criminals” (Senate 2017/791). Although a few centre-left MPs (including LEU MP Erasmo Palazzotto and PD MP Laura Boldrini) adopted a more moderate stance,

⁶As per the Refugee Convention, migrants cannot be returned to a country where their lives are at risk. See Vari 2020.

they remained an exception to the otherwise security-focused debates. Even the technocratic Minister of the Interior Luciana Lamorgese noted that, when the MoU was signed in 2017, the size of migratory flows was “worrisome” and Italy was facing “a very complex phase of the migration crisis” (Parliament 2019/253), attesting to the transversality of the security logic.

As for the M5S, despite the party’s ambiguous stance on migration, M5S MP Francesco Berti concurred with PRPs in depicting an alarming situation and emphasising the migration-security nexus. This was most evident in his argument that Italy is still “suffering the consequences” of the high migration flows of 2014-17, as demonstrated by the difficulties in returning “those individuals who not only do not have a right to remain in our country, but also commit crimes and threaten the security of our cities” (Parliament 2021/541). The MP continued by stressing the alleged “pull factor” of search and rescue operations (Ibid).

Interestingly, although the MoU was signed by the then PD Minister of the Interior Marco Minniti, his own party did not abstain from expressing humanitarian concerns. Instead, in line with the left’s traditionally more open approach to immigration, a rights-based logic was at the centre of widespread disquiet among MPs from the left (PD and LEU) and from the M5S, particularly at the time of the renewal of the Memorandum.

Most of all, several MPs from the PD, LEU and M5S showed concern for the treatment of migrants in detention camps and the conduct of the Libyan Coast Guard. Both PD MP (and member of the Committee for foreign and EU affairs) Laura Boldrini and M5S MP Francesco Berti, for instance, denounced the “unacceptable” conditions of Libyan detention centres and the human rights violations taking place there (Parliament 2021/541). Multiple MPs also referred to such centres as “lagers” (for example, PD MP Lumia in Senate 2017/791, PD MP Pini in Parliament 2021/541, LEU MP Palazzotto in Parliament 2019/253). Through the use of the historically-loaded term “lager” and emotionally-charged vocabulary, stressing that migrants are treated as “slaves” (Lumia in Senate 2017/791) and “women are raped and men tortured” (Pini in Parliament 2021/541), these MPs triggered a strong reaction against human rights abuses. More generally, PD MP Lumia invoked a sense of shared humanity, by asserting that migrants seeking legal routes to enter Italy are like “brothers, sisters, children [...]. We must not hide their being human in their tragedy, their escape from wars, and their desperation” (Senate 2017/791).

Thus, MPs from across centre-left parties and the M5S emphasised both security and human rights concerns. Notably, however, concerns with migrants’ rights did not prevent the MoU from being renewed in 2020.

Overall, the analysis reveals that parliamentary debates on Italy-Libya migration cooperation blurred the traditional left-right divide, being characterised by strong emphasis on both security concerns and migrants’ rights *across* the political spectrum. Importantly, statements by all parties were punctuated by a logic of emergency and exceptionality. As Castelli Gattinara (2017) argues, governments of EU member states faced the so-called 2015 “refugee crisis” by conflating immigration with a security emergency. In the Italian context, parties fanned the flames of public perceptions of the immigration-security nexus, by portraying migrants as national security threats, dangerously penetrating state borders and imperilling social cohesion and economic security.

Responding and contributing to public demands for urgent action, parties located in disparate positions of the Italian left-right political spectrum made regular use of the security framing to justify the need to secure and maintain an agreement with Libya.

The EU as an arena for the promotion of Italy's influence

Having discussed major parties' positioning on migration cooperation with Libya, we now turn to how they framed the deal in relation to the EU. Remarkably, the analysis revealed a strong emphasis by all parties, including the PD, LEU, M5S, Lega and FdI, on Italy's role as a key mediator between the EU and Libya, particularly on migration-related matters. Italy was depicted as promoting economic cooperation with Libya, facilitating dialogue between different belligerent parties and playing a pivotal role in EU and international missions in the country (Parliament 2021/541).

Although Italy's track record in advancing cooperation with Libya is long-established, we can understand MPs' emphasis on Rome's mediating role as underlining the country's strategic leadership on migration and in the Mediterranean. Indeed, the Mediterranean Sea has traditionally been regarded as a key area for Italy's foreign policy (Coticchia and Mazziotti di Celso 2024). Furthermore, the MoU with Libya has by now become a cornerstone of EU migration policy, as testified by the EU's funding contribution and prompt endorsement of the agreement (see IT-LY MoU 2017; European Council 2017). As we will see in later sections, the depiction of the EU as an arena where Italy can showcase its prowess is not unique to the Libyan case but also extends to the Albanian one.

Italy-Albania cooperation

Context

Landings to Italy slowed after 2016, but increased again after 2020, reaching 157,652 in 2023 (MoI 2023). It was against this backdrop that, on 6 November 2023, Italian Prime Minister Meloni and her Albanian counterpart Edi Rama signed a Protocol to strengthen collaboration on migration matters. While Italy-Albania migration cooperation has a long history dating back to the 1990s (Fontana and Rosina 2024), this agreement is a first of its kind insofar as it foresees the outsourcing of European immigration and asylum processes to a third country.

The 2023 agreement envisages the construction of two immigration centres in Albania, to host and process migrants who have been rescued at sea by Italian military ships (IT-ALB Protocol 2023). The centres are meant to host up to 3,000 migrants at any time, ideally processing a total of 36,000 per year. Importantly, they fall under Italian jurisdiction, meaning that they are governed by Italian legislation and staffed by Italian personnel (Ibid). Rome will cover all the costs involved, with an expected overall expenditure of €670 million (*Corriere della Sera* 2024).

The deal has received significant criticism, both in Italy and Albania. In Italy, multiple organisations challenged the agreement based on its high costs, lack of transparency and potential non-compliance with international law (ECRE 2023a; Amnesty International 2024). Both the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, raised concerns about the respect of migrants' rights, particularly the identification of vulnerable people, adequacy of asylum

procedures and freedom from arbitrary detention (*Ekathimerini* 2024; CHR 2023). In Albania, members of the parliamentary opposition appealed to the Constitutional Court, challenging the Protocol for its lack of transparency (Infomigrants 2023). Despite criticism, the Albanian Constitutional Court ruled in favour of the agreement on 29 January 2024 and the Italian Senate ratified it on 15 February 2024 (*Independent* 2024). The EU Commissioner for Home Affairs Ilva Johansson also appeared to endorse the agreement, by stating that it falls “outside” of EU law and does not violate it (*Euronews* 2023).

Party positioning: the return of the ideological divide

In the case of cooperation with Albania, parties’ discourse reflects their traditional ideological positioning on the left-right political spectrum: generally, toughness on migration matters among PRPs and inclusivity by the centre-left. The human-rights logic that cropped up in the case of the MoU with Libya lost importance in the case of Albania for PRPs. Instead, what differentiates the PRPs’ discourse from that of competing parties, is its deployment of legalistic discourse for validation purposes.

Starting with PRPs, the analysis of parliamentary debates shows that ministers and MPs from such parties often emphasise the security logic. As an example, Minister of the Interior Matteo Piantedosi (close to the PRR *Lega*) presented the Protocol as part of an “extraordinary plan [...] to manage and deter irregular immigration” (Senate 2023/210). Similarly, *Lega* MP Simone Billi repeatedly stressed the word “security” by quoting a cardinal as stating that “a reception system must provide security to those who are hosted and to those who host, and it must provide security to [Italy]” (Parliament 2023/199).

PRPs also underlined the migration-security-development nexus. Indeed, the wider goal of buttressing state security against immigration was often linked to the “Piano Mattei”, an Italy-Africa cooperation framework launched by Meloni’s government in 2024. A €5.5 billion cooperation plan, the Piano Mattei covers energy, infrastructure, health, water, education and agriculture, with the goal of promoting development and disincentivising irregular migration (Senate 2023/210; Cotichia and Mazziotti di Celso 2024). Although the Piano Mattei did not apply to Albania (given its focus on Africa), its logic points to the intersection between migration, security and development.

Turning now to the discursive position of the centre-left, contrary to the case of Libya, parliamentary debates on cooperation with Albania were characterised by a clearly delineated opposition group, composed of PD, AVS and M5S. The opposition raised regular concerns about the agreement’s compliance with the human rights standards set out by EU and international law. For example, they stressed the “duty to receive migrants and protect them as human beings” as stemming from EU membership (Francesco Boccia *et al.* in Senate 2023/136), and PD MP Graziano Delrio accused the Protocol with Albania of infringing international law (Senate 2023/136). Throughout, emotion-laden language choices that highlighted the sacredness of life, liberty, human dignity and solidarity were leveraged to augment the persuasiveness of the criticism of the Protocol (Parliament 2023/199).

Overall, parliamentary debates on the 2023 Italy-Albania protocol show that, while the security-logic was present among PRPs, the rights-oriented logic was markedly more salient among the centre-left and M5S opposition parties. As such, the case of migration

cooperation with Albania confirms our initial expectations about distinct party stances on migration issues.

A key difference thus emerges between our two case studies. While in the case of Albania, parties' discourse broadly aligned with our initial expectations about the left/right ideological divide, in the case of Libya, the PRPs were not averse to using rights-based language, while the centre-left and M5S also incorporated security concerns.

We hypothesise that the clearer party positions in the Italy-Albania deal, compared to the one with Libya, can be attributed to two main factors: a situation of (real or perceived) crisis and parties' position in and out of government. The deal with Libya was struck during the so-called "migration crisis", which saw unprecedented arrivals to Italy. The centre-left, then in power, faced significant pressure to promptly address soaring migration numbers. This urgency led them to design and adopt the agreement with Libya, framing it within emergency and security logics. The MoU did not trigger substantial opposition from PRPs, as it met their traditional discourse on migration and security.

In contrast, by 2023, when the PD was in opposition, the pressure to show resolve on immigration had diminished, due to both a reduced sense of crisis and to the party being in opposition. This enabled centre-left MPs to revert to a more rights-centric discourse.

Overall, this suggests that a sense of crisis and parties' position within or outside government, are pivotal factors in explaining differences in political parties' discursive stances on migration externalisation.

The EU as an arena for the promotion of Italy's influence and a source of legitimacy

Two elements stand out in parties' representation of the role of the EU in the debate on the Albania deal. First, as had been the case for the MoU with Libya, multiple MPs depicted Italy as a key mediator between the EU and the third country (Albania in this case), particularly by committing to brokering its accession to the EU. This was particularly visible among PRP MPs, who presented the Protocol as rooted in the "historical friendship" between Rome and Tirana (Parliament 2023/199). The government and several MPs underscored Italy's commitment to Albania's membership of the EU (Parliament 2023/199) and *Lega* MP Alessandro Giglio Vigna stressed the EU's need to continue working on accession procedures in the Western Balkans, that is, Albania, which should "not look to the East, but to the West" (Parliament 2023/184). Other PRP MPs identified Albania as an integral part of Europe (FdI MP Giulio Terzi di Sant'Agata in Senate, 2023/136) and emphasised the shared identity between Albania and the EU, as exemplified by the words of FdI MP Marco Scurria, who solemnly wished the reunion of the Western Balkans with "European history and identity" (Senate 2023/136).

Italy's efforts to align Albania with the EU echo its broader commitment to act as a mediator with key Mediterranean partners, similar to its role with Libya – though in Albania's case, this was framed within a discussion on enlargement. However, a key distinction emerges: while all political parties emphasised Italy's mediating role with Libya, the situation with Albania was more contentious. PRPs repeatedly underscored Rome's leadership in fostering cooperation with Tirana, whereas the opposition refrained from doing so, consistent with its criticism of the deal.

What makes the case of the Protocol with Albania stand out is a second, key point: the use of the EU as a source of legitimacy. As already hinted at, much of the debate on the Italy-Albania Protocol centred on the agreement's compliance with EU and international law. On one hand, the opposition made humanitarian preoccupations a centrepiece of the debate, accusing the Protocol of infringing EU and international law and stressing the duty to receive and offer protection to migrants (Senate 2023/136). On the other hand, PRPs made regular reference to the same legal frameworks to legitimise the Protocol with Albania. It is therefore interesting to observe that the opposition adopted legalistic discourse to denounce the Protocol and, at the same time, legalistic justifications were adopted by the governing PRPs for the exact opposite goal: to enshrine the legitimacy of the deal.

For the PRPs, legitimisation comes from the alleged compliance with human rights, as well as with national, European and international law, as argued by the government in its defence of the deal with Albania in Parliament (Parliament 2023/199). Unhesitatingly buttressing the legitimacy of the Protocol, Meloni herself claimed that it was clear that the agreement did not breach international, national or European law (Senate 2023/136).

By stressing legitimacy, the Meloni government adopted a rights-based discourse functional to their own political goals, putting aside humanitarian concerns. In the process, they often adopted the discursive strategy of authorisation, making use of quotes by prominent EU leaders alluding to the legitimacy of the Protocol with Albania to support their position. Such a strategy of authorisation, often deployed in political discourse (Wodak 2015), aims to buttress political claims through reference to official sources or authorities. As an example, FI Minister of Foreign Affairs Antonio Tajani noted that German Chancellor Olaf Scholz implicitly approved of the deal, by claiming that "Albania will soon be part of the EU; therefore, we are now trying to work out the issues arising inside our European family" (Senate 2023/136).

In sum, we can interpret Meloni's strategy as an attempt to gain trust and respectability at both the domestic and international levels, through a reconfiguration of the party away from Euroscepticism. An example of this attempt is FdI MP Giulio Terzi di Sant'Agata's emphasis on the EU appreciation for Meloni's leadership, which authoritatively heralds EU values (Senate 2023/136). This confirms Meloni's commitment to drifting away from the hostility and diffidence against the EU that had characterised FdI before its entry into government in 2022. Meloni's assiduous diplomatic relationships with President of the EU Commission Ursula von der Leyen bear witness to FdI's effort to moderate and endear Meloni's government to the EU (Griffini 2023b), which is in turn deployed as a source of legitimacy.

Conclusion

The externalisation of border controls is increasingly common in the EU context. Against this backdrop, two pivotal agreements in recent years have been the 2017 MoU between Italy and Libya and the 2023 Protocol between Italy and Albania. These agreements were signed by governments occupying different positions on the left-right spectrum, which testifies to the broad convergence among political parties around the external dimension of migration policies.

Yet, to what extent did parties in Europe differentiate themselves in their discourse on bilateral migration agreements and how did they depict the EU in such debates? This article has shed light on this little-researched topic through a qualitative analysis of the parliamentary debates on Italy's cooperation with Libya and Albania.

We observe the recurrence of two main logics underlying party discourse on the agreements: a security-based logic and a rights-oriented logic. In the case of the MoU with Libya, we notice a blurring of parties' distinctive ideological positioning, concerning both (i) a security logic and (ii) a rights-oriented one. On both sides of the political spectrum, parties underlined the need to promptly respond to the migration "emergency", but equally showed concerns with the protection of migrants' rights.

In the case of the Protocol with Albania, we witness a clearer discursive distinction between parties, in line with their traditional ideological beliefs. PRPs in particular stressed the link between migration and security, while centre-left and M5S opposition parties regularly raised preoccupations about the safeguarding of migrants' rights. Examining the differences between the two case studies, we suggest that parties' discursive stances on migration externalisation have the potential to become more blurred in times of crisis (whether real or perceived), and when centre-left parties are in government.

In this context, the EU was simultaneously presented as an arena for the promotion of Italy's influence and a source of legitimacy. First, in both Libya's and Albania's cases, MPs depicted Italy as a key mediator between the partner country and the EU. This points to the willingness to employ migration policy to underscore Italy's leading role in the Mediterranean, traditionally considered as one of Italy's main areas of influence.

Second, concerning the deal with Albania, PRPs repeatedly emphasised the Protocol's compliance with EU laws and the approval given by the Union, in order to withstand criticism. The EU thus became a source of legitimation in the discourse of Meloni's right-wing government, in line with the cabinet's shift away from Euroscepticism. This was done to validate the deal and the government's international standing.

Overall, our findings make an important contribution to the fields of migration policy, Italian and European politics, at a time of growing electoral success for populist parties across Europe. They show that parties' positioning on migration externalisation can exhibit surprising similarities. Moreover, our findings demonstrate that, despite being often associated with Euroscepticism, PRPs may in fact leverage the EU as a source of legitimacy.

Many questions remain. Is the discourse of parties of different leanings on the *internal* dimension of migration policies similarly blurred? To what extent do PRPs in other European countries employ the EU to legitimise their policies and their role as respectable actors? The increasing emphasis on the externalisation of migration warrants further investigations into political parties' positioning on the matter and the role of the EU within such debates.

Data access statement

This study analyses existing data as cited in the "References" and "List of analysed documents" sections.

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