Inclusive Left and Exclusive Right?
Assessing Italy's Foreign Policy on Irregular Migration Governance

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Abstract

Governments' political affiliations traditionally exert a tangible influence over a country's foreign policy. However, does the external dimension of irregular migration change when different governments come to power? And do related foreign policy measures change as well? To answer these questions, this article first reviews the theoretical and empirical literature on the influence of political affiliation on migration and foreign policy. Second, it analyses the foreign policy of Italy's irregular migration governance from 2000 to 2023 inclusive. Third, it draws theoretical and policy implications. With a focus on foreign policy measures, it finds that path dependence favours a broad bipartisanship – a valence issue for the political system – with 10 governments out of 12 adopting restrictive approaches through the use of analogous foreign policy measures. Specifically, it shows that Rome's great power politics comprises naval deployments in the Mediterranean, leading contributions to related EU initiatives, externalised offshore processing in Libya, a military mission in Niger, strengthened support to Tunisia, and the establishment of a new offshore processing agreement with Albania. Ancillary implications affect: i) migrants' own insecurity, aggravated by additional obstacles; ii) foreign and security policy, since Italy's goals of halting irregular flows, increasing repatriations, and deterring traffickers are frustrated; and iii) the potential external applicability of these findings in comparable destination countries. As a result, this novel research contributes to the literature on both irregular migration governance and Italian foreign policy, by shedding light on the bipartisanship of Italy's migration-related foreign policy.

1. Introduction

In the post-Cold War era, rigid distinctions between the realms of domestic politics and international relations have progressively weakened, aided not only by the end of antagonistic bipolarity, but also by the resulting advent of globalisation. Consequently, domestic political characteristics have increasingly shaped countries' foreign policies, while in turn being affected by global phenomena (see Noël and Thérien 2008). The deep-rooted distinction between progressive and conservative ideas, often described in the literature as the 'Left-Right divide' (Noël *et al.* 2021), is therefore widely regarded as one of the driving forces in contemporary global affairs, especially in liberal democracies where electoral concerns impact policy formulation. Progressive positions (left-wing) are generally associated with cosmopolitan, normative and globalist approaches, whereas conservative ones (right-wing) more closely relate to national interest and security (Beardsworth 2011). To wit, even a cursory glance at the extant literature is able to reveal the extent to which scholars acknowledge the influence of the domestic political

elements in international relations. To name just a few examples, this is attested in the discipline as a whole (Cassels 1996), the domestic-foreign policy nexus (Chryssogelos 2021), international trade (Milner and Judkins 2004), peacekeeping (Rathbun 2004), climate change (Farstad 2018), and migration policies (Stewart *et al*. 2019).

However, fixed universals rarely apply to entire disciplines, and international relations is no exception. Governments' political affiliations cannot be understood as the sole driver in foreign policy formulation, as there are numerous other influencing factors, including socio-economic characteristics, domestic pressure groups, path dependence, exogenous events, and regional and global pressures. In other words, specific types of external approaches to irregular migration, and their related foreign policy measures, are the product of multiple elements and not of a single one (see Chandler 2009). With this necessary clarification in mind, it is important to note that the relationship between the type of government in power and the subsequent external approaches to irregular migration governance is under-examined in the literature. To be sure, the extant scholarship offers relevant insights into the fact that not only conservative (right-wing) administrations, but also progressive ones (left-wing) may adopt restrictive migration policies (e.g. Akkerman 2015). However, the actual difference in the adoption of such policies by progressive and conservative governments in destination countries, and the contrast (or lack thereof) in their use of specific foreign policy tools remains understudied in the international relations (IR) literature.

Starting from these premises, this article seeks to answer two questions pertaining to two interrelated gaps in the literature, namely: a) if the external dimension of irregular migration governance changes when different governments come to power in destination countries; and b) whether the related foreign policy measures also change with them. For the purposes of this research, the external dimension is understood as the broad direction of state policies designed to manage irregular migration outside national borders/territorial waters – i.e. either unrestrictive or restrictive towards seaborne arrivals. The related foreign policy measures, on the other hand, are considered to be specific developments allowing the implementation of the former category, such as naval deployments, externalisation agreements, support to transit countries, and other related foreign policy tools (for a comparable distinction between the external dimension and the actual measures of migration policies, applied at the EU level, see Czaika *et al*. 2023; Longo and Fontana 2022). Only measures that have actually been implemented (as opposed to statements or electoral promises) have been included in this research.

The article argues that they do not change with different governments, as Italy displays a certain level of bipartisanship in foreign policy which is typical of many liberal democracies (see Croci and Valigi 2013), and, since the external dimension of its irregular migration governance utilises fully-fledged foreign policies measures, they too generally enjoy bipartisan support. Cognisant of the rich body of literature on the broader relationship between political partisanship and migration policies (among the many, see Lutz, 2021; Urso 2018; Akkermann, 2015; Alonso and Claro da Fonseca, 2011), this article focuses on two specific and understudied elements, that is the external dimension of irregular migration governance, and its specific foreign policy measures. As such, insights pertaining to *domestic* policies on irregular migration – including criminalisation, regularisations, and the employment of irregular workers – as well as the

significance of readmission agreements (see Marchetti 2010) and the role of NGOs and international organisations (see Cusumano and Gombeer 2018), which are abundantly explored in the literature, are not within its scope due to reasons of space and analytical focus.

For the purposes of this qualitative international relations research, Italy has been chosen as a case study for four reasons: i) on account of its heavily-debated irregular migration policies (see Bello 2021; Geddes and Pettrachin 2020; Ceccorulli and Coticchia 2020; Talani 2019; Ambrosini 2018; Abbondanza 2017; Finotelli and Sciortino 2009, among the many); ii) the broad timeframe in which they occurred (specifically from 2000 onwards, given the relevance of new migration policies in this timeframe); iii) the potential external validity of these findings for comparable, developed destination countries (Düvell 2011a), and iv) the theoretical implications stemming from the analysis of whether or not Italy's subsequent governments have led to a change in the country's migratory foreign policy, which would contribute to the literature on the Left-Right divide and path dependence.

In order to pursue this, the article examines Rome's external dimension of irregular migration governance through foreign policy analysis (FPA). The latter is a versatile methodological approach exploring the nexus between domestic factors, international context, and resulting foreign policies (Hudson and Day 2019), and is therefore germane to this article's goals. More specifically, FPA displays six theoretical hallmarks: it is multifactorial (there are no monocausal explanations), multilevel (all levels of analysis are involved), multidisciplinary (insights from different disciplines), integrative (conceptual integration of diverse insights), agent-oriented (attention to policymakers as agents), and actor-specific (emphasis on influential actors) in its rationale (Hudson 2005). In other words, FPA allows to qualitatively assess a range of elements that support a theoretical understanding of the foreign policy making decision process, including domestic political factors, the international context, and resulting foreign policies. Despite its vast and somewhat indefinite conceptual boundaries, this methodological approach has been a key tool for IR scholars for decades (see McClosky 1962) and thus this article makes use of its broad theoretical scope accordingly.

Additionally, both international and Italian sources are employed to nuance the analysis, as well as both primary (official) and secondary (academic) ones. In particular, the most frequently utilised official source is that of Italy's Ministry of the Interior, which provides the number of irregular maritime arrivals that this study relies on. Tertiary sources (news reports) have been kept to a minimum. Further, it adopts a neutral terminology employed by both UN agencies and seminal publications (see International Organization for Migration 2024a; and Castles *et al.* 2012) and therefore utilises 'irregular migrants', 'irregular maritime arrivals' (IMAs), 'seaborne migrants', 'undocumented migrants', and 'asylum seekers' interchangeably.

The article is structured as follows. After this introduction, a review of the theoretical and empirical literature on the Left-Right divide in both international relations and migration studies is presented. The subsequent section analyses Italy's external dimension of irregular migration governance, from January 2000 to December 2023 inclusive, and categorises them as either 'unrestrictive' or 'restrictive', to explore if national approaches to irregular migration – including specific foreign policy measures – change

with different administrations. Next, it addresses select implications in terms of both theory and policy, prior to presenting the article's conclusion. It finds that the vast majority of Italian governments (10 out of 12) have pursued restrictive approaches with analogous foreign policy measures. The latter are, chiefly, the use of the Italian navy to stem seaborne flows of asylum seekers in the Mediterranean (since 2001), support for and leading roles within EU initiatives to stem migration (since 2004), externalised offshore processing policies in Libya (since 2008), a military mission in Niger (since 2018), new support to Tunisia's government, and the establishment of a new offshore processing agreement with Albania (both since 2023). As a result, this research seeks to contribute to the literature on Italian foreign policy and irregular migration governance, by shedding light on the understudied yet deep-rooted bipartisanship of a specific kind of foreign policy.

2. The influence of domestic politics on migration and foreign policies

This section concisely outlines the significance of the Left-Right divide in international relations and migration studies.[1] The conceptual dichotomy between progressive and conservative priorities and values, and its influence on foreign policy formulation, have been the object of theoretical and political discussions for decades and, broadly speaking, for centuries (see Cassels 1996). The pervasiveness of this political dualism in the global society, especially in established democracies, is further attested by large international surveys conducted in recent years (see Noël *et al.* 2021; Freire and Kivistik 2013a). On a theoretical level, left-wing politics is in principle more supportive of cosmopolitan and globalist values, while right-wing politics is more concerned with domestic priorities and border/national security. On a more practical level, this may result in progressive governments providing active support for the international law, United Nations (UN) provisions, and humanitarian endeavours according to the principles of 'good international citizenship'. Conversely, conservative governments may be warier of explicit interference from international organisations in domestic politics (see Abbondanza 2021). To quote Noël and Thérien (2008, 3-4):

> Indeed, the politics of the world, no matter on what scale, is most often a politics of left versus right. Whether they take place in global forums, in international organizations [...] all our political debates are connected to the old, universal conflict over the meaning of equality, which divides progressives and conservatives.

The significance of this deep-rooted notion in international relations is further attested by more specific analyses. Gries and Yam (2020, 135) review the related literature to depict precisely how political ideas at the domestic level 'shape state-level foreign policies and system-level IR'. Federico and Malka (2018) show that conservative politics is more closely associated with firmer security policies, while Bertoli *et al.* (2019, 950) take a further step through a large statistical analysis and conclude that 'electing right-wing candidates increases state aggression'. Moving from war to peacekeeping and humanitarian interventions, both Rathbun (2004) and Kreps and Maxey (2018) show instead

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[1] While other dichotomies are discussed in the literature, including economic and socio-cultural Left-Right, this article explores the political Left-Right divide for reasons of space and analytical focus.

that morally-motivated (left-wing) electorates are more prone to support interventions entailing the use of force. Bodenstein and Faust (2017) investigate the predisposition to support foreign aid, with data from 27 countries, concluding that conservative citizens and governments seek tight conditions attached to aid provision, unlike progressive ones. Moreover, scholars detect the Left-Right divide in less 'traditional' IR areas as well. These include adherence levels to anti-pandemic provisions (Ruisch *et al.*, 2021, 795), climate change mitigation (Farstad, 2018), and feminist agendas at the UN level (Cupać and Ebetürk, 2020). This broad and multidisciplinary literature therefore places political partisanship as one of the pillars of foreign policy formulation.

As mentioned earlier, while the influence of the Left-Right divide is far from being regarded as the sole factor at play (see Chandler 2009; Noël and Thérie 2008, 198-230), the field of migration studies is not immune to the effects of this political dichotomy. Gries and Yam (2020) remind us that conservative politics associates immigration with crime, terrorism, and other threats, whereas progressive politics relies more on normative attributes and humanitarian values, thus supporting less rigid migration policies. Homola and Tavits (2018) utilise data from German and US surveys to argue that political affiliation explains why leftist voters witness a decrease in immigration-related fears once they are in direct contact with migrants, while rightist voters either show no change or experience an increase in their fears. Stewart *et al.* (2019) provide interesting psychological insights to explain the openness (or wariness) that progressives (or conservatives) have towards migrants. Freire and Kivistik (2013b) further nuance the relevance of the above to the migration policy formulation process by linking tolerance and multiculturalism to the Left, and national traditions and resistance to globalisation to the Right. However, it ought to be noted that the influence of this political dichotomy over policy preference is still somewhat unclear, as authors such as Amadio Viceré and Angelucci (2023) found a convergence between political parties' positions and public opinion's attitudes to migration, whereas Lutz (2021) detected a policy gap. This may be clarified by Goodhart (2004), who argued that solidarity-based approaches can be limited by the perception of excessive socio-cultural diversity, which he labelled the 'progressive dilemma'.

Getting to the thornier subject of *irregular* migration,[2] van Prooijen *et al.* (2018) detect the same dichotomy of previous studies by correlating right-wing voters with increased anxieties and opposition to this phenomenon, and left-wing voters with greater flexibility. Moreover, Koser (2010) reminds us that this phenomenon is often *perceived* as leading to increased crime and terrorism ('immigration-crime nexus' and 'migration-terrorism nexus'), thus impacting both the human (in)security of migrants themselves and national security policies. It is not surprising, therefore, that countries facing large flows of seaborne asylum seekers tend to inflate the risks of terrorism and adopt restrictive foreign policy tools such as naval deployments, military missions in third countries, and externalisation agreements (see Ceccorulli and Coticchia 2020). However, the theoretical literature concisely summarised in this section applies political

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[2] The theoretical and conceptual literature on irregular migration is rich and varied (see, among many, Black et al., 2011; Düvell, 2011b; Castles et al., 2012; Carling and Collins, 2018; Echeverría, 2020; de Haas, 2021). However, given the focus of this article on the foreign policy of irregular migration governance, only select studies are mentioned, and this short list is clearly not meant to be comprehensive.

partisanship to debates on either *regular* migration policies, or *citizens'* attitudes towards irregular migration, not on the external dimension of policies conceived and implemented by states (the focus of this article). In other words, we know that political and ideological differences affect the management of regular migratory flows (as one of the many variables involved), and that they play a role in forming people's opinions, but there is a conspicuous lacuna in the theoretical literature where *states'* external dimension of irregular migration governance is concerned.

Consequently, the question that arises is whether the foreign policy of irregular migration governance changes with subsequent governments. The theoretical literature on the Left-Right divide outlined above might lead to an affirmative answer, as progressive governments emphasise globalist values and the international humanitarian law – theoretically implying an unrestrictive approach to irregular migration – whereas conservative governments stress national and border security, which ought to entail restrictive policies towards irregular flows. However, as mentioned earlier, state policies on complex phenomena such as this one are shaped by a number of elements besides Left-Right political affiliation. Additionally, Italy has had two populist administrations and two technocratic governments within the article's timeframe, which transcend traditional Left-Right political divisions, and thus the answer to the above question could equally be a negative one. In this alternative scenario, where different types of government maintain existing approaches to irregular migration governance, path dependence theory could help to explain the reasons behind this condition. Broadly understood throughout the social sciences as the notion that past choices influence and constrain future ones, due to four interrelated causes (increasing returns, self-reinforcement, positive feedbacks, and lock-in), path dependence has long been utilised in both political science and international relations, with authors agreeing on its significant role in reinforcing policy continuity (see Page 2006; Leithner and Libby 2017). In this case, the political affiliation of a given government would not lead to a change in the type of migration policy it implements, as attested by related research analysing European destination countries (Hansen 2002).

In essence, the extant theoretical literature provides explanations for both policy divergence *depending* on the type of government in power (Left-Right divide) and policy continuity *regardless* of the type of government in power (path dependence) where migration policies are concerned. To assess which of the two applies to the Italian case – thus contributing to theoretical literature on the Left-Right divide and path dependence – and in arguing that Italy validates the path dependence thesis (since the external dimension falls under the scope of foreign policy, which generally benefits from bipartisan support) the following section analyses Italian irregular migration policies from 2000 to 2023 inclusive (totalling more than 1.35 million seaborne arrivals, see Figure 1). In doing so, it briefly considers: i) the type of government in power;[3] ii) the international context (maritime arrivals and other relevant regional developments); and iii) the resulting migratory foreign policy for each administration, as per the methodological principles of

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[3] For reasons of space and clarity, this article does not delve into the many nuances of Italian politics, and concisely describes governments as conservative or centre-right, right-wing, progressive or centre-left, technocratic (government of 'non-political experts'), or populist. Technocratic governments are included in this article not only on the basis of analytical continuity across the 2000-2023 timeframe, but also due to their significance in contemporary Italian politics.

foreign policy analysis outlined earlier. Subsequently, it categorises such policies as either 'unrestrictive' or 'restrictive'. [4] As the research focus of this article lies in the external dimension of irregular migration governance, with an emphasis on foreign policy measures, significant aspects beyond this scope are not addressed here. These are the many socio-economic and domestic party politics developments impacting the policy formulation process; the many readmission agreements concluded with origin and transit countries, including Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, and Nigeria (Marchetti 2010); and the significant role of NGOs in rescuing asylum seekers at sea (Cusumano and Gombeer 2018), which ought to be acknowledged nevertheless.

3. Italy's external dimension of irregular migration governance: 2000-2023

The first significant development of the twenty-first century in terms of irregular migration policies took place in 2001, when Silvio Berlusconi won the election and formed two consecutive conservative governments (2001-2006) supported by two junior parties – the Northern League and National Alliance – which had strongly campaigned on tougher migratory measures. Internationally, Italy had been experiencing sustained numbers of irregular maritime arrivals (IMAs, 23.719 in 2002). The result was the approval of the 2002 Bossi-Fini Law, which framed irregular migration with an abrasive rhetoric and whose restrictive provisions were strongly criticised by numerous non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and agencies (Associazione Antigone 2007). The new law not only had serious domestic consequences, but also signalled a new direction in terms of Italy's external approach along with significant foreign policy implications, chiefly the deployment of Italian Navy vessels in the Mediterranean to intercept and deter boats, revised entry quotas, new anti-migration cooperation with Libya (supported by the EU Frontex agency since 2004), and the increased use of deportation to third countries (Abbondanza 2017). While, on the one hand, the Berlusconi government contributed to the 'democratic gap' or 'paradox' by simultaneously approving the largest amnesty for irregular residents in Italian history (646,000 people, see Colombo and Sciortino 2002), it also spearheaded what would become an increasingly-restrictive Italian approach to this transnational phenomenon, and therefore its international provisions mark its policy as 'restrictive'.

The following government (2006-2008) was remarkably different in its political stance, supported as it was by a centre-left coalition led by Romano Prodi. The latter won the elections, among other things, with a change in the rhetoric on immigration and by advocating a reform of the immigration law to improve the many issues that had been unfolding in the previous years and which had been under close scrutiny by national and international NGOs, civil society, and progressive circles (though a radical change to the country's external migratory policy was not contemplated). Internationally, seaborne arrivals had not changed compared to pre-Bossi-Fini Law years (22.016 IMAs in 2006,

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[4] For the purposes of this research, 'unrestrictive' policies favour humanitarian concerns over state security, therefore including measures such as state-sponsored search and rescue missions and the lack of push-back operations, whereas 'restrictive' ones prioritise border security and aim to prevent irregular migrants from reaching Italian shores through offshore externalisation policies, push-back operations, financial and logistical support to transit countries, and other comparable foreign policy tools.

see Giovannetti 2018), and the government proposed a new law that would amend the previous one, named the Amato-Ferrero Bill. While it provided for new pathways granting differential and increasing levels of rights for migrants, it retained migrant quotas and migrant centres, as well as the use of previous foreign policy measures, such as the deployment of Italian Navy vessels in international waters to stop and deter boat arrivals in the Mediterranean (Çetin 2015). The Amato-Ferrero Bill never managed to get full approval due to the government's collapse in 2008, which meant that the Bossi-Fini Law remained in place. However, it can still be categorised as 'restrictive' on account of its restrictive foreign policy measures, despite the presence of a progressive administration behind it.

The succeeding Italian administration (2008-2011) was led once again by conservative politician Berlusconi, who implemented a historic rapprochement with Libya, Italy's former colony and the country from which most seaborne migrants were departing. Italy had ratified the Treaty of Lisbon in 2008, spurring tougher controls on irregular migration, which became a criminal offence according to Italian law in the following year (Rosina 2022). Internationally, Rome toughened its external migratory policy by signing a comprehensive partnership with Tripoli which, among other things, included explicit foreign policy measures aimed at halting maritime migratory flows towards Italy. With article 19, in particular, Libya would intercept migrants within its territory and place them in detention camps, while Italy strengthened the use of its navy and satellites to monitor the central Mediterranean route. In foreign policy terms, this new approach represented a historic turning point since, in the words of Marfleet and Cetti (2013, 233), it meant that 'the Italian border had, in effect, been moved to Libya'. Italy's new external dimension of irregular migration governance, based on the principle of externalisation through offshore detention and processing, attracted a barrage of criticism, both nationally and internationally, since migrants' human and civil rights were far from guaranteed (Amnesty International 2009), although the government ignored such condemnations and praised the numerical effectiveness of its new policy (from 36,951 IMAs in 2008 to 4,406 in 2010, see Abbondanza 2016). Given the nature of this new policy, and its consequential foreign policy implications, it is categorised as markedly 'restrictive'.

The subsequent administration (2011-2013) took charge after a domestic political crisis unfolding as a result of the global financial crisis, and involved a technocratic government led by independent Mario Monti. Internationally, the outbreak of the Arab Spring had meant that Italy's previous agreements were *de facto* void, and the consequences could be seen in the largest number of IMAs until that moment, peaking at 62,962 in 2011 (Giovannetti 2018). Due to this development, the Monti administration upheld the country's previous external dimension of irregular migration governance and resorted to the same type of foreign policy measures that had been applied by preceding governments, by reaching an agreement with the Libyan National Transition Council (NTC). With the sole exception of Italy's so-called 'push-back' operations, which had been ruled illegal by the European Court of Human Rights in 2012 (European Court of Human Rights 2012), the agreement was entirely comparable to the previous Italy-Libya agreement in terms of both international goals and means (Morone 2016), although in this instance centre-left parties did not officially protest. On account of its

restrictive foreign policy measures, Italy's agreement with the Libyan NTC is also openly 'restrictive' in nature.

The next 'grand coalition' administration (2013-2014) was instead led by centre-left politician Enrico Letta, who entirely reformed the country's approach to irregular seaborne migration and changed the government's rhetoric concerning the latter. A tragic shipwreck near the Italian island of Lampedusa, which caused 366 deaths, contributed to a radical change in Rome's external dimension to irregular migration governance and related foreign policy means. This change was implemented through the launch of a *unilateral* mission in international waters with primary support from the navy and other branches of the armed forces, called Mare Nostrum (Latin for 'our sea'). In just one year, the operation rescued at sea and brought to Italy more than 170,000 seaborne migrants (Baldwin-Edwards and Lutterbeck 2019). It was thus praised for its colossal humanitarian and logistical effort by national and international NGOs, agencies, the EU, and the UN (International Organization for Migration 2014). However, it ought to be emphasised that it was designed to be a temporary solution to be enforced until a shared European approach could be conceived and implemented. Owing to the explicitly humanitarian focus of its foreign policy measures, Mare Nostrum represented a turning point in Italian irregular migration policies, as well as being a remarkably 'unrestrictive' one.

Rome's subsequent government (2014-2016) was also led by a centre-left politician, Matteo Renzi. At the European level, irregular migration had become an increasingly-contested issue, with the lack of appropriate EU support becoming a lightning rod for mounting Euroscepticism. The Central Mediterranean route had become (and remains to this date) the busiest – and deadliest – maritime migration route in the world (see UNHCR 2014). While Italy maintained its more 'humanitarian' rhetoric towards asylum seekers and its new (non-restrictive) external approach to seaborne migration, it also made substantial changes to its migratory foreign policy by ending its unilateral mission Mare Nostrum and vocally requesting a multilateral approach at the EU level. Brussels responded by strengthening Frontex and replacing Mare Nostrum with Operation Triton (from 1 November 2014) and EUNAVFOR Med (from 18 May 2015). These changes ensued from both Italian political pressure (Italy rescued and received from NGOs 153,842 maritime asylum seekers in 2015, and 181,436 in 2016) and several new shipwrecks. Of the unfolding developments at the EU level, in particular, proposals to amend the Dublin III regulation[5] and implement EU relocation quotas never saw the light, thus testing the EU's ability to secure its borders humanely but equitably (see Barbulescu 2017). Even so, given the continuing humanitarian approach through multilateral missions in the Mediterranean and political attempts to foster a shared EU solution, Italy's 2015-2016 external dimension of migration policy was equally 'unrestrictive' in its goals and foreign policy means.

Another centre-left politician, Paolo Gentiloni, took office as the Prime Minister of the country's new government (2016-2018). Politically, his cabinet shared the same concerns – and frustrations – of previous administrations pertaining to the overall ineffectiveness of the EU in equitably addressing this transregional phenomenon.

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[5] The Dublin III regulation states that responsibility for addressing immediate migration emergencies falls on the closest country, as do all the procedures for seaborne asylum seekers.

Irregular migration flows had peaked in 2016 (more than 181,000 IMAs, see Italian Ministry of the Interior, 2024) and, in the light of the EU's inability to swiftly replace Italy's former (inclusive) policy, Rome reverted to its previous external approach to migration, along with related foreign policy measures, by striking a deal with the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) in 2017. The latter mirrored the 2008 and 2012 agreements while adding the provision of Italian patrol boats to the Libyan coast guard (Di Filippo and Palm 2018). With the same goals and foreign policy means, and the same contraventions to migrants' human rights, it was strongly criticised by NGOs and agencies (Save the Children 2022), although it was implemented with the acquiescence of both centre-left and centre-right parties. Moreover, in January 2018 Rome also approved a new military operation in Niger – with an area of intervention extending to Mauritania, Nigeria, and Benin – whose goal was to stem irregular migration flows reaching Libya (Ceccorulli and Coticchia 2020). In the light of its restrictive and strengthened foreign policy measures, the Gentiloni agreement with the Libyan GNA and the new mission in Niger display all of the characteristics of a 'restrictive' policy.

The subsequent general election formed a hung parliament and Giuseppe Conte, affiliated with populist party "Five Star Movement", became the country's Prime Minister for the next three years (2018-2021). His first administration was remarkably conservative in nature (sustained by a populist-conservative coalition), while the second was more progressive (a populist-progressive coalition). Internationally, the flow of maritime asylum seekers had been unsteadily stemmed by the 2017 Libyan agreement (from 119,369 IMAs in 2017 to 34,154 in 2020, see Italian Ministry of the Interior 2024). With reference to the country's external dimension of migration governance during those years, which was not modified substantially, the first Conte administration introduced the 'Security Decrees' – which, among other things, strongly penalised NGOs rescuing migrants in the Mediterranean (Cusumano and Gombeer 2018) – while also allowing the automatic extension of the existing Libyan deal for three more years. In 2020, the more progressive second Conte executive mitigated the heavily-contested provisions approved in 2018 and 2019, which previously targeted migrant-rescuing NGO vessels, but did not alter the existing foreign policy measures, centred on Libya and Niger, in attempting to halt migration flows (Ceccorulli, Coticchia, and Gianfreda 2022). Consequently, due to this manifest foreign policy continuity, both of the Conte governments implemented (and at times aggravated) 'restrictive' policies.

As a result of yet another political crisis, Italy formed a new government (2021-2022), this time led by independent Mario Draghi. The country's second technocratic executive in 10 years faced multiple international security issues (Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the resulting energy crisis, and a worsening political landscape in Libya, among others). As far as seaborne asylum seekers were concerned, the deteriorating security environment in origin and transit countries produced a sharp increase in IMAs in Italy (67,477 in 2021 and 105,140 in 2022, see Italian Ministry of the Interior 2024). From an international relations perspective, on the one hand the Italian government managed to cement a European approach to security and energy crises. On the other, it maintained the existing external approach to maritime asylum seekers – including the specific foreign policy measures encompassing navy deployments, externalisation in Libya, and military involvement in Niger – with the intention of fostering a European approach to

this phenomenon in due course (Barana 2022). However, the priority allocated to the other security challenges, and the withdrawal of parliamentary support in 2022, meant that it was not able to do so, and that Italy's agreement with Libya was automatically renewed in November 2022, while Draghi was leading a caretaker government following the recent snap elections. Consequently, given that it maintained (and indirectly renewed) the exclusive framework already in place, the Draghi government applied 'restrictive' irregular migration policies.

As a consequence of the aforementioned snap election, the country's first far right-wing government ensued (2022-onwards), led by the country's first female Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni. Despite concerns over a G7 country having a far-right administration, the latter has so far pursued traditional continuity with reference to international relations, including the country's (unchanged) external dimension of irregular migration governance. This phenomenon keeps burgeoning due to the worsening security landscape not only in Libya, but also in Tunisia, leading in 2023 to a strong increase in arrivals (157,652) (Italian Ministry of the Interior 2024, see also Figure 1). A tragic new shipwreck near Crotone spurred the government to call for a multilateral European approach – a far cry from the naval blockade promised during the electoral campaign – remarkably in line with previous administrations. In March 2023 the government also approved a new immigration decree – comprising minor changes including tougher sanctions on smugglers and quicker repatriation procedures (Italian Government 2023) – and in June 2023 it brokered easier repatriations in the context of a new EU deal under discussion with Tunisia.

Figure 1. Irregular maritime arrivals in Italy between January 2000 and the end of December 2023 inclusive, totalling more than 1.35 million.
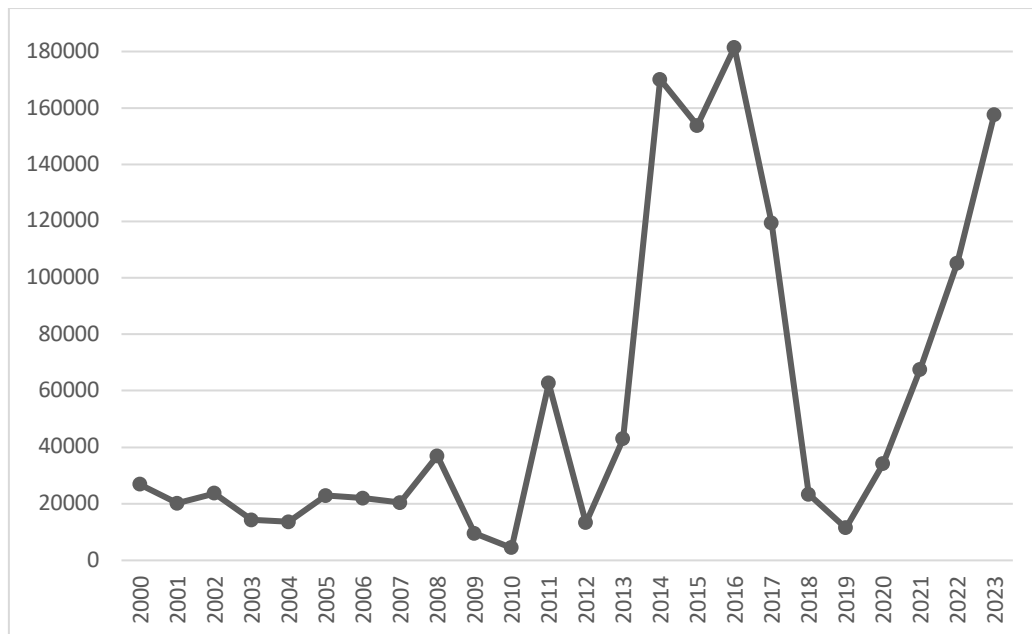
Source: official data from the Italian Ministry of the Interior (2024) collated by the author.

Lastly, a new offshore processing agreement with Albania was unveiled in November 2023. It entails the reception of up to 36,000 asylum seekers per year for five years (vulnerable groups are excluded), sent by Italy to Albania, to process their asylum applications in two new reception centres funded by Italy and operating under Italian laws. The agreement was provisionally suspended by the Albanian Constitutional Court, which subsequently validated its constitutionality (ANSA 2024). Due to its maintenance of a restrictive foreign policy framework – navy vessels in the Mediterranean, offshore externalisation in Libya, the military operation in Niger, new financial and logistical support to Tunisia, and the new agreement with Albania – the Meloni government's external policies on irregular migration also fall into the 'restrictive' category.

4. Theoretical and policy implications

The above analysis, focusing on foreign policies relating to irregular migration, allows for some considerations that are germane to this article's goals. Starting with the theoretical implications, one of the main findings is the broad bipartisanship of Italy's external dimension of irregular migration governance, a significant exception to the Left-Right divide in IR and a confirmation that path dependence exerts a strong influence on Italy's migratory foreign policy. Out of the country's 12 new governments since 2000, the vast majority (10) have adopted clearly-restrictive foreign policies (see Table 1). The only exceptions among the four centre-left governments in this article's timespan were the Letta and Renzi administrations. These can be explained by the highest number of shipwrecks and deaths at sea in recent history during their tenure, the impact of these both nationally and internationally (see El-Enany 2016; International Organization for Migration 2024b), and Rome's attempt to convince the EU to 'put its flag on Mare Nostrum' (Çetin 2015, 286).

These findings therefore directly address the article's original research question, and answer it by attesting that Italy's external dimension of irregular migration governance (its overarching stance towards maritime asylum seekers) has remained mostly the same for the past 23 years. Additionally, its specific foreign policy means have progressively cemented measures established in 2001 (deployment of navy vessels in the Mediterranean to stem maritime flows, offshore externalisation policy in Libya) while adding new ones over the years to strengthen the same approach. All of the latter are still ongoing at the time of writing (leading contributions to related EU initiatives, provision of patrol vessels to the Libyan coast guard, military operation in Niger, strengthened economic and logistical support to Tunisia to curb departures, and the inclusion of Albania as a new offshore processing country).

Consequently, restrictive external policies on irregular migration have progressively become a valence issue not so much for the Italian electorate (as per the original meaning of valence issue, see Stokes 1963), but rather for the Italian political system as a whole. To be sure, there are meaningful differences between opposing parties, including contrasting rhetoric, different levels of priority for human rights concerns, the (de)criminalisation of the status of irregular migrants, and the closure (or reopening) of ports to migrant-rescuing NGOs. These are notable differences that remain somewhat underexplored and therefore call for new research. However, despite the above, the overall external dimension and foreign policy measures bear little difference (if any), which

is partially due to electoral expediency reasons. While the resulting policy continuity across subsequent governments is not new in destination countries – including non-European ones (see Carr 2016, Abbondanza 2023) – it still challenges traditional notions pertaining to the influence of governments' political colour on their foreign policy, and validates the significance of path dependence with Italy as a case study, thus supporting this article's argument and providing a niche contribution to the theoretical literature on the Left-Right divide and path dependence.

Additionally, since Italian irregular migration policies have progressively crystallised in the twenty-first century, this article highlights three policy-related implications as well. First, the policy continuity which has emerged since 2001 cemented the multifarious risks run by the migrants themselves. These include both the physical and psychological forms of violence they have to endure, which encompass the whole human (in)security spectrum outlined by the United Nations Development Programme (1994). Due to numerous reasons comprising actual or potential persecution, war, famine, drought, poverty, environmental degradation, as well as their own desires and aspirations (de Haas 2021), undocumented migrants embark on a highly-perilous journey which endangers them in origin and transit countries alike, in addition to the dangers of maritime routes (Dastyari and Hirsch 2019). The prolonged bipartisanship of Italy's external policies on irregular maritime migration, and the related spiralling securitisation (Bello 2021), reinforces migrants' risks across the whole human security spectrum, and indirectly makes them state-sponsored due to their official nature.

Secondly, the current regional landscape is not satisfactory for Italy either, since most of its foreign policy goals are frustrated. To wit, subsequent Italian governments have made it clear that their objective is three-pronged: halt irregular flows, increase third-country repatriations, and deter human trafficking organisations from continuing their activities. As attested by the relevant literature, none of these goals has been reached (Rosina 2022). Moreover, the inability (or impossibility) to effectively stop such momentous maritime flows has also frustrated existing (though small-scale) concerns voiced by security agencies. In particular, while the likelihood that undocumented migrants may commit a terrorist attack is minuscule, it is never equal to zero. According to the latest report of the EU Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, more than a dozen irregular migrants and several asylum seekers were arrested in the EU in 2021, charged with terrorism offences (Europol 2022). From a security perspective, this means that Italy, like many destination countries, has failed to shield its borders from those few potential threats. More so, this occurs despite Rome's great power politics in the Mediterranean, Libya, Niger, Tunisia, and Albania, which has effectively extended the country's borders, as Marfleet and Cetti (2013) remind us.

Thirdly, the specific characteristics of the Italian case may offer external validity insights. While the nexus between Italy's irregular migration governance and its related foreign policy elements is still relatively unexplored (for valuable studies see Ceccorulli, Coticchia, and Gianfreda 2022; Zotti and Fassi 2020; Strazzari and Grandi 2019; Di Filippo and Palm 2018; Çetin 2015), Italy is far from being the only wealthy destination country implementing restrictive external policies irrespective of the type of government in charge. Among the many, European countries such as Denmark, France, Spain, and the United Kingdom stand out (see Finotelli and Ponzo 2023; Ceccorulli, Fassi, and

Lucarelli 2021; Carvalho 2013), as well as non-European ones including Australia, Israel, South Africa, and the United States (see Abbondanza 2023; Bloch and Chimienti 2013). Given that the bipartisanship of this particular type of foreign policy remains understudied in the disciplinary literature, along with related theoretical and policy implications, the potential external validity of this article's findings could warrant new research endeavours in the future.

Table 1. Italy's governments and the external dimension of their irregular migration policies from 2001 to 2023 inclusive.

Government	Political ideology	Type of irregular migration policy
Berlusconi II	Centre-right	Restrictive
Berlusconi III	Centre-right	Restrictive
Prodi II	Centre-left	Restrictive
Berlusconi IV	Centre-right	Restrictive
Monti	Technocratic	Restrictive
Letta	Centre-left	Unrestrictive
Renzi	Centre-left	Unrestrictive
Gentiloni	Centre-left	Restrictive
Conte I	Populist (right-leaning)	Restrictive
Conte II	Populist (left-leaning)	Restrictive
Draghi	Technocratic	Restrictive
Meloni	Right-wing	Restrictive

Source: author's own work.

5. Conclusion

This article sought to shed light on the foreign policy of irregular migration governance, and the type of political support behind it. After reviewing the influence of political affiliation on migration and foreign policy, it argued that the external dimension of irregular migration governance represents a deviation from this deep-rooted political notion, and that path dependence in foreign policy applies to irregular migration policy too. In order to pursue this argument, it examined Italy's new governments between 2000 and the present day, and in doing so it took into account the international context (especially in terms of external pressure from seaborne arrivals) as well as the country's resulting foreign policy. Lastly, it was able to draw theoretical and policy implications which call for future research on related and under-examined aspects of the nexus between foreign policy and irregular migration governance.

The main finding of this research lies in the broad political bipartisanship behind restrictive external approaches towards irregular migration flows, along with the continuity of related foreign policy elements. While some important differences ought to be acknowledged in terms of rhetoric and domestic policy (such as the criminalisation-decriminalisation of irregular migration and the closure-reopening of ports to NGOs), the

framework of Italy's foreign policy for the management of irregular migration is maintained and renewed by the vast majority of its governments, be they centre-left, centre-right, right-wing, populist, or technocratic. The foreign policy measures, in particular, are the focus of this research and are inherited, maintained, and at times strengthened by subsequent administrations. More specifically, these are: the use of the Italian navy in the Mediterranean, the externalised offshore processing policy in Libya, the military operation in Niger, support for and leading roles in EU initiatives such as Frontex, Triton, and EUNAVFOR Med, strengthened support to Tunisia, and the establishment of a new offshore processing agreement with Albania. This bipartisanship renders this type of foreign policy a valence issue for the key components of the Italian political system, similarly to what other developed destination countries have been experiencing in recent years.

The more practical implications of this condition, first and foremost, affect the migrants themselves, whose human insecurity is aggravated by any additional obstacles. But they also impact Italy's foreign and security policy, since Rome's threefold objectives of halting irregular flows, increasing third-country repatriations, and deterring human trafficking organisations are all equally frustrated. Lastly, Italy is by no means an exception in the broader (geo)political context, as several other developed destination countries experience somewhat comparable phenomena and migratory pressures, most of which have devised restrictive external policies of different kinds. In this respect, the external applicability of the Italian case study could serve as a point of departure for analogous investigations in comparable destination countries experiencing sustained flows of asylum seekers. It is therefore with such goals that this article has sought to contribute to the study of Italian foreign policy and irregular migration governance, through an innovative analysis of a highly relevant case study with a 23-year-long timeframe.

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