

Securitization of the Italian Discourse on the Libyan Conflict: an Analysis of Policy Priorities from 2011 to 2021

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Abstract

This study focuses on the evolution of Italian discourse on the Libyan conflict from 2011 to 2021, with a specific focus on the phenomenon of securitization. Drawing upon the discourse analysis of communications from prime ministers and ministers of foreign affairs, the interior and defence, this research investigates the manifestation of securitization within the framework of the Copenhagen School's theory of sectoral security. The findings reveal that securitization predominantly occurs within the societal sector of security, particularly concerning migration issues. The study uncovers notable shifts in Italy's policy approach and priorities throughout the analysed period. By providing insights into the dynamics of securitizing discourses and their implications for Italian policy making regarding Libya, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between security narratives and political realities within the realm of foreign policy.

1. Introduction

Since the establishment of the Republic, Italy's foreign policy has evolved around three interconnected circles – Atlanticism, Europeanism, and Mediterraneanism – requiring adept navigation amidst rapidly changing governments (Parsi 2016; Croci and Valigi 2013). Atlanticism covers a strong and stable alliance with the United States and NATO to counterbalance Italy's influence on economic and security matters within European powers (Croci et al., 2011). Europeanism seeks strong integration within the EU while preserving the capacity for independent action (Carbone 2011; Andreatta 2008). Mediterraneanism aims to extend Italian influence in the Mediterranean region and attain regional power status (Davidson 2011; Molnár 2019). While fully autonomous Mediterranean foreign policy faces constraints within the international system, some independent action became feasible after the Cold War, even occasionally in opposition to Western allies (Carbone 2008). Italy's foreign policy towards the Mediterranean has been intricately linked to the role the country seeks to play within the Euro-Atlantic spectrum, influenced by the governing coalition at the time. Governments prioritize either bolstering European relations or engaging in bilateral relations with the United States. However, it is evident that on certain occasions, such as issues relating to illegal migration and energy security, Italy has pursued an independent path when the government perceived that the Euro-Atlantic framework did not adequately address the situation (Alcaro 2010). Such challenges have predominantly arisen in the Mediterranean direction.

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Within the Mediterranean region, a special emphasis is placed on Libya due to historical reasons. Given the significant role Libya has historically played in Italian foreign policy, there exists a rich body of literature on bilateral relations. Scholars generally agree that the colonial period's legacy continues to influence the relationship between the two countries to this day (Bono 2005; Emiliani 2012; Borgoni and Soave 2015; Horváth 2012). Italy's interests in securing energy supplies, managing migration from Libya and fostering economic relations have led successive Italian governments to establish privileged ties with Libya, sometimes at the expense of the international community's normative expectations, opting for stability over democracy (Lombardi 2011; Varvelli 2010; Miranda 2011).

By employing software-assisted discourse analysis, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of Italian political discourse on Italian foreign policy towards Libya and of securitization surrounding it between 2011 and 2021. The study seeks to contribute to understanding how the communication of key political actors has shifted over time, thereby displaying the discursive dynamics shaping Italy's approach to Libya. Therefore, the research question guiding the paper can be phrased as follows: how has the discourse on Italy's policy towards Libya evolved from 2011 to 2021, as reflected in the communication of key political actors?

The objectives of this research are twofold. Firstly, it seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Italy's discourse on Libya has evolved over the past decade, including key themes (themes were categorized based on Buzan's sectors of security), and shifts in emphasis. Secondly, it aims to contribute to the literature on securitization theory by applying discourse analysis methodologies to the study of Italian foreign policy discourse on Libya. The study focuses on identifying patterns, similarities, and differences in the communication strategies of Italian political actors regarding Libya, with a particular emphasis on securitization discourse.

The paper unfolds as follows: an introductory section explains the reasons behind the study and summarizes the relevant characteristics of Italian foreign and security policy, after which the methodology and theoretical framework are defined. The results of the study are then presented. In this section several subcategories are used: thus speeches made by Italian securitizing actors during bilateral visits with their Libyan counterparts are examined separately from their more detailed speeches delivered in the Italian parliament. The main findings of the study are summarized in the concluding remarks.

2. Methodological remarks: discourse analysis and securitization

The theoretical framework of securitization is a valuable tool for analysing countries' foreign policy behaviour due to its comprehensive interpretive scope, encompassing areas beyond traditional security studies, such as human security and societal security (Szabó 2014). The Copenhagen School's securitization theory contends that (national) security is a discursive construct rather than an objective reality. The pivotal connection between security and speech acts marked a significant advancement in the field of security studies, prompting numerous studies exploring the role of discourse in diverse contexts (Hansen 2006; Huysmans 2006; Laustsen and Waever 2000). Political

discourse plays a pivotal role in creating and recreating legitimacy, by providing legitimacy to political institutions (including the state itself), the actions of political actors, and the politics they advocate (Burnham et al. 2008, 258). Simultaneously, it seeks to delegitimize alternative political solutions (Milliken 1999, 229).

A topic per se does not constitute a threat; rather, it acquires the status of a threat when specific public actors, referred to as security actors, ascribe this characteristic to it through their discourse, whether oral or written (Huysmans 2006, 7). The strategic use of the term 'security' holds the transformative power to shape a segment of social reality into an existential threat, as security actors reconstruct reality through persuasive rhetoric, speech, and argumentation (Balzacq et al. 2016; Balzacq 2011; Floyd 2016). The term 'existential threat' refers to a threat that directly jeopardizes the survival of the object of protection in some aspect, with the specific nature of this threat also varying across sectors. Nevertheless, considering that numerous threats in the international political arena may not directly imperil survival, it is permissible to omit the 'existential' threat, allowing for a broader consideration of factors that have the potential to disrupt collective life (Marton et al. 2015).

The process of securitization occurs when certain conditions are met, including the speech act itself, the intended audience, and the need to implement extraordinary measures (Buzan et al. 1998, 80). Securitization is distinguished by its rhetorical communications and subsequent policy decisions that facilitate the implementation of specific provisions, even if they involve restrictions of rights that would typically be deemed unacceptable. The effectiveness of securitization hinges on the securitizing actor's acceptance and legitimization of the extraordinary measures (Wæver 1993; Balzacq 2004, 2008). The paper contributes to the Copenhagen School's understanding of securitization by illustrating if and how securitizing actors within the Italian government employ rhetorical strategies to frame Libya as a security issue, thus justifying exceptional measures and policy responses. Furthermore, the paper highlights the role of discourse in legitimizing security narratives and shaping public perceptions, thereby extending the Copenhagen School's insights into the power dynamics inherent in the securitization process.

Within the context of this study, software-assisted discourse analysis is employed to investigate the political communications surrounding the Italian foreign and security policy on Libya (Libya policy) from 2011 to 2021. Potential securitizing actors (prime minister, foreign minister, interior minister, defence minister) within the Italian Libya policy during the stated period were identified, based on the assumption that their statements in their respective positions accurately represent the position of the current Italian government.

After identifying the potential securitizing actors, I constructed two distinct corpora of their speeches, obtained from open sources, which were examined using consistent criteria but with varying scopes.

Corpus1: This corpus comprises statements made by the potential securitizing actors during Italo-Libyan bilateral visits between 2011 and 2021. Apart from their symbolic significance, these visits offer a platform for discussing diverse perspectives and conflicting interests, thereby shaping international relations. Given their

mediatised nature, bilateral visits allow securitizing actors to publicly articulate their views on events, providing a platform for political discourse (N=92).

Corpus 2: Institutional sources, consisting of speeches delivered by the potential securitizing actors in the Italian Parliament's Chamber of Deputies (Camera dei Deputati) and Senate (Senato della Repubblica) between 2011 and 2021, as this public forum serves as a prominent platform for policymakers to discuss their proposed policies (N=30).

My research adopted a problem-centred approach, focusing on analysing the discourse to identify which sectors of security and in what manner securitization manifested itself between 2011 and 2021. In my research I focused on finding similarities and differences and eventual patterns regarding how and what the respective Italian securitizing actors communicated on Libya. As per the accepted literature, both quantitative and qualitative methods, aided by software-based and researcher-supervised approaches, can be utilized for corpus-based text analysis (Franzosi 2018; Kutter 2018).

For the analysis, NVivo12 software was employed to organize and code the data, after which the results were visualized and presented. The software facilitated text analysis through word-based searches, frequency, and collocation analysis. Additionally, coding matrices were constructed and linked to individuals and their political affiliations, serving as primary annotations. Hierarchical graphs were created, and cases (ministers) and codes were compared.

Table 1. Securitizing actors of subsequent Italian governments between 2011-2021

Legislation	Prime Minister	Foreign Minister	Interior Minister	Defence Minister
XVI leg. (2008-2013)	Silvio Berlusconi	Franco Frattini	Roberto Maroni	Ignazio La Russa
	Mario Monti	Giulio Terzi di Sant'Agata	Annamaria Cancellieri	Gianpaolo Di Paola
XVII leg. (2013-2018)	Enrico Letta	Emma Bonino	Angelino Alfano	Mario Mauro
	Matteo Renzi	Federica Mogherini Paolo Gentiloni	Angelino Alfano	Roberta Pinotti
	Paolo Gentiloni	Angelino Alfano	Marco Minniti	Roberta Pinotti
XVII leg. (2018-)	Giuseppe Conte I	Enzo Moavero Milanesi	Matteo Salvini	Elisabetta Trenta
	Giuseppe Conte II	Luigi Di Maio	Luciana Lamorgese	Lorenzo Guerini
	Mario Draghi	Luigi Di Maio	Luciana Lamorgese	Lorenzo Guerini

Source: own elaboration.

As the constructed corpus differed in terms of text length, target audience, and speech context, the analysis framework remained consistent across both corpora. However, the depth of the analysis varied, taking into account the unique characteristics of each corpus. Following the compilation of the corpora, a codebook was constructed and validated through a combination of deductive and inductive approaches. Main categories were established via a priori coding, based on theoretical frameworks and prior knowledge. Subsequently, additional layers of subcodes were iteratively developed during the pre-reading phase, culminating in the final code list. Adhering to methodological

standards in discourse analysis, two independent coders conducted blind coding to ensure reliability and objectivity.

By applying discourse analysis methodologies to the Italian foreign policy discourse on Libya, this paper aims to contribute to understanding how political actors construct and shape security narratives related to Libya, which in turn contributes to a broader understanding of securitization processes in international relations. The paper's focus on the intersection of discourse and security narratives within Italian foreign policy towards Libya fills a gap in the existing literature, offering insights into how security concerns are framed, legitimized, and communicated by political elites.

3. Results of the study

3.1. Statements made during official visits

During the examined decade, the statements made by defence ministers primarily focused on cooperation and stabilization efforts. Bilateral cooperation took centre stage, with only two mentions of UN activities in Libya and none regarding the European Union. Over time, the core objectives concerning Italy's engagement with Libya remained consistent – the stabilization of the country and the provision of support for capacity building within Libya. The predominant aspect of capacity building involved the training of various components of the Libyan armed forces, such as the coastguard, police, general forces and military doctors, with institutional capacity building serving as a secondary focus.

In contrast, interior ministers emphasized the EU's role, with the UN family receiving less attention. By analysing the word clouds and coding matrices of interior ministers' statements, it is evident that the EU is strongly linked to the addressing of migration issues, particularly in terms of financial support and playing a more substantial role in tackling the problem. The EU is consistently portrayed as a supportive and positive actor in dealing with external countries, including third countries from the EU's perspective. Notably, the discourse of abandonment by the EU, often present in parliamentary communication, is not evident in this international context.

The corpus also reveals a noticeable delay in Italy's policy concerning Libya. The international nature of the Libyan conflict was only addressed by interior ministers in 2018, despite the fact that the conflict had been steadily growing since 2014. Throughout, consistent statements have been made rejecting the internationalization of the conflict. Italy's primary tasks concerning Libya have remained centred on stabilizing the country, guiding it towards democratic development, combating human trafficking, and subsequently providing training to the Libyan armed forces and engaging in counter-terrorism efforts, some of which now fall under the purview of defence ministers.

Economic cooperation with Libya has emerged as a new element, though not a prominent one, in relation to defence ministers. Communications concerning the recovery of bilateral economic relations were chiefly conducted by the interior minister of the first Conte government (Luciana Lamorgese). In contrast, all other ministers (prime, foreign, interior, and defence ministers) focused on the development of the Libyan economy.

In the statements made by foreign ministers during bilateral meetings, a recurring theme was the emphasis on stabilization and pacification. Interestingly, the improvement of the security situation in Libya was not prevalent in the statements of defence ministers, whereas it was commonly highlighted in the communications of foreign ministers. Notably, the most prominent theme among the surveyed ministers was the economy. Although this aligns with the fact that foreign economic tasks fall under the jurisdiction of the minister of foreign affairs, these statements did not overwhelmingly focus on economic relations between Italy and Libya but rather on efforts to improve the economic situation in Libya. Surprisingly, energy relations, which are a crucial component of economic relations between the two countries in terms of economic security, were hardly mentioned in communications.

While economic relations between Italy and Libya were mentioned to a lesser extent, these statements primarily referred to the Italian-Libyan economic/business forum held occasionally. The proxy conflict was less emphasized in bilateral statements, primarily appearing in the context of rejecting a military solution and expressing a preference for a diplomatic approach from 2018 onwards.

Regarding international organizations, foreign ministers, similar to defence ministers, underscored the role of the UN and its affiliated bodies and institutions (e.g., the Libya envoy), while the European Union received less attention and was relegated to the background.

The statements made by prime ministers consistently demonstrated a strong commitment to stabilization efforts and the promotion of democratic transition. Additionally, tasks related to migration management, particularly prevention, were prominently addressed. However, the fight against terrorism and people smugglers received less emphasis compared to the communications of foreign ministers. Cooperation in other areas, such as health and cultural cooperation, was mentioned solely in the communications of prime ministers, although these aspects remained secondary to the overall discourse. Health cooperation primarily focused on the military sector of security, particularly involving the training of Libyan civilian and combat doctors, as well as operation of the hospital in Misrata. Notably, the COVID-19 epidemic did not feature in any form in the speeches.

Overall, the analysis of prime ministers' statements underscored the centring of their priorities around stabilization, democratic transition and migration management, with other areas of cooperation receiving comparatively less attention.

3.2. Parliamentary hearings: Interior Ministers

Of the eight Italian governments examined, three appointed technocratic (*tecnico*) interior ministers: Cancellieri in the Monti government, Lamorgese in both the second Conte government and the Draghi government. Four governments were centre-right, with interior ministers Maroni in the Berlusconi government, Salvini in the first Conte government, and ~~believ~~Alfano in the Letta and Renzi governments. Only one government was centre-left, with Minniti serving as interior minister in the Gentiloni government.

In general, the interior ministers displayed limited attention to the current situation of the conflict in Libya, with their communications primarily focused on its

societal security dimension, particularly migration issues. However, their assessment of the situation consistently included a recurrent element of considering the challenges and threats in the societal security sector from Libya's perspective, especially concerning countries to the south.

During 2011-2012, the communications of Minister of the Interior Roberto Maroni indicated that Italy lacked sufficient information about the situation in Libya, unlike the more manageable cases of Tunisia and Egypt (Ministero dell'Interno 2011a). In the Monti government, the interior minister acknowledged that they were monitoring developments but had no direct contact with the emerging Libyan centres (Ministero dell'Interno 2012a). This reflected a lag/passivity that characterized Italy's overall policy towards Libya during this period. As a result, the discourse of interior ministers in the early 2011-2013 period echoed the same hesitancy observed in Italy's approach towards Libya during that time.

A significant change in Italy's position on Libya emerged as Roberto Maroni, at the start of the conflict, suggested that the international community need not necessarily advocate a model akin to Western democracies, which might be difficult to implement in the Libyan context. Instead, the primary objective was to establish a new regime that was not hostile to Italy, Europe, and the Western community (Ministero dell'Interno 2011a). Subsequent interior ministers after Maroni focused on the importance of stabilization in Libya, in tandem with promoting democratic development, which has remained a recurring element in Italy's discourse on Libya to the present day.

Similar to the previous corpus of declarations, the idea of the EU as a foreign actor and any form of intervention remained marginal in the discourse, with the EU predominantly being discussed in the context of migration and asylum. Interior Minister Maroni emphasized that the characteristics of the new regimes emerging in Libya and North Africa depended on the EU's actions or lack thereof. However, apart from him, only Minniti mentioned the need for strategic intervention by the EU, albeit without providing a more detailed definition (Governo Italiano 2017).

Until the second Conte government, interior ministers tended to refer more to the lack of solidarity and support within the EU rather than discussing its existence. This trend shifted under Lamorgese's tenure. The most severe criticisms of the EU came from the interior minister of the Renzi government, Angelino Alfano, particularly concerning rescue operations and EU activities in the Mediterranean. It is worth noting that during the Renzi government's term, Italy held the rotating presidency of the European Union. However, proposals to modify EU migration policy in Italy's interests were not addressed in the examined speeches, despite the rotating presidency prioritizing the issue of migration at the community level.

Although the first Conte government was notably more confrontational with the EU during the period under review, its communications through the interior minister did not significantly differ from other governments. The Renzi government displayed a more critical stance towards the EU, while the Gentiloni government's approach was roughly on par with that of the first Conte government.

The issue of borders, particularly border control and central control of Libyan territory, was addressed by the ministers of defence, foreign affairs, and interior, with the interior ministers analysing the location of borders more extensively. Throughout the

discourse on Libya, a notable feature was the confusion between Italian and European borders, with Italian national borders being relegated to the background, while the issue of European borders took precedence. This led to a recurrent element of confusion between Italian and European interests.

In this context, the concept of borders expanded in scope. For instance, while Angelino Alfano still referred to Lampedusa as the border of the whole of Europe, this concept expanded further in the discourse of Marco Minniti, defining the southern border of Libya as the southern border of the whole of Europe (Governo Italiano 2017). Although Alfano did not extend the geographic borders of Europe, he presented the question of borders as a critical determinant of Europe's future trajectory, emphasizing its importance as a future issue.

Closely linked to the Italian/EU borders issue is the notion of externalization, which was a recurring aspect in the interior ministers' communications. This concept was evident in the context of EU operations and the bilateral activities of the Italian armed forces, serving as one of the most stable pillars of Italy's policy on Libya. Controlling the Libyan border (south) is perceived to be crucial for Italian national security, especially concerning efforts to combat terrorism and human trafficking.

During the study, a particular viewpoint emerged regarding the clash between national and international interests. Marco Minniti recognized the legitimacy of both national interests and the importance of acting upon them, while also emphasizing the significance of finding and maintaining a balance between national and international interests (Governo Italiano 2017). It is noteworthy that when Italian and EU interests were mentioned together, they were consistently depicted as being in synergy. Similarly, the international community and Italian interests were portrayed as conflicting with the national interests of other countries, which, according to this logic, were not considered part of the common interests of the international community. However, none of the ministers specified which countries' national interests were in conflict with Italian interests although throughout the speeches France was the most frequently mentioned country in a reference context.

The issue of the responsibility of the ministry of the interior was not a recurring topic in the interior ministers' briefings (appearing only in the reports of Cancellieri and Minniti). It is worth noting that while Cancellieri referred to her position as a technocrat rather than a politician and underscored the responsibility of parliament and politicians, Minniti emphasized his own personal responsibility (Ministero dell'Interno 2012b and 2017).

The link between migration and terrorism was not a recurring element in the discourse of any of the politicians. However, the fight against human trafficking networks emerged as the most significant common element in the communications of the interior ministers. This issue was consistently connected to the need for stabilization, seen as a prerequisite for the elimination of human trafficking networks. Additionally, the discourse frequently highlighted the southern perspective from Libya.

Cooperation with the Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa was the most distinct geographical orientation of the Italian mandate, indicating a focus on addressing issues in these regions. On the other hand, the emphasis on east-west reconciliation within Libya was a characteristic highlighted primarily by Marco Minniti.

In summary, the fight against human trafficking networks, the need for stabilization, and a focus on cooperation with the Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa were consistent themes in the discourse of interior ministers. While the link between migration and terrorism was not a prominent element, Minniti specifically emphasized the importance of east-west reconciliation within Libya.

The economic aspects of the migration issue were not consistently addressed by the interior ministers in the examined hearings. When the speeches are compared with statistics on illegal maritime arrivals in Italy, it becomes evident that during the peak of arrivals, the economic burden of the influx was only briefly mentioned, with Marco Minniti mentioning it once in the corpus. Notably, the Monti government's minister of the interior, Anna Maria Cancellieri, discussed this issue more extensively, even when the number of arrivals in Italy was much lower than in later periods. Subsequently, only Matteo Salvini mentioned the economic burden of migration, and this occurred after the number of arrivals had significantly decreased due to Minniti's Libya policy. Salvini's emphasis on the economic aspect of migration appeared to be driven by party politics rather than objective reality, reflecting his focus on votes and public opinion.

The discursive element of trafficking in human beings as a business emerged as one of the priority issues during Matteo Salvini's tenure as interior minister. However, it was not the main focus of his parliamentary hearings. Only Luciana Lamorgese mentioned trafficking as a business issue during the Draghi government, presumably influenced by Salvini having previously brought it into the Italian public discourse.

Interestingly, the analogy with Cold War Germany was used twice in the context of humanitarian aspects. In 2011, Roberto Maroni, the centre-right interior minister of the centre-right government, compared the refugee waves caused by protests in Libya and Tunisia to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Later, Angelino Alfano, the centre-right interior minister of the centre-left Letta government, likened Lampedusa to Checkpoint Charlie of the third millennium (Ministero dell'Interno, 2013).

It is important to note that considering the values represented by the political parties, the interior ministers of the League (Roberto Maroni in 2011 and Matteo Salvini in 2018-2019) placed proportionally more emphasis on the humanitarian and human rights aspects in their parliamentary discourse compared to the interior ministers of the centre-left governments. Both Salvini and Maroni considered the humanitarian emergency as a major concern in their discussions. On the other hand, the Democratic Party's Marco Minniti, serving in the Gentiloni government, emphasized Italian national interests and national security more prominently.

Overall, Marco Minniti's speeches comprehensively covered various aspects of Italy's policy towards Libya. Many elements introduced into the discourse by Minniti were subsequently reflected in the speeches of the ministers who followed him. These elements included the activities of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the stabilization of Libya, economic development in the region, support for the UN and its specialized agencies, the supply of military equipment and weapons to Libyan state entities, and the training of Libyan forces.

The results of the analysis show that a securitization approach was only partially present in the Italian political discourse on Libya. However, the link between migration and crime featured prominently in the parliamentary hearings of Matteo Salvini

(Ministero dell'interno 2018a, 2018b). During his committee hearings, Salvini repeatedly associated migration with crime, using it as a justification for adopting the new security package (*decreto sicurezza*), which tightened previous rules. This aligns with Waeber's criteria for securitization, as within the security package the range of offences that can result in the refusal or withdrawal of international protection has been expanded.

Emphasizing the threat posed by potential terrorists hiding among illegal immigrants in Italy and linking migration and transnational criminal organizations appeared in the communications of several interior ministers (and of Milanese, the foreign minister in the first Conte government (MAE, 2018)). Despite it not being the main focus of the discourse of interior ministers, Minniti, Salvini (Conte-I), and Lamorgese (Draghi government) all talked about the possibility of terrorists infiltrating migration flows. However, these discursive elements were not used to justify new extraordinary measures; rather, they referred to the existing European control mechanisms. As such, they were not considered as successful securitization but rather as steps towards securitization.

3.3. Parliamentary hearings: Defence Ministers

Of the eight Italian governments examined, four had a Democratic Party defence minister (Roberta Pinotti in the Renzi and Gentiloni governments, Lorenzo Guerini in the Conte II and Draghi governments), one from the centre-right (Ignazio La Russa in the Berlusconi government), one from the Five Star Movement (Elisabetta Trenta in the first Conte government), one from a liberal-centrist party (Mario Mauro in the Letta government), and one, the Monti government, had a defence minister who was a technocrat.

During the period analysed, discourse analysis identified the main tasks related to Italy's involvement in Libya. These tasks included the training of Libyan security forces, particularly the coast guard, efforts for stabilization, counter-terrorism measures, and actions against trafficking and organized crime. These tasks emerged consistently in the speeches and communications of the defence ministers from different political backgrounds.

During their parliamentary hearings, the defence ministers provided a more strategic approach while analysing the situation in Libya after the 2011 intervention. They contextualized the Libyan situation within a broader Mediterranean framework, indicating a broader understanding of relations and challenges in the region compared to the interior ministers.

The issue of borders was emphasized less by the defence ministers than by the interior ministers, but the extension of Libya's borders did appear in this corpus. According to Guerini, the Sahel is considered the southern border of Europe and NATO, expanding the territory's scope compared to previous discussions and briefly bringing NATO back into the discourse. This extension of borders was justified by the problems in the Sahel region, stretching up north to Libya, which supported the need for an Italian military presence in the areas south of Libya.

EU operations in Libya, such as EUBAM Libya, and in the Mediterranean, like EUNAVFOR MED Sophia and Iriini, were central to the discourse on the EU. However,

the ‘dissatisfaction’ with the EU that was present in the discourse of the interior ministers was not as prominent in the speeches of the defence ministers. Only Defence Ministers Mario Mauro (Letta government) and Elisabetta Trenta (first Conte government) stressed the lack of solidarity and support from the EU, criticizing the other EU member states for their lack of support in the transport of rescued migrants during naval operations to Italy. This discourse coincides with the period when the issue of European solidarity started gaining momentum (related to humanitarian disasters in the Mediterranean), and the first Conte government had a more confrontational foreign policy, the EU being one of its main targets. Elisabetta Trenta's speeches were particularly focused on the involvement of international organizations (UN, EU, NATO) in Libya, despite the fact that it was the first Conte government that shifted away from the traditional multilateralist focus of Italian foreign and security policy, prioritizing bilateral relations.

The European Union (EU) as a foreign policy actor, particularly its involvement in Libya and the Mediterranean, was not a prominent feature in the hearings of the defence ministers. While operations in the Mediterranean fall under the Common Foreign and Security Policy, they were discussed in terms of specific tasks rather than being assessed in a broader context. However, under the Draghi administration, the EU's external engagement was more prominently discussed. This was evident through the inclusion of the idea of Irini as the EU's strongest ‘instrument’ in Libya and an emphasis on the EU's action for economic development in the region. Guerini emphasized that the EU should play a more significant role in the economic development of the region to kick-start growth, which, in turn, would enhance European security. He identified capacity building through military means as a precondition for institutional capacity building through soft foreign policy instruments. Therefore, Guerini considered the Italian military presence in Libya as the essential starting point for all stabilization efforts (Ministero della Difesa, 2021).

As observed in the previous corpus, the United Nations (UN) remained the most important international organization for stabilization and pacification efforts in Libya, while NATO was not mentioned in relation to its activities in Libya following the 2011 intervention.

Regarding humanitarian discourse, it was most frequent during the 2011 military intervention when the centre-right defence minister Ignazio La Russa addressed the issue. Subsequently, humanitarian issues were repeatedly mentioned during the Letta government, especially in the context of the strong solidarity of Italian public opinion regarding the tragedies faced by people arriving by sea, such as those on Lampedusa. However, in the speeches of defence ministers from the Democratic Party and the Five Star Movement (M5S), humanitarian issues were emphasized less. This discrepancy did not necessarily align with the values represented in classic right-left political grouping but rather corresponded with the results of the analysis of the corpus of interior ministers.

The Italian vision of the future of Libya has evolved over time. Initially, the defence minister of the Monti government focused on the responsibility of Libyans to build their own future. However, this viewpoint changed in later speeches, with an increased emphasis on Italy's responsibility to ensure its own national interests and security, as

well as the role of the international community in Libya's future. For example, Roberta Pinotti, defence minister during the Renzi government, referred to operations as a response to potential threats and conflicts in Libya, which could lead to increased migration (Ministero della Difesa, 2014). Pinotti thus connected international intervention in Libya to migration issues in general.

While both bilateral and EU operations mentioned in the discourse primarily addressed the management of the migration problem and social security, the protection of other Italian interests linked to the economic sector of security (such as free trade and shipping routes, import-export, and energy security) was emphasized more in the context of these operations compared to the discussions by interior ministers. Some defence ministers also intertwined the military sector of security, particularly the terrorist threat, with the economic sector. The overall examination of the security's economic sector does not indicate a clear party-political pattern. Instead, it appears to be associated with different governments, with a declining order of significance as follows: the defence ministers of the second Conte government, the first Conte government, and the Renzi government introduced these aspects into the discourse.

An emphasis on patrolling the Mediterranean and related rescue work characterized the defence ministers of the three centre-left governments of the grand coalition (Letta, Renzi, Gentiloni) and the first Conte government formed after the 2018 parliamentary elections. It is worth noting that the sharp shift in the discourse is not between the centre-left governments and the Conte government but between the Letta-Renzi and Gentiloni-Conte governments. Under the Letta and Renzi governments, the focus was on the rescue work carried out by the Italian armed forces, while under Gentiloni and the first Conte government, the focus shifted to the rescue work carried out by the Libyan security forces.

National and international security and interests mostly appeared in synergy in the discourses, but under the Letta government their opposition was also evident. The European Union, as a successful political project, became politically contradictory by entrusting the protection of its common external borders to nation states.

The first Conte government initiated the addressing of external actors involved in the Libyan conflict, followed by the second Conte government and the defence minister of the Draghi government. Among the sponsor states, only France was mentioned during the first Conte government, in a rather critical tone, which reflected the tense dynamics of Italian-French relations at that time. The second Conte government raised the issue of Turkish intervention, but Guerini did not elaborate on the threat it posed to Italian national interests. However, under the Draghi government, the focus shifted to Chinese and Russian penetration in the Mediterranean, with Russia's Libya policy becoming the main obstacle to stabilization in Libya and the safeguarding of Italian national interests (Ministero della Difesa 2019, 2020, Governo Italiano 2019, 2021a).

The proxy war has been a subject in defence ministers' communications since 2018, but the elements communicated vary from government to government, showing inconsistency in this area, just like the main tasks related to Libya or the rejection of a military solution to the Libyan conflict as a whole. The internal civil war dimension of the Libyan conflict (militias fighting each other) was addressed by more ministers

before 2018, while the external dimension, particularly the proxy war, dominated after Trenta's time in the first Conte government.

The COVID-19 epidemic entered the discourse of the defence ministers later than that of the interior ministers. While the latter addressed the problems posed by COVID, mainly due to the quarantine obligation for maritime arrivals, already during the first Conte government, for defence ministers, COVID was only mentioned in the Draghi government as a factor aggravating the already complex Mediterranean security environment.

3.4. Parliamentary hearings: Foreign Ministers

Among the ministers surveyed, the party-political composition of the foreign ministers was the most diverse. Two governments had technocratic foreign ministers (Terzi in Monti, Milanese in the first Conte government), two had a foreign minister from the Five Star Movement (Di Maio in the second Conte and in the Draghi government), two governments had a centre-right foreign minister (Frattoni from PdL in the Berlusconi government, Alfano from NCD in the Gentiloni government), and two had centre-left foreign ministers (Bonino from +Europa in the Letta government, Mogherini and Gentiloni from the PD in the Renzi government).

While there is a widespread view among experts and academics that Italy reacted too late to the Libyan crisis, this perspective was not reflected at all in the Berlusconi government's communications. The foreign minister Franco Frattini, who played a crucial role in managing the crisis, repeatedly emphasized the importance of a rapid response, including in the context of the Italian contribution to UN and NATO action. In contrast, what the Berlusconi government's foreign and defence ministers described as a success was much more modest: both La Russa and Frattini identified the primary success as bringing the military intervention under the NATO umbrella.

The analysis also revealed that the issue of morality was mainly addressed by foreign ministers, particularly in the context of the 2011 intervention. Foreign Minister Frattini, during that time, raised concerns about neo-colonialism as a socio-cultural factor that could hinder the intervention. However, he emphasized that this issue was resolved when the Libyan National Transitional Council (CNT) requested Italy's assistance, stating that Italy had a moral obligation to help Libya (Governo Italiano 2021b). Frattini consistently used the CNT's request as justification for Italy's involvement in the intervention, rejecting any notion that Italy's decision was influenced by external pressure, particularly from the United States.

It is important to note that although the foreign minister's discourse on intervention appeared value-based, the actual foreign policy stance was fundamentally driven by national interests. The interest-based aspect of the intervention was explicitly mentioned in Frattini's later speech, where he acknowledged that Italy's participation was also motivated by concerns about becoming isolated in the Mediterranean and potential consequences for energy contracts and Italian companies. This highlighted the link between the intervention and the economic sector of security, further reinforcing the intertwining of moral obligation and national interests in the decision-making process (Governo Italiano 2021b).

In summary, the discourse on the Libyan intervention exhibited a complex interplay of moral considerations and national interests, with foreign ministers framing the intervention in moral terms while being mindful of Italy's economic and strategic interests in the region. This duality underscored the multi-dimensional nature of Italy's foreign policy approach during the Libyan crisis.

The image of Italy assuming a leading role in managing the situation in Libya was a recurring theme in the communications of the foreign ministers. This portrayal persisted through every foreign minister's tenure until the first Conte government, formed after the 2018 elections, after which it gradually faded. However, statistical data suggest a different reality, with a decline in Italian influence, particularly in the security sector of the economy, between 2011 and 2018. This discrepancy between communication and reality indicates that there may have been a disconnect between public messaging and actual outcomes during this period.

Former Foreign Minister Frattini positioned Italy on par with major international partners, emphasizing Italy's significant role in assisting Libya during the Arab Spring events. However, this assessment appears to be somewhat distorted and potentially driven by domestic political considerations. Former Foreign Minister Terzi stated that Italy is Libya's primary partner, while Bonino emphasized Italy's political and moral obligation to take the lead in Libya, highlighting Italy's unique experience in the country compared to other nations.

Under the Renzi government, both Federica Mogherini and Paolo Gentiloni presented Libya as the most pressing challenge for Italy, both politically and geographically, and asserted that Italy served as a reference point for other international actors. Gentiloni even claimed that the stabilization efforts were coordinated by Italy and recognized by all, despite the central role of the UN in the foreign minister's discourse regarding stabilization efforts and Italy's support for the UN. This apparent contradiction raises questions about the coherence of Italy's foreign policy messaging during that period. Similarly, Alfano continued the pattern of communication, asserting that Italy was the main actor in stabilizing Libya and promoting human rights in the country.

In summary, Italian foreign ministers consistently projected Italy as a leading actor in managing the Libyan crisis, despite a disconnect between this image and Italy's actual influence on the ground. This dissonance underscores the intricacies of foreign policy messaging, emphasizing the need for a more nuanced and coherent approach in communicating Italy's role in addressing regional challenges.

The emphasis on Italian leadership was coupled with a shared responsibility narrative from the foreign ministers. However, they distributed the responsibility for Libya's management, particularly in terms of stabilization, among various actors. Former Foreign Minister Terzi attributed responsibility exclusively to 'other countries' (MAE 2012). In contrast, the Renzi government attributed responsibility to both the international community and the Libyans, with an implicit recognition of the EU's role (especially post-2018).

Notably, a shift occurred during the first Conte government, when the foreign minister had to clarify Italy's position in Libya, emphasizing that Italy was not acting in isolation. Subsequently, Foreign Minister Di Maio acknowledged that while Italy had

historical ties, achieving certain objectives (e.g., obtaining the exequatur of the Benghazi consulate) required the support of multilateral forums (MAE 2021).

Throughout their discussions on Libya, all foreign ministers focused on the topic of stabilization. Without exception, they unanimously emphasized that stabilization efforts should be coordinated by the UN, and Italy's support for this process was deemed to be in the national security interests of the entire Mediterranean region. Notably, the role of other international actors such as NATO and the EU, crucial for Italian national security, evolved over time. Former Foreign Minister Frattini initially envisioned NATO playing a supporting role to the UN in the reconstruction process after the intervention. He also mentioned the training of Libyan forces primarily in the context of the UN. However, later communications placed more emphasis on national interests in the training of Libyan forces. Mention of NATO's role in Libya dwindled, and when it was brought up, it was related to NATO's involvement in the reform of the Libyan security sector without being a focal point of communication.

In summary, the foreign ministers consistently discussed the importance of stabilization in Libya and emphasized the UN's role in coordinating these efforts. The perception of responsibility and the roles of other international actors, such as NATO and the EU, shifted over time in their communications, reflecting the evolving dynamics of the Libyan conflict and Italy's foreign policy priorities.

According to Frattini, the EU should be the primary political partner in the Libya of the future, while Italy should maintain its position as the foremost economic partner through bilateral relations. The EU's role in foreign policy was naturally a central aspect in the communication of foreign ministers, considering the entire corpus. However, in practice, the EU played a secondary role compared to the UN and Italian bilateral initiatives in addressing the Libyan situation.

Consistent with the discourse of the interior ministers, Italy's policy on Libya emphasized the EU's involvement in addressing migration and refugee issues, as well as through civilian and military missions. Except for the Monti government, all subsequent governments addressed the EU's external action, or the need for it, often referring to discussions with the Foreign and Security Policy representative or in the Foreign Affairs Council.

A significant portion of the discourse on EU foreign policy has revolved around promoting the EU's role as a security provider and enhancing its engagement in Libyan affairs. Specifically in the context of Libya, the EU's involvement has been evident in activities related to institution building within Libya, fostering economic relations with the government of national unity, and enforcing the arms embargo through the Irini operation.

Regarding Libya, Italy has put forth demands for the EU to revise its sanctions regime to target external actors intervening in the conflict, to establish European strategic autonomy, and to strengthen the European defence industry. The proposal for an EU Special Envoy for Libya initially received ambiguous support ('we are ready to discuss the issue'), but the later Italian position was that the role should be filled by an Italian to avoid discrediting it.

The intensity of the discourse on the EU's foreign policy role has fluctuated over time. After the events of 2011, the discourse on this subject diminished but regained

momentum from 2018 onwards. Notably, the grand coalition governments led by the Democratic Party (PD) were more focused on EU foreign policy than migration and refugee policy in relation to Libya.¹

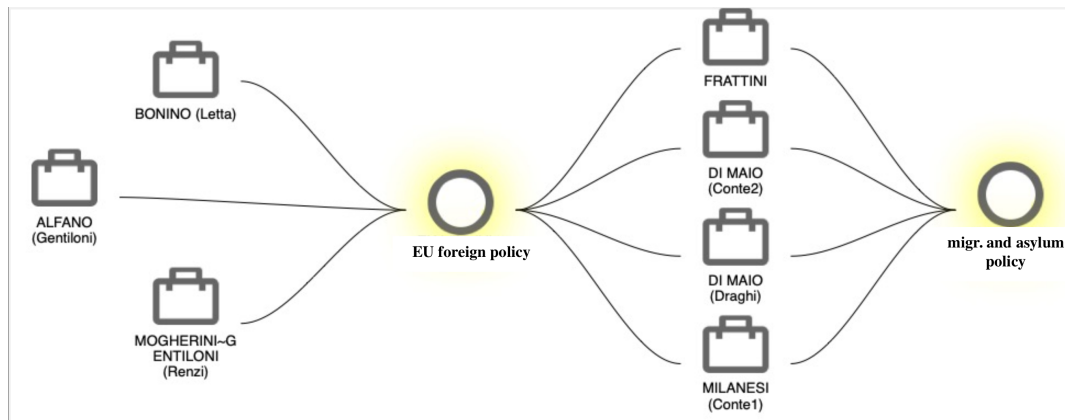
Criticisms of EU action, particularly regarding solidarity and insufficient support, emerged during the first Conte government and continued to a lesser extent under the second Conte and Draghi governments. This stands in contrast to the communication from the interior ministers, where negative criticism of the EU's actions on Libya was more prevalent until the second Conte government, and then became more positive. In the case of the foreign ministers, criticisms of the EU's actions began with the first Conte government, and none of the foreign ministers emphasized EU support in their communications. However, strong EU criticism during the first Conte government was also reflected in the discourse of the foreign ministers.

The focus on seeking a negotiated solution to the military conflict, including a cease-fire and rejection of a military solution, re-emerged during the Renzi government's communications. However, at that time, it was still primarily linked to the internal, civil war nature of the Libyan situation. The emphasis on a negotiated settlement of the military conflict was a recurring theme during the Berlusconi, Renzi, and Conte I-II governments, which aligns with the internationalization of the Libyan conflict. Only the Conte governments started addressing the proxy nature of the conflict.

The involvement of external actors in the Libyan conflict was mentioned relatively early in the communications of foreign ministers, particularly during the Monti government, where only the involvement of neighbouring countries was addressed. The issue of regional involvement was also highlighted by the foreign ministers of the Renzi government, although it was considered to be diminishing in intensity at that time. From the first Conte government onwards, the topic of external interference gained more prominence in the communications of foreign ministers and became a recurring element. Notably, during the period under review, the Libya policy of the Gentiloni government utilized proxies to promote national interests, particularly in stopping migration through proxies, while Alfano and the key figure in Libya policy, Interior Minister Marco Minniti, did not touch upon external interveners in their communications.

Since 2018, references to external interveners have been closely tied to the rejection of a military solution, the emphasis on multilateral dialogue involving the UN and international conferences on Libya, and the need for stabilization. Of the external actors involved in the conflict, France was the most frequently discussed, especially during the first Conte government, which was characterized by strained relations with France throughout that period. Turkey's involvement was mentioned to a lesser extent, and the other sponsor states were not explicitly mentioned as sponsor states in communications. It is noteworthy that while relations with France have been analysed in detail, Turkey has not been seen as a greater threat to Italian interests in Libya than France since 2020.

¹ The graph shows which governments' foreign ministers dealt with EU foreign policy AND migration and asylum policy during their parliamentary hearings, and which governments dealt only with EU foreign policy.

Figure 1. Foreign ministers' communications on EU immigration and foreign policy

Source: own elaboration. The graph shows which governments' foreign ministers dealt with EU foreign policy AND migration and asylum policy during their parliamentary hearings, and which governments dealt only with EU foreign policy.

The first Conte government initiated more detailed communications on the two main internal actors in the Libyan conflict (Sarraj - Government of National Unity, Haftar - LNA), despite substantive engagement with Haftar dating back to the Gentiloni government. The policy of equidistance, developed during the first Conte government, was later refuted by Conte's Foreign Minister Milanese himself. While acknowledging that Italy's strategy involved negotiations with all parties, he explained that once one of the parties is recognized by Italy as an official partner (in this case, the Government of National Unity), equidistance is no longer possible, as they are automatically closer to the recognized party.

In the discourse on Libya, the challenges in the economic and social sectors of security were given roughly equal weight, indicating that Italy's foreign policy on Libya does not solely focus on economic interests, unlike Hungary's. All foreign ministers were more concerned with managing and stopping illegal migration, the greatest challenge in the societal security sector, rather than the economic sector of security. The governments with the least economic focus were the grand coalition governments led by the centre-left PD (Letta, Renzi, Gentiloni). The discourse on energy security had relatively low prominence initially but started to increase under the first Conte government, surpassing non-energy trade in importance from the second Conte government onwards. However, this increase in discourse did not necessarily parallel the rise in oil and gas imports from Libya, as changes in the balance of power in the Libyan conflict also affected energy production.

A study of the party-political affiliation of ministers revealed similar results to the corpus of interior ministers: humanitarian discursive elements in the communications of centre-left foreign ministers (Bonino, Mogherini/Gentiloni) were proportionally less prominent than in the communications of centre-right and technocratic ministers.

4. Summary and discussion

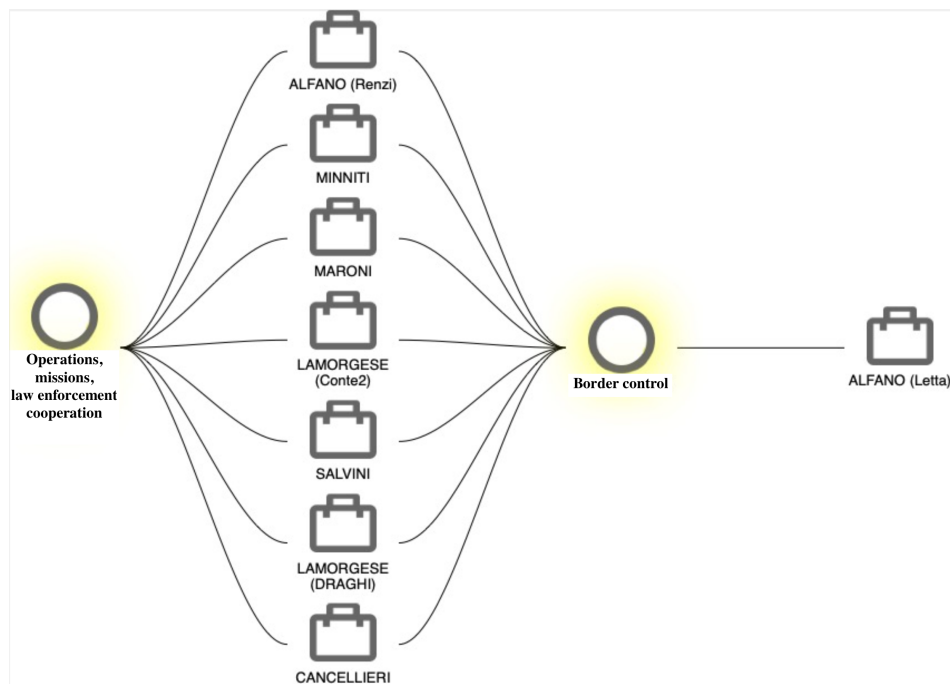
This study offers a detailed exploration of Italian political discourse surrounding Libya, spanning the period from 2011 to 2021. Through the analysis of speeches and statements by key political actors, the paper sheds light on the evolving narratives, priorities, and

policy orientations vis-à-vis Libya. By employing software-assisted discourse analysis within the framework of securitization theory, the study uncovers underlying trends and shifts in Italian foreign policy discourse.

The paper reveals a consistent emphasis on stabilizing Libya, combating human trafficking networks, and addressing terrorism. While border control remains a significant concern, discourse extends beyond national borders to encompass broader European and Libyan contexts. Additionally, the concept of externalization, particularly within the EU framework, emerges as a prominent theme, reflecting Italy's engagement in multilateral efforts to address Libyan challenges.

Italy's interaction with international actors in navigating the Libyan crisis reflects dynamic diplomacy. The United Nations emerges as a central coordinator of stabilization efforts, while the EU focuses on migration-related issues. Despite criticisms voiced by interior ministers regarding the EU's actions, there are instances of acknowledgment of solidarity and support, indicating a nuanced engagement with global counterparts. Interior ministers criticized the EU on Libya, but surprisingly, under the otherwise Eurosceptic second Conte government, some acknowledgment of solidarity and support emerged. Humanitarian references in parliamentary hearings were more prominent for centre-right ministers than for centre-left or technocratic ministers, but this was not the case for bilateral statements.

Figure 2. Interior ministers' communications on border control and EU operations



Source: own elaboration. The figure shows which governments' interior ministers have linked border control tasks to EU operations.

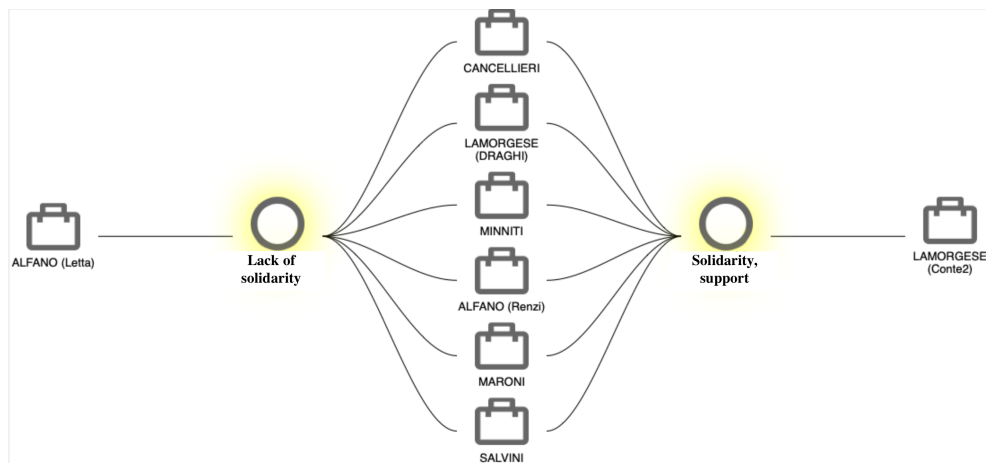
The internationalization of the conflict in Libya became evident during the first Conte government, as observed in parliamentary hearings. Gentiloni's actions were indicative of a proxy-type conflict in Libya. The main discourse in this proxy conflict revolved around rejecting a military solution and calling for the withdrawal of foreign

interventionists, with Italy positioning itself as a non-party in the conflict. Before 2018, Italy was strongly represented as an indispensable actor in resolving the Libyan crisis, particularly in foreign ministers' communications. However, as the discourse on the internationalization of the conflict emerged, the emphasis on Italian leadership diminished. Of all the states involved, France was the most discussed, especially during the first Conte government, but Russia was the only one mentioned later as an obstacle to Italian interests. Although government communications on Libya were generally unified, there were instances when ministers in the same government held different positions. In the hearings in the committees, criticisms of a party-political nature played a marginal role, and from the ministerial side – if it was mentioned at all – Italian domestic policy was only presented in the government-opposition split and typically referred to the constructive contribution of the opposition parties.

Throughout the examined period, the discourse on Libya underwent notable transformations, influenced by changes in domestic political dynamics and the escalation of the conflict. Notable turning points were under Minister Minniti for the interior ministers, Milanese for the foreign ministers and Trenta for the defence ministers (the latter two both members of the first Conte government). The latter two were more rhetorical turning points, reflecting, rather than a real change of direction in Italian Libya policy, the changes in domestic political power relations after the 2018 parliamentary elections and the intensification of the Libyan conflict, which then reached internationalization level.

While the phenomenon of securitization is only partially evident in the discourse analysed, the study underscores the complex interplay between security narratives and political realities. While there is a broad consensus on the securitization of migration within Italy, the discourse on Libya demonstrates a nuanced engagement with security issues, with a predominant focus on the societal sector of security (as defined by Barry Buzan's theoretical framework) rather than a comprehensive securitization of bilateral relations. The only partial presence of securitization can be attributed to the fact that the two major corpus groups under study are not primarily aimed at the domestic electorate. Bilateral statements are used to highlight the current focus of bilateral relations on the international public, while committee hearings, although publicly available, are primarily aimed at Members of Parliament and Senators. An important aspect of securitization is that it addresses citizens excluded from power, who do not have access to classified information available to the executive.

Figure 3. Interior ministers' communications on EU solidarity/lack thereof



Source: own elaboration. The figure shows which governments' interior ministers criticised EU migration and asylum policies during their parliamentary hearings, and which governments' interior ministers were more concerned about the existence of solidarity.

The speech act justifies exceptional measures, and without such measures successful securitization cannot be achieved: it would only be considered a move to securitize. All of the ministers surveyed have the potential to be securitizing actors, but the use of securitizing elements in the communication of the interior ministers was the most common, particularly in the societal sector of security.

Securitization efforts were largely aligned with the League's domestic policy goals. Between 2011 and 2021, there was a notable increase in the perception of migration as a threat, and support for anti-immigration parties also saw a sharp rise, which allowed the League to attract new voters and expand its support base beyond its traditional constituents. The fight against transnational criminal organizations was not limited to a specific ministerial portfolio; rather, it was discussed by ministers of the interior, foreign affairs, and defence. The concept of security was emphasized in the speeches of the first Conte government by both the minister of the interior, Salvini, and the minister of defence, Trenta. They focused on the security of the Italian people rather than solely the security of the Italian state, aligning with the Copenhagen school of thought, where the shift from state security to the security of individuals is considered significant in the securitization process (Wæver 1995: 47-48, Buzan and Wæver 2003).

This study contributes to understanding Italy's foreign policy dynamics, as well as broader debates on securitization theory. By illuminating the multifaceted nature of Italian discourse on Libya, the study opens avenues for further research on the intersection of security narratives, political discourse, and policy outcomes. Future studies could delve deeper into the dynamics of securitization within Italian domestic politics and its implications for regional stability and security governance. In summary, the analysis provides insights into the Italian discourse on Libya, enhancing our understanding of foreign policy dynamics within the broader international context.

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