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A Loss of Purpose? Sartori and the Current State of Political Science

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Abstract

This article revisits Giovanni Sartori's seminal critique of political science, examining its relevance in the contemporary context. It acknowledges the significant advancements in political science since the early 1990s, particularly in the sophistication of concepts, methods, and data and questions the idea that social sciences can match the 'hard' sciences. Sartori's four identified errors — parochialism, misclassification, degreeism, and conceptual stretching — are critically engaged with, providing a nuanced assessment of their persistence and evolution over time. The article, originally conceived as a lecture for the Annual Congress of the Società Italiana di Scienza Politica, adopts an autobiographical perspective to extend Sartori's critique to broader contemporary issues in political science, advocating for a more constructive approach in addressing these enduring challenges.

1. Introduction

Let me begin by just stating how extremely honoured I am to be here today with you on the occasion of your conference. I do not mean this as merely a formal expression of thanks, but as something that reflects deeper feelings of gratitude. The reason is quite straightforward: from early on in my intellectual life, I have been highly influenced by foundational works of political science authored by Italian scholars; I still believe in the lasting impact of these works on my thinking, but also more broadly on my understanding of what it is to be a social scientist today. Which is why I thought it would be appropriate for me today to use this talk as an opportunity to reflect on our discipline, political science, and its evolution over the past thirty years. I will do so taking as my starting point the work of the most influential Italian political scientist of our time, Giovanni Sartori.

The title of my talk, *A loss of purpose*, lifts a sentence from a well-known and oft-cited article of his, "Comparing and Miscomparing" (Sartori, 1991).[1] It is effectively both a sequel and an update of an earlier article, his famous piece on "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics" published twenty years earlier, in 1970, still taught in comparative politics seminars across the world and very widely cited (Sartori, 1970).[2] It is indeed, one of these rare articles that have defied the test of time.

[1] This article has garnered 1,211 citations according to Google Scholar, as of January 2024.
[2] It has 5,262 citations on Google Scholar, as of January 2024.

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In those two articles, separated by more than twenty years, Sartori articulates a pointed critique about the way most political scientists use concepts; although his focus was on comparative politics, his points apply broadly to political science as a whole and even beyond, including political sociology and political economy. He argues that we use concepts in a way that is often inappropriate and ultimately misleading, effectively tainting our analysis and undermining our findings. In his words, "a growing cause of frustration and failure is the undetected proliferation of … nonexistent aggregates, which are bound to defy … any and all attempts at law-like generalizations." He concludes that "vis-à-vis the high hopes of three decades ago, comparative politics is, to say the least, a disappointment" Sartori (1970: 255).

Like many political scientists, Sartori shared the idea that the study of politics should aspire to the scientific ideal; that is, it should produce law-like generalizations. Despite some contestation, mostly from the field of political philosophy, this objective remains the driving force behind the enterprise of political science. Yet, despite the considerable expansion of political science that had taken place between the 1970s and the 1990s, Sartori remained pessimistic. He did not see political science progressing in the right direction, and he attempted to explain this failure by identifying fundamental errors with the use of concepts.

Hence my question: is Sartori's critique valid today? In many ways it is not. Political science is much more sophisticated in its use of concepts, methods, and data compared to where it was in the early 1990s, let alone the 1970s. In fact, reading Sartori's piece, it is easy to detect a tone that we often associate with an aging man's rant, what we would nowadays describe as an "OK Boomer" type of tone. As far as I am able recall at least, this must have been my reaction when I first began to read this article back in 1991. I was then a graduate student in my twenties, beginning to research my dissertation. All too naturally perhaps, I was disinclined to pay too much attention to this kind of complaint.

But though Sartori's style might be far from ideal, it would be wrong to dismiss his critique. If anything, he sought to make sense of our inability to achieve the standards of the so-called hard sciences. And who would disagree that this is a goal that we have yet to achieve? In fact, it would be hard to dismiss the obvious fact that despite our growing sophistication, social scientists have still not achieved the kind of quantum leap that, say, the either the life sciences or the study of the physical sciences have achieved in the past. We do know more than we knew about the world of politics in the 1990s or the 1970s and yet, our progress appears to be tiny in comparison with these areas of research.

Now, my goal today is not to discuss why the social sciences are not scientific in the same way that the life or physical sciences are. Despite the rising tide of attacks against science, the social legitimacy it confers, let alone its overall contribution to human development, remains, thankfully, evident. It is thus completely understandable to try to emulate its ways when studying politics and society. At the same time, however, we have placed ourselves in a kind of trap by setting standards that might well prove impossible to achieve. But exploring these critical issues is a different talk from what I have prepared today.

Instead, I would like to focus on Sartori's diagnosis, which strikes me as both relevant and incomplete. Sartori focused on concepts, and it is true that concepts are the building blocks of any analytical enterprise. Unlike "hard" sciences, where concepts are

generally precise, consensus-laden contraptions produced by scientists in the glorious isolation of their labs, the social sciences suffer from the problem of natural categories, a term popularized by Emile Durkheim (Schmaus, 1998). We inherit most of our concepts from society and we thus rely on terms that are often imprecise and contested, such as democracy, populism, or civil war. It is just very hard to replace these concepts with more appropriate ones because the way we think about the political world is permeated by the political world. We are in a loop.

But that is not Sartori's point. So let me take up his critique. He reminds us that the point of comparing is to control; it is, in other words, an approximative adaptation of the experimental logic on questions of political and social significance. In other words, he saw the qualitative, small-N comparative politics of his time as a substitute for the experimental method which he thought was out of reach. Given this condition, his critique focused on four errors: parochialism, misclassification, degreeism, and conceptual stretching.

What did Sartori mean by those terms?

By **parochialism** he referred to single country case studies done in a theoretical vacuum, using local terms that were arbitrary and meaningless from a broader, theoretical and comparative perspective. The example he used was of a study of coalition government in a non-parliamentary system, then generalized to include all political systems.

By **conceptual stretching**, he pointed to the creation of artificial categories through the broadening of concepts meant to increase their empirical capacity. His examples were concepts such as constitution, pluralism, or mobilization that were used so broadly as to contain within them a host of heterogenous, even contradictory phenomena.

By **misclassification**, he meant the misallocation of empirical cases to existing categories, real or artificial—what we could describe today as miscoding. He supplied the example of single-party systems that contained both dominant party systems in western democracies and authoritarian single-party systems, an example suggesting that misclassification is not a mere error of coding, but the flip side of conceptual stretching.

Lastly, by **degreeism**, he castigated the replacement of binary concepts by categorical ones and provided the example of coding democracy on a continuum a practice that, in his mind, caused concepts to lose their substance.

Is Sartori's critique still valid—or to put it otherwise, are the problems he identified still with us? The answer is both No and Yes.

On one side, some of these problems, like parochialism, appear less acute today. Parochial case studies do not get much traction nowadays and there is much more awareness of how concepts that we might take for granted in specific contexts are just products of our own societies and do not apply everywhere. In contrast, some other problems are not thought as problems at all. Most political scientists consider that democracy is best approached on a continuum rather than being a binary concept: witness V-Dem.

Yet, in between these two extremes, I would argue that we still suffer from many of the afflictions highlighted by Sartori. Many of our concepts have an artificial flavour to them and we often rely on problematic contraptions so that we can conduct certain types of empirical analysis, resulting in considerable measurement bias. If anything, the problem is amplified given the massive use of datasets. I could give you many examples, but I will spare you.

I would argue, in short, the evolution of political science since the early nineties has been quite spectacular, and yet we have failed to solve some of the problems identified by Sartori.

Normally I would provide a few examples and stop here, but the organizers asked me to speak for 40 to 45 minutes and on top of it, I would like to be constructive rather than just critical! So, what I want to do is to take some liberties with Sartori's critique and broaden his four problems to capture some larger issues. In other words, I propose to conceptually stretch Sartori.

I would like to argue that his critique of parochialism can be broadened to apply to the uses of theory, conceptual stretching to the construction of concepts, and misclassification and degreeism to measurement and operationalization. By doing this, I will try to discuss current practices in a broader and perhaps more meaningful and constructive way (Table 1).

However, and here is the catch, I thought that rather discuss our current practices in an impersonal, dry, and let's recognize it probably dull way, I should take advantage of this occasion to rely on my own experience and professional trajectory as a source for examples. This way, I could hope to make my talk if not more interesting, at least more entertaining.

Depending on how I count it, I have been actively involved in the study of politics either for over forty years, since I began my undergraduate studies at the University of Athens in 1981 or exactly thirty years since I began my professional career as an assistant professor at Ohio State University in September 1993. These are significant numbers, and they ought to bestow, at least in theory, the gift, if not of wisdom, at least of experience--an additional reason being that in those forty years I have moved between several cities, countries, and continents: from Athens to Chicago, to Columbus, Ohio, to New York, back to Chicago, and then on to New Haven, Connecticut and since five years ago to Oxford, in the United Kingdom. So let me begin, by adopting the format of this life journey.

Table 1. Stretching Sartori's Concepts

Sartori's categories	Broader category
Parochialism	Theory
Conceptual stretching	Concepts
Misclassification & Degreeism	Measurement & Operationalization

Source: own elaboration

2. Athens

As a high school student in Athens, I did not even suspect the existence of a political science discipline, let alone professional occupation. On the one hand, politics seemed to be both highly partisan and ideological, hence not amenable to a cool-headed, even less scientific approach. Because our memory is so short, we tend to believe presently that we live in an era of unprecedented polarization. Yet this is hardly the case. When I was growing up, in Greece during the 1980s, I went through a time of extreme polarization. For example, it was quite common for people to place a party flag on their window or balcony

in order to publicly declare their partisan affiliation. Parties were able to mobilize tens of thousands of people and organize humongous rallies. I still remember a question I got from a classmate when I was 13 years old: "What are you?" What he meant by this question was which party I identified with and support. It was almost unthinkable not to be partisan.

Not surprisingly, such a high level of politicization made partisan bias a universal affliction: how could one seriously claim to be an unbiased and objective student of politics? Furthermore, with such a high degree of interest in politics and constant partisan mobilization, everyone had come to believe that they had become experts in politics. But when everyone is an expert, there really is no room for real expertise. Political science, at least for those who had heard of it, was thought to be either a stupid pursuit or an outright fraud, either propaganda or opportunism, a way to get into politics and gain an office or a job. In short, the idea that a person would get paid to study politics was considered either hilarious or suspect. No wonder, no one claimed to be a political scientist.

So, I did not know of political science's existence, but being nevertheless fascinated by politics, I thought that a good compromise would be to study history. History was much more legitimate than political science, both because this was discipline with a long pedigree and because to study the past (the more remote the better) was seen as somehow safer from the ravages of partisan bias. Unfortunately for me, the discipline of history in Greece was positioned in the Faculty of Philosophy, which was also a misnomer. In fact, what the Faculty of Philosophy did was train philologists. And because philologists were at the time assured of a public job as high school teachers of ancient Greek, getting into the Faculty of Philosophy required a stellar performance at the university entrance exams, which in turn entailed an extremely high capacity for memorization of ancient Greek that I was simply unwilling to contemplate or incapable of achieving. As a result, I failed in the highly competitive exams and through the system's bizarre allocation process I ended up being admitted to the department of Public Law in the Law Faculty, effectively a sort of second-rate Law School.

As I was going to find out throughout in my life, there is almost always fortune hiding in misfortune. It turned out that the department of Public Law was being transformed at that exact time into a department of "Political Science and Public Administration." In this context, it had just hired for that purpose two young "modern political scientists" fresh off the boat from the University of California, Berkeley and Harvard, respectively. They were smart, young, enthusiastic, and up to date in political science. I was, therefore, able to receive a high-quality introduction to American-style political science—with a welcome twist to boot. Because one of these political scientists was a historian of political ideas and the other an empirical political scientist using data analysis to make sense of modern Greek history, I learned that political science could combine (a) ideas with data, (b) data analysis with qualitative and historical approaches, and (c) an abstract scientific approach with a passion for real politics. To put it in different words, I realized that one could be at once parochial (in the sense of being motivated by the politics of a specific place and grounded in its messy reality) and theoretically motivated and scientific. Of course, I would only be able put this insight into words much later. But there is no doubt in my mind that I absorbed these lessons during my

undergraduate studies in an indirect but deep way, because of this unexpected education for which I remain extremely grateful.[3]

To put in it Sartori's terms then, what I took out from Athens was a positive version of parochialism: one that could be both theoretically motivated and passion-driven.

3. Chicago

Needless to say, I found my undergraduate experience to be totally eye-opening. Naturally, I wanted more, and my professors were happy to help, by encouraging me to apply to the top departments in the United States. In those pre-internet times, figuring out this process was almost impossible; the United States felt less like a different country and more like a different planet. The result was that, outside sciences and engineering, very few people applied from abroad and, when they did, the outcome was usually negative; it was just terribly hard to crack the social "code" of the application process. That turned out to be almost my own experience. I applied to a dozen great departments only to be soundly rejected by all. I then took two years off, served my compulsory military service in the Greek Navy, improved my English, studied harder for the GRE exams, and applied again. Again, I was rejected by everyone, but two departments. One of those was the department of Political Science at the University of Chicago. With the help of a Fulbright fellowship, I was able to pack my bags and fly to the United States for the first time of my life. That was in August 1988.

The University of Chicago was perhaps the hardest but also the best experience of my life. It felt like a boot camp that made the Greek Navy pale by comparison. There was no room at the time for failure and failure could easily result from a middling performance in a single class. At the same time, this was also a place that had assembled some of the most creative minds of the time in political science, and where the dominant ethos was that of ambitious, almost unrestricted, open-ended exploration. The department encouraged us students to explore our interests with rigor but with no concern whatsoever for professional etiquette or hierarchy. The goal was to come up with the best possible ideas rather than merely get a job. Indeed, like many of my classmates, I did not expect to find an academic job at the end of my studies: the conventional wisdom at the time was that there were very few academic jobs available anyway; I thought that I would use my graduate studies to write a thesis (i.e. a book) and eventually find an interesting non-academic job. As a result, I felt free to be as creative as I wished to be. I was inspired by my professors, people like, Adam Przeworski whose books *Paper Stones* and *Capitalism and Social Democracy* merged history, mathematical models, and empirical political science; David Laitin who used ethnographic fieldwork with an experimental bent in places like Somalia, Nigeria, and Catalonia to study political culture; Jon Elster whose book *Making Sense of Marx* used rational choice theory to reformulate Marx's theories; Bernard Manin who explored the evolution of our understandings of key political concepts like representation; and Mark Hansen who applied hypothesis testing in a way that was intuitive and stimulating—among many others.

[3] This is a great opportunity to thank here my two teachers: George Th. Mavrogordatos and Paschalis Kitromilidis.

I thus ended up with a thesis that felt completely idiosyncratic and outside the main trends of the time, a study of how Catholic parties emerged in 19th century Europe. I did so using a combination of historical research with rational choice theory. I later realized that in most other departments at the time I would have been discouraged from blending two approaches that were widely perceived to be contradictory to each other and, what is more, on a topic that struck most people as unusual or plain eccentric. But rational choice theory, like many of the approaches we use, is open-ended. When done right, it boils down to a set of insights that helps you decide how to ask your questions, what kind of data you need, and how to organize it and use it to answer your questions; it does not tell you which questions to ask nor does it suggest what the answers are before you do the research. Rational choice theory told me that political actors tend to maximize their preferred goals, but it did not tell me who those political actors were in the first place and what their preferred goals actually were. This had to be ascertained by historical research. In contrast, existing accounts of Catholic parties tended to assume who the actors and their preferences were. These assumptions turned out to be incorrect for reasons that are too lengthy to explain here—a classic case of Sartori's misclassification.

In short, what I learned in Chicago was to question existing accounts and classifications by plunging deeper into context and data—that is, to recognize and correct misclassification. And a way to do this, was to imaginatively stretch concepts—in my case to broaden the concept of political entrepreneurs to include social actors that had been marginalized in existing accounts, such as the low clergy and the lay Catholic people. What I also took away from Chicago was the willingness to be bold and take risks, to prioritize the question over the method and the data, and to come up with new concepts even if that meant raising the bar of empirical validation. Lastly, I learned how to combine new and old methods in creative new ways.

4. Columbus

Contrary to my initial expectations, I was able to land an academic job, albeit in a rather unlikely place, at Ohio State University. I felt very fortunate. This was back in 1993 and it was hard to think of a department that was as "square" as this one, and a university more unlike Chicago. Yet, the fact that this department was willing to take a chance on me even though my work must have looked so different from what they were used to, meant that they were eager to diversify. Given that we inhabit a discipline where our approaches are imperfect, there is always something to gain by bringing together people who deploy different methods.

The political science department at OSU was a place which at the time prioritized the statistically sophisticated study of American politics much more than Comparative politics; many there believed at the time that political philosophy was not a necessary subfield. The department was very good at producing large quantities of well-placed "meat-and-potatoes" type of work, mostly centred around US electoral behaviour; work that was solid but, with the hindsight of time, rather forgettable. I am no longer sure if this paper came from OSU: it showed that the best predictor of turning out to vote in elections was the intention to turn out and vote a few days before. Which is to say that, although the department offered excellent conditions of work, it felt a bit uninspiring.

All in all, OSU awakened me to the importance of a curated methodological pluralism, but also to the professional dimension of academics that I had missed at Chicago (which tells you again the kind of place Chicago was), i.e. the idea that one was expected to specialize narrowly and publish extensively. Originality and big ideas were frowned upon as a mark of unprofessional dilettantism. "Here, we are academics, we are not intellectuals," I was told with authority. Sartori would have probably looked at this attitude as a factor likely to sustain opportunistic conceptual stretching through the reproduction and proliferation of poor concepts with the aim of maximizing publications.

5. New York

A year later, in 1994, I unexpectedly moved to the department of Politics at New York University which at that time was an unremarkable department, albeit one located in New York City, a city at the time perceived as in the throes of decline. In fact, I had never been to New York before and having spent all my time in the US in the Midwest, I had internalized the perception that it was a dystopic place. Movies like *Taxi Driver* and *Escape from New York* reinforced this view. I almost didn't show up for the interview, but ultimately, I changed my mind and realized how wrong I had been! I ended up going and spent six years there which were happy and productive. My Chicago-induced worldview was strengthened because almost half the Chicago department moved to NYU around that time, including Russell Harding, Adam Przeworski, and Bernard Manin, while Jon Elster moved to Columbia. Mobility, as I was about to learn, was a key facet of both American life and American academia—and despite the occasional disruption it caused it was a source of endless stimulation.

NYU had poached all these people away from Chicago acting like a football team owned by a Russian oligarch or Saudi Sheik. As New York was staging a comeback, it found itself with loads of cash which it could spend to improve its ranking and reputation. And after bringing in all these stars, it decided that it had to become a "high-tech" powerhouse—which it eventually did. As a result, this led to a situation where methods began to drive questions and technical proficiency took precedence over substantive creativity. To go back to Sartori's terms, privileging certain methods and techniques following a narrow technical logic worsened conceptual problems and added "opportunistic measurement" to "opportunistic stretching" in the sense that technique dictated what data to use, rather than the data leading the techniques. In Sartori's term, this was breeding ground for misclassification and degreeism.

6. Greece

At the same time that NYU was transforming itself, I was facing an important personal problem: my past came back to haunt me. Recall that I had attended the University of Chicago on a Fulbright grant; it turned out that this grant required me to go back to Greece for a period of two years, a measure meant to stem the brain drain for countries whose citizens received Fulbright grants or, alternatively, to limit immigration in the US. There was nothing I could do. Suddenly I was forced to return to Greece with no research plans whatsoever.

Again, disaster bred opportunity. My forced exile helped me develop a new research project on civil wars which evolved into the research agenda that I am still working on. My idea was to take advantage of my presence in Greece to do exploratory field research on how people behave amid a civil war—how they decide whom to support, whether to join an armed faction or to commit violence against their neighbours. The standard account was that individual behaviour was an expression of pre-existing social and political cleavages, but there was no research on this topic. My foray uncovered a different, and puzzling, mechanism: rather than just political preferences leading to violence, violence often was critical in shaping peoples' allegiances; furthermore, violence was often the result of military rather than political considerations. This realization led me to completely reframe my question and therefore my research project and focus on understanding the production of violence. This was an instance of "good parochialism" at work, whereby the context suggested and forced me reframe the question. It also forced me to develop new concepts, like territorial control, and come up with appropriate empirical measures that would have been impossible to even imagine in the absence of this type of deep engagement with the context. This research would eventually become *The Logic of Violence in Civil War (*Kalyvas, 2006).

7. Chicago

With my exile over, I left NYU and moved back to Chicago, this time as an associate professor. It is, I think, a recurring academic fantasy to become a professor in the department one was a student, and I couldn't resist the temptation to fulfil it. While there, I worked on my civil war project and as is often the case, I began to test the waters by submitting my first papers to various journals. They kept being rejected. I quickly realized that it was just impossible to publish them. On the one hand, the emerging field of civil war studies was at the time overwhelmingly macro-oriented, using country-years as units of analysis and focused on the causes of civil war rather than the causes of violence in civil war. My work which focused on individual behaviour and local dynamics did not fit in at all with this agenda and was, therefore, bypassed. On the other hand, I argued in favour of decoupling war and violence, arguing that these two processes were analytically distinct. Most people then assumed that war and violence were the same: war was violence and violence was war. They, thus, had very little patience for my approach. Perhaps they saw it as a form of conceptual stretching. I had two options. The first was to abandon this project because this type of rejection meant that I was wrong—and if not wrong, certainly about to commit professional suicide. The second was to follow my intuition, for better or worse, and persist.

I decided to persist for two reasons. First, I trusted my intuition. Obviously, we often think we are right when we are, in fact, wrong. In my case, however, the strength of my intuition came from the research I had conducted: when you walk where civil wars had been fought and you talk to those who survived to tell the tale, you develop a very different sense of the phenomenon compared to when you just read about it or when you interview high-placed actors. Of course, I tried to counteract my confirmation bias tendencies by using my best professional judgment which, I thought, could not have been totally arbitrary, as it had been shaped in some of the best universities in the world. The encouragement of my former professors and my peers was also key at this stage. Second,

I was part of an institution (the University of Chicago in particular, but most excellent research universities in the US followed the same principle) which encouraged risk-taking and the production of work that had a shot in being long-term impactful over those leading to publications with limited shelf life. Departments, in other words, that did not treat their faculty as line workers who had to fulfil yearly productivity norms. That's the cloth great universities are made of.

What I learned in Chicago, then, was how to pursue my intellectual vision even in the face of initial rejection. In my case, I was eventually proven right. However, this vision would still have been worth pursuing even if I had been wrong because this type of failure can be productive. What I very strongly believe I should have avoided instead is the obliteration of intellectual vision and ambition to satisfy intellectual conformism and the prioritization of quick publications over longer-term contributions. This is not part of the four problems Sartori identifies but it is connected to the deeper logic driving his critique, namely his injunction to question current practice even (or perhaps especially) when it is both popular and dominant.

8. New Haven

In 2003, I moved to Yale. *The Logic of Violence* came out in 2006, but most of the work was done in Chicago (Kalyvas, 2006). At Yale, I focused on creating an intellectual community which took the form of a research program, the Program on Order, Conflict, and Violence; its goal was to help transcend existing boundaries between subfields (comparative politics and International Relations) or even disciplines--something nicely reflected, I think, in an edited book we published in 2008, *Order, Conflict and Violence* (Kalyvas, Shapiro and Masoud, 2008). I had a strong intuition from my days at Chicago, that good research requires a community rather than individuals working in isolation from each other. It is daily, face-to-face community that helps generate the kinds of interactions, ideas, good judgment and ultimately confidence that leads to risk taking and important breakthroughs. I was fortunate to work there with many colleagues, graduate students and postdoctoral researchers and I can see today how many works bear the stamp of this environment. Again, this does not boil down to any of Sartori's four points but rather fits his overall perspective.

While I was at Yale, I witnessed the eruption of the so-called "credibility revolution". As a result of the problems encountered by both traditional statistical analysis and game theory, a new research school emerged, heavily influenced by both economics and psychology; it advocated a tighter correspondence of social science with the standards of experimental science. Initially this was to be achieved with field experiments, but eventually new statistical methods emerged that allowed the analysis of observational data in ways that closely imitated the experimental approach. Today these methods tend to be described under the label of "causal inference" and they have become as dominant if not more as game theory or "naïve" OLS regression analysis used to be in the past. The ability to infer a causal relationship between two variables is obviously extremely important and an important component in the evolution of the social sciences. At the same time, however, it is important to keep in mind that no technique is substitute for a deep understanding of the data-generating context and a capacious theoretical imagination. Nevertheless, as much as I welcomed their arrival, I also noticed that these techniques

were often used to produce "findings" bordering on the artificial that I sometimes found problematic; these findings required considerable conceptual stretching to materialize.[4] More specifically, and rather surprisingly, the "credibility revolution" appears to have led us back into Sartori's world of parochialism with work that is at once theoretically very broad and technically extremely ambitious yet empirically very parochial. This work typically juxtaposes a highly ambitious title with a very narrow empirical subtitle, something like "The Effect of Democracy on Development: Evidence from South-Central Guinee." Because this work suffers from problems of external validity it requires considerable conceptual stretching to overcome it. Overall, then, it is possible to argue that Sartori's comment about "a loss of purpose" of the discipline applies to the world of the credibility revolution. To quote him directly from thirty years ago: "Let us squarely face it: normal science is not doing well" (Sartori, 1970: 255). Table 2 summarizes this discussion.

Table 2. Sartori's Categories and the Evolution of Political Science

Sartori's categories	Broader category	Negative	Positive
Parochialism	Theory	Causal inference parochialism	Theoretically motivated parochialism
Conceptual stretching	Concepts	Opportunistic stretching	Theory driven imaginative conceptual-stretching Subfield-transcending concepts
Misclassification and Degreeism	Measurement and Operationalization	Opportunistic measurement	Measurement with deep understanding of question and context Methodological pluralism

Source: own elaboration

9. Conclusion

Let me come to my conclusion.

As a discipline, political science has made enormous strides in terms of concepts, methods, and data during the past thirty years. It is a fact that political science has never been as big, as diverse, and as international as it is now--and this conference is a testament to this positive evolution.

Nevertheless, I would argue that we have not succeeded in escaping from Sartori's critique. We still face many of the problems he identified thirty years ago. We still suffer, albeit to a different degree and in different forms, from the problems he identified, from the incoherent use of political concepts to the paucity of theoretical imagination and the proliferation of trivial "findings." It is as if every new development carries with it the afflictions identified by Sartori. This is not to say that we are in limbo; we are sitting on top of more data about politics than we ever imagined, and we have the tools that allow us to analyse them. Yet, we somehow can't turn our findings into cumulative, general, law-like propositions and, thus, predictions.

What to do? I can see three ways to go. One is to ignore these problems and pretend that we are becoming a real science, that this goal is just behind the corner. The advent

[4] For a discussion, see Kalyvas and Fedorowicz, 2022.

of Artificial Intelligence, for instance, might be the last boost that we need. I personally think that this is an illusion, but I also recognize that sometimes illusion is what drives progress.

The second one is to become deeply pessimistic about the current state of affairs and altogether reject the positivist drive toward a more scientific political science. This is the position adopted by the post-positivists. I think it is wrong, perhaps even dangerous. Questioning the value of science undermines it and opens the door to arbitrariness and ultimately autocracy.

Sartori would have rejected both these options: "It is infinitely easier to behead problems by invoking incommensurability or by letting computers do our work while we relax" (Sartori, 1970: 254).

There is a third way, however, which I think would be fully in line with Sartori's spirit. Perhaps instead of only pushing, headfirst, into the same direction of more data and more computer power, in the hope that we would achieve the breakthrough that has eluded us so far, we could instead process the data we have differently and better. We could still aspire to be as scientific as we can realistically be while at the same time recognizing that this might be an unattainable target. And we could try to fill the gaps in our understanding with more care: deeper contextual knowledge, better theoretical imagination, more creativity and, yes, careful consideration to concepts.

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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

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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

[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

[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

[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,

[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.

[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.

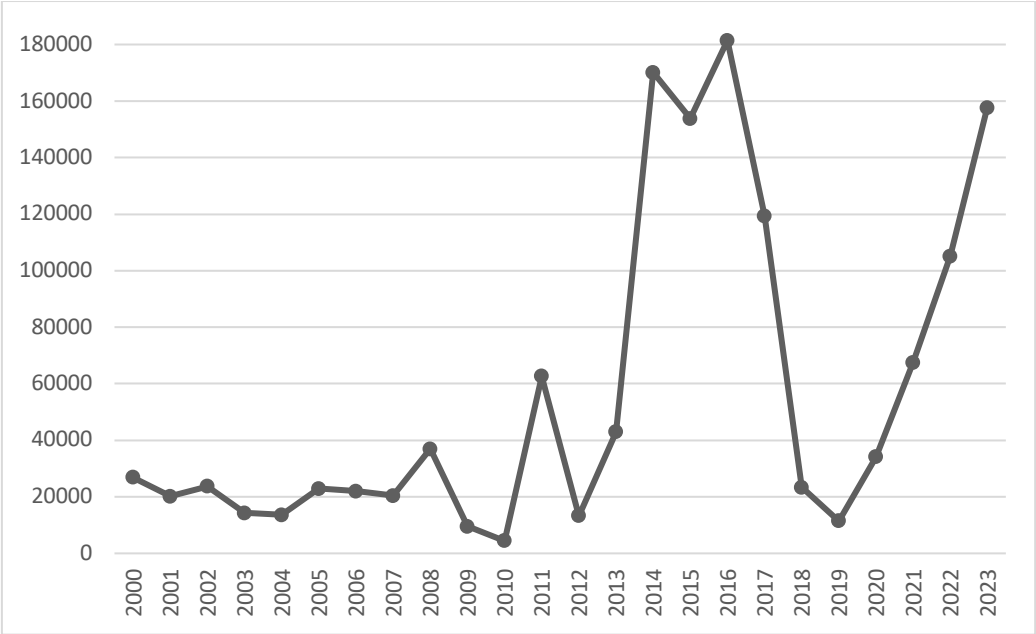
The subsequent general election formed a hung parliament and Giuseppe Conte, affiliated with populist party "Five Star Movement", became the country's Prime Minister for the next three years (2018-2021). His first administration was remarkably conservative in nature (sustained by a populist-conservative 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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The Cherished Outcast: Italian Foreign Policy Change Toward Russia in the Cases of Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014), and Ukraine (2022)

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Abstract

Italy used to have a conciliatory approach towards Russia when dealing with international crises, but this outlook changed with the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine. This study aims to explain this puzzle by examining Italy's foreign policy change in response to three Russian conflicts in the post-Soviet space: Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014), and Ukraine (2022). In particular, this study analyzes changes in Italy's approach to sanctioning Russia both in terms of substantial and symbolic differences. To explain these changes, the study focuses on three main factors at the international level: Italy's position as a middle power in the international system, the level of economic interdependence between Italy and Russia, and the conflict intensity. By investigating these factors within three case studies, the empirical analysis suggests that Italy's position as a middle power was the main factor defining Italy's substantial approach to Russia, which was in line with the common EU response to the three Russian conflicts. However, Italy's middle-power position also gave the country room to maneuver its symbolic approaches to Russia, which shifted from a soft approach to a rather hard one throughout the three conflicts. Empirical results indicate that this symbolic shift was mostly caused by a decrease in Italy's economic interdependence with Russia and the heightened intensity of the conflict in Ukraine.

1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, Russia has been involved in several military conflicts in the post-Soviet space that have posed significant challenges to EU security. Despite this, up until the last conflict in Ukraine, Italy succeeded in developing good relations with Russia, maintaining reasonable economic and political ties. The Federation Council of Russia even defined Russian–Italian relations as "the best among the worst" in 2019 (Federation Council 2019). However, with the last ongoing Russian "special military operation" in Ukraine, the relationship between Italy and Russia has deteriorated significantly, striking a shift in Italy's foreign policy posture towards Russia. This study seeks to explain such a shift, focusing specifically on Italy's substantial and,

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above all, symbolic commitment to the imposition of sanctions on Russia over three different conflicts: Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014), and Ukraine (2022).

Several studies have analyzed the unique relationship between Italy and Russia and its evolution over time (Carbone 2009, Natalizia and Morini 2020, Siddi 2019; Coticchia & Davidson, 2019); however, none of them has fully explained Italy's foreign policy towards Russia from the lens of integrating both substantial and symbolic changes. Although substantial changes remain the central focus of any foreign policy analysis, we argue that symbolic changes are equally important, as they are capable of grasping subtle changes in a country's foreign policy that remain unobservable within substantial changes.

Integrating symbolic changes into the analysis is essential to reveal new plausible arguments to explain Italy's foreign policy shifts towards Russia. Indeed, Italy's foreign policy decisions were in line with the EU's decision to impose sanctions on Russia for sovereign violations in Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014), and Ukraine (2022). While Italy's decision relative to the EU stance remained substantially unchanged, its symbolic approach to sanctions on Russia changed noticeably over the three instances, highlighting the importance of discourses in the analysis.

Different factors may explain changes in Italy's substantial and symbolic approaches to imposing sanctions on Russia. These factors can be generally located at the international, domestic, and individual levels (Garrison, 2003). In this study, we focus primarily on factors located at the international level. In doing so, we do not discredit other levels of analysis but rather, we narrow our research to the international level of analysis for two main theoretical reasons. First, multilevel FPA analyses start by identifying what international preconditions and systemic constraints shape foreign policy decisions (Peterson, 2006). Second, international security concerns as well as conflicts are specific research problems in which international factors tend to exert significant influence on the decision-making process of small and middle powers' foreign policies (Elman, 1995). In light of this, we aim to contribute to explaining Italy's substantial and symbolic foreign policy towards Russia as a result of three international factors: power, economic interdependence, and war intensity.

2. Foreign Policy Change through Substantial and Symbolic Lenses

A foreign policy is a "set of actions or rules governing the actions of an independent political authority deployed in the international environment" (Morin and Paquin 2018, 3). Thus, they are commonly directed "toward entities outside the policymakers' political jurisdictions" (Hermann 1990, 5). These foreign policy decisions can be officially declared through speeches or "non-verbalised" means (Haesebrouck and Joly 2021). As Holsti (2016) argues, foreign policy changes can also occur without the adoption of an official program.

There are different ways to distinguish foreign policy change, either qualitatively or quantitatively (Haesebrouck and Joly 2021). From a qualitative point of view, Hermann conceives of four typologies of change, ranging from the total reorientation of a country's foreign policy position to a slight change in its foreign attitude (Hermann, 1990). This

study focuses on adjustment changes, the smallest observable foreign policy change, by looking into the commitment of countries to adopt a foreign policy decision.

Adjustment changes can be analyzed both substantially and symbolically. Substantial changes mainly focus on tangible policy actions, such as the arrangement of a bilateral agreement or adherence to a new international organization. In this case, the set of tangible policy actions carried out in response to Russia's military actions is represented mainly by the packages of sanctions imposed on Russia, which can include arms embargos, asset freezes as well as trade and diplomatic restrictions. For example, the EU implemented all of these sanctions in the case of Crimea and Donbas, except for arms and diplomatic sanctions (Giumelli et al., 2020). These targeted sanctions should be understood as "coercive, constraining and signalling devices in foreign policy" rather than the mere output of a sanctioning mechanism (Giumelli 2013:37). Substantial policy changes vary between soft and hard approaches. The soft approach refers to a policy decision resulting in no sanctions, whereas the hard approach applies to a policy decision establishing sanctions (Carbone, 2009, Garrison 2003).

By contrast, symbolic change refers to the discursive and rhetorical approaches adopted by Italian politicians and policymakers regarding the imposition of sanctions on Russia (Adler-Nissen 2014; Brighi, 2013). This type of approach draws on government statements and political declarations that reflect Italy's symbolic approach to Russia. Symbolic changes can also vary between soft and hard approaches. A soft approach consists of a discourse according to which Italy invites its fellow European countries to refrain from sanctions, thereby possibly maintaining good economic relations with Russia. On the contrary, a hard approach envisages a discourse based on which Italy proactively promotes the imposition of sanctions within the European block, inevitably undermining its political and economic relations with Russia. While substantial approaches are evaluated based on tangible policies, symbolic changes are examined against political arguments (see methodology). By analysing foreign policy through both symbolic and substantial lenses, we thus attempt to provide an additional perspective on Italy's foreign policy change, by highlighting the importance of symbolic changes, mostly in the form of discursive approaches, which are downplayed in foreign policy analyses (Kaarbo, 2015).

2.1. Italy's three concentric circles in relation to Russia

Since the beginning of the Cold War, Italy's foreign policy has been based on three concentric circles: Atlantism, Europeanism, and the Mediterranean (Felsen 2018). Atlantism refers to Italy's continuous commitment to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and its key allies, especially the United States (US). Europeanism instead relates to Italy's attachment to the EU as an EU founder and a major European economy. Finally, the Mediterranean circle applies to Italy's geostrategic position in the Mediterranean and its willingness to play a prominent role in the region when it comes to conflicts and crises, such as the ongoing crises of migration from North Africa (Coticchia & Vignoli, 2021).

In all three circles, Italy has also dealt with Russia, balancing its actions between its national economic interests and the international constraints exercised within NATO and the EU (Cotichia&Davidson, 2019). In the Atlantic circle, before the current conflict in Ukraine, Italy attempted to act as a mediator between Russia and NATO (Natalizia and

Morini 2020). In fact, Italy used to see Russia as a pillar of European security architecture, promoting engagement rather than confrontation with Russia (Arbatova 2011).

In the same vein, in the Mediterranean circle, before the current conflict in Ukraine, Italy perceived Russia as an important player because of its mediation in the Libyan crisis and involvement in the fight against ISIS (Siddi 2019). In light of this, Italy's foreign policy decisions toward Russia have been constantly affected by finding a balance between its interests, above all economic interests, and the international constraints exercised by NATO and the EU on which Italy's foreign policy is ultimately based (Cotichia&Davidson, 2019).

It is worth adding two aspects to such a framework. First, Italy had also engaged in independent economic cooperation with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, pioneering a special relationship between Western Europe and the Soviet Union in the energy sector. This cooperation continued even after the end of the Cold War, with Russia becoming Italy's primary gas provider and one of Italy's key energy partners until 2021. This partnership was significant not just for the economic benefits it brought, but also for the security implications it had at the time (Bianchi&Raimondi, 2022).

Second, Italy and the U.S. can have different approaches to Russian foreign policy. According to Natalizia and Morini (2020), Italy's approach is influenced by changes in the international system while Boller and Werle (2016) suggest that these shifts are driven by norms. The U.S. prioritizes the norms of general international law over democracy promotion (Boller and Werle, 2016) which resulted in a stronger response against Russia in the Georgian and Crimean cases. This approach possibly explains the differences in the U.S.'s responses in 2008 and 2014, but it can arguably also explain the more assertive actions taken by the U.S., such as providing military support in response to the 2022 conflict.

2.2. Explaining Italy's Foreign Policy Change: Analytical Framework and Operationalization

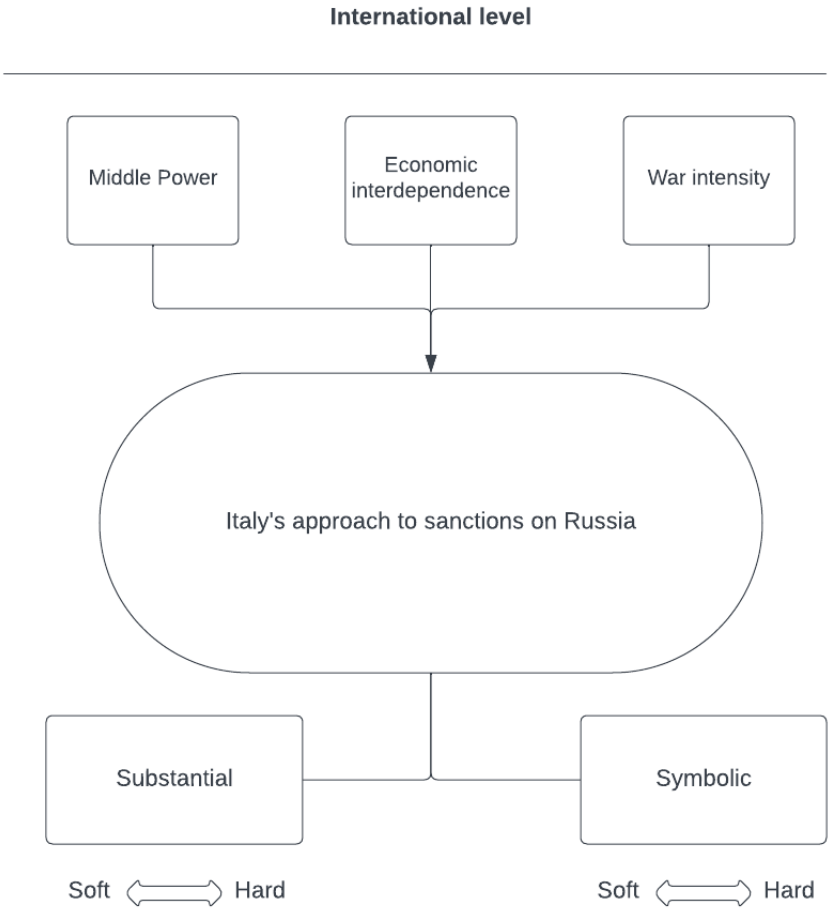
When examining the three conflicts under scrutiny, Italy's relationship with Russia has deteriorated from a symbolic perspective. While Italy's decision to impose sanctions on Russia has not changed substantially relative to the EU stance, its symbolic approach has changed noticeably from a conciliatory approach to an uncompromising one, namely from a soft approach to a hard one. This shift can be explained by a wide set of plausible explanatory factors located at three different levels: international, domestic, and individual (Isernia&Longo, 2017).

At the individual level, leaders and their personal relationships can significantly influence foreign policy choices (Yang, 2010). For instance, Berlusconi and Putin had a close personal connection, contributing to Italy's soft approach to Russia in the Georgian case (Arbatova, 2011). Renzi also tried to maintain a conciliatory relationship with Putin in the case of Crimea in 2014, while Draghi adopted a more confrontational stance in 2022, advocating for tougher EU measures against Russia (Politico, 2022). Leaders can play a pivotal role in shaping a country's international position, acting as positive or negative multipliers within the international system (Giacomello et al, 2009). However, the international system's material constraints make leaders and their personal ties intervening variables rather than independent ones.

At the domestic level, the political composition of the government and the role of major political parties are factors that can also impact foreign policy changes (Walsh, 2016). Indeed, Italy's relationship with Russia might have also been influenced by the composition of the governing coalition at the time of the conflicts. For instance, up until the last conflict in Ukraine, Forza Italia and the Five Star Movement used to openly criticize the EU's sanctions on Russia. Similarly, the coalition government formed by the Five Star Movement and Lega in 2018 expressed a more pro-Russian stance (Siddi, 2019). By contrast, in 2022 a broad coalition led by Draghi united against Russia, limiting the pro-Russian agenda of some Italian parties (Amante, 2022).

Although domestic and individual political affairs can contribute to the analysis of foreign policy changes, we prioritize the international level, given the great constraints it exercises on the other levels of analysis, which can eventually be analyzed in future research (Peterson 2006). This analytical decision aligns with the assumption that the international level is the primary factor in explaining countries' behavior in the international system (Waltz 2000). Drawing on this literature, this study develops an analytical framework combining three international factors (Figure 1): Italy's power dimension in the international system, its economic interdependence with Russia, and the intensity of the war in the three case studies under analysis.

Figure 1. Italy's Approach to Sanctions on Russia



Source: own elaboration.

Size and power have been key in determining one country's international behavior. Scholars generally describe Italy as a middle-power country (Bosworth, 1992; Romero, 2016; Santoro, 1991). Cooper, Higgot, and Nossal (1993) define the middle power concept in normative, geographic, and positional terms. The positional definition refers to the state's position in the international hierarchy based on its material capacities. The geographic definition instead relates to the state's location between the great powers, both geographically and ideologically. The normative definition focuses on the ability of states to act in the international system through "honest broker" practices, without, however, being able to exercise hegemonic influence (Robertson 2017). Furthermore, as a middle power, Italy has limited natural and military resources and "can only achieve its foreign policy goals by expanding its influence in international organizations and through bilateral relations with larger powers" (Siddi 2019, 124). While this positioning forces Italy to manoeuvre its national interest among the great powers, it still leaves Italy with some room for autonomy in foreign policy decisions. For this reason, *we expect that Italy's symbolic approach to imposing sanctions on Russia is shaped by its middle power dimension. (E1)*

Focusing on the international level, Cooper (1972) suggests that the level of economic interdependence between two states shapes how they interact with each other by mutually affecting their respective foreign policy positions. Along these lines, the liberal peace theory argues that economic interdependence can make two countries' behaviour more peaceful and cooperative (O'Neil et al., 1996). This is particularly the case when leaders expect large benefits from trade in the long term (Copeland, 1996). According to this literature, we expect that Italy's symbolic approach *to sanctions on Russia is affected by the level of economic interdependence between Russia and Italy compared to the EU-27 average. (E2)*

To assess the impact of economic relations between Italy and Russia on Rome's FP decisions, we estimated economic interdependence following the approach used by Barbieri (1996). Thus, interdependence is the product of the salience of trade and symmetry. Dyadic salience represents the extent to which each country depends on trade with its partner. Dyadic salience is always between 0 and 1. In contrast, the symmetry of dyadic trade represents how much one country's trade weight is greater than the other's. The higher the score, the stronger the dependence between the countries. "Salience, symmetry, and interdependence have a range of values between zero and one, with mean values of 0.03, 0.9, and 0.03 respectively" (Barbieri 1996).

However, the economic interdependence between Italy and Russia does not tell us much about why the former's symbolic approach to Moscow differed from the rest of the EU or NATO countries. Therefore, Italy's historical trend of economic interdependence needs to be compared with the trend of other EU or NATO countries. Selecting only one state would have been complicated and reductive. Thus, we opted to compare Italy with the EU-27 average interdependence with Russia.

Power dimension and economic interdependence cannot be considered the only international factor that explains foreign policy changes (Franks 1980, 73–77). International events greatly impacting the international system, such as the current pandemic or wars, can also drive foreign policy changes (Hermann 1990). As Natalizia and Morini (2020) argue, a period of instability in the international system caused by various

factors can affect changes in foreign policy. As they further argue, countries' foreign policy changes can be triggered by structural changes at the international level that are historically caused by wars. Not all wars are the same: their scale affects the international system differently. The intensity of war can be a good proxy to consider the scale of a conflict. Comparing the intensity of the three case studies, *we expect that the intensity of war shapes Italy's symbolic approach to imposing sanctions on Russia. (E3)*

To operationalize the war intensity factor, we use the Uppsala index, which defines war as "a state-based conflict or dyad which reaches at least 1000 battle-related deaths in a specific calendar year" (*UCDP definitions* 2023). Two levels of war intensity can be identified: minor and major. Minor wars involve at least 25 but fewer than 1000 battle-related deaths in one calendar year; by contrast, a major war has at least 1000 battle-related deaths in one calendar year (UCDP definitions 2023).

3. Methodology and Research Design

This study uses a case-oriented approach to evaluate our analytical framework against three distinctive Russian conflicts. The first case was the 2008 Russian–Georgian conflict, which led to the self-proclamation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent republics. On that occasion, Italy was part of the Western coalition that condemned Russia for its "disproportionate" actions against Georgia and opposed the recognition of separatist republics (Alcaro 2013). However, Prime Minister Berlusconi stood against any sanctions and supported the prompt resumption of Russian-EU-NATO dialogue (Siddi 2019). In the second case, the Crimea Peninsula was incorporated into Russia through military assistance in 2014. Italy officially joined the EU and NATO in condemning Russian actions against Ukraine and the non-recognition of the Crimea referendum results. During this time, the EU swiftly implemented sanctions on Russia. Italy supported the EU stance, raising serious economic concerns about the effect of sanctions on its economy (Natalizia and Morini 2020). The third case coincides with the Russian "special military operation in Ukraine" in 2022, in response to which Italy adopted a tougher position on Russia. Prime Minister Mario Draghi strongly condemned Russia's "unjustifiable attack on Ukraine" (The Local 2022), approving the imposition of severe economic and financial sanctions on Russia with unprecedented cohesion in the legislative bodies. Additionally, the Italian parliament approved the delivery of weapons and ammunition to Ukraine, marking a significant change in Italy's foreign policy (Alekseenkova 2022).

The discussed cases were selected based on their similarities in the context of European security. First, these episodes involved the explicit use of Russian military force. In the Georgian case, Russia conducted an operation called "Operation to Coerce Georgia to Peace" (Alisson 2008). In 2014, Russia also acknowledged deploying troops in Crimea (Prentice, 2014). This deployment consisted of masked Russian forces seeking control of the Crimean Peninsula and supporting Aksyonov's appointment as Crimea's new leader. In 2022, Russia entered Ukrainian territory under the guise of a "special military operation", claiming the need to "defend Russian-speaking people" and "denazify Ukraine" (The Hindu, 2022).

In addition to the three main conflicts analyzed, other conflicts have occurred in the post-Soviet space in the last few decades. One of these conflicts was the conflict in Donbas that started in the spring of 2014, escalated until February 2015, and continued

throughout the period until the beginning of the "special military operation" in February 2022. This conflict had a negative impact on Russia's relations with the West, leading to more sanctions against Russia. In 2015, the Minsk agreements helped to temporarily ease the tension, resulting in the EU adjusting its sanctions. Although the Donbas conflict had international implications, it was considered primarily an intrastate matter (UCDP 2023). The research conducted in this study focused primarily on explicit Russian military engagement in the post-Soviet region.

Second, the three cases examined led to *de facto* changes in the definition of borders between states. Third, Russia violated the territory of sovereign states in all cases. Russia used the pretext of defending the Russian-speaking population from targeted discrimination and violence to justify their actions. In the Georgian war, Russia claimed to protect the Abkhaz and Ossetian people. These groups recognize Russian as a state language in their respective constitutions (Parliament of South Ossetia 2019, President of Abkhazia 2014). Russia also claimed that they wanted to prevent further Russian casualties like those that occurred during the Georgian shelling of Tskhinvali on 7-8 August (Reuters 2008). Similarly, in the last conflict in Ukraine, Russia continuously accused Kyiv of discriminating against the Russian population in the East. These allegations were particularly loud in Putin's speech on 24 February 2022. Last, Russia's military actions directly impacted European security in the post-Soviet space, which fits within the Italian-European concentric circle of foreign policy.

Italy's evolving stance on Russia sanctions and their international drivers is evaluated using primary sources such as speeches, international reports, and surveys, along with secondary sources such as policy papers and academic articles. Qualitative data from global databases are also considered. This study uses sources in two ways: substantial changes are evaluated by checking Italy's sanctions on Russia listed on the European Council website, while symbolic changes are assessed through declarations made by Italian politicians on sanctions during specific conflicts. An example of such a declaration is Mario Draghi's statement on the conflict in Ukraine on February 24 from Palazzo Chigi. This governmental declaration reflects Italy's symbolic approach to the conflict.

The middle power concept is evaluated based on the existing literature on Italy's foreign policy regarding Russia. Many studies highlight Italy's unique relationship with Russia due to its economic interests and international pressure (Natalizia and Morini 2020; Siddi 2019). Economic and energy interdependence is measured by analyzing trade data between Italy and Russia during the conflicts, which were sourced from the World Bank and the Italian Ministry of Ecological Transition. Conflict intensity is gauged using reports and indexes from organizations like the UN, OSCE, and Uppsala Data Program, chosen for their neutrality and reliability.

4. Empirical analysis

4.1. Italy as a middle power in relation to Russia

By considering both lenses, we observed that while Italy's foreign policy has been substantially in line with the EU position over the imposition of sanctions on Russia, its symbolical approach has changed over the three conflicts from a soft to a hard approach. More precisely, in 2008 Italy demonstrated a soft symbolic approach to Russian

sanctions. In the same vein, in 2014 Italy reluctantly joined the EU and NATO stances regarding sanctions. In contrast, in 2022, by welcoming sanctions and becoming one of the main suppliers of weapons to Ukraine, Italy sided with the line established by the Euro-Atlantic allies, both symbolically and substantially. Table 1 summarizes Italy and the EU approaches to the three cases of Russian policy in the Post-Soviet space.

Table 1. Summary of Italy and EU reactions in the three case studies (substantial and symbolic policy position)

Conflict	EU's position	Italy's position
2008	Disproportionate use of force, support for peaceful resolution of the conflict, EU fact-finding report (soft-soft)	Opposition to sanction's regime, support for peaceful resolution of the conflict (soft-soft)
2014	Condemnation of Russia, imposition of sanctions (hard-hard)	Initial support for sanctions, then a critique and quest to remove (hard-soft)
2022	Strong condemnation of Russia, military support for Ukraine, harsh sanctions (hard-hard)	Fully joined the EU position and all packages of sanctions (hard-hard)

Source: own elaboration.

Italy is often seen as a middle power that aims to balance relations with major powers while safeguarding its interests (Santoro, 1991; Siddi 2019). Italy is a key player in the making of the EU's global policies as an EU founder and the third-largest economy. However, this position has been disputed more recently. Romero (2016) contends that Italy's middle-power status has shrunk in recent decades, attributing this to political instability and economic struggles.

Subsequent events, including Italy's limited role in the late 2010s Libyan crisis (Santini, 2020) and the recent decision to withdraw from the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) under Western pressure, may further point to Italy's reduced autonomy in the Western alliance and its diminishing middle power role (Park & Karthikeyan, 2023). The rise of emerging regional powers and the relative decline of the Western bloc have further challenged Italy's middle-power status. Despite this, Italy has managed to maintain a certain degree of influence and autonomy, especially in relation to the Mediterranean region and Russia. In these areas, Italy has demonstrated relative autonomy compared to the Western/European block. For instance, Italy played a significant role in addressing the Mediterranean migration crisis and in fostering economic ties with Russia (Siddi, 2019). Italy maintained strong economic and industrial relations with Russia, even as some Eastern European countries opposed Russia (Siddi, 2019). While Italy's overall foreign policy autonomy may have decreased, it can be argued that it has retained its middle power status in specific policy domains and relationships.

Italy's relationship with Russia has undergone significant changes over time. While Russia was once an important political and economic partner for Italy, its confrontational stance with the West has now led to it being seen within the EU as a rival country, which

has impacted Italy's bilateral ties (EC 2022). Italy's foreign policy used to involve a delicate balance between adhering to EU constraints and pursuing its own economic interests. This dynamic can be observed in the three case studies.

During the 2008 Georgian conflict, Italy, under the leadership of Berlusconi, played a mediating role. The country took a cautious approach towards Russia's involvement in Georgia, supporting European and NATO condemnations, and participating in OSCE missions to oversee post-war agreements (Italy's House of Representatives 2008). However, along with Germany and France, Berlusconi's government advocated for a more lenient solution compared to the stance of the US and some central and eastern European countries in response to the Russian–Georgian conflict (Ferrari 2008). Later, Italy opposed sanctions, strongly supporting the resumption of the Russia–NATO relationship (Arbatova 2011).

This soft reaction to the military conflict was in line with the general EU response and contradicted the US stance that favored the imposition of sanctions. Referring to Russia's military interventions in Georgia, the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Frattini, said that "we [Italy] cannot create an anti-Russia coalition in Europe, and on this point, we are close to Putin's position" (Bennhold 2008). Overall, the Georgian case had a minor impact on Italian–Russian relations, with Italy aligning with the EU's stance. This approach did not significantly influence Italy's relationship with the US since President Obama was pursuing a policy of "reset" with Russia.

In summary, Italy reaffirmed Russia's strategic partnership in European security and its commitment to diplomatic conflict resolution at the symbolic level. Italy backed German and French mediation efforts. On the substantial level, Italy did not recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence. Nevertheless, Italy's prominent role contributed to the resumption of a Russian-NATO dialogue.

In the Crimean case, Italy supported *prima facie,* a hard reaction in the West led by Germany and the United States. Renzi accused Russia of committing an "unacceptable violation" (Rame 2014). However, as soon as the Minsk-2 agreements were signed, Italy used this opportunity to reconsider this approach. As with Georgia, Italy supported the general line of its EU partners. It implemented Western sanctions but criticized them and tried to reinstate good working relations with Russia rapidly. Renzi was the only G7 leader to visit the St. Petersburg Economic Forum after Crimea (Dunaev 2018).

Furthermore, since Italy was not fully part of the Normandy format, which is the group of states (Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine) that came together in 2014 to solve the Donbas crisis, it could not directly participate in the Ukrainian crisis settlement. Nonetheless, Italy tried to play a bridging role between Russia and the West. In October 2014, Renzi hosted a working breakfast with Putin, Poroshenko, and European leaders (President of Russia 2014). In March 2015, after Crimea, Renzi was the first European leader hosted in Russia. Renzi used friendly rhetoric, mentioning that Russia, Ukraine, and the EU had made progress toward the conflict resolution (Minsk-2 agreements) and highlighting that "Italy is ready to provide all possible support within the structures of the European Union, including, perhaps, its experience, if we talk about the decentralization of Ukraine" (President of Russia 2015).

Italy used the Minsk-2 agreements as a pretext to change the rhetoric and rebuild economic ties with Russia. Similarly, the EU agreed that the sanction regime against

Russia should be conditioned by the implementation of these agreements. The Minsk-2 agreements were an occasion to soften the approach toward Russia and avoid breaking ties with an important partner.

At the substantial level, Italy upheld Euro-Atlantic solidarity by maintaining sanctions against Russia. Italy prioritized its Euro-Atlantic alignment over economic and security ties with Russia. The strategic decision was to align with the EU's stance and safeguard "strategic relations" with Russia. The main strategic choice was to follow the EU general line and use the degree of liberty in foreign policy to maintain "strategic relations" with Russia.

Thus, Italy pursued the EU sanctions regime against Russia despite its rhetorical complaints. Simultaneously, Italy used opportunities, such as the Minsk-2 agreement, to demonstrate that Russia was disposed to continue beneficial relations. Italy, as a middle power, tried to play a "bridge role" again. This translated into a reluctant implementation of sanctions on the substantial level, and the continuation of Italy's friendly rhetoric with Russia at the symbolic level.

In the wake of 21 February 2022 with the outbreak of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict by Russia's recognition of the Lugansk People's Republic (LPR) and Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) as independent states, the Italian government sided with countries that demanded a stricter response to Moscow's actions. In 2022, the government led by Draghi took a clear stance by condemning Moscow's intervention of Ukraine on February 24 and supporting a rapid and effective response, unlike the two previous crises in Georgia and Crimea. In fact, in 2008 and 2014, Italy simultaneously tried to mitigate the escalation of tensions between the United States, the Baltic, and former Warsaw pact states, and to preserve its own economic interests. In 2022, the Italian government was one of the most assertive in imposing sanctions against Moscow and sending military and humanitarian support to Kyiv.

Italy strongly supported Western responses to the conflict in Ukraine, aligning closely with EU leaders, particularly of Germany, and France (Alekseenkova 2022). Prime Minister Draghi condemned Russia's actions, calling for a withdrawal, and the restoration of internationally recognized borders (Balmer and Fonte 2022). The Italian *Guardia di Finanza* seized assets of Russian individuals subject to personal sanctions (De Vito and Landoni 2022). In contrast to previous cases, Italy closely sided with the US in advocating for sanctions. Moreover, unlike the Crimea case, the Italian Prime Minister first visited Kyiv, not Russia. Draghi visited the Ukrainian capital to participate in a meeting with Zelensky, together with German and French leaders (Sauer 2022). Draghi showed support for Ukraine's application for European Union membership: "We are at a turning point in our history. The Ukrainian people defend the values of democracy and freedom that underpin the European project, our project. We cannot wait. We cannot delay this process" (Balmforth 2022).

Given the intensity of the conflict and its impact on European security, Italy had less room to maneuver in relation to the general EU line. However, Italy tried to maintain its "bridge" role by proposing a peace plan to mitigate the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. This plan included the neutral status of Ukraine and its accession to the EU, autonomy for Donetsk, Lugansk, and Crimea, and a treaty on European security following the Russian

troops' withdrawal from Ukraine in exchange for sanctions relief. This plan was rejected by Russian and Ukrainian authorities (Mikhelidze and Alcaro 2022).

In any case, this plan had little chance of success. It contains proposals that cannot be tolerated by both parties. This fact is evident when Russia authorized the 'referenda' in four regions (Kherson, Zaporizhian, Donetsk, and Lugansk) resulting in the formal incorporation of these regions into Russia, and Ukraine officially applied for NATO membership. Draghi assured Zelensky that Italy was not going to recognize either the referenda or the annexation of Ukrainian territories (Government of Italy 2022). Italy's peace plan failed to achieve any of its intended objectives, suggesting the ineffectiveness of Italian autonomous foreign policy maneuvers on a substantial level.

Hence, Italy's substantial policies were in line with the EU's and NATO's responses to Russia's actions. Italy's complete alignment with the EU and NATO confirmed its priority in promoting the EU/NATO agenda. Italy's foreign policy is strictly linked to the EU, given the set of values and norms shared and the delegation of sovereign competencies to the EU in the field of trade and monetary policies. Italy is also highly dependent on NATO because it is its primary security provider. Considering this, Italy responded to Russia just like other EU powers. However, from a middle-power perspective, Italy also attempted to symbolically preserve working relations with Russia, considering it an important economic and political partner. For this reason, Italy symbolically tended to avoid problematic approaches to Russia as much as possible. Table 2 summarizes Italy's changes towards Russia both substantially and symbolically.

Table 2. Summary of changes in the position of Italy towards Russia

Cases	Symbolic policy position	Substantial policy position
Georgia 2008	Verbal opposition to sanctions, Russia as a strategic partner (soft)	No sanctions implemented, facilitation of renewal Russian-NATO dialogue (soft)
Crimea 2014	Condemnation of annexation of Crimea, reluctant implementation to sanctions, Russia as a strategic partner (soft)	Italy joined all the EU sanctions (hard)
Ukraine 2022	Strong condemnation of Russian actions, solidarity with Ukraine, no more "business as usual" (hard)	Italy joined all the packages of sanctions, active participation in implementation of personal sanctions, military aid to Ukraine (hard)

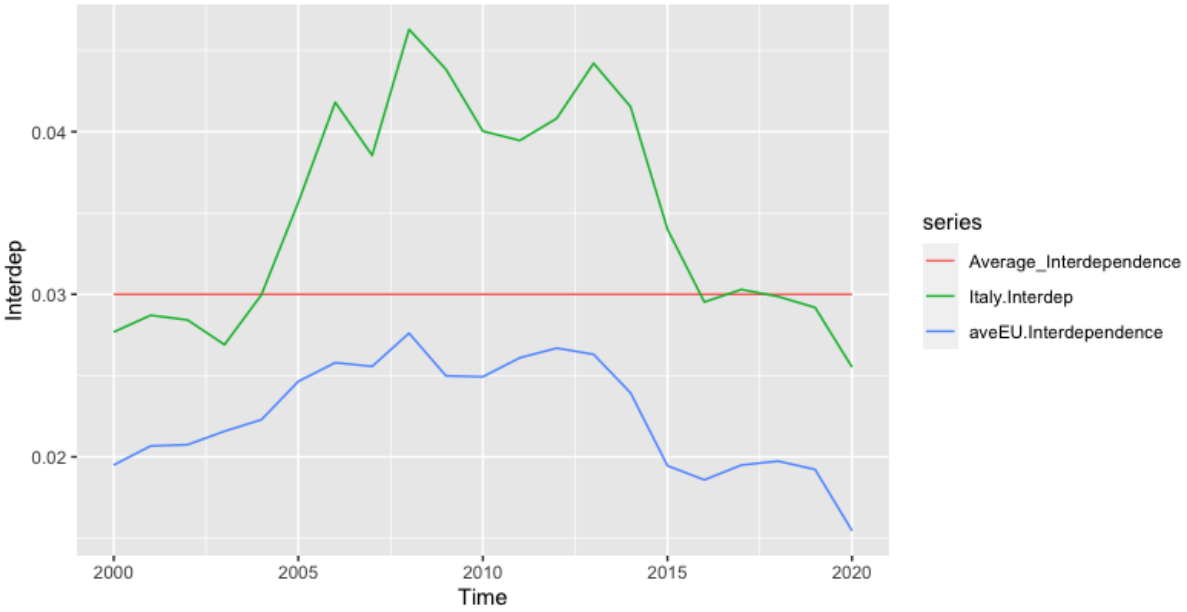
Source: own elaboration.

4.2. Economic and energy (inter)dependence

Italy's middle power dimension is not the only factor contributing to the changes in its foreign policy positions toward Moscow; economic interdependence between the states could also explain Italy's hard or soft approaches to imposing sanctions on Russia. In the case of Italy and Russia's economic interdependence, Italy's economic interdependence with Russia changed according to a similar trend that takes into account the

EU-27 average (EU average). In both cases (Italy and the EU average), the economic and financial crisis and the Crimea case corresponded to a decrease in economic interdependence with Moscow. However, the main difference between Italy and an EU average is that the former is consistently above the mean value (Figure 2), as calculated by Katherine Barbieri of 0.03 (1996), indicating a high level of economic interdependence between Rome and Moscow. The trend of Italy-Russia economic interdependence shows a decrease in economic interdependence after 2008. Still, it was mainly due to the reduced trade between the countries induced by the financial and economic crisis of 2007/2008 (figure 2). Furthermore, the decrease in interdependence was not consistent and remained above the mean values of interdependence. After some years of renewed growth, in 2013, the trend in the economic interdependence between Italy and Russia started to decline steeply, to stabilize, below the mean values, only after 2016. In particular, after the EU sanctions following the Crimea case, economic interdependence declined further. During the coronavirus pandemic, dyadic trade levels decreased along with economic interdependence. More up-to-date data support the recent trend of economic interdependence between Italy and Russia.

Figure 2. Economic interdependence between Italy and Russia and between the EU-27 average and Russia



Source: elaboration of World Bank Data (2022).

The impact of Russia's export blockades on the Italian economy was limited. The sanctions implemented thus far were expected to damage Italian exports to Russia by almost 9 percent of the total, which represents 1.5 percent of all Italian exports (Centro Studi Confindustria 2022). Confindustria showed a preoccupation with some specific Italian products, such as machinery and luxury goods (Centro Studi Confidustria 2022). To bypass Western sanctions and fulfill Russia's need for critical technological components in the defense industry, the Russian government has allowed the creation of parallel markets for specific brands and goods since spring 2022. These markets focus on

strategic technology and luxury items, constituting 4% of total imports in 2022 (Reuters 2023). Italy's exports to Russia will now have to go through intermediaries, making parallel markets more crucial for Russia's economic stability than for Italy's.

Historical trends show that Italian exports to Russia decreased between 2008 and 2014. However, while total Italian exports drastically decreased after 2008 because of the effects of the economic and financial crisis, in 2015 they were on the rise (World Bank 2021). This decrease in Russian imports of Italian goods and services is consistent with the decline of the Russian economy following international sanctions and the devaluation of the ruble in 2014–2015. In both 2008 and 2014, Italy's exports decreased, and Rome's position was an open condemnation of the European and Euro-Atlantic stance of imposing heavy sanctions on Russia. However, we observed the opposite trend before the 2022 Russian–Ukrainian conflict. Italy–Russia economic relations suffered heavily from the COVID-19 disruption, and in 2021, Italy's exports to Russia were still not at pre-COVID levels.

However, economic relations between Rome and Moscow are constituted by a significant energy component, which is strategic for Italian national interests. Indeed, to better understand Rome's FP decisions, it is appropriate to distinguish between the effects of Italian economic interests on exports and those on Italy's energy security. For the former, we can hypothesize that in the context of already deteriorated exports to Russia, Italy may have developed a reduced interest in fighting for its economic revenues coming from exports to Russia. In addition, Italy alone is highly dependent on imports of Russian energy products and does not have sufficient bargaining power. Combining an economic interdependence much above the EU average and above Barbieri's mean value (1996), a logical explanation of Rome's foreign policy behavior can be found. Economic interdependence and energy security together might very well explain why Italy decided to abide by the EU and NATO positions while engaging Russia in more friendly ways through symbolic FP activities.

It has been argued, in fact, that Italian foreign policy towards Russia has always been affected by Italy's dependence on Russian oil and gas imports (Carbone 2008). Many analysts have suggested that the reluctance of some European countries to implement harsh sanctions on the Russian energy sector is due to their overdependence on Russian gas and oil (Rosato 2016).

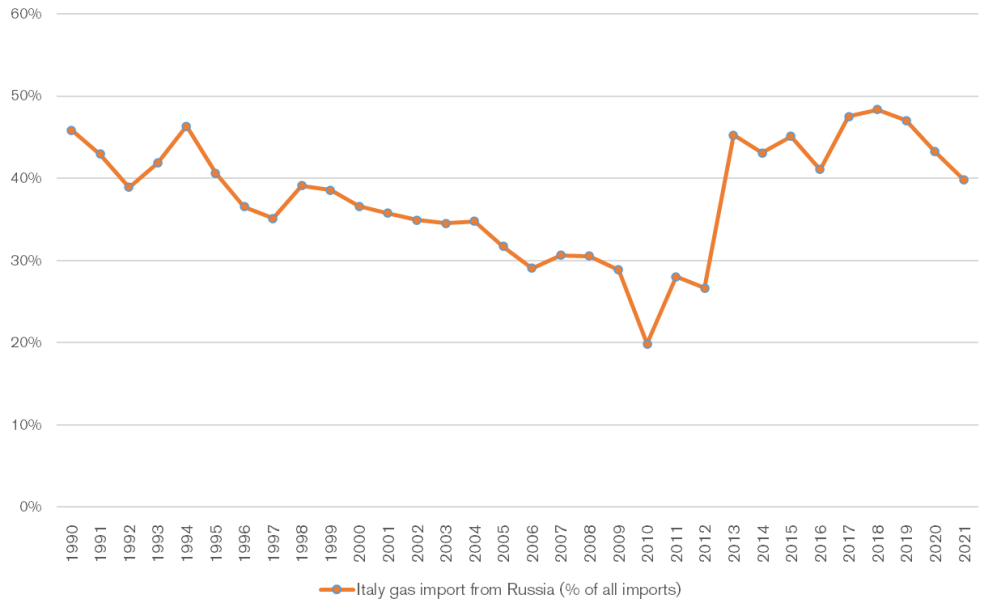
Italy is a European country that is highly dependent on Russian hydrocarbons (figure 3). Russia was among the top five providers of Italian energy hydrocarbons. Moreover, Italy's energy mix relies heavily on oil, gas, and coal, which together constitute over 70% of Italy's energy consumption (International Energy Agency 2021). However, the share of oil in the energy produced by gas nearly doubled at the beginning of this century. Over the last 20 years, the share of gas in the Italian energy mix has increased. Currently, natural gas is the main energy source in Italy (International Energy Agency 2021). The coal trend, instead, remained stable until 2014, when it started to decrease rapidly, and Italy moved from producing approximately 10% of its energy from coal (International Energy Agency 2021). Therefore, even though Moscow is still in the top five countries from which Italy imports its oil, it accounts only for 10%–15% of the country's oil demand. Simultaneously, with Italy increasing the proportion of gas by 14% from 25% to 39% of its energy mix, the import and consumption of Russian natural gas increased steadily after 2009, and after

2012 it stabilized. These statistics show why the argument of Italian dependency on Russian fossil fuels was often used to explain Rome's soft approach to imposing sanctions on Russia during the 2008 Georgian and 2014 Crimean crises. At the beginning of February 2022, 40% of Italy's gas imports came from Russia (Figure 3). This pushed the Italian government to find alternatives rapidly. In the summer of 2022, Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi reported that Italy, less than six months from the start of the conflict, reduced its dependence on Russian gas to 25% (Segreti 2022).

Italy was one of the first NATO member states to sign a deal with the Soviet Union to supply energy (Siddi 2017). After the end of the Cold War, the ENI strengthened its position in Russia by building a solid partnership with two main Russian state companies, Gazprom and Rosneft (Siddi 2019). However, after the 2014 Crimean crisis, ENI projects with Russian companies suffered a drawback, although they did not stall completely. In 2017, ENI signed a new memorandum of understanding with Gazprom to confirm its interest in increasing "gas supplies from Russia to European countries, including Italy, as well as the modernization of the Russia–Italy gas supply agreements" (ENI 2017).

However, solely focusing on Italian energy dependency may be misleading. Italian imports of Russian gas, oil, and coal represent 10% of Russia's gas imports to the EU. Russia's exports to Italy comprise over 50% of its energy products or derivatives, with Italy being one of Russia's ten largest trading partners (OECD 2021). Thus, the economic relations between Rome and Moscow in the energy sector are mutually dependent. Nevertheless, this dependency changes if we expand our analysis to balance the trade of goods and services, where Italy's exports are more diversified (OECD 2021). Russian energy exports to Italy have represented, on average, 3%–5% of Moscow's exports, while Italian exports to Russia represent only 1%–2% of Italy's exports in goods and services. Moreover, the overall effect western sanctions have on Moscow's energy sector is considered to harm the Russian economy more than that of Europe (Council of the EU 2023).

Figure 3. Percentage of Italy's gas imports from Russia, 1990–2020



Source: Ministero della Transizione Ecologica, 2022.

From the data, it emerges that both economic interdependence and energy played a role in explaining the shift of the Italian symbolic approach to Russia. Notably, Italy has always maintained a higher level of economic interdependence with Russia than its European counterparts. During the conflicts that arose in Ukraine in 2008 and 2014, Italy adopted a more lenient stance towards Russia, primarily due to its economic and energy interests. However, in 2022, when the conflict resurfaced, the level of interdependence between Italy and Russia significantly dwindled. Additionally, Italy's gas imports from Russia had been on a decline during the COVID-19 pandemic years, prompting the Italian Prime Minister, Mario Draghi, to diversify the country's energy supply sources and adopt a more aggressive stance towards Russia's actions.

This marked a significant departure from Italy's previous position, as the country no longer viewed sanctions on Russia as detrimental to its economy. Instead, the government regarded its previous strong energy dependence on Russia as unacceptable and placed the blame on the previous administration's efforts to cultivate close economic ties with Russia over the years (La Repubblica 2022). While Italy's response was consistent with that of other European nations, the country's symbolic shift towards a more negative view of its energy dependence on Russia was significant.

4.3. Conflict intensity

The intensity of conflict might provide an additional argument for explaining Italy's foreign policy changes towards Russia. Indeed, all three cases experienced direct military interventions by Russian troops in a sovereign state, producing different intensities of conflict. In the Georgian case, during a five-day conflict, Russia reported approximately 163–170 military losses, including Russian military staff and Abkhazian and South Ossetian troops (Lavrov 2010, 130–135). Georgia reported 180 losses on its side (Ministry of Defense of Georgia 2010). First, the intensity of the conflict was low and the duration was short. This conflict falls within the armed conflict definition of UCDP. Second, this conflict was an opportunity for the Italian government to improve the Italian position. Amid the conflict between Georgia and Russia, Berlusconi worked to avoid further escalations of the conflict and a possible return to a Cold War logic. To do so, he tried to persuade other European countries, particularly Germany and France, to avoid imposing sanctions on Russia, positioning himself as a friend (Arbatova 2011). Third, the EU dealt with an internal case of Kosovo recognition. Several European nations, notably Spain, Slovakia, Cyprus, Greece, and Romania, did not recognize Kosovo's independence. This division on self-determination rights hindered EU consensus and raised legitimacy questions for other minority groups like Abkhaz and Ossetians. Russia also opposed the recognition of Kosovo, but it was proactively used in the quest for new territories more recently. Overall, it seems that the conflict did not have any significant impact on the relationships between Russia and the US. The Obama administration implemented a "reset' policy with Russia to improve relations damaged by the Russian-Georgian war, which did not escalate to a point where it caused any major damage to their diplomatic ties. Similarly, Italy seemed to view the conflict as a chance to avoid any potential fallout with Russia, given the relatively low intensity of the situation. In sum, it appears that the conflict was ultimately contained and did not result in any major systemic changes.

The Crimean case also had low intensity and cannot even be formally categorized as armed conflict. There is no confirmed evidence of any military loss from either Russia or Ukraine because of this military operation. However, Putin confirmed the presence of Russian troops, following his explanation of ensuring the safety of the Russian people (Prentice, 2014). Differently from Crimea, the Donbas conflict rapidly escalated to "high intensity", resulting in over 1000 annual fatalities in 2014 and 2015 (OHCHR 2022). Most sanctions on Russia were a response to this escalation (European Council 2023). After the Minsk agreements, which deescalated the conflict, Italy and some EU states resumed business relations with Russia (OHCHR, 2022). This development is additional proof of how the intensity of conflicts can impact various aspects, such as the severity of sanctions. For example, the "low-intensity" situation in Crimea resulted in milder sanctions, while the "high-intensity" events in Donbas prompted stricter measures.

The last conflict in Ukraine was a significant turning point that changed the general assumption about the relationship between Russia and European security. In 2014 Russia violated Ukraine's sovereignty by taking control of Crimea. However, due to the absence of a full-scale, interstate military conflict, some European countries such as Italy were able to maintain their relations with Russia. By contrast, in the 2022 interstate conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which has seen a much higher intensity of conflict and a greater security threat, Italy's stance towards Russia changed. The intensity and number of losses in this conflict far exceeded the two previous cases. According to official reports, Russia has suffered 6,000 losses, while Ukraine has recognized approximately 9,000 deaths (Matthews 2022). This conflict caused a high number of civilian casualties, an influx of refugees to Europe (7.4 million), and a significant number of internally displaced people (Matthews 2022). The conflict also affected the energy and food markets, causing great instability. The implications of such an intense conflict and the threat posed to European security left Italy with no choice but to support hard sanctions and use hard rhetoric to condemn Russian actions, which resulted in a hard symbolic approach towards Russia. This also highlights the importance of international factors in explaining Italy's changing approach towards Russia, as suggested by Natalizia and Morini (2020).

5. Conclusions

The empirical analysis suggests that Italy's diminished power and autonomy explain Italy's consistent alignment with its European Union and NATO partners over the substantial decision to adopt sanctions on Russia or not. As Romero (2016) argues, Italy's power has slightly diminished over the past decade; despite this, it still maintains a middle-power role in some areas as demonstrated in the three case studies. Indeed, our findings indicate Rome's autonomy in pursuing symbolic foreign policy towards Russia, providing support to the first expectation (E1).

As observed, Italy's foreign policy adopted a softer symbolic approach than the EU's general position in the cases of Georgia and Crimea. However, this changed with the outbreak of the 2022 conflict in Ukraine when Italy shifted to a harder approach to sanctions on Russia. The empirical analyses suggest that this shift is related to a decrease in Italy's economic interdependence with Russia to the levels of the EU average, confirming the second expectation (E2).

At the same time, the empirical analysis also suggests that the intensity of the conflict can explain Italy's tougher symbolic approach to Russia. The higher intensity of conflict in Ukraine threatened Italy's security and liberal democratic values on a whole new level compared to Russia's interventions in Georgia and Crimea. As a result of a much larger scale of violence, Rome reacted differently by symbolically siding with the hardliners favoring sanctions on Russia. This reaction substantiates the third expectation.

In conclusion, our research question, which proposes that variation in economic interdependence and conflict intensity provide valid arguments to explain changes in Italy's symbolic approach toward sanctioning Russia, leads us to some methodological considerations and future research directions. First, we argue that examining symbolic changes in Italian Foreign Policy may allow for a better study of the interaction between international factors and Italian foreign policy choices. Separating the symbolic aspects of foreign policy from the substantive ones allows for a more attentive view of symbolic positions, often constrained by a country's geopolitical and power dimensions. Second, we propose that this analytical framework should be empirically tested on other dyads that include Italy to determine whether economic interdependence and war intensity are good explanatory factors for Italian foreign policy in general. This would help determine whether symbolic changes are observed after changes in economic interdependence or conflict intensity involving the second party. Finally, we believe that it would be interesting to investigate the role of domestic and individual factors in relation to symbolic policies. In our previous discussion, we briefly touched upon the various factors that can influence foreign policy, such as individual diplomacy or parliamentary composition. For instance, Italy's soft approach towards Russia during the Georgian case can be attributed to Berlusconi's personal relationship with Putin, despite the fact that Putin was not President at that time (he served as Prime Minister). Additionally, Italy's hesitant acceptance of sanctions against Russia in 2014 could be due to the domestic pressure from Confindustria and Italian business stakeholders. While our study mainly focused on the impact of international factors on the Italian approach to Russian assertive policy, analyzing the role of domestic and individual factors would provide a more complete understanding of the political issue.

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Democratic backsliding and resilience in extraordinary times: Poland and Italy during the Covid-19 crisis

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Abstract

We investigate the consequences of the Covid-19 crisis for the quality and survival of democracy. According to the literature, in countries with a weak state of emergency regulation (SER), crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic entail a risk of democratic backsliding. Yet the experience of some countries challenges similar conclusions. For instance, democracy in Italy proved resilient despite a relatively thin SER. In turn, a well-defined and constitutionally embedded SER did not shield Poland against backsliding. To explain these 'deviant' cases, we argue that, besides SER robustness, at least two other factors could influence the likelihood of experiencing 'pandemic backsliding', namely, the prior quality of democracy and government loyalty to democracy. The analysis of Poland and Italy corroborates our argument. In Poland, in particular, relatively malleable democratic institutions allowed an authoritarian-leaning government to circumvent the existing SER to aggrandize its own power beyond the realm and duration of the Covid-19 crisis.

1. Introduction

Despite differences in terms of intensity and timing, the Covid-19 pandemic has been a tremendous challenge for the governments of virtually all countries, which suddenly had to deal with an unprecedented calamity affecting health, welfare, labour, productivity and social life. Even more worryingly, the Covid-19 pandemic threatened the quality and survival of democracy in many states (Lührmann et al., 2020a; Maerz et al., 2020). According to several monitoring institutes, in 2020 we experienced, in particular, 'the biggest rollback of individual freedoms ever undertaken by governments during peacetime' (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021: 14; see also Freedom House, 2021a; Varieties of Democracy, 2021; Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2021).

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During a pandemic, some waivers to the normal functioning of democracy in terms of individual and political freedoms and regarding the balance of power between executive and parliament (Bolleyer and Salàt, 2021; Gambacciani, 2022) are justifiable, as long as they are proportionate, non-discriminatory, and temporary.[1] Nevertheless, scholars argued that, in countries lacking a well-defined and constitutionally embedded state of emergency regulation (SER) (De Angelis and de Oliveira, 2021), crises provide governments with an opportunity to take advantage of their greater authority and of the reduced checks and balances to aggrandize their power and repress dissent and political opposition (Lührmann and Rooney, 2021).

While intuitive, similar conclusions are challenged by the experience of some countries. For instance, in Italy, the weakness of SER (Canestrini, 2020) did not pave the way for democratic backsliding during the pandemic. In turn, Poland supposedly had a well-defined and robust SER (Szymański and Zamęcki, 2022), but nonetheless was among the worst performers in terms of 'pandemic backsliding' (Varieties of Democracy, 2022). How can we explain such counterintuitive and 'deviant' regime trajectories? Rather than considering Poland and Italy as exceptions, in our view, these cases demonstrate that SER, previously identified as a key safeguard against backsliding, is only part of the story. A robust SER is neither necessary nor sufficient to prevent backsliding, as Italy and Poland respectively suggest.

In this paper, we argue that the backsliding effect of exogenous shocks such as the Covid-19 pandemic is contingent on a combination of structural conditions and agency (North, 1990; Thelen, 1999). More specifically, we posit that, besides the robustness of the SER, the vulnerability of a country's democratic institutions is shaped by the pre-pandemic state of democracy in that country, and by the loyalty to democracy of the incumbent government. To investigate variations in the democratic backsliding effect of the Covid-19 pandemic, and to test the explanatory power of the above factors, we analyse the apparently 'deviant' cases of Italy and Poland.

The analysis supports our argument and shows how differences in terms of prior quality of democratic institutions and governments' democratic commitment help explain the regime trajectories followed by Italy and Poland during the Covid-19 crisis – democratic resilience and backsliding, respectively. In Poland, the presence of malleable democratic institutions already weakened by years of executive aggrandizement allowed an authoritarian-leaning government to circumvent a relatively well-defined and constitutionally embedded SER and to take advantage of the emergency to consolidate its own power and pursue an illiberal agenda. In Italy, on the contrary, a combination of government loyalty to democratic principles and relatively well-consolidated democratic institutions favoured democratic resilience, despite a SER that was potentially prone to abuses of power. Hence, Poland and Italy are neither exceptions nor deviant cases, if we pay attention to how the SER interacts with other variables.

This paper contributes to the debate on the consequences that exogenous shocks such as the Covid-19 pandemic could have on the risk of democratic backsliding and on the significant differences in terms of policies and power abuses observed across countries, regions, and political regimes during the pandemic (Croissant, 2020; Hale et al.,

[1] International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights.

2020; Guasti, 2020; Lührmann et al., 2020a; Lührmann et al., 2020b; Cassani, 2022; Engler et al., 2021; Goetz and Martinsen, 2021; Russack, 2021; Narsee, 2022). From a theoretical viewpoint, our contribution is twofold. First, we show that the causal relationship between the Covid-19 crisis and democratic backsliding is complex, and we draw attention to factors such as the pre-pandemic state of democracy and government loyalty to democracy, which should be integrated into existing explanations of when, how and to what extent crises threaten the quality and survival of democracy. Second, and relatedly, we show that, rather than an outright *trigger* of democratic backsliding, a crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic is better understood as a *catalyst* of an ongoing process of backsliding.

The paper is organized as follows. First, we review the literature on the impact of exogenous shocks such as the Covid-19 pandemic on democratic backsliding and discuss our theoretical argument and hypotheses. In the next three sections, we introduce the cases of Poland and Italy, illustrate the SER and the pre-pandemic state of democracy in these countries, and investigate the loyalty of their governments to democratic rules during the Covid-19 crisis, respectively. In the final section, we draw some conclusions regarding the different effects the Covid-19 crisis had on democracy in these two countries, and we elaborate further on what we can learn from future research on this topic regarding not only backsliding but also democratic resilience (Merkel and Lührmann, 2021).

2. Pandemics, states of emergency and the risk of democratic backsliding

The Covid-19 pandemic broke out in a historical conjuncture which was particularly dismal for democracy, characterized by an increasing number of episodes of backsliding – that is, a state-led debilitation of some of the political institutions sustaining democracy (Bermeo, 2016; Waldner and Lust, 2018) – as well as of outright autocratisation (Cassani and Tomini, 2019; Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019). Crises (of various origins) have frequently been studied as potential challenges to democracy (Linz and Stepan, 1978; Morlino and Quaranta, 2016; Foa and Mounk, 2017). Since the pandemic's onset, accordingly, scholars have been debating its possible impact on the ongoing global trend of democratic erosion (Lührmann et al., 2020a; Maerz et al., 2020).

The instruments available to governments for addressing the pandemic have been identified as a potential threat, in particular. Extra-ordinary challenges, as a pandemic arguably is, require extra-ordinary responses, such as the adoption of emergency powers to allow faster decision-making and limit or suspend certain rights and freedoms. In this regard, Lührmann and Rooney find that states of emergency have historically offered political leaders 'the opportunity to both extend their control beyond the realm of the emergency and past the duration of the emergency' (2021: 622; see also Bjørnskov and Voigt, 2018). Specifically, executives can use the state of emergency both as a formally legal instrument to aggrandize their power, weaken checks and balances and silence the opposition (Scheppele, 2018), and as an argument to justify these actions and reduce their legitimacy cost (Petrov, 2020).

Based on this argument, the state of emergency adopted in several countries during the pandemic was in itself a factor that heightened the risk of backsliding (Lührmann and Rooney, 2021). Others contend that states of emergency are windows of opportunity

for eroding democracy (Palano, 2022) rather than sinkholes in which democratic countries inevitably fall, and investigate the factors shaping the actual probability of experiencing democratic backsliding in such critical junctures. In a recent article, in particular, De Angelis and de Oliveira (2021) identify the state of emergency regulation (SER) as a key source of variance that makes some countries more immune to the risk of democratic backsliding than others.

For clarity, states of emergency by definition are situations in which the constitutional order is 'at least partially suspended' (De Angelis and de Oliveira, 2021: 1604), executive powers are expanded, and the division of state powers and the hierarchy of laws are subverted. However, states of emergency could be designed in different ways (Ferejohn and Pasquino, 2004) – e.g. in terms of who is entitled to take and implement emergency decisions, the time limit and the scope of the emergency powers, the type of legislation that can be adopted, and the level of parliamentary involvement. Given that these variations could influence the ability of incumbent rulers to abuse emergency powers, they also imply different levels of protection for democracy. Accordingly, countries in which the state of emergency and the corresponding expansion of executive powers are tightly regulated and embedded in a sound legal framework should face a lower risk of democratic backsliding during crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic than countries characterized by thin and/or ill-defined SER (De Angelis and de Oliveira, 2021).

We contend that, while SER robustness could undoubtedly constrain incumbent governments during crises, it hardly represents a sufficient and/or necessary condition against abuses of power. In our view, the risk of democratic backsliding in extraordinary situations depends on a more complex combination of both structural conditions and agency-related factors (North, 1990; Thelen, 1999). Concerning structural conditions, besides the robustness of the SER, we consider another factor, namely, the pre-pandemic state of democratic institutions, which could be more or less malleable. Concerning agency, given the focus of this research on state of emergency situations in which executives play a prominent role, we focus on incumbent governments and, specifically, on their 'loyalty' to democracy.

First, institutional pre-conditions matter. Some democracies are more vulnerable than others (Croissant, 2020). In this regard, empirical research highlights that backsliding is more likely to occur in so-called 'defective' democracies (Cassani and Tomini, 2019; Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019), in which elections are relatively free but, differently from 'liberal' democracies, the boundaries of government power remain blurred. When the system of checks and balances of the executive power is weak, the survival of democracy is at risk: attempts to abuse political power will face little resistance from those institutional actors that, in principle, are entitled to prevent such abuses, such as parliament and the judiciary. Hence, we expect defective democracies to face a greater risk than liberal democracies of suffering backsliding during critical junctures such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Second, agency matters. Recent research shows that the relationship between the strength of democratic institutions and democratic resilience during the Covid-19 crisis is not so obvious (Youngs, 2023) and that other factors should be considered. In particular, we note that democratic backsliding is a process of regime change intentionally pursued by state actors (Bermeo, 2016); it rarely happens by accident. According to a

long tradition in democratization studies emphasizing the role of partisan preferences (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986), even if heads of government want to keep their jobs (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003), some political leaders are more committed and loyal to the rules of democratic politics – including the principle of fair competition and the legitimacy of opposition – than others (Linz and Stepan, 1978). In a similar vein, we argue that not all political leaders are interested in seizing the opportunities to erode and/or subvert democracy offered by crises and states of emergency. Therefore, we expect the risk of democratic backsliding during crises to be higher in countries governed by authoritarian-leaning rulers who 'prefer less democracy' (Waldner and Lust, 2018: 99) and who are inclined to take advantage of all the legal (and sometimes even illegal) means available to aggrandize their executive power and to prolong their grip on it.

To summarize, while the literature on 'pandemic backsliding' has mostly focused on states of emergency and SER as key determinants (Lührmann and Rooney, 2021; De Angelis and de Oliveira, 2022), we contend that this is only part of the story. Building on the broader comparative literature on regime change, we identify other factors that, besides the SER, could influence the risk of experiencing backsliding during the Covid-19 crisis, such as the pre-pandemic state of democratic institutions in a country and the democratic commitment (or loyalty) of its rulers.

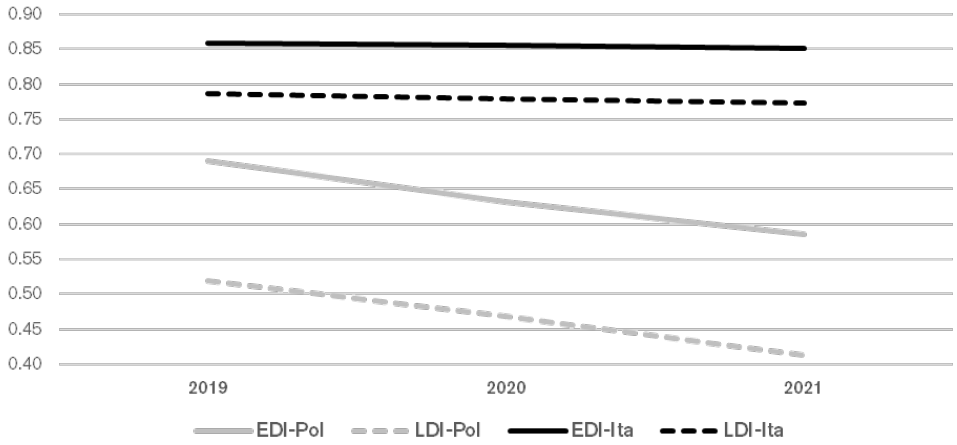
3. Reassessing democratic backsliding and resilience during the Covid-19 crisis in two deviant cases

To demonstrate how, besides the state of emergency regulation (SER), considering factors such as prior quality of democracy and government loyalty to democracy could improve our understanding of when, how and to what extent crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic threaten democracy, we analyse the cases of Italy and Poland. In both countries, the governments adopted extraordinary powers and quite stringent measures to contrast the spread of the disease, but democracy followed quite divergent trajectories during the Covid-19 crisis. Using the Varieties of Democracy's Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) and Liberal Democracy Index (LDI), Figure 1 vividly shows that Italy experienced only minor decline, while Poland's levels of democracy suffered a much more evident negative trend.

Italy and Poland differ in several respects – including, for instance, the time in which they transitioned to democracy and the form of government. However, they share one important aspect in the context of this research: they both appear to be 'deviant' cases, to the extent that, during the pandemic, these countries followed regime trajectories that cannot be explained by the SER alone. Democracy in Italy proved resilient during the Covid-19 crisis *even though* the Italian SER offered scarce guarantees against abuses of power (De Angelis and de Oliveira, 2021). In turn, Poland suffered backsliding *despite* its supposedly well-defined and robust SER. In principle, based on the different robustness of the SER in these countries, we should have observed diametrically opposite trajectories, namely, backsliding in Italy and resilience in Poland. Moreover, studying these cases is useful as they offer substantial variance in the other two factors to which we drew attention, namely, the pre-pandemic state of democracy and government loyalty to democracy. Using Italy and Poland, we will thus show how differences in these factors help explain the regime trajectories they followed. In fact, the analysis will

demonstrate that Poland and Italy are neither exceptions nor deviant cases, if we pay attention to how the SER interacts with these factors.

Figure 1. Trends of Electoral Democracy and Liberal Democracy in Italy and Poland, 2019-2021



Source: authors' own elaboration of data from the Varieties of Democracy dataset (https://www.v-dem.net/data/the-v-dem-dataset/). Notes: EDI stands for Electoral Democracy Index, LDI stands for Liberal Democracy Index, Pol stands for Poland, Ita stands for Italy.

The analysis focuses on the period from early 2020 to mid-2021. The in-depth study of these two cases was conducted through content analysis of documents such as constitutional provisions regarding the proclamation and management of a state of emergency, executive and legislative acts adopted during the pandemic, legal commentaries, and expert opinions from secondary sources (including newspapers and research centres' online publications and country reports). Concerning the case of Poland, whose Covid-related legislation was particularly challenging from an interpretative viewpoint (as we will illustrate), especially concerning some legal aspects and their accordance with the rule of law, we also conducted two focus group interviews online with 12 Polish legal experts (both academics with at least a PhD, and practitioners, such as attorneys and legal advisers).

4. State of emergency regulation and the quality of democracy in Italy and Poland before the Covid-19 crisis

Consistently with the theoretical framework we proposed, our analysis of the factors influencing the risk of democratic backsliding during crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic, starts from the institutional pre-conditions Italy and Poland displayed at the outbreak of the pandemic. First, we illustrate Italy and Poland's state of emergency regulation (SER) through an in-depth analysis of the relevant laws and regulations. Next, we discuss the prior state of democracy in each of these countries through a reconstruction of the main political events that occurred in the years preceding the pandemic. The narrative is supported by quantitative data tracing democracy trends in Poland and Italy during the 2010s.

4.1. State of emergency regulation

Several studies highlight the weaknesses of the Italian regulatory framework for the state of emergency (Canestrini, 2020; De Angelis and de Oliveira, 2021; Gambacciani, 2022). The Italian constitution does allow the government (i.e. the Council of Ministers and its President, or Prime Minister) to overcome parliamentary approval to adopt by decree temporary extraordinary measures 'in cases of necessity and urgency' (Art.77) and to limit individual mobility 'for reasons of health or security' (Art.16).[2] However, the constitution also establishes that, while these provisional measures have the force of law, they remain valid for a maximum of 60 days and must be presented immediately to Parliament, which can either convert them into law or terminate them even before their 60-day validity (Art.77). Based on article 87, moreover, even the President of the Republic (i.e. the Italian head of state) has a say when emergency measures are taken, as he/she is formally entitled to issue the decree-laws.

Importantly, however, the Italian constitution does not explicitly envisage the possibility of declaring a state of emergency, which is instead regulated by a 1992 law creating the Civil Protection Agency, subsequently replaced by a 2018 legislative decree introducing the Civil Protection Code.[3] The state of emergency has a 12-month limit (renewable for other twelve months) and grants the central government the authority to intervene directly in the administrative affairs at all levels of governance (regions, provinces, metropolitan cities, communes). However, since it is not a constitutional norm, the limitations to the individual freedoms that could be necessary in circumstances such as the Covid-19 pandemic can only be enacted by law or the above-described acts having the force of law.

Differently from Italy, the Polish constitution provides a quite detailed regulation of the state of emergency. Specifically, 'in situations of particular danger, if ordinary constitutional measures are inadequate', three alternative extraordinary legal instruments can be adopted, namely, martial law, state of emergency, and state of natural disaster (Art.228, Par.1).[4] While martial law and state of emergency refer to cases of threat to the security of the country as well as of constitutional and public order, the 2002 Act on the state of natural disaster specifies that the mass spread of infectious diseases – such as the Covid-19 pandemic – constitutes a case of natural disaster.[5] The constitution (Art.232) also spells out that the state of natural disaster can be introduced by the Council of Ministers over the whole territory or part of it for no longer than 30 days, and its extension may only be issued upon consent of the Sejm (i.e., the Parliament's lower chamber).

Under this regulation, the government has the power to limit, among other things, personal freedom, freedom of movement, freedom of work and economic activity, prop-

[2] Constitution of the Italian Republic, https://www.senato.it/sites/default/files/media-documents/Costituzione_INGLESE_2023.pdf.

[3] Gazzetta Ufficiale, 17 March 1992, n.64, https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1992/03/17/092G0253/sg; Codice della protezione civile, Decreto Legislativo n.1 del 2 gennaio 2018, https://www.protezionecivile.gov.it/en/normativa/decreto-legislativo-n-1-del-2-gennaio-2018--codice-della-protezione-civile/.

[4] Constitution of the Republic of Poland, https://www.sejm.gov.pl/prawo/konst/angielski/kon1.htm.

[5] Ustawa z dnia 18 kwietnia 2002 r. o stanie klęski żywiołowej, https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=wdu20020620558.

erty law, as well as the right to strike. These extraordinary measures 'may be introduced only by regulation, issued upon the basis of statute, and which shall additionally require to be publicized' (Art.228, Par.2) and 'shall be proportionate to the degree of threat and shall be intended to achieve the swiftest restoration of conditions allowing for the normal functioning of the State' (Art.228, Par.5). Significantly, moreover, during a period of extraordinary measures, the constitution, electoral laws and laws on extraordinary measures cannot be modified (Art.229, Par.6), and nationwide elections cannot be organized (Art.228, Par.7).

4.2. Democracy before the Covid-19 pandemic

Italy – a parliamentary system in which the head of government is a Prime Minister who can be dismissed together with his/her cabinet by a simple vote of no confidence – transitioned to democracy at the end of World War II. In turn, Poland – a *de facto* semi-presidential system of the premier-presidential subtype, in which executive power is shared by a directly elected President and a Prime Minister that can be removed by Parliament through a constructive vote of no confidence – is a 'third wave' democracy (Huntington, 1991), which returned to multiparty politics in 1989. While the two countries clearly differ in the level of consolidation of their democratic institutions, in both of them democracy came under threat in the years preceding the pandemic, even though to different extents and with different implications.

Since 2011, Italian politics has been characterized by a high degree of instability. The worsening of the economic recession led the centre-right government chaired by Silvio Berlusconi to be replaced by a technocratic government. The 2013 elections failed to identify an outright winner and, between 2013 and 2018, three different coalition governments led by the centre-left Democratic Party (DP) succeeded one another. The 2018 parliamentary elections instead resulted in the success of the Five Star Movement (5SM), an anti-establishment party that quite unexpectedly allied with the right-wing and anti-immigrant League (Lega) to form a coalition government chaired by the relatively unknown law professor Giuseppe Conte.

During the first year, the political agenda of the new government was dominated by the Minister of the Interior and Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini (the League's leader), who on several occasions professed admiration for both 'illiberal democrats', such as Viktor Orban, and outright autocrats, such as Vladimir Putin (Donadio, 2019). Salvini launched several security reforms aiming to increase the power of the interior ministry (often interfering in the prerogatives of other ministries) and to limit the rights of migrants and ethnic minorities (e.g. Roma), the freedom of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the freedom to demonstrate.[6]

The 5SM-League government was short-lived. Following the success of the League in the May 2019 European Parliament elections, Salvini publicly asked Italians to grant him '*full powers* to wholly do what we promised, without slowdowns' (Harlan, 2019), presented a motion of no confidence against the government, and called for snap elections. In accordance with the constitution, however, the President of the Republic Sergio

[6] Gazzetta Ufficiale, 3 December 2018, n.281, https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/gu/2018/12/03/281/sg/pdf ; Gazzetta Ufficiale, 14 June 2019, n. 53, https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2019/08/09/19A05128/sg.

Mattarella did not dissolve Parliament and started new consultations that eventually led to a new coalition government in September 2019 formed by 5SM and the DP with Giuseppe Conte still as Prime Minister. However, the new government was born weak (Bull, 2021), due to the ideological distance between the two main parties – previously, fierce political opponents – and the fragmentation of the coalition, especially following a fracture within the DP and the formation of a new party led by former prime minister Matteo Renzi.

Poland did not suffer from the political instability that characterized Italy during the 2010s. However, the year 2015 represented a turning point for politics in this country. The right-wing Law and Justice party (PiS) won both the May presidential election – with Andrzej Duda defeating incumbent Bronisław Komorowski at the runoff – and the October parliamentary elections, in alliance with two smaller parties (the United Right coalition). Soon after its appointment, the new government embarked on a swift and far-reaching reform of the judiciary.

The first target was the Constitutional Tribunal, which gradually lost its independence through the replacement of several judges with persons close to the government (Sadurski, 2018). Moreover, a series of reforms progressively altered the composition of the courts and increased the control of the governing party (Varieties of Democracy, 2017). For instance, a law on the Supreme Court increased the head of state's influence over the appointment of its president and created two new chambers with the authority to *de facto* pick on judges criticizing the government's actions – i.e., the Chamber of Extraordinary Control and Public Affairs, which could overturn final judgements based on relatively vague criteria and call into question the results of elections and referendums, and the Disciplinary Board.

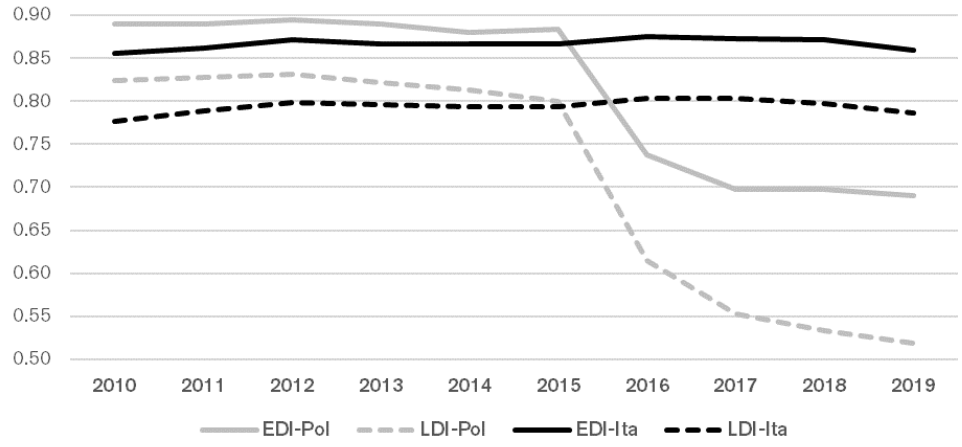
The same law also lowered the mandatory retirement age for the judges of the Supreme Court, which obliged about 40 percent of sitting judges to retire, including its president (Freedom House, 2018). These reforms were heavily criticized by the European Union, which for the first time called upon Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union, forcing the Polish government to reinstate the retired judges (Freedom House, 2019). However, other bills were approved to expand the control of the ruling party over appointments and dismissals in local and appellate courts and in the National Council of the Judiciary.

The judiciary was not the only accountability agent whose independence and ability to check and balance the executive power was severely limited by the PiS-led government. Parliament, for instance, suffered substantial disempowerment in terms of its involvement in the discussion of the new draft legislation proposed by the government (Szymański, 2020). Moreover, the government increased control over state-owned media and the previously independent National Broadcasting Council (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2018). The mandates of the directors of public television and radio broadcasters were ended and the Minister of Treasury appointed their successors (Freedom House, 2017). Other controversial measures included some restrictions to the freedom of assembly and the right of public protest (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2018), new regulations on NGO funding (Przybylski, 2018), and a reform of the National Electoral Commission that strengthened the role of political appointees (Varieties of Democracy, 2019).

To summarize, the instability that characterized Italian politics during the 2010s fuelled disillusionment with political institutions and increased support for an illiberal political leader who, once in power, adopted measures constituting a 'threat to civil liberties' (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019: 15) and tried to bypass the rules of the game. However, Italy is a relatively consolidated democracy and its institutions proved resilient, even though government weakness persisted (Bastasin, 2019). In turn, from 2015, the PiS-led government engaged in the dismantling of Poland's comparatively less consolidated democratic institutions (Pirro and Stanley, 2022). As a consequence of these actions, the quality of Polish democracy significantly declined.

These conclusions are supported by Figure 2, which traces the regime trajectories that Italy and Poland followed during the ten years preceding the pandemic (2010-2019), using Varieties of Democracy data. As we can see, Italy's democratic performance suffered only a minor decline between 2018 and 2019, that is, during the 5SM-League government. On the contrary, the graph unambiguously shows the transformation of Poland into a defective democracy following the 2015 elections won by PiS.

Figure 2. Trends of Electoral Democracy and Liberal Democracy in Italy and Poland, 2010-2019



Source: authors' own elaboration of data from the Varieties of Democracy dataset (https://www.v-dem.net/data/the-v-dem-dataset/). Notes: both indexes range from 0 to 1. EDI stands for Electoral Democracy Index, LDI stands for Liberal Democracy Index, Pol stands for Poland, Ita stands for Italy.

5. (dis)Loyalty to democracy: Government conduct during the Covid-19 crisis in Italy and Poland

The evidence we have thus far presented demonstrates two key points regarding the institutional conditions Italy and Poland displayed when the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in early 2020. On the one hand, from a legal viewpoint, Poland seemed to be better equipped than Italy to prevent abuses of power in a situation of crisis, thanks to a more detailed state of emergency regulatory framework (SER) embedded in the constitution. On the other hand, while Italy is a relatively consolidated liberal democracy which proved resilient even to years of political instability and a government with illiberal tendencies, Poland is a relatively young and defective democracy, especially considering

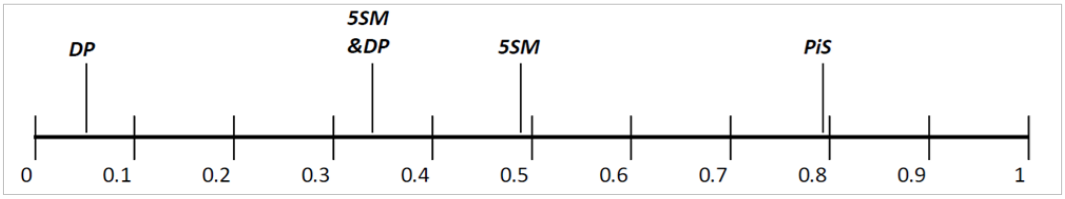
the weakening of the institutional checks and balances of the executive power enacted by the PiS-led government.

As anticipated, however, we should consider a third factor that could shape the risk of suffering 'pandemic backsliding', namely, the democratic commitment of the governments that managed the Covid-19 crisis. Government loyalty to democracy can hardly be estimated *a priori*; it must be demonstrated (and assessed) based on the actual behaviours and decisions of those who rule. Hence, our analysis will mainly focus on what actually happened in Italy and Poland during the period under examination and, specifically, how the governments of these countries managed the emergency and the measures they adopted.

According to some scholars (Medzihorsky and Lindberg, 2023), however, we could learn about the extent to which some political parties and leaders could threaten democracy by looking at their 'anti-pluralist rhetoric' before elections. Using the recently released *Antipluralism Index* from the V-Party Dataset, Figure 3 thus illustrates the degree of antipluralism of the main parties in government in Italy (5SM and DP) and Poland (PiS) when Covid-19 broke out, measured in the years before the most recent pre-pandemic elections (2018 in Italy; 2019 in Poland). As we can see, the Polish PiS stood out for its low commitment to democratic values (unsurprisingly, given its conduct during the 2015-2019 term, as described above), whereas the Italian 5SM and DP were characterized by comparatively lower levels of antipluralism.

Prima facie, therefore, even before the pandemic outbreak, we could have expected the Italian and Polish governments to behave in different ways in a window of opportunity for backsliding such as the Covid-19 crisis. Did these premonitory signs translate into concrete actions?

Figure 3. Antipluralist rhetoric of the main governing parties in Italy and Poland



Source: authors' own elaboration of data from the Varieties of Democracy's V-Party Dataset (https://www.v-dem.net/data/v-party-dataset/). Notes: the 5SM&DP value was estimated based on the average of the Antipluralism Index scores of the two main parties forming the Italian government, weighted according to their respective majority seat shares. The index ranges from 0 to 1.

5.1. The management of the Covid-19 crisis in Italy

Reflecting a relatively weak SER, the earlier responses to the pandemic of the Italian government were rather chaotic and uncoordinated. The first two restrictive measures were issued in January 2020 by the Ministry of Health based on Article 77 of the Constitution.[7] At the end of January, however, the government also declared a nationwide state

[7] Gazzetta Ufficiale, 27 January 2020, n.21, https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2020/01/27/20A00618/sg; Gazzetta Ufficiale, 1 February 2020, n.26, https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2020/02/01/20A00738/sg.

of emergency in accordance with the Civil Protection Code,[8] and the restrictive measures were subsequently issued by a plurality of institutional actors at different levels of governance (e.g. Ministry of Economy and Finance, Ministry of Health, Ministry of the Interior, Regional Presidents, City Mayors), through legislative acts of different natures and sometimes containing conflicting directives (Canestrini, 2020; Vicentini and Galanti, 2021; Pecchioli, 2022).

Most importantly, given the limited scope and non-constitutional nature of the Italian state of emergency, which does not allow limitations on individual rights and freedoms, and considering the sudden and indeed quite shocking spread of the disease in the country, in late February 2020 the government resorted to a rather unusual legal procedure. Based on a relatively generic decree law,[9] the government availed itself of the power to adopt 'any appropriate restrictive measure' through subsequent Decrees of the President of the Council of Ministers (DPCM), with no clear scope and boundaries. DPCMs are administrative acts that allow the government to enact measures that become immediately effective. They do not need parliamentary approval, nor must they be formally issued by the President of the Republic. The extensive use of a similar instrument to enact a vague – and thus potentially unlimited – list of measures implying significant restrictions to fundamental constitutional rights and freedom (including regional and nationwide lockdowns) was, at best, questionable (De Angelis and de Oliveira, 2021).

From late March 2020, however, many of these shortcomings were progressively addressed. A new decree law provided a better definition of the responsibilities and of the emergency measures that could be taken via DPCM.[10] Moreover, the executive's accountability to Parliament was restored, as well as Parliament's involvement in the decision-making process (Poli, 2021). Between May and December 2020, for instance, the government was called 60 times to present the Covid-19-related measures in front of Parliament before their adoption (during 2019, the government was called by Parliament only 13 times) (Openpolis, 2020).

Most importantly, despite several flaws in the legal and material management of the crisis, no evidence was reported of attempts by the Italian government to abuse emergency powers and DPCMs in their own favour (Amnesty International, 2022; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020; Reporters without Borders, 2020). Indeed, the country's democratic institutions proved resilient even to another change of government, between January and February 2021, when Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte was replaced by the former president of the European Central Bank Mario Draghi. Supported by a larger coalition of both centre-left and centre-right parties, Draghi extended the state of emergency, but he also reduced the use of DPCMs and progressively lifted the restrictions to public life, whose persistence was fuelling new anti-establishment movements (Amoretti et al., 2021; Campati, 2022).

[8] Gazzetta Ufficiale, 1 February 2020, n.26, https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2020/02/01/20A00737/sg.
[9] Gazzetta Ufficiale, 23 February 2020, n.6, https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2020/02/23/20G00020/sg.
[10] Gazzetta Ufficiale, 25 March 2020, n.19, https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2020/03/25/20G00035/sg.

To summarize, in Italy, the lack of a well-defined SER led to a rather chaotic legislative activity during the first phase of the Covid-19 crisis. However, neither Conte nor Draghi actually tried to exploit the window of opportunity opened up by the pandemic to aggrandize their power beyond the realm and duration of the crisis.

5.2. The management of the Covid-19 crisis in Poland

Differently from Italy, our analysis of the case of Poland reveals that the PiS-led government intentionally attempted to abuse the emergency powers in its own favour in several ways, from silencing the opposition to manipulating the electoral process and passing illiberal legislation unrelated to the management of the emergency.

The main issue refers to the PiS-led government's decision not to use the previously described relatively solid and well-defined SER to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic. Instead, the Polish government introduced new ad hoc legal instruments. The earliest measure (2 March 2020) consisted in the so-called 'Special Coronavirus Act' regulating 'special solutions related to the prevention, counteracting and combating of Covid-19, other infectious diseases and the crisis situations caused by them'.[11] In turn, on 20 March 2020, the Ministry of Health introduced the so-called 'State of Epidemic',[12] based on which a series of legislative acts called 'Anti-crisis shields' were subsequently issued to provide infrastructural support to contrast the spread of the virus and impose temporary restrictions on people's movements, organised events and any other gatherings of people.

Legal experts harshly criticized this decision as an act of 'illiberal constitutionalism' (Florczak-Wątor, 2020; Drinóczi and Bień-Kacała, 2020), claiming that the already existing and constitutionally regulated state of natural disaster offered the necessary instruments to adopt appropriate extraordinary measures.[13] Why, then, did the government choose to address the pandemic and impose restrictions on citizen's rights based on a new legal instrument whose accordance with the rule of law was controversial (Garwol and Grzęda, 2020; Żaczkiewicz-Zborska, 2021)?

The easiest answer refers to the relatively few obstacles the government faced. The low commitment of PiS to the rules of the game was not new and, as previously discussed, Poland's system of checks and balances was severely weakened in the years preceding the Covid-19 crisis. Most importantly, however, the introduction of a brand new emergency regulation was instrumental to the government's attempt to take advantage of the emergency to consolidate its own power and pursue its illiberal agenda.

First, the proclamation of the new state of epidemic had the immediate effect of further marginalizing parliamentary opposition and civil society organisations, which lost any impact on the legislative process (Szymański, 2020; Szymański and Zamęcki, 2022). Parliamentary voting was typically organized according to a two-step procedure

[11] Ustawa z dnia 2 marca 2020 r. o szczególnych rozwiązaniach związanych z zapobieganiem, przeciwdziałaniem i zwalczaniem COVID-19, innych chorób zakaźnych oraz wywołanych nimi sytuacji kryzysowych, https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU20200000374/U/D20200374Lj.pdf.
[12] Rozporządzenie Ministra Zdrowia z dnia 20 marca 2020 r. w sprawie ogłoszenia na obszarze Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej stanu epidemii, https://sip.lex.pl/akty-prawne/dzu-dziennik-ustaw/ogloszenie-na-obszarze-rzeczypospolitej-polskiej-stanu-epidemii-18972567.
[13] The legal experts we interviewed confirmed that the 'state of natural disaster' regulated by the Polish constitution is the legal instrument the government should have used during the Covid-19 crisis. They agreed that there was no 'technical' necessity to introduce a new 'state of epidemic'.

collecting proposals from the majority and amendments from the opposition in separate groups, so that the latter could be easily rejected *en bloc*. Moreover, government bills were often introduced as parliamentary ones, which allowed bypassing regulatory impact analysis and stakeholder consultations. In practice, also considering the restrictions on public gatherings to contrast the spread of the virus, opposing the government became virtually impossible.

The decision to bypass the existing constitutional norms by proclaiming a new 'state of epidemic' had a second key goal for PiS: avoiding a postponement of the presidential elections scheduled for 10 May 2020 (Guasti, 2020). According to Poland's constitution (Art.228, Par.7), elections cannot be held during a state of natural disaster, but only 90 days after its termination. The idea of holding national elections amid a pandemic was quite in contrast with the election postponements that occurred during the same period in several countries. Yet, PiS had good reasons to be in a rush. First, at the beginning of 2020, President Andrzej Duda, who was supported by PiS, was highly favoured to win a second mandate (Szczerbiak, 2020). Second, winning the presidential elections would have strengthened the government, given that PiS lacked the three-fifths parliamentary majority to over-turn presidential vetoes. Third, holding elections during the pandemic would have significantly increased the incumbency advantage. Short-term support for top political leaders tends to increase during crises, whereas the medium-to-long term implications of crises tend to erode support for incumbents (Kucharczyk, 2021; Oana et al., 2021; Szymański and Zamęcki, 2022; Tatarczyk and Wojtasik, 2023). Moreover, during a lockdown, an incumbent enjoys the privilege of being *de facto* the only candidate free to travel around the country to campaign (Kucharczyk, 2021; Tatarczyk and Wojtasik, 2023).

Despite the protests of the other candidates emphasizing the obstacles to holding free and fair elections during a pandemic (Vashchanka, 2020), in April 2020, about one month before the scheduled elections, PiS drafted a reform to conduct elections entirely through postal voting and to transfer election management from the National Electoral Commission to the Ministry of State Assets.[14] Besides holding elections, modifying electoral rules would have been impossible if the government had proclaimed the constitutionally regulated 'state of natural disaster' (Art.228, Par.6) instead of the new 'state of epidemic'. The whole legislative process in the Sejm was conducted in a single day, but the final approval of the reform was delayed until the beginning of May, as it faced some resistance in the Senate and harsh criticisms even outside the country (ODHIR, 2020). Even the collection of voter data by the Polish Post was declared a violation of the rule of law by the Voivodeship Administrative Court in Warsaw (Tarka, 2020).[15]

[14] An attempt was also made to change the constitution to extend the presidential term by two years (Reuters, 2020).

[15] The interviewed legal experts expressed several criticisms regarding the entire management of this issue. Besides the blatantly unconstitutional nature of the government's decision to both hold elections and pass an electoral reform in a period of extraordinary measures, they noted that experimenting a voting procedure entirely based on postal voting during the pandemic would have significantly threatened the integrity of the electoral process. They also expressed a critical position regarding the attempt to disempower the National Electoral Commission in favour of the Ministry of State Assets and to delegate voter data collection to the Polish Post.

In the end, the vote did not take place due to organisational difficulties in the absence of any formal procedure of postponement. The election was rescheduled to 28 June 2020 via both personal and postal voting. Duda was re-elected narrowly in the second round (51%), following an electoral contest marked by misuse of state resources, unauthorized informal campaigning during lockdown, and media capture (Freedom House, 2021b; Skrzypek, 2021; Tatarczyk Wojtasik, 2023).

Besides elections, the Polish government exploited the new state of epidemic to pass legislation either loosely or entirely unrelated to the emergency, and in some cases introduced permanent changes to existing laws (Szymański and Zamęcki, 2022). Among others, in April 2020, the government resumed the parliamentary debate on the so-called 'Stop Abortion' bill, a controversial legislative proposal aimed at limiting legal access to abortion. Previous attempts to pass the bill had failed in 2016 and 2018 due to mass protests (Eşençay, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020a). With the public attention focused on the pandemic, the government probably expected to face less resistance. While civil society organisations and opposition parties did organize some protests (Guasti, 2020), the Covid-19 restrictions on public gatherings inhibited their effectiveness (Kucharczyk, 2021). In the end, the abortion ban passed thanks to the intervention of the Constitutional Tribunal (Human Rights Watch, 2020b), whose independence was severely compromised in the years preceding the pandemic.

6. Conclusions

The Covid-19 pandemic threatened the quality and survival of democracy in many countries. In this paper, we claimed that the 'backsliding effect' of the Covid-19 pandemic – and, more generally, the likelihood that governments exploit states of emergency to aggrandize their power beyond the realm and duration of an ongoing crisis – depends not only on the tightness of the state emergency regulation, as previously argued by the literature (De Angelis and de Oliveira, 2021), but also on other structural and agency-related factors, such as the pre-pandemic state of democratic institutions in a country, and the democratic commitment (or loyalty) of its rulers.

The analysis of the apparently 'deviant' cases of Poland and Italy confirmed that the state of emergency regulation is neither sufficient nor necessary to prevent backsliding during crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic. In fact, we showed that, for a fuller understanding of when, how and to what extent crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic threaten the quality and survival of democracy, we should look at the complex interplay of the aforementioned factors.

On the one hand, Italy suggests that a state of emergency regulation potentially prone to power abuses could lead to rather chaotic management, but does not necessarily pave the way for democratic backsliding, as long as the government remains loyal to the rules of the game and the democratic institutions are robust, as demonstrated on several previous occasions. On the other hand, Poland shows that backsliding is possible even in the presence of a well-defined and constitutionally embedded state of emergency, if the government is willing to take advantage of an ongoing crisis and checks and balances are weak.

Relatedly, the cases of Italy and Poland demonstrate that, rather than outright *triggers* of democratic backsliding, crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic probably should be

understood as *catalysts* of an ongoing process of backsliding – a conclusion that echoes the findings of Engler and colleagues (2021) regarding variations in Covid-19 policies across democracies. Specifically, even when windows of opportunity open up, as in Italy due to an ill-defined state of emergency regulation, democratic backsliding does not happen by default, in the absence of explicit attempts and a favourable institutional context. In turn, in Poland, backsliding during the pandemic followed, and indeed was facilitated by the weakening of the checks and balances relating to the executive power that occurred in the years preceding the pandemic outbreak.

Several caveats and issues requiring further research must be highlighted, though. First, our research focused on the short-term regime consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, which is bound to also have longer-term implications for democracy's quality and survival (Cassani, 2022). Our findings, therefore, remain preliminary, given that the Covid-19's medium-to-long term consequences on the quality and survival of democracy are yet to be fully evaluated. Second, the interregional perspective that we adopted to study the consequences of the pandemic on democracy complements other studies focusing on Europe that instead analyse countries belonging to the same geographical area (Guasti, 2020; De Angelis and de Oliveira, 2021). However, the explanatory power of the factors that we analysed should be tested on a larger sample of countries and against other variables that could affect democratic backsliding.

Moreover, the conclusions we drew from the cases of Poland and Italy regarding democratic backsliding and resilience during crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic, need to be reassessed by studying cases that display different combinations of the conditions under examination. For instance, we emphasized that democratic backsliding and resilience during the Covid-19 crisis resulted from the interaction between similarly important structural and agency-related factors. True enough, most of the time backsliding is intentional. Yet, in our view, we should not overlook the importance of the institutional context. In this regard, the case of Poland vividly shows that the government's attempt to bypass the existing state of emergency regulation was crucially facilitated by the defective nature of the country's democratic institutions and particularly the weakness of the checks and balances relating to the executive power. Admittedly, however, we do not have sufficient evidence to conclude that a hypothetical attempt by the Italian government to erode democracy during the Covid-19 crisis would have failed due to the strength of the country's democratic institutions.

To demonstrate further that agency alone is not sufficient, it would be useful to analyse other cases in which authoritarian-leaning leaders governed in countries with (still) relatively robust democratic institutions. Moreover, while our analysis challenges previous conclusions regarding the saliency of the state of emergency regulation (De Angelis and de Oliveira, 2021), we should consider that Italy's weak state of emergency regulation did not undergo the stress test of an authoritarian-leaning government, and that in Poland the SER was circumvented thanks to a specific combination of factors facilitating backsliding. Therefore, even the state of emergency regulation needs further attention through the investigation of other cases presenting different constellations of the factors under examination.

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