# italian political science

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# The integrity of the 2022 Italian parliamentary election:
# A subjective perspective

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## Abstract

Democracy is a political regime in which citizens can select their rulers through electoral procedures. Thus, effective rules and institutions are necessary for democracy to work correctly. Besides these institutional prerequisites, democracy needs attitudes and behaviors to be shared by the most relevant political actors. Among them, the losers' consent to accept an electoral defeat plays a key role and should be considered a necessary feature of electoral integrity. This paper uses survey data collected by ITANES – about 4,000 cases – to assess evaluations of the fairness of the 2022 Italian parliamentary election as expressed by a representative sample of citizens. We treat perceptions of fairness as a dependent variable, and through a series of bivariate analyses and then a multivariate regression, we research the covariates that can make sense of their distribution. Results show that the voter with the highest probability of perceiving the 2022 parliamentary election as fair is a male over 64 years old who voted for the winning parties, has a pro-democratic attitude, lives in a municipality of under 30,000 inhabitants, and has a high level of education.

## 1. Introduction

Free and fair elections are insufficient to underpin a fully-fledged democracy, but no one disputes that they are necessary. From this point of view, current trends concerning the correctness of electoral processes should worry all supporters of democracy. Ironically enough, while democracy and electoral practices are spreading on an unprecedented scale, the actual implementation of elections is flawed by fraud, maladministration, voter harassment, media repression, and open violence. In the case of hybrid regimes and partial democracies, these are not news. After all, the association of actual dictatorship with some forms of democracy has contributed significantly to the success of expressions such as 'electoral authoritarianism' (Schedler 2009). However, the January 6 Capitol Hill attack has clearly shown that problems of electoral fairness may also affect consolidated democracies, and related consequences may even result in extended violence.

Given the apparent relevance of the topic, political science and related disciplines have long assessed the quality of elections, and over time different methodologies have been applied. Primarily due to the impact of the electoral integrity project led by Pippa

Norris (2014; 2017), this field of research is currently dominated by the expert survey approach. The same perspective is adopted in the broader methodology Freedom House uses to assess the level of democracy in all existing polities, and some indicators utilized by Freedom House are explicitly dedicated to evaluating the correctness of the electoral process.[1] However, other scholars address the quality of elections by using aggregate data. This is the case of scholars interested in detecting fraud by election officials (Myagkov, Ordeshook and Shakin 2009) and those investigating invalid votes, namely the sum of blank and null ballots (Kouba and Lysek 2019).

Following the tradition of electoral studies, part of the research on the quality of elections is based on survey data. An important stream aims to clarify voters' motivations for casting an invalid ballot, a problem that can only be addressed through aggregate data at the peril of ecological fallacy (Moral 2016; Cohen 2018). Other scholars use individual-level data to control for the role of the perceptions of electoral integrity in satisfaction with democracy (Esaiasson 2011; Mauk 2022). In this case, voters' thoughts on election administration, public officials' honesty, candidates' fairness, and the reliability of the media report are crucial variables for explaining their attitudes towards democracy and democratic institutions.

This article agrees that the perception of electoral integrity is essential in shaping public opinion attitudes. To deal with it, we start by accepting that '... [t]he concept of electoral integrity refers to agreed international conventions and global norms, applying universally to all countries worldwide through the election cycle, including during the pre-election period, the campaign, on polling day, and its aftermath' (Norris 2023, 88). First, this definition focuses on a whole electoral cycle encompassing before, during, and after the election day, as spelled out by Van Ham (2020, 116). Second, it identifies some core standards in a series of acts issued by the international community institutions derived from the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.[2] Once the objective benchmark of electoral integrity is defined, the *perceptions* of electoral integrity concern citizens' thoughts about implementing the core standards in a given election.

As mentioned, the quality of elections is investigated by employing both an objective approach, based mainly on aggregated data, and a subjective one, based on experts' or voters' perceptions. Moreover, even when a survey aims to understand voters' perceptions of the quality of elections, an interconnection with the objective characteristics of voters clearly emerges. This is the case of this article, in which we will investigate how some objective characteristics of the interviewees (i.e., the party they voted for) determine – or influence – their perception of the electoral process. However, there is more: the connection between objective and subjective aspects will also concern independent variables. As anticipated, some of these will reflect the objective characteristics of the interviewees, while others, such as attitudes toward democracy, will concern their perceptions. We will then be able to understand what aspects – objective or subjective – prevail in shaping voters' opinions on the integrity of the electoral process.

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[1] Available online: freedomhouse.org/reports/freedom-world/freedom-world-research-methodology

[2] 'The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures' (UDHR 1948, art. 21.3).

The case we examine is the Italian voters' opinions toward electoral integrity in the 2022 parliamentary election. The choice of Italy may raise some skepticism regarding its contribution to the knowledge of Western democracies from a comparative perspective. At a glance, Italy is an established parliamentary democracy, essentially similar to other European systems. Nevertheless, it features some peculiarities relevant to analyzing electoral integrity. For instance, in the nineties, its party system entered a prolonged time of deinstitutionalization, resulting in a chaotic merging and splitting of existing parties and the birth of new and often irrelevant parties (Emanuele and Chiaramonte 2020), and this organizational instability has given rise to unprecedented electoral volatility. In addition, personalization – another recent characteristic of many political systems – has reached a huge dimension in Italy, bringing about several personal and leader-based parties (Rahat and Kenig 2018, 200). Again, Italy is one of the first European countries so far to be ruled by a coalition composed exclusively of populist parties. In fact, after the 2018 general election, a two-party government was formed with Movimento 5 Stelle and Lega (Itanes 2018), changing the design common in some other countries, where populist parties have entered government as junior partners in a coalition led by mainstream parties. This may suggest a strong presence of populist attitudes in Italian public opinion, likely consequential for the formation of perceptions of the working of democracy (Zaslove and Meijers 2023). Of course, these tendencies are present by and large in all contemporary democracies, but their unusual amount may make Italy a peculiar case.

Another factor that could possibly make Italy a deviant case is the data collection time. In the year 2022, some anti-pandemic provisions were still in operation. This exceptional condition has been demonstrated to affect political attitudes and opinions (Maggini and Vezzoni 2022). But, above all, the current political attitudes of Italian voters could be affected by the type of government formed after the last parliamentary election. From the nineties onward, Italy experienced frequent government alternation. When successful, the right-wing coalition formed governments under the leadership of Silvio Berlusconi, with moderate and centrist parties' primacy over the extreme and populist partners, such as Lega and Alleanza Nazionale. Things went differently in 2022 when the dominant party leading the right-wing coalition became Fratelli d'Italia, supposedly heir to the fascist tradition. The consequent appointment of Giorgia Meloni as prime minister emphasized the marked cleavage between fascism and antifascism, originated an unprecedented polarization, and posed a first-time problem of acceptance for the opponents. This is an issue unknown to most European political systems, where fascism is not a pervasive and durable experience, and it could make Italy a case that is difficult to compare, if not a complete outlier.

Having discussed this note of caution about the possible generalization of our work, we may add that, as mentioned above, the perceptions of electoral integrity are usually used as an independent or intermediate variable to account for satisfaction with democracy, trust for institutions, or propensity to turnout. Our approach is exploratory in principle, so we adopt a different research design where Italian voters' perceptions of electoral integrity are considered a dependent variable, and we search for factors able to explain their distribution among different individuals.

The article is organized along these lines. Section 2 presents the Italian National Election Studies (Itanes) survey data we use in the subsequent analyses and discusses the relevant variables to be chosen as covariates. In Section 3, we first present the results of the bivariate correlations between the perceptions of electoral integrity and several independent variables indicated as potentially relevant by the existing literature; we then propose a multivariate analysis using the most promising. In the final section, we summarize our results and discuss the implications for this field of research.

## 2. Data and Method

### 2.1. The dependent variable: a sketch

First, let us search for an objective benchmark for the electoral integrity of the Italian political system. As reported above, several non-governmental organizations and research groups provide yearly estimations of levels of democracy on a global scale. Among others, the abovementioned research program *Freedom in the World* has been carried out by Freedom House since 1973 to assess the conditions of political rights and civil liberties in all existing polities. As a part of a consolidated methodology, country experts use a 0-4 scale to evaluate the correctness of the presidential and parliamentary elections and election management in general. Adding this information builds a scale anchored to 0 and 12, where electoral integrity is associated with higher scores. After examining more than 200 polities in the 2000s, it turns out that from 2005 to 2015 scores were stable at about 7.5, with minor improvements due to episodes of democratization, such as the Arab Spring in 2011. However, from 2016 onward, the quality of elections steadily worsened, reaching a score inferior to 7.0 in 2022 and witnessing the existence of democratic backsliding.[3]

Of course, this trend is largely determined by the malpractices of hybrid regimes and partial democracies, where low-quality elections remain a recurrent characteristic. When the focus is on established democracies, (although negative campaigning, questioned results, maladministration, and extended post-electoral violence have recently occurred), the Italian political system is seemingly untouched by this negative trend. In order to warrant a comparison involving only veteran democracies, Figure 1 portrays the electoral integrity scores for the countries participating in the European Union, and Italy, from 2005 to 2022.[4] During this period, the averages of electoral integrity calculated for the EU members show a negative trend, but as expected, the slope is very different from the dramatic fall affecting the whole range of countries. The lowest score, registered in 2022, still achieves a satisfying 11.70 on a scale with 12 as its highest value. The scores for Italy reached the maximum assessment of 12 in all years except for a slight decrease to 11 in 2011 and 2012, a negative bump not easy to shed light on, as in those years only minor local elections unaffected by major problems took place.

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[3] Source: Freedom House, Aggregate Category and Subcategory Scores, 2003-2023.
[https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world]

[4] To calculate the averages for the EU members, the starting point takes advantage of the 2004 wave of ten new entries. Due to their late entry, Romania and Bulgaria have been considered only since 2007, and Croatia has been considered only since 2013; due to Brexit, the United Kingdom is included in the dataset until 2019.

Similarly, the recent report by Garnett et al. (2023, 6), a part of the Electoral Integrity Project, gives Italy 72 on a 0-100 scale. Thus, Italy performs better than France and the United Kingdom.

These are not surprising results. Although often considered a problematic democracy, Italy nowadays has a consolidated parliamentary system with frequent alternations in government. The Minister of Internal Affairs professionally manages electoral administration according to the principles of the governmental model (James 2020; James and Garnett 2023), and the unique severe contestation that happened in the 2006 election came to nothing (Lioy 2021). Considering these general conditions, the information reported in Table 1 may be entirely unexpected. It comes from the Itanes post-electoral survey administered in 2022, which featured a question about the perceived fairness of the election held on September 25: *Elections can take place more or less regularly. Thinking about the September 25 election, where would you place it on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means the election was fair, and 5 means irregular?*[5]

**Figure 1.** The integrity of the electoral process in the European Union and in Italy, 2005-2022
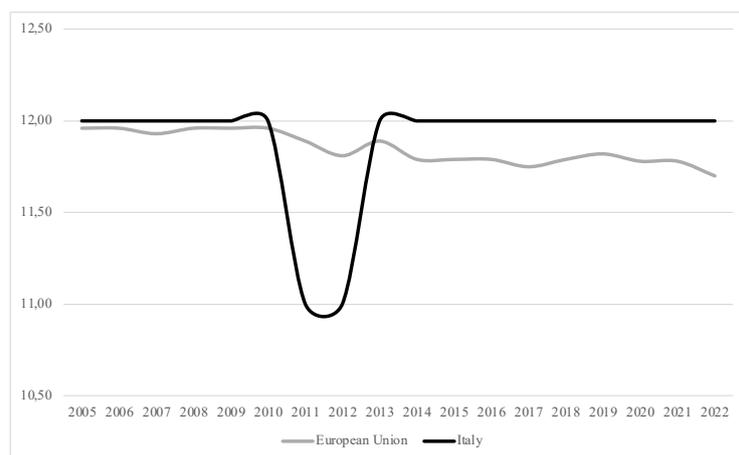


Source: Freedom House, Aggregate Category and Subcategory Scores, 2003-2023.

Taken together, the objective measures and the subjective perceptions of electoral integrity pose a puzzle. Lack of electoral integrity is a thorny problem at a global level, but only a minor one for established democracies, and, in the end, Italian politics seems to be almost untouched by it. Most Italian citizens consider the 2022 election process to be quite regular, while a notable minority consider defects to be noteworthy and presumably consequential for the election results and government formation. This case is not unique because, in other political systems, ordinary citizens have also shown exaggerated evaluations of electoral malpractice compared to other political actors (Partheymüller et al. 2022; Fisher and Sällberg 2020). However, even such an unrealistic picture of the election administration may breed a remarkably negative vision of democracy and politics in general. Nevertheless, as the reasons for accepting it have gone undetected so far, in the following section we explore the relationship between the

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[5] Q13. Le elezioni possono svolgersi in maniera più o meno regolare. Pensando alle elezioni del 25 settembre, dove le posizionerebbe su una scala da 1 a 5 dove 1 significa che le elezioni si sono svolte in maniera regolare, e 5 significa in maniera irregolare?

perceptions of election integrity and several independent variables, using both bivariate analyses and multivariate regressions.

**Table 1.** Perceptions of election integrity in the 2022 Italian parliamentary election

| Perceptions of election integrity | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 Election has been regular | 1966 | 46.9 | 53.8 | 53.8 |
| 2 | 600 | 14.3 | 16.4 | 70.2 |
| 3 | 473 | 11.3 | 13.0 | 83.2 |
| 4 | 332 | 7.9 | 9.1 | 92.3 |
| 5 Election has been irregular | 284 | 6.8 | 7.8 | 100.0 |
| Valid cases | 3656 | 87.2 | 100.0 | – |
| I don't know | 466 | 11.1 | – | – |
| No answer | 70 | 1.7 | – | – |
| Missing cases | 536 | 12.8 | – | – |
| Total | 4192 | 100.0 | – | – |

Source: ITANES 2022. Note: weighted cases.

To this end, the variable described in Table 1 poses some problems. It is clearly anchored to positions 1 and 5, corresponding to a perception of a completely fair and completely rigged election, but the middle positions are perhaps too nuanced and, therefore, difficult to figure out. Thus, we prefer to recode the original values in a new dichotomous variable to minimize this problem and avoid misinterpreting the interviewees' answers. Of course, this procedure requires a new choice, namely, recognizing the break-even point. Two solutions promise significant benefits. The first solution envisages a dichotomy between position 1 – corresponding to a perception of complete electoral fairness – versus positions 2 to 5. By so doing, one may exploit two major advantages. Firstly, the divide is extremely clear, with those believing that the 2022 election has been completely fair against all those thinking that the election has been even minimally biased; secondly, the sample is split into two more or less similar halves (53.8 versus 46.2 percent).

A possible inconvenience of this solution is a lack of realism. In particular, respondents choosing position 2 admit the actual existence of some minor flaws, arguably due to trivial episodes of involuntary maladministration rather than deliberate fraud; however, this is not sufficient to vitiate the whole electoral process. Accepting this assumption, we define these cases as similar to those considering the 2022 election to be fully regular so that the sample is dichotomized between those choosing positions 1 and 2 versus those choosing positions 3 to 5. Thus, in the last analysis, the dependent variable is dichotomized, identifying, on the one hand, those who believe that elections are regular and, on the other, all those who have an opposite opinion. It is coded (1) if respondents answered 1 or 2 on the five-point scale of electoral integrity perceptions and (0) if they answered 3 to 5.

As anticipated, we aim to discover the differences, if any, between supporters and critics of Italian electoral policies. To do so, we now discuss possible characteristics of the profile of both types of citizens to be investigated empirically.

## 2.2. Searching for independent variables: a discussion

Ascertaining how citizens accept a positive or negative vision of the electoral process in their country is quite a complex problem, and the related literature has used different approaches and several variables. Some scholars maintain that perceptions of electoral integrity are mainly a consequence of long-term individual attitudes. Among them, support for democracy has a prominent role. For instance, Flesken and Hartl (2018) use a variable named 'antiauthoritarian values' to gauge feelings toward democracy and its correlation with what citizens think about elections in their country. Our dataset features several items appropriate for tapping pro-democratic attitudes. One of them is proposed as follows: *Democracy is always preferable to any other form of government.*[6]

Interviewees could react to this item on a five-step scale: strongly agree (1), agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree (5). We prefer to reverse the scale so that high values correspond to solid support for democracy. Given this variable's orientation and the orientation of the dichotomous variable measuring the perception of electoral integrity, we expect a positive correlation between them.

A remarkable stream of literature argues that the so-called winner-loser gap prominently influences several types of voters' attitudes and opinions (Anderson et al. 2005). For each voter, the status of winner or loser is simply a consequence of voting for a party winning or losing a given election. In turn, a party is said to be a winner when, after the election, it enters the next government. At the same time, a losing party is relegated to opposition or eventually excluded from parliament. During the 2022 parliamentary election, four parties – Fratelli d'Italia, Lega, Forza Italia, and Noi Moderati – participated in the right-wing electoral coalition and then formed the incumbent government; thus, they are the winners according to the above criteria. The definition of the status of the losing party is a little more complicated because of party fragmentation and some characteristics of the mixed electoral system. Four parties – Partito Democratico, Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra, Più Europa, and Impegno Civico – joined a left-wing coalition and were defeated, and three out of these are currently in the parliamentary opposition. At the same time, Impegno Civico did not win any seats. Movimento 5 Stelle and Azione-Italia Viva did not join any coalition, entered the parliament, and are now in opposition. Sud chiama Nord is a local party that fielded candidates only in Sicily, gained a single seat, and its sole representative is now in the opposition. All other parties were unable to surpass the electoral threshold in the proportional competition or win a single-member district race. Therefore, they are excluded from parliament and, by definition, cannot enter or support the incumbent government.[7]

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[6] Q04a. La democrazia è sempre e comunque preferibile a qualsiasi altra forma di governo.

[7] Most of the parties out of parliament are left-wing; thus, their supporters add the frustration of loser's status to ideological aversion for the incumbent government. This is not true for Italexit and Vita, two small right-wing parties advocating Eurosceptical and no-vax positions. It is plausible that their voters are satisfied with the government. However, this is a different attitude from the perception of electoral integrity we are focusing on, so we maintain them in the losers' camp.

In our dataset, we have recoded voters as winners (1) or losers (0) according to their answers to the question: *For which of the following parties did you vote in the Chamber election held last September 25?*[8]

In the same mood as the advocates of the winner-loser gap, we claim that the psychological satisfaction bred by the electoral victory of the supported party produces a sense of appreciation for the electoral process, while disappointment due to defeat drives losing voters to question the correctness of the election administration. Given the orientation of the involved variables, we anticipate a positive relationship between the winner-loser status and the perception of election integrity.

Citizens' levels of information and political competence change with their use of mass media. Both common sense and research agree that 'mediavores' with frequent media use develop a more accurate picture of political affairs (Coffé 2017). Of course, current media fragmentation offers citizens several opportunities to approach domestic and international politics, and the problem arises of the outlets to be considered for correctly representing media effects on public opinion. In addition, the Itanes dataset features several items to grasp traditional and new Internet-based media. Referring to the former, we prefer to concentrate on television. Although current conventional media also include radios and newspapers, we maintain that television is still the more familiar source of information for most citizens; thus, focusing on it allows us to provide a realistic and parsimonious picture of media consumption. The Italian system is partitioned into public and private media firms, each having a clear political standing and a well-entrenched relationship with segments of voters. Accordingly, we use two different items to identify voters' television use and preferences: *During the last election campaign, in a typical week, how many days a week did you:* 1. *watch the news on RAI channels?* 2. *watch the news on a private network (Mediaset, La7, Sky, etc.)?*[9]

These variables are calculated using an 8-point scale from 1 (no use of television) to 8 (used every day). Scholars investigating the consequences of television watching are divided into pessimists fearing growing cynicism (Putnam 2000; Sartori 1989) and those arguing that attention to the news reinforces civic disengagement instead (Norris 2000). Our items deal with serious politics rather than tabloidization or infotainment. Thus, we expect frequent watchers to develop a more accurate perception of electoral administration, and the expected correlation with our dependent variable is positive.

Besides traditional media such as television, new social media are becoming increasingly important in political communication. Our dataset contains some items dedicated to them, and we have selected the following: *And during the last electoral campaign, in a typical week, how many days a week did you use social media (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, etc.) to follow news on parties and candidates?*[10]

The respondents' answers are collected utilizing the same 1-8 scale to assess television use. Yet, in this case, we have no clear expectations about the likely correlation with the dependent variable. Social media are valuable tools for acquiring a high level of

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[8] Q10LHb. Per quale dei seguenti partiti ha votato alla Camera lo scorso 25 settembre?

[9] Q02. Durante la scorsa campagna elettorale, in una settimana tipo, quanti giorni a settimana lei ha: Q02a. Guardato il telegiornale sui canali RAI? Q02b. Guardato il telegiornale su una rete privata (Mediaset, La7, Sky, etc.)?

[10] Q02f. E durante la scorsa campagna elettorale, in una settimana tipo, quanti giorni a settimana lei ha utilizzato i social media (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, etc.) per seguire le notizie su partiti e candidati?

information. However, due to warranted open access, they are also an instrument for vehiculating fake news and distorting knowledge. Thus, their impact on voters' perceptions of electoral integrity is unclear.

## 2.3. Control variables

Besides the critical variables discussed above, we also use some standard control variables that are, in principle, capable of influencing voters' perceptions. The first set of control variables captures voters' political characteristics. Interest in politics is measured on a 4-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 4 (very much). We expect that interested citizens will be more involved and knowledgeable; therefore, they will develop an accurate point of view about the integrity of the 2022 parliamentary election, and the correlation with the perceptions of electoral integrity will be positive.

Voters' self-location on the left-right continuum is collected on a 0-10 scale, with a low score corresponding to left-wing and a high score to right-wing positions. We do not have a theory-driven expectation about its correlation with the perceptions of electoral integrity. However, some researchers have found that 'voters for right-wing parties may be more concerned with electoral fraud than voters for left-wing parties' (Fisher and Sällberg 2020, 408). Thus, we predict a negative relationship between self-location and visions of electoral integrity.

By political efficacy, scholars mean that, in citizens' views, participation is relevant to drive government decisions and that individuals matter in politics. This concept may be split into two components: voters experiment with external efficacy when they think the political system is open to their requests and the political authorities are influenced by their opinions; instead, voters experience internal efficacy when they are confident in their skills for understanding political affairs. The questionnaire administered by Itanes in 2022 included items tapping both dimensions, but for our goals, we prefer using only the question referring to internal efficacy: *Do you feel you understand what the most important political issues are in the country?*[11]

The item for external efficacy focuses on clearly alternative political offers by parties instead of overlapping programs. Thus, it seems especially tailored to predict political alienation and propensity to turnout. Having to do with the perceptions of electoral integrity, the just reported item is more promising because it may be considered a proxy for political involvement and political competence in addition to measuring internal efficacy. Interviewees may answer using a five-step scale anchored to 'strongly disagree' (1) and 'strongly agree' (5). As may be inferred from Karp, Nai and Norris (2018), we expect a positive relationship with the variable measuring the perceptions of electoral integrity.

The second set of control variables includes voters' sociodemographic characteristics. Age distinguishes six groups, with the youngest voters aged 18, the minimum age required for voting according to the Italian electoral legislation. As Cantú and García-Ponce have found that 'older citizens are more likely to have positive perceptions about the integrity of the election' (2015, 10), we suppose there will be a positive relationship with our dependent variable.

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[11] Q03. Lei sente di capire quali sono i temi politici più importanti nel paese?

Gender is a dummy, scoring (0) for women and (1) for men. As Cantú and García-Ponce (2015, 9) have discovered that women are less confident than men, we anticipate a positive relation between gender and perceptions of electoral integrity in our data. Education is a three-mode variable: less than primary, primary, and lower secondary (1); upper secondary and post-secondary (2); tertiary education (3). In general, educated people are more sophisticated and able to reach a correct vision of politics; therefore, we expect a positive correlation with confidence in electoral fairness. Income partitions voters into five classes, with the lowest echelon grouping those with an income from 0 to 19,990 euros and the highest with those earning more than 80,000. Extending the logic of modernization theories, Frank and Martínez i Coma (2017) find that developed countries have a higher electoral integrity. Moving to the individual level, we suppose that wealthier individuals may have greater confidence in election integrity, creating a positive correlation with the dependent variable. Among other things, income is often related to other relevant variables, such as education. Finally, we use two contextual variables. City dimension is a 6-class variable, with the smallest towns having up to 5,000 inhabitants and the largest having more than 250,000. The variable 'macroregion' acknowledges the importance of territorial differences by partitioning Italy into five geopolitical zones. In both cases, we have no expectations about the likely effect of these variables.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Bivariate analysis

This section examines the bivariate relationships between the dependent variable measured as a dummy and the several independent variables discussed in the above section. To begin with, Tables 2 to 4 present the frequencies of each independent variable in relation to the perception of electoral integrity.

Table 2 shows a linear relationship between pro-democratic attitudes and the perceptions of electoral integrity: as the intensity of pro-democratic attitudes increases, the perception of the regularity of the election grows. The figures in Table 3 are equally clear. Those who voted for a winning party are over-represented among those who perceive the election as regular (+5.8 percentage points); conversely, those who voted for the losers are underrepresented (-3.3 percentage points). Thus, electoral integrity perceptions are influenced by long-lasting attitudes about democracy and short-term factors due to election results.

**Table 2.** Pro-democratic attitudes per perceptions of electoral integrity

| Democracy always preferable | Irregular election | Regular election |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly disagree | 45.7 | 54.3 |
| Quite disagree | 44.6 | 55.4 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 44.0 | 56.0 |
| Quite agree | 34.1 | 65.9 |
| Strongly agree | 20.9 | 79.1 |
| All voters | 29.6 | 70.4 |
| N | 1063 | 2533 |

Source: own elaboration of ITANES 2022. Note: percentual values.

**Table 3.** Winner-loser status per perceptions of electoral integrity

| Winner-loser status | Irregular election | Regular election |
|---|---|---|
| Losers | 25.3 | 74.7 |
| Winners | 16.2 | 83.8 |
| All voters | 22.0 | 78.0 |
| N | 578 | 2047 |

Source: own elaboration of ITANES 2022. Note: percentual values.

**Table 4.** Media use per perceptions of electoral integrity

| Media use per week | Public television use | | Private television use | | Social media use | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Irregular elections | Regular elections | Irregular elections | Regular elections | Irregular elections | Regular elections |
| Never | 29.4 | 70.6 | 30.9 | 69.1 | 19.6 | 80.4 |
| One day | 35.1 | 64.9 | 42.8 | 57.2 | 31.7 | 68.3 |
| Two days | 37.6 | 62.4 | 39.6 | 60.4 | 43.8 | 56.2 |
| Three days | 39.7 | 60.3 | 47.2 | 52.8 | 40.8 | 59.2 |
| Four days | 40.1 | 59.9 | 35.5 | 64.5 | 46.4 | 53.6 |
| Five days | 30.6 | 69.4 | 22.6 | 77.4 | 36.4 | 63.6 |
| Six days | 26.7 | 73.3 | 24.6 | 75.4 | 32.7 | 67.3 |
| Every day | 19.1 | 80.9 | 17.7 | 82.3 | 24.4 | 75.6 |
| All voters | 29.6 | 70.4 | 29.8 | 70.2 | 29.8 | 70.2 |
| N | 1066 | 2531 | 1074 | 2528 | 1051 | 2470 |

Source: own elaboration of ITANES 2022. Note: percentual values.

The relationship between media use and the dependent variable is less linear, although some trends can be seen in Table 4. Firstly, among those who never watch the news on TV – public or private – the share of those who trust the regularity of the elections is higher than those who follow the information occasionally (from one to four or five days a week). Secondly, when TV news is followed with some regularity – starting from four times a week – there is a growing trend in the percentage of those who perceive elections as fair. The same trend also affects social media users. In short, whether it is news from TV or social media, people who never seek information and those who often do so have a positive attitude toward the electoral process.

How can we try to explain this apparent paradox? Firstly, it should be noted that those who never seek information through TV have a sociodemographic profile similar to the rest of the sample. Therefore, we can exclude the fact that the trend of this relationship is due to the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents. Conversely, a further explanation can be sought in the high age of those who have never used social media as a source of information. In fact, according to our dataset, 79.2 percent of those over 64 years old believe that the elections were held fairly. This percentage is the highest of the six age groups into which the sample is divided.

That said, exploring their respective association through a correlation matrix seems appropriate to assess if and to what extent the selected variables are related (see Table 2A in the Appendix). Concerning the key variables, all correlations are statistically significant except for the relationship between 'perceptions of electoral integrity' and 'social media use'. However, none has particularly robust coefficients, suggesting that multicollinearity problems should not affect the multivariate model. In particular, the

strongest correlation is between the use of public television and the use of private television. However, the coefficient is somewhat limited, being equal to 0.367. Regardless of the sign of the relationship, all the others are between 0.018 and 0.248: very low values. Given the bivariate analysis results, we can introduce all key variables into multivariate models. The only exception is social media use, which, as anticipated, is not correlated to the dependent variable.

Multicollinearity does not regard control variables either, as there are no robust coefficients concerning their mutual correlations or their relationship with the dependent and independent variables. In only five cases, the coefficient is greater than 0.3: internal efficacy and interest in politics (0.375); pro-democratic attitudes and internal efficacy (0.338); social media use and interest in politics (0.323); age and education (-0.316); winner-loser gap and left-right self-location (0.307).

## 3.2. Multivariate analysis

As a preliminary point, it has to be noted that the number of cases in the logistic regression is less than the total number of cases. This is because if there is a missing value for any variable in the model, the entire case is excluded from the analysis.

The logit models in Table 5 show that some key variables have a statistically significant relationship with the dependent variables. Looking at Model 1, which was run without control variables, a positive relationship emerges, as expected, between the dependent variable and the pro-democratic attitude. In other words, people who support democracy think the 2022 Italian election was regular. For example, respondents who do not have a pro-democratic attitude, compared to strongly pro-democracy people, have a lower probability (-50,1 percent) of evaluating the elections as regular.[12] With few differences, the trend is the same for those who have a less hostile attitude towards democracy but are not firmly in favor of it. Moreover, looking at Model 2, introducing political, sociodemographic, and contextual control variables is essentially irrelevant to the relationship between pro-democratic attitudes and evaluating the fairness of elections.

Our expectations are confirmed concerning another key variable: the winner-loser gap. Both models show, without particular differences, that those who voted for a losing party have a much lower probability of perceiving the elections as fair than those who voted for a winning one. The introduction of control variables, while reducing the gap between the two groups of respondents, does not alter the statistical significance of the relationship.

The last two critical independent variables concern the frequency with which respondents gather information about collective issues. As anticipated, regression models do not include the use of social media but only the frequency with which voters watch news on public television and private networks. The relationship between the variable 'public television use' and the dependent variable is not statistically significant and, in any case, the coefficient is close to 1, which implies a zero effect. Conversely, the 'private television use' variable has a statistically significant coefficient in both models.

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[12] The exponentiated coefficient, which in this case is equal to 0.499, is an odds ratio and can be easily transformed into a percentage variation, according to the following expression: (0.499-1) X 100 = -50.1.

Although the relationship is positive, its intensity is very close to 1; therefore, there is no relevant effect on the dependent variable.[13]

Although control variables are not reported in Table 5, it is worth looking at them more closely. A comparison between Models 1 and 2 shows that adding them to the basic model – where only the key variables are used – does not alter the results. However, while political variables – interest in politics, internal efficacy, and left-right self-positioning – only sporadically achieve statistical significance, their inclusion reduces the probability of perceiving the election as fair by 39 percent, almost ten percentage points less than Model 1.[14]

Unlike political predictors, sociodemographics significantly correlated with the dependent variable. However, their introduction does not affect the impact of key independent variables on the perceptions of electoral integrity. Focusing on age, it emerges that, other things being equal, younger age cohorts, compared to those over 64, are less likely to perceive the 2022 election as fair. As expected, a positive relationship exists between age and the perception of electoral integrity. While being male or female makes a somewhat limited difference in the perception of the integrity of elections, education level is quite relevant. All other things being equal, those with primary rather than university education are about 50 percent less likely to perceive elections as fair. Conversely, income is not statistically significant, although the sign of the relationship goes in the expected direction.

The last group of controls consists of context variables, whose introduction does not substantively impact the relationship between independent variables and the perception of electoral integrity. Only the demographic size of the municipality of residence has a relevant impact. Compared to those who live in large cities, those who reside in municipalities with up to 30,000 inhabitants have a much higher probability of perceiving the 2022 parliamentary election as fair. In light of what has been said about education levels, this finding seems counterintuitive as the incidence of people with high levels of education is higher in larger cities. However, it can be explained by considering the role played by the interaction of gender and education. Firstly, it must be considered that women in small municipalities, compared to those living in cities over 30,000, are more likely to consider elections as fair. Therefore, including 'gender' in the equation contributes decisively to determining the negative relationship between the size of the municipality of residence and the propensity to perceive elections as fair. Of course, it is not so much gender that is relevant, but its interaction with the level of education. We know that women are underrepresented in the upper secondary and tertiary levels of education. We also know this is due to the limited percentage of women with high

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[13] Negative odds ratios can only vary between 0 and 1, and positive odds can take any value greater than 1, which suggests caution when comparing odds greater than 1 to less than 1. According to some scholars (Pisati 2003), a positive odds ratio equal to $v$ has the same intensity as a negative odds ratio equal to $1/v$. This further reduces the impact of the positive coefficient associated with the variable 'private television use'.

[14] A full presentation of the multivariate models, including all the control variables, is reported in Table 3A in the Appendix.

education levels (upper secondary and tertiary) in municipalities under 100,000 inhabitants.[15]

To sum up, according to the results of the multivariate analysis, the voter who has the highest probability of perceiving the elections as fair has a pro-democratic attitude, supports a winning party, does not show any peculiar media exposure, and is a male over 64 years old, living in a municipality of under 30,000 inhabitants, and with a high level of education.

**Table 5.** Determinants of perceptions of electoral integrity

| | Model 1 | | Model 2[(a)] | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | S.E. | Exp (B) | S.E. | Exp (B) |
| Pro-democratic attitudes Reference: strongly agree | | | | |
| Strongly disagree | 0.403 | 0.499* | 0.436 | 0.542 |
| Quite disagree | 0.329 | 0.507** | 0.373 | 0.445** |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 0.187 | 0.377*** | 0.205 | 0.463*** |
| Quite agree | 0.133 | 0.463*** | 0.145 | 0.478*** |
| Winners and losers Reference: winners | | | | |
| Losers | 0.131 | 0.504*** | 0.184 | 0.610*** |
| Public television use during the campaign | 0.023 | 1.004 | 0.025 | 0.985 |
| Private television use during the campaign | 0.024 | 1.097*** | 0.026 | 1.114*** |
| Constant | | 5.638 | | 5.030 |
| N | | 2311 | | 2311 |
| Nagelkerke R square | | 0.074 | | 0.130 |

Source: own elaboration of ITANES 2022. Note: * = p<0.1; ** = p<0.05; *** = p<0.01. Note: * = p<0.1; ** = p<0.05; *** = p<0.01.
Notes: (a): control variables are: interest in politics, internal efficacy, left-right self-positioning, age, gender, education, income, city dimension, and area.

## 4. Conclusion

The quality of the electoral process can be examined from an objective point of view, using expert judgments and election results, and from a subjective one, using the perceptions of the voters, the elected representatives, and practitioners. Assuming the latter perspective, in this article, we have examined the quality of the 2022 Italian parliamentary election, taking into account the voter perceptions reported in the post-election survey conducted by Itanes.

The empirical analysis has highlighted two relevant findings. The first certifies the existence of a strong relationship between the idea that democracy is always preferable to any other form of government and a high perception of electoral integrity. From the theoretical point of view, we have assigned to this relationship a causal mechanism,

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[15] While, overall, 39.6 percent of women have an upper secondary education level, in municipalities up to 5,000 inhabitants this is 33.9; 32.0 in the range 5,001-10,000; 40.5 in the range 10,001-30,000; 38.2 in the range 30,001-100,000; 48.1 in the range 100,001-250,000; 44.1 over 250,000. Women who have a tertiary education equal 16.7 percent overall. In the six bands of municipalities, the percentage is 13.0 percent up to 5,000 inhabitants.; 12.1 in the range 5,001-10,000; 10.8 in the range 10,001-30,000; 14.7 in the range 30,001-100,000; 23.1 in the range 100,001-250,000; 26.0 over 250,000.

according to which the first variable impacts the second. The other – and more relevant – finding shows how the perception of the quality of elections is strongly influenced by satisfaction with the election result. Therefore, those who voted for the competition's winners are more likely to consider the election fair than those who voted for the losers.

The first result has no particular implications. It would indeed be rather curious to discover that a voter has an appreciation for democracy and at the same time perceives elections – that is, the main instrument of the democratic method – to be unfair or irregular.

Conversely, the second finding is much more important and has implications for future research. Although a plurality of both winner and loser voters are confident that the election has been conducted fairly, there are substantial differences between these two groups. Compared to the former, we know that the latter are less likely to consider the elections fair. This means that electoral outcome strongly affects voters' perceptions of electoral integrity. Therefore, this approach seems too context-dependent to ensure a reliable measure of electoral integrity. However, knowing that it also depends on the election's outcome is still essential as it sheds light on the volatility of perceptions and helps us to be very cautious in generalizing the results.

Moreover, we must remember that this exploratory analysis concerns only one country and one election. To strengthen the findings of this research, it is urgent to extend the number of cases by increasing the number of elections and including countries other than Italy in the analysis.

## Acknowledgements

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# Appendix

**Table 1A.** List of the independent variables and their expected correlation with the dependent variable

| Status | Name | Expected correlation |
|---|---|---|
| Key variables | Pro-democratic attitudes | Positive |
| | Winner-loser | Positive |
| | Public television use | Positive |
| | Private television use | Positive |
| | Social media use | Unclear |
| Political control variables | Interest in politics | Positive |
| | Left-right self-location | Negative |
| | Internal efficacy | Positive |
| Sociodemographic control variables | Age | Positive |
| | Gender | Positive |
| | Education | Positive |
| | Income | Positive |
| Contextual control variables | City dimension | Unclear |
| | Macro region | Unclear |

Source: own elaboration

**Table 2A.** All variables, matrix of correlations

| Variables | Perceptions electoral integrity | Pro-democratic attitudes | Winner-loser | Public television use | Private television use | Social media use | Interest in politics | Internal efficacy | L-R self-location | Age | Gender | Education | Income | City dimension | Macro region |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| El. Integrity perceptions | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Pro-dem attitudes | 0.184** | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Winner-loser | -0.184** | -0.248** | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Public television use | 0.078** | 0.110** | -0.096** | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Private television use | 0.141** | 0.078** | -0.048** | 0.367** | 1 | | | | | | | | | | |
| Social media use | -0.018 | 0.660** | -0.133** | 0.129** | 0.165** | 1 | | | | | | | | | |
| Interest in politics | 0.084** | 0.201** | -0.224** | 0.174** | 0.190** | 0.323** | 1 | | | | | | | | |
| Internal efficacy | 0.134** | 0.338** | -0.141** | 0.081** | 0.117** | 0.173** | 0.375** | 1 | | | | | | | |
| L-R self-location | 0.023 | -0.197** | 0.307** | -0.076** | 0.064** | 0.044** | 0.066** | -0.12 | 1 | | | | | | |
| Age | 0.130** | 0.090** | -0.029* | 0.154** | 0.092** | 0.090** | -0.019 | 0.055** | 0.064** | 1 | | | | | |
| Gender | 0.070** | 0.063** | -0.096** | -0.024 | 0.024 | 0.026 | 0.210** | 0.114** | 0.009 | 0.066** | 1 | | | | |
| Education | 0.053** | 0.084** | -0.108** | 0.019 | 0.019 | 0.098** | 0.216** | 0.100** | -0.099** | 0.316** | 0.046** | 1 | | | |
| Income | 0.087** | 0.056** | -0.035* | 0.057** | 0.086** | 0.068** | 0.164** | 0.053** | 0.040* | -0.030* | 0.138** | 0.278** | 1 | | |
| City dimension | -0.014 | 0.060** | -0.420** | 0.037** | 0.021 | 0.045** | 0.066** | 0.055** | -0.050** | -0.021 | 0.026 | 0.151** | 0.068** | 1 | |
| Macro region | -0.048** | 0.022 | -0.021 | 0.054** | 0.007 | 0.059** | 0.037** | 0.040** | -0.017 | -0.048** | 0.037** | 0.061** | -0.138** | 0.013 | 1 |

Source: own elaboration of 2022 ITANES data. Note: ** $p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$; coefficients are Kendall's tau-b.

**Table 3A.** Determinants of perceptions of election integrity

| | Model 1 | | Model 2 | | Model 3 | | Model 4 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | S.E. | Exp (B) | S.E. | Exp (B) | S.E. | Exp (B) | S.E. | Exp (B) |
| Pro-democratic attitudes (Ref. cat. = strongly agree) | | | | | | | | |
| Strongly disagree | 0.403 | 0.499* | 0.425 | 0.483* | 0.432 | 0.542 | 0.436 | 0.542 |
| Quite disagree | 0.329 | 0.507** | 0.362 | 0.409** | 0.366 | 0.454** | 0.373 | 0.445** |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 0.187 | 0.377*** | 0.199 | 0.403*** | 0.202 | 0.459*** | 0.205 | 0.463*** |
| Quite agree | 0.133 | 0.463*** | 0.138 | 0.436*** | 0.143 | 0.496*** | 0.145 | 0.478*** |
| Winners and losers (Ref. cat. = winners) | | | | | | | | |
| Losers | 0.131 | 0.504*** | 0.179 | 0.609*** | 0.182 | 0.621*** | 0.184 | 0.610*** |
| Public television use during the campaign | 0.023 | 1.004 | 0.024 | 1.006 | 0.025 | 0.984 | 0.025 | 0.985 |
| Private television use during the campaign | 0.024 | 1.097*** | 0.025 | 1.099*** | 0.025 | 1.102*** | 0.026 | 1.114*** |
| Interest in politics (Ref. cat. = very interested) | | | | | | | | |
| Not at all | | | 0.505 | 1.830 | 0.512 | 1.932 | 0.513 | 2.030 |
| A little | | | 0.203 | 1.097 | 0.213 | 1.268 | 0.216 | 1.330 |
| Somewhat | | | 0.162 | 1.277 | 0.166 | 1.339* | 0.169 | 1.351* |
| Internal efficacy (Ref. cat. = strongly agree) | | | | | | | | |
| Strongly disagree | | | 0.641 | 0.486 | 0.653 | 0.442 | 0.656 | 0.487 |
| Quite disagree | | | 0.347 | 1.460 | 0.351 | 1.475 | 0.358 | 1.330 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | | | 0.205 | 0.781 | 0.209 | 0.786 | 0.212 | 0.753 |
| Quite agree | | | 0.168 | 1.182 | 0.171 | 1.113 | 0.173 | 1.052 |
| Left-right self-positioning | | | 0.027 | 1.049* | 0.027 | 1.042 | 0.028 | 1.036 |
| Age (Ref. cat. = over 64) | | | | | | | | |
| 18-24 | | | | | 0.254 | 0.525** | 0.256 | 0.521** |
| 25-34 | | | | | 0.215 | 0.424*** | 0.216 | 0.434*** |
| 35-44 | | | | | 0.205 | 0.487*** | 0.206 | 0.495*** |
| 45-54 | | | | | 0.190 | 0.590*** | 0.192 | 0.556*** |
| 55-64 | | | | | 0.189 | 0.670** | 0.191 | 0.657** |
| Gender (Ref. cat. = male) | | | | | | | | |
| Female | | | | | 0.124 | 0.790* | 0.126 | 0.801* |
| Education (Ref. cat. = tertiary education) | | | | | | | | |
| Less than primary, primary, and low secondary | | | | | 0.196 | 0.648** | 0.200 | 0.592*** |
| Upper secondary and post-secondary | | | | | 0.169 | 0.764 | 0.172 | 0.730* |
| Income (Ref. cat. = over 80,000) | | | | | | | | |
| 0-19,990 | | | | | 0.361 | 0.805 | 0.365 | 0.765 |
| 20,000-39,990 | | | | | 0.353 | 1.096 | 0.355 | 1.052 |
| 40,000-59,990 | | | | | 0.366 | 1.059 | 0.369 | 0.997 |
| 60,000-79,990 | | | | | 0.458 | 1.544 | 0.461 | 1.526 |
| City dimension (Ref. cat. = over 250,000) | | | | | | | | |
| Up to 5,000 | | | | | | | 0.245 | 2.504*** |
| 5,001-10,000 | | | | | | | 0.214 | 1.605** |
| 10,001-30,000 | | | | | | | 0.188 | 1.576** |
| 30,001-100,000 | | | | | | | 0.174 | 1.130 |
| 100,001-250,000 | | | | | | | 0.228 | 1.382 |
| Area (Ref. cat. = islands) | | | | | | | | |
| North-west | | | | | | | | 1.244 |
| North-east | | | | | | | | 1.215 |
| Center | | | | | | | | 1.394 |
| South | | | | | | | | 1.222 |
| Constant | | 5.638 | | 3.183 | | 7.388 | | 5.030 |
| N | | 2311 | | 2311 | | 2311 | | 2311 |
| Nagelkerke R square | | 0.074 | | 0.088 | | 0.114 | | 0.130 |

Source: own elaboration of 2022 ITANES data. Note: * = p<0.1; ** = p<0.05; *** = p<0.01. Logit model. Dependent variable: 1 = 2022 parliamentary election has been regular; 0 = 2022 parliamentary election has been irregular.

# Do paradigms matter in LGBT+ policymaking?
# Understanding Italian policies within the European framework

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## Abstract

This article explores the trajectory of LGBT+ policies in Italy, examining their evolution within the European framework of antidiscrimination and equality paradigms. Focusing on three major Italian policy programs developed since 2013, it analyzes the interplay between European and national influences, the involvement of LGBT+ groups, and the impact of policy paradigms on LGBT+ policymaking and implementation. Grounded in a methodological posture oriented towards problem representations and ideationality, the findings indicate a coexistence between antidiscrimination and equality paradigms in Italy under external (European) and internal (LGBT+ and anti-LGBT+ groups) pressure. This research contributes to understanding the dynamics of policy change in the contentious field of gender and sexuality, offering insights into the role of policy paradigms in shaping LGBT+ policies in Italy.

## 1. Introduction

On September 14 2023, the new Minister for Family, Natality, and Equal Opportunities, Eugenia Roccella, answered a parliamentary question by Senator Sensi from the opposition (Democratic Party). In 2021, tens of associations had received €4 million worth of extraordinary funding to open shelters for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, etc. (LGBT+) victims of violence and discrimination. The MP was voicing his concern over the possibility of the financing not being renewed. However, after about a year of uncertainty that seemed to suggest that the new Meloni government would abandon the commitment made by its predecessor, Minister Roccella declared: "on May 23 I signed the decree to release the 2020-2021 funds, ensuring continuity to the implemented projects".[1]

This episode is a good illustration of the uncertain and discontinuous trajectory of policies related to sexual orientation and gender identity in the Italian context, often

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[1] Redazione, Diritti Lgbtq: si parla del contrasto alle discriminazioni ma l'Aula è vuota. Roccella: "Sbloccati i fondi per vittime e centri antiviolenza", Corriere della Sera, 14 September 2023. URL: https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2023/09/14/news/diritti_lgbtq_governo_senato_aula_vuota-414461355/.

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portrayed as a traditionalist country (Hurka, Knill & Rivière, 2018). Here, policies on controversial issues related to morality politics (Engeli & Varone, 2011) tend to either be obstructed or go through long and tortuous processes, when not interrupted altogether. The literature on gender policies (Donà, 2007) has long explored the dynamics that have shaped the path leading to the elaboration of increasingly articulated and complex models of public intervention (Lombardo, 2012), ranging from formal gender partisanship, to gender mainstreaming policies (Mazur & Engeli, 2020), and to more recent approaches grounded in intersectional perspectives, also known as "gender+" (Krizsan, Skjeie, & Squires, 2014). By contrast, little is known about the specific dynamics of LGBT+ policymaking processes, the role of agenda-setters, or existing policy instruments and their development (Capano & Howlett, 2009). In Italy specifically, we are faced with a situation where the general difficulty of extending the field of recognition of LGBT+ rights, as witnessed by the emblematic case of civil unions (Prearo 2024a; Grimaldi and Prearo 2022; Donà 2021; Ozzano 2020 and 2015), does not automatically correspond to an absence of public policies engaging with sexual orientation and gender identity. On the contrary, such policies *have* been on the agenda of several governments for ten years in explicit or implicit ways.

This paper aims to examine the complex interplay between policy paradigms, policymaking, and the European LGBT+ policy framework of antidiscrimination and equality to explain how, when, and why LGBT+ policies are put on the agenda, elaborated, and implemented. Our study contributes to the analysis of the specific trajectory of LGBT+ policies and situates them in the broader canvas of gender policy literature. By combining attention for the ideational tenets and the operational aspects of Italian LGBT+ policies, we fine tune a critical lens that enhances our understanding of the interplay between the symbolic and practical orientations inherent in LGBT+ policymaking. We thus aim to answer the following research question: how are LGBT+ policies set on the agenda, elaborated, and implemented in a context of external (European) and internal (LGBT+ and anti-LGBT+ organizations) pressures, coupled with structural governmental instability? Interrogating policymaking *ideationally* does not mean sidelining its implementation; rather it is an invitation to consider the objectives that policies implicitly or explicitly pursue. In other words, do policies have a significance before and beyond their execution? Do they attend to practical or symbolic ends?

To answer this question, in the first section, we propose an analysis in terms of *policy paradigms* and *paradigm shifts* rather than policy instruments to focus on those aspects that can be identified as internal and external pressures (Capano, Pritoni & Vicentini, 2020; Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007). In the second section, we situate European LGBT+ policies alongside other grounds of discrimination (gender, race, religion, etc.) and describe their trajectory as marked by at least two different paradigms: antidiscriminatory and egalitarian (Geddes, 2004). After presenting a methodology borrowed from the literature on gender policy analysis, we discuss the collected data and highlight instances of continuity and discontinuity between three policy programs adopted in Italy over the last decade. Finally, we advance an interpretation that points to policy paradigms as determinant factors in explaining the shape and advent of LGBT+

policies in Italy and, at the same time, as a valuable analytical perspective for future research.

## 2. Analyzing LGBT+ policies through paradigms

A *policy paradigm* is broadly described as "a framework of ideas and standards that specifies not only the goals of policy and the kind of instruments that can be used [...], but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing" (Hall, 1993, p. 276). In an effort to operationalize this concept in the field of policy analysis, it has been described as an internally coherent system ordering four dimensions: "values, assumptions and principles about the nature of reality, social justice and the appropriate role of the State; a conception of the problem that requires public intervention; ideas about which policy ends and objectives should be pursued; and ideas about appropriate policy 'means' to achieve those ends" (Daigneault, 2014, p. 461).

The prism of policy paradigms brings into focus the relevance of ideas to policymaking processes across the macro (general vision and principles), meso (broad strategies), and micro (policy instruments) levels (Pizzimenti, 2008). To reformulate it from the entry point of ideas and representations, the consolidation and circulation of ideas that are crystalized into variably structured and coherent assemblages to which actors subscribe give rise to *paradigms*. Policies are developed and put into action within said paradigms. As Giliberto Capano states: "[p]olicies [...] are *ideational fora* where different ideas develop, interact, and often collide on what is to be done and what values are to be pursued" (2009, p. 18).

The concept of policy paradigm, on the one hand, offers a way of thinking about the role of conflict over ideas and conceptions of public issues, notably in the contentious field of gender and sexuality. On the other, it accommodates an analysis that seeks to apprehend the transnational circulation of ideas, especially within European institutional spaces. Capano's work (2003) on administrative paradigms underscores the importance of the ideational content shared by policymakers in shaping policy solutions and networks that deviate from the "hegemonic paradigm". Policy change does not happen through strictly political or partisan conflict, but precisely on the ideational level of policy paradigms.

Centering the production and circulation of ideas that frame and define policy issues (i.e. the ideational dimension) is of particular importance in gender equality policies (Kennett and Lendvai, 2014). Problem definitions (Bacchi, 1999), frames (Verloo, 2007), discourses (Sauer, 2010), *référentiels* (Muller, 2005), paradigms (Jenson, 1989) or narratives (Lowndes, 2020) – depending on the theoretical and epistemological perspective – result from the interactions between social, political, and institutional actors within the formal and informal rules that govern these processes. Since conflicts over the very definition of gender equality (Lombardo et al., 2009) are often rooted in divergent sets of intellectual and feminist traditions, one can register a variety of meanings ascribed to gender equality (Verloo, 2005) which in turn translate into a variety of gender equality policies.

Alongside the animated conflicts over the meanings of gender and sexual equality, the second element that has a remarkable influence on LGBT+ policies is the European context. When in 1997 the Amsterdam Treaty introduced the protection from

discrimination based on sexual orientation, it foregrounded the possibility of public intervention within the EU on an issue that was until then regarded as a private matter. Within a couple of decades, this ushered in interventions at the European level that made LGBT+ rights into a question that has come to define the very identity of the EU – not without its own set of problems (Eigenmann, 2022; Slootmaeckers, 2020). These developments have been given theoretical coherence under the idea of a "Europeanization" of LGBT+ rights (Ayoub & Paternotte, 2020; Slootmaeckers et al., 2016), which has produced changes in member states' policies.

More precisely, a European framework productive of an "equality regime" gradually appeared (Krizsan et al., 2014). Following this intense work of political definition and instrumentation at the European level, departments or ministries dedicated to equal opportunities and equality emerged (Donà, 2018) and worked on policies that address issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity, which were later translated into a wide set of policy instruments. This productive link between ideas over equality/discrimination and policy instruments explains why it can be heuristic to make sense of the ideational dimension in terms of *policy paradigms*, and even more so in a European context.

## 3. Empirical context: Italian policies within the European framework

The fight against gender- and sexual-orientation-based discrimination first received institutional attention during the 1970s and 1980s in conjuncture with a heightened investment in the European field by LGBT+ activists (Ayoub & Paternotte, 2020). Within the EU (then European Community), two institutions were at the forefront in this regard: the EU Court of Justice, which carved an important space for antidiscrimination law on the basis of gender thanks to an "activist interpretation" of Article 119 EEC (now Art. 157 TFEU) on equal pay (Belavusau & Henrard, 2019), and the European Parliament that played host to claims for greater equality as evinced by the adoption of two reports (i.e. Squarcialupi and Roth) in 1984 and 1994 (Ayoub & Paternotte, 2020; Belavusau, 2020).

Signed in 1997, the Treaty of Amsterdam entered into force in 1999. The document was pivotal in two regards. Firstly, with Article 3(2) TEC (now Art. 8 TFEU), it extended the objective of eliminating gender discrimination beyond the field of employment, thus making it a general principle. Secondly, with Article 13 TEC (now Art. 19 TFEU), it extended the recognized and protected grounds of discrimination to sexual orientation (Belavusau, 2020; Belavusau & Henrard, 2019). Lacking direct effect per se, it was through the Framework Equality Directive or FED (2000/78/CE) that entered into force in 2000, that Article 13 became available as a legal antidiscrimination instrument. However, its applicability was restricted to the area of workplace and working conditions because of the perimeter set in the directive.

The next noteworthy legal step undertaken at the EU level came with the 2009 Lisbon Treaty (signed in 2007). Contrary to the Amsterdam Treaty, it did not represent a fundamental change but rather solidified some trends that had been set in motion in the early 2000s. While in principle this new legal base could have proved to be a solid bedrock for more ambitious directives (e.g. the one formulated in 2008 extending sexual

orientation antidiscrimination actions beyond the workplace) these never saw the light of day due to stronger internal resistance (Belavusau, 2020; Belavusau & Henrard, 2019).

Until this point, while the sexual orientation category increasingly found its place as a specific area of intervention (Golebiowska, 2019), gender identity was kept outside the purview of European antidiscrimination regulations as such. Despite the legislative vacuum, the European Court of Human Rights had already included this category in case law, alongside the EUCJ and national courts. This shows that within Europe, other institutions outside the EU can have a significant influence on the approach to LGBT+ issues.

With the historic 2010 Resolution 1728 on *Discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity* the parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (CoE) articulated an antidiscrimination framework that introduces two crucial conceptual changes. First, it extends its scope to gender identity and affirms that "[s]exual orientation and gender identity are recognised as prohibited grounds for discrimination". Second, it incorporates an approach to discrimination that covers all aspects of life beyond the workplace: precisely what the EU directives had failed to recognize. The unprecedented development put forth by Resolution 1728 – building on the work of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers and its recommendation (CM/Rec/2010/5) – is an import of the *gender mainstreaming* model (Ahrens, 2019; Daly, 2005; Eveline & Bacchi, 2005) from the field of European gender equality policies to a different field of action (Lombardo et al., 2017; Lombardo & Forest, 2012; Lombardo & Meier, 2022). While the 2000 EU Directive recognizes sexual orientation and gender identity as grounds of discrimination, following the CoE document the political goal shifts from the protection of LGBT+ people from violence and discrimination, to the achievement of their substantive equality.

At EU level, post-Lisbon, no substantial change was introduced in the form of either primary (e.g. treaties) or secondary (e.g. resolutions) law, which both have binding force. However, one should not underestimate the importance of policy *programs* as a crucial – though oft underestimated – form of de-legalized policy instrument (Ahrens, 2019). When we turn to soft law (e.g. policy programs) we can catch sight of the developments that have occurred during the last decade and that Laura Eigenmann situates in: "the increased visibility of LGBTI policies, the proliferation of 'symbolic actions' portraying LGBTI rights as 'core values' of the EU [...] and increasing support of high-level actors and entire EU institutions" (Eigenmann, 2022, p. 102). The prevalence of soft law instruments reached its peak with the launch of the *2020-2025 LGBTIQ Equality Strategy* by the European Commission. An important shift crystalized by the *Strategy* is the accrued importance of measures that aimed to guarantee the more general goal of equal rights across all areas of life and not only to prevent discrimination.

Looking back at the last thirty years, two paradigmatic tendencies rise to the surface. First, the introduction in Article 13 of the Treaty of Amsterdam of sexual orientation as recognized ground of discrimination opened a historic sequence of progressive extensions of the scope of antidiscrimination law to hitherto excluded categories. This greatly contributed to a larger process that established discrimination as a *public* problem requiring *public* intervention, and therefore as "one of the main

policy paradigms that emerged during the process of Europeanization" (Amiraux & Guiraudon, 2010, p. 1692).

Second, the 2010 CoE resolution marks a shift in paradigm insofar as it redefines, on the one hand, the values on which public action is grounded and on the other, the conception of the problem, or to borrow Carol Bacchi's terms, what the problem is represented to be (2012b). In other words, while the 2000 EU Directive recognizes sexual orientation and gender identity as grounds of discrimination to be incorporated into antidiscrimination actions, the CoE 2010 Resolution recognizes *both* discrimination *and* the right to equality. In the first case, the grounds of discrimination are acknowledged in abstract; in the second, proactive political actions are summoned that extend the bearing of LGBT+ rights recognition.

To summarize and conceptualize the changes that occurred in European institutions, we hold that between the 2000 Directive and the 2020 Equality Strategy a *paradigm shift* happened. Along the four axes identified by Daigneault, a shift occurred from a paradigm predicated on antidiscrimination interventions to one grounded in the aspirations to equality achieved through a wide-ranging mainstreaming approach. It is important to mention that the transformations that occurred in LGBT+ policymaking interestingly mirror what has been observed in the field of gender equality policies, where the literature variously identifies progression from a unitary to a multiple approach and a shift from antidiscrimination to gender mainstreaming (Lombardo & Verloo, 2009).

This shift had a direct impact on the context of LGBT+ policies in Italy. Italy incorporated the 2000 EU directive in 2003 with a law introducing sexual discrimination as a category in the context of workplace discrimination (Decreto Legislativo n. 216 2 July 2003, modified in 2008). However, a report by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) (2009) situated Italy among the most conservative member states. Unlike most countries, when incorporating the Directive, Italy did not extend its purview to all areas included in the racial discrimination Directive, which was significantly more capacious (CE 2000/43 29 June 2000). Gender identity does not appear explicitly in Italian workplace discrimination law. However, case law has long held that "gender" norms are also intended to protect trans people.

The 2003 law also provided for the establishment of the National Racial Antidiscrimination Office (UNAR) within the Department for Equal Opportunities. Since 2012, UNAR is charged with the implementation of policies addressing not only racial minorities but also gender, sexual, disabled, and religious minority groups. This is why Italy first attempted to forge a set of policy tools addressing gender identity and sexual orientation only with the elaboration of the *2013-2015 National LGBT Strategy*. This was a direct result of Recommendation CM/Rec (2010)5, which the CoE had promoted by establishing an experimental program that provided Italy with technical support to design a national program. It must be highlighted that CoE recommendations are non-binding. However, in this case they held significant guiding power as witnessed by the fact that they incited domestic policymaking through a specific experimental program.

In 2014, Italy launched the National Operative Program *Inclusione* (PON Inclusione), a large-scale initiative for poverty reduction. Worth €1.2 billion, it was

encouraged and 75% financed by the EU through the European Social Fund. In 2016, UNAR signed an agreement with the PON Inclusione management authority to receive €23.4 million, €3 million of which were allocated to measures to increase marketplace inclusion of LGBT+ people. Most policy initiatives implemented in Italy targeting LGBT+ antidiscrimination and equality since 2016 have been a direct result of this funding campaign. This included a project assigned to the National Statistics Institute (ISTAT) to develop a survey and surveying tools to collect data on LGBT+ access to employment; a project to encourage trans entrepreneurship; and a project entrusted to the National Health Institute (ISS) to promote the fight against the discrimination and social exclusion of intersex people.

These and other initiatives did not depend on an overarching policy strategy; they rather constituted a sparse ensemble of specific measures. A second policy program, presented as a more comprehensive plan, though limited to one area of intervention, was the *Program to prevent and combat violence on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity* designed between 2020 and 2021 as part of a much broader governmental initiative to tackle the COVID-19 emergency. The plan was allocated €4 million, and it mandated the funding of shelters for victims of LGBT+ violence across the country to address the housing emergency exacerbated by the pandemic.

The last attempt to date to design a coherent and comprehensive policy came with the *2022-2025 National LGBT+ Strategy*. This program is the most ambitious initiative in terms of areas of intervention. Though not explicitly developed in close association with any European institution like the 2013 Strategy, the 2022 program is unequivocally a by-product of a European policy reference. Not only is the *2020-2025 European LGBT+ Strategy* taken as a model and referenced, but its structure is also directly mirrored.

The ideational transition from an antidiscrimination paradigm to one that is equality-based and its resulting policies form the backdrop to Italian policy stance and instruments. This invites reflection on Italy's position and ideational foundations within both its national and the broader European policy frameworks. Still, one should not fail to remember that the different developments at the European level interact in various fashions with domestic contexts based on the type of legal and policy instruments that supports them. While primary and secondary law is binding, soft law can only guide but not constrain governments, allowing for different degrees and modalities of import, resistance, and negotiation within national contexts. The non-binding nature of this European framework could even be considered a key factor that left room for organized protests against government endeavors to adopt LGBT+ policy programs which were not strictly linked to constraining directives or resolutions (Verloo, 2018). Unlike the LGBT+ policies analyzed in this article, it is noteworthy that the adoption of marketplace-related sexual orientation antidiscrimination laws did not face opposition from conservative social movements. This was demonstrated in the 2010s by rather proactive domestic policies put on the agenda, elaborated and implemented within the European framework (Ayoub, 2015), yet not always supported by binding primary and secondary EU laws.

## 4. Data and Methods

We focus our attention on the three major policy programs developed in Italy in the last decade, since they were an attempt to provide a coherent vision of LGBT+ public intervention and allow us to harvest the ideational premises of Italian LGBT+ policymaking. The aims of the analysis are threefold: to marshal the ideational coordinates plotted by the three pieces of policy, to situate their relative positions with respect to each other and to European paradigms, and to understand to what extent they are influenced or substantively determined by said paradigms.

To operationalize the analysis, we borrow a tool from Bacchi's *Analysing policy: what's the problem represented to be?* (2009) and adapt it to our research. In challenging policy analysis oriented around problem-solving, Bacchi argues that solutions are implicitly revelatory of what is regarded as problematic by policymakers. She develops a set of six questions that illuminate how single policies draw on specific problem representations (Bacchi, 2012a). This instrument is germane to our work because on the one hand, the *representation* of LGBT+ issues is where the ideational quality comes to the fore and on the other, it provides a consistent grid for comparing different policies. However, the original set of questions is not perfectly suited to the analysis we are pursuing for two reasons. First, it entails both a descriptive and a normative dimension, the latter being irrelevant to our research ends. Second, it explores three aspects of a policy: the representation per se, its origins, and its effects. The third aspect exceeds the scope of our analysis. We thus decided to exclude the questions that sit outside of our research perimeter, and to orient the analysis around the remaining themes.

The first question that guides our analysis explicitly concerns problem representation. Intervening in the literature on gender equality in Europe, Mieke Verloo and Emanuela Lombardo identify several dimensions that constitute policy frames and suggest the analysis of two dimensions: *diagnosis* and *prognosis* (2007). These two concepts work in tandem to illuminate what is represented as problematic and invite us to be attentive to the representations that emerge through specific problem-solution pairs. We therefore operationalize the first query by articulating the answers along the categories of diagnosis and prognosis.

The two subsequent questions both attend to policy origin, and most importantly to the representations it foregrounds. Here, it seemed necessary to account for two factors.

The overview on Italian LGBT+ policymaking hinted at the influence of European institutions and EU funding, and at much broader conjunctures like the pandemic in the initiation of the policy design process. It is fundamental to highlight that such interactions are not inconsequential details, but rather factors that can stir the domestic policy trajectory (Alonso et al., 2023). In our case, accounting for these factors is crucial, since the very policy documents include them as integral to their problem representation.

A second element deserving heightened attention is the role of the dialogue with LGBT+ groups, understood as an epistemic community. The notion of epistemic communities, introduced by Peter Haas, designates a network of experts that can make "authoritative claim[s] to policy-relevant knowledge within [a] domain" (1992, p. 3). Coined to describe scientific actors, the term expanded to include non-scientific ones and highlight their role in both phases of problem definition (diagnosis) and solution

(prognosis) (Béland & Haelg, 2020). It also gestures to the transnationality of knowledge circulation within expert circles (Meyer & Molyneux-Hodgson, 2011). This notion is germane to LGBT+ associations and groups (Paternotte, 2011) because it stresses their role without deflecting attention from the fact that their influence is dependent on the proclivity of decision-makers to afford it to them (Béland & Haelg, 2020). Finally, it invites us to consider that the knowledge they supply is collectively constructed and turned into political action (Akrich, 2010). To think of LGBT+ groups as an epistemic community and of their role in the ideational origins of LGBT+ policy programs affords a sharper insight into the three selected policies.

Finally, though the overarching focus of this article is on the ideational dimension, it seemed reasonable to add a final question that departs from it and pushes us to reflect on how ideation is linked (or not) to implementation, and especially to funding.

We carried out the analysis of the three policy programs through the following set of questions:

**Q1:** What is the problem represented to be in a specific policy or policies? (Articulated in terms of diagnosis and prognosis);

**Q2:** In what national and transnational conditions was the policy produced?;

**Q3:** What institutional arrangement birthed the policy? What role did LGBT+ groups play?;

**Q4:** Was the policy operational until its due term?

The official documents of the three selected policies are used as main sources and constitute the centerpiece of our documental corpus. However, we also rely on a series of other institutional documents produced in relation to the policies, their design, and their implementation, or that reported on their advancement before the government or Parliament.[2]

## 5. Results: is there a represented problem?

To present a detailed analysis, each policy program is treated separately across the four questions. The final section provides general conclusions derived from the juxtaposition of the individual observations.

*Q1. Problem representation.* The documents showed a tendency to articulate the diagnosis of the policy problem across three areas. They identify a first site of problem diagnosis in Italy's position with respect to external standards. They produce problem representations regarding the (im)possibility of properly measuring and apprehending LGBT+ inequalities as a phenomenon. Finally, they formulate diagnosis regarding specific policy areas. Given the recurrence of these three sites of problem identification, the diagnosis side of the analysis is articulated along these three axes, while the prognosis side is treated unitarily as no recurrent internal structures emerged. To facilitate the analysis, the responses to Q1 are summarized in the tables 1-3.

The analysis of the three documents highlights that a primal source of concern lies in Italy's position with respect to external standards: the country is represented as providing inadequate legal, administrative, and social intervention and portrayed as a

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[2] See Appendix for the list of sources on which the research relies.

context that is generally lagging behind European and international standards. Furthermore, the 2013 and 2022 Strategies are explicit in diagnosing a difficulty in tackling LGBT+ disenfranchisement because of insufficient data. They signal the impossibility of accurately apprehending discrimination as a social phenomenon since measuring tools are absent or inadequate. However, the two documents differ insofar as the latter makes claims on the dearth of data mostly in two policy areas whereas the first one signals across-the-board issues. The 2020 Plan, though it dispenses with diagnosing an inadequate measuring of the phenomenon, relies exclusively on the data produced by international institutions, implicitly exposing national deficiencies. When it comes to the diagnosis in specific policy areas the most striking difference is between the 2020 Plan and the two other policy documents. The two strategies (2013 and 2022) tend to represent LGBT+ discrimination as a cultural phenomenon: a lack of social legitimacy that is mostly to be fixed through awareness and knowledge building activities. By contrast, the 2020 Plan, considering its more restricted scope, describes discrimination as a more material process articulated through broader social exclusions and most violently instantiated in the lack of housing and access to work.

Given the different diagnostic patterns, the prognoses reproduce some of the divisions that were just highlighted. The first strategy presents numerous interventions, though they mostly fall under data collection or awareness rising. The second document has an extremely limited policy area that it invests with one single concrete measure. The last strategy is the broadest in terms of scope of action since it seeks to encompass all "main areas of people's lives" (p. 8). The measures it foregrounds are closer to the ones designed in 2013; however, a greater variety must be noted.

*Q2. National and international backdrops.* As previously suggested, the 2013 Strategy was designed in a situation of perceived legal and political backwardness with respect to international counterparts. As a matter of fact, the document is presented as a corpus of "measures on the administrative level, which, regardless of an incomplete legal framework, can support national and local policies on the matter in compliance with international and European obligations" (p. 6). Most importantly, the document resulted from a process of cooperation between the Italian government represented by UNAR and the Council of Europe. Following the 2010 resolution and recommendation, the CoE launched the initiative "Combatting discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity". It was designed to provide technical and financial support to some member states to promote the adoption of antidiscrimination policies. It sought to help partner countries develop training for policymakers and institutional actors, mechanisms to increase the protection of LGBT+ people, analyses of national legal instruments, and exchanges with other partner countries. Tough policy design involved other actors, the 2013 Strategy was initiated in a context of perceived inadequacy and concretely developed under the impulsion of the CoE.

The 2020 Plan is a program fleshed out from a subsection of a much broader governmental decree approved in August by the second government led by Giuseppe Conte. The decree encompassed all the measures passed to face the social, economic, and health emergency caused by the outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy. Not only was the anti-violence plan designed at a moment of acute urgency, but it was also allocated funds during a period of unprecedented public spending. By the time the governmental

decree was issued, the Parliament had already voted for two extraordinary budgetary slippages, and the government was in close contact with EU institutions as well as member states to secure EU economic intervention through instruments that would later come to be identified in the Recovery Fund and NextGenerationEU (Cavatorto et al., 2021).

Finally, the 2022 LGBT Strategy saw the light under two governments: the second Conte government and the one led by Mario Draghi. The Minister in charge of the Department of Equal Opportunities (Elena Bonetti) remained unchanged. Having arisen from very different political and institutional needs, the two governments were appointed with partially comparable intentions since they both tried to show a more "responsible" face than their predecessors and both attempted to maintain appeased relations with EU institutions. Conte found himself negotiating on the EU response to the crisis (Cavatorto et al., 2021), while Draghi had the explicit mission of guaranteeing Italy's compliance with EU requirements to unlock the tranches of the recovery fund (Guidi & Moschella, 2021). It is against this backdrop that the LGBT+ Strategy that most explicitly draws on EU policies was designed and approved, in parallel with important interventions in the field of gender equality (Donà, 2022).

*Q3. Institutional arrangement and LGBT+ groups*. The policymaking journey of the 2013 Strategy was inaugurated in February 2012 by a conference in which the Minister of Labor and Social Policy launched the Italian branch of the CoE program before national and European institutions. It was followed by meetings involving UNAR (national focal point for the strategy) and other institutional stakeholders such as the Italian UNHCR representative, the Senate Human Rights Commission, the National Press Association, and some LGBT+ associations. Throughout the development of the strategy, UNAR took part in international workshops organized by the CoE LGBT Unit with the countries involved in the program (i.e. Albania, Latvia, Montenegro, Poland, and Serbia) in September and December 2012. UNAR equally joined the March and September 2012 meetings of the national LGBT focal point informal network. Alongside the CoE workshops and meetings that supplied UNAR with technical support, between June and December 2012 procedures were undertaken to set up a working table constituted by LGBT+ groups. These efforts culminated in a December 2012 meeting where 29 LGBT+ associations discussed the general orientation of the strategy and worked on four thematic workshops, one per area of intervention of the final document. The first draft was drawn up in the following weeks and the final version first presented in late April 2013. It can be argued that LGBT+ groups were consulted; however, the policy design remained resolutely in the hands of UNAR, which itself largely benefitted from international support and only interfaced with LGBT+ associations on one intermediary occasion, once the general imprint had already been given but the technical details were yet to come.

The 2020 Anti-Violence Plan has a strikingly different institutional genealogy. On May 19, 2020, the government passed decree-law number 34 on "Urgent measures on health, labor and economic support, as well as social policies related to the epidemiological emergency from COVID-19". The law comprised more than 250 articles, one of which – art. 105 *quater* – allocates €4 million to a program aimed at combatting violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity. It equally mandates that the

support program should provide legal, health, psychological, and social assistance to victims of violence and discrimination. In mid-December 2020, Minister Bonetti officially set up the program. The document mentions that the Equal Opportunity Department shall "ensure, in its drafting, appropriate forms of consultation with associations working in the field". However, no contact was in fact made with LGBT+ groups regarding the design of this measure. In early March 2021, UNAR issued a public notice to select the shelters that would be beneficiaries of the funding, rapidly ushering in the implementation phase. It is safe to contend that, triggered by a precisely defined governmental orientation, the Department for Equal Opportunities was the actor that mostly contributed to the policy journey of the 2020 Plan.

The 2022 National LGBT Strategy had a different institutional journey. It was inaugurated in May 2020 by the first meeting of the permanent LGBT+ working table gathering 66 LGBT+ associations, where the initiative was officially announced. Between July and September, the permanent working table was split into topic-specific workgroups which were consulted twelve times during the trimester to collect their input on the objectives and measures of the program. A second plenary meeting with the permanent table was held in March 2021. This initial phase was followed by the work of other bodies involved in the design, namely the control board and the technical board. In December 2021, a third plenary session was held where the final draft was presented. The process was closed two weeks later by a final Control board meeting. In this case, LGBT+ groups were integral to the elaboration of the policy. Not only were they more numerous than on any previous occasion, but they were consulted on many occasions and at different stages of the design process, though more intensely at the beginning. It seems that they acquired a clearer role insofar as UNAR provided a general working framework, a method, and technical expertise while LGBT+ groups were entrusted with fleshing out the policy axes within the set perimeter.

*Q4. Policy operationality.* The first national strategy was an articulate project covering four different policy areas, each registering a significant number of measures, intended to operate over a three-year span (2013-2015). However, only three initiatives from the strategy were implemented. In 2014, six training periods (6-9 hours each) were held to raise awareness on LGBT issues among civil servants involving 140 people in total. In the same year, two experimental projects were financed: one was developed by the Transsexual Identity Movement (MIT) and consisted in training on LGBT+ issues for prisoners and prison personnel; the second one was brought by the Arcigay association to set up help desks and counselling options for trans people. Nothing else from the strategy seems to have been put into action either that year or in 2014 and 2015. One of the reasons behind this lack of implementation is surely the fact that between 2013 and 2014 a strong mobilization of Catholic and pro-life actors (such as Family Day, ProVita Onlus and Giuristi per la Vita) launched several campaigns against so-called "gender ideology" allegedly promoted by the "LGBT lobby" (Lavizzari & Prearo, 2019). One of these campaigns specifically targeted an action stemming directly from the 2013 Strategy: the distribution of three educational booklets addressed to schoolteachers to update their knowledge on issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity among children and teenagers. Responding to this anti-gender campaign, the Ministry stopped the distribution of these booklets in early 2014. From this point on, there are no

other traces of implemented measures from the Strategy, which seems to have been *de facto* suspended.[3]

The implementation pattern of the 2020 Plan is more straightforward. From its inception the program, with its limited area of intervention (i.e. shelters), was set up in tandem with precisely defined funding and seemed geared toward its translation into action. The plan was taken up by the Department of Equal Opportunities in December 2020, the public notice to select the recipients was issued in March 2021, and in November 2021 the final ranking of beneficiaries was made public and showed that the entirety of the funding was to be distributed.

Finally, the operational follow-up to the 2022-2025 strategy is quite clear as well, though in the opposite direction. The policy was entirely developed under Minister Bonetti, who maintained her role from the second Conte-led government through the Draghi-led one and supervised the final policy elaboration stages in late 2021. However, the Draghi government fell less than a year later, in October 2022.

The new right-wing government appointed a new minister, Eugenia Maria Roccella, who is herself an exponent of anti-gender mobilization and holds personal and political ties with anti-gender campaigners (Prearo, 2024b). She subscribes to a feminist genealogy known as "pensiero della differenza", a perspective also adopted by groups that self-identify as "radical" feminists. This particular stream within Italian feminism (re)emerged prominently in the public arena amidst the debate on the so-called Zan Bill (2020-2021), compounding the already existing anti-gender movement's narrative on "gender ideology" with a "gender-critical" stance. The primal concern of these contentious feminist-gender-critical actors is the self-determination of gender identity, leading to their frequent designation as trans-exclusionary (Cabral Grinspan, Eloit, Paternotte & Verloo 2023) or anti-trans (Prearo, 2023). In spring 2024, Minister Roccella, in collaboration with Health Minister Schillaci, took action against gender-affirming care for trans minors, and was supported by both anti-gender movements and activist groups identifying with gender-critical and anti-trans feminism. The aftermath of the discursive and political convergence during the debate against the Zan Bill highlights the significant role these movements play as pivotal actors within the Italian socio-political and partisan landscape – especially on the right (Reinhardt, Heft & Pavan, 2023; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). It is not hard to imagine that the LGBT strategy was not given operational continuity, even though UNAR has – at least temporarily – stopped publishing its annual reports, which makes it harder to track the advancement of the Strategy.

Besides the frameworks built by the three policy programs and their varied degrees of implementation, it is important to draw attention to the fact that the initiatives that are recurrently funded by UNAR are those set up following the agreement with PON *Inclusione* in 2016. Most, if not all of them, were merged into the 2022 Strategy to weld them to a more comprehensive strategic policy. Though it is impossible to claim with certainty given the lack of recent reports, it is likely that those projects are still in place.

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[3] Few national newspapers addressed this story: online research generally directs to partisan anti-gender resources, such as: Redazione, Bloccati i libretti Unar. Le associazioni lgbt attaccano Bagnasco e il Governo, Tempi, 05 April 2014. URL: https://www.tempi.it/bloccati-i-libretti-unar-le-associazioni-lgbt-attaccano-bagnasco-e-il-governo/.

**Table 1.** National LGBT Strategy: 2013-2015.

| Diagnosis | | | Prognosis |
|---|---|---|---|
| **National position with respect to external standards** | **Measuring of the phenomenon** | **Diagnosis on specific policy areas** | |
| • Insufficiency of national legal instruments.<br>• Lack of compliance with international and European standards. | • Across policy areas, there is a lack of tools to measure, describe, and understand the scale and nature of discrimination. | • Problem at the level of the perception of homosexuality.<br>• Lack of knowledge and awareness of LGBT+ issues across all policy areas.<br>• A cultural shift needs to happen so that LGBT+ people can gain more social legitimacy.<br>• Therefore, LGBT+ phobias are a cultural problem. | **Two main types of action:**<br>• General awareness-raising activities, training of specific actors, workshops.<br>• Initiatives to improve monitoring and measuring of LGBT+ discrimination in different areas.<br>**Some exceptions:**<br>• Measures to improve professional and workplace inclusion of LGBT+ people.<br>• Measures to encourage hate crime victims to press charges.<br>• Introduction of counselling options in prison.<br>• Facilitate access to gender-affirming hormone treatment. |

Source: authors' own analysis.

**Table 2.** Program to prevent and combat violence on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity: 2020.

| Diagnosis | | | Prognosis |
|---|---|---|---|
| **National position with respect to external standards** | **Measuring of the phenomenon** | **Diagnosis on specific policy areas** | **Prognosis** |
| • National average of LGBT+ social and housing inclusion is well beneath European standards. | • No specific claims made over the lack of tools to measure the phenomenon; however, only European surveys are mentioned (Eurobarometer, ILGA, FRA). | • LGBT+ people are particularly exposed to social exclusion, especially housing emergency.<br>• Social inclusion is predicated on access to a house and to work. The lack of these two is a hindrance to personal autonomy and self-determination.<br>• These predicaments are exacerbated by the Covid emergency. | • Support new or existing anti-violence centers and existing LGBT shelters to give both concrete help to victims of violence and discrimination and to face the LGBT housing emergency.<br>• These structures should provide assistance in these areas: legal, health, psychological, information/workshops, counselling, professional inclusion. |

Source: authors' own analysis.

**Table 3.** National LGBT+ Strategy: 2022-2025.

| Diagnosis | | | Prognosis |
|---|---|---|---|
| **National position with respect to external standards** | **Measuring of the phenomenon** | **Diagnosis on specific policy areas** | **Prognosis** |
| • Europe is explicitly the reference and benchmark of the strategy. Implicitly, it signals the inadequacy of national measures to that point. | • Lack of tools to collect sufficient and precise data, especially in the fields of Public Health and Security. | • The section providing the general orientation of the strategy is replaced by a detailed explanation of the latest EU LGBT+ Strategy.<br>• However, the document diagnoses a general lack of knowledge and awareness of LGBT+ people and issues; a national backwardness concerning diversity management in the workplace; an inadequate preservation and showcasing of LGBT+ cultural heritage. | **Three main types of action:**<br>• General awareness raising activities, training of specific actors, workshops<br>• Initiatives to improve monitoring and measuring of LGBT+ life experience in different areas<br>• To a lesser extent, but still recurring: actions to facilitate network building between different institutions and stakeholders.<br>**Some exceptions:**<br>• Guaranteeing access to gender-affirming hormone treatment for trans people in jail<br>• Facilitate access to health services for LGBT+ people (especially Trans)<br>• Funding of anti-violence centers and shelters.<br>• Support towards a national LGBT+ archive.<br>• Support for trans entrepreneurship |

Source: authors' own analysis.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

Reading the data through the prism of policy paradigms can help us make sense of this discontinuous trajectory. More specifically, it is worth wondering how determinant the European models of antidiscrimination and equality are in Italy. The first strategy appears to embrace the ambition of functioning not only in an antidiscriminatory, strictly reparative fashion, but rather in a way that encompasses different domains with a proactive, equality-inciting action. Similarly, but more acutely, the last LGBT+ strategy falls resolutely under the equality paradigm. The patent mirroring of EU policies, its much broader ambition to reach all areas of life, as well as explicit reference to *mainstreaming* as a modality of action undoubtedly situates it further away from an antidiscrimination paradigm. By contrast, the 2020 plan presents a restricted area of intervention and is marked by an emergency-driven character mobilized around the immediate purpose of repairing acts of violence. It thus appears as the intervention that most neatly responds to an antidiscrimination model.

Two factors emerge as conducive to specific policy paradigms. First, we can observe that the *involvement (or lack thereof) of LGBT+ groups* does seem to make a difference in ideation. In the design processes where they were included, the strategies map more accurately on an equality paradigm. A much higher degree of involvement (2022 strategy) has yielded the policy output that best fits the (EU) equality framework. Conversely, the plan that saw the light in isolation from non-state actors shows a markedly different paradigmatic categorization. Second, *European influence* appears as an equally decisive factor insofar as direct engagement in the corridors of policymaking (2013 strategy) or passive, yet unambiguous inspiration (2022 strategy), set the two national LGBT strategies apart from the 2020 plan.

**Table 4.** Overview of national LGBT+ policies: 2013, 2020, 2022.

|  | **2013 LGBT Strategy** | **2020 Program** | **2022 LGBT+ Strategy** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Policy paradigm** | Leaning towards equality | Antidiscrimination | Equality |
| **National context (Q2)** | Perceived backwardness with respect to international actors | Emergency spending due to the pandemics | Quest for government respectability |
| **Influence of European actors (Q2)** | Designed within Council of Europe program | None | Heavily inspired by EU policies |
| **Involvement of LGBT+ groups (Q3)** | Secondary | None | Substantial |
| **Implementation (Q4)** | Few measures implemented in initial phase, de facto discontinued | Implemented | Not implemented |

Source: authors' own analysis.

The last question illuminates that the only measure that received substantial financial backing and was operational in the capacities settled upon its approval is the one that was devised in severance from non-national, non-state actors and that subscribed to an antidiscrimination framework. More importantly, it seems that these conditions are shared

by the other projects that did receive funding in recent years, namely those tied to PON *Inclusione* which are not subsumed under the ambition of more elaborate policies.

We propose a schematic overview of the findings in table 4. Overall, a general picture seems to lie before us. When associations are involved and European institutions exert influence, the policy result is closer to the equality paradigm and has a much broader scope of intervention. However, these strategies are more contested and much less operational. Conversely, the absence of LGBT+ groups and European influence yields policy interventions akin to the antidiscrimination paradigm, projected towards a restricted scope, but encountering less friction and benefitting from sizable financial means.

While in Europe the notion of policy paradigm signals a trajectory where one set of representations supplants or integrates another, in Italy the two frameworks coexist simultaneously and seem to respond to different inputs, as demonstrated by the fact that the drawing up of the 2020 Plan and the 2022 Strategies started almost simultaneously. In situations that are perceived as urgent, where action feels much needed and emphasis is put on implementation, antidiscrimination appears as the established, readily available framework. If we take policies at their word, we could say that equality paradigm informed policies fail because, unlike antidiscrimination ones, they set more ambitious objectives but fall short of executing them. However, we could shift the perspective and, paraphrasing James Ferguson, consider that "what is most important about a [policy] is not so much what it fails to do but what it does do" (1994, p. 254). In this light, the equality paradigm could be fulfilling a different function because it is mobilized as a more symbolic framework whose primary purpose is to respond to both endogenous (LGBT+ and anti-LGBT+ groups) and exogenous (European) pressure. We call it a "symbolic" function to stress that the policy does attend to a political need, but not through measure implementation. The policy is not a means to an end, but an end in itself. In other words, we could argue that the objective of the 2020 Plan was to actually fund LGBT shelters. On the contrary, the very *elaboration* of the 2013 and 2022 strategies was an objective in and of itself. It appears safe to contend that their very existence as official documents achieves the primary symbolic result of providing Italy with an LGBT strategy, while their actual implementation is regarded only as secondary because it exceeds – at least partially – the *raison d'être* of those public interventions. To put it differently, we could argue, for instance, that the primary intended goal of the 2022 Strategy, though never implemented, was simply to exist as such, not to yield concrete measures.

To conclude, in this article we have explored the role of policy paradigms in the trajectory of LGBT+ policies in Italy, focusing on three major policy programs: the 2013 LGBT Strategy, the 2020 Antiviolence Plan, and the 2022 LGBT+ Strategy. We have found that the European models of antidiscrimination and equality have a significant influence on the Italian context, but they do not follow a linear path. Rather, they coexist simultaneously and respond to different inputs, such as perceived urgency, availability of funding, involvement of non-state actors, and pressure from EU institutions. We have also found that policy paradigms have different functions and effects, depending on their symbolic or practical orientation.

Our analysis contributes to the literature on LGBT+ policies and politics, offering a novel way of understanding the role of policy paradigms and the dynamics of policy change with respect to sexual orientation and gender identity, considered and experienced as highly contentious public problems. Further research could benefit from a broader analysis to include other sources and capture how LGBT+ issues are addressed by social, political, and

institutional actors, for instance during legislative or parliamentary debates, as in the recent case of the Zan Bill (Feo, 2022). Comparative research within the European context could also expand our understanding of the role of European frameworks in domestic contexts and thus refine our appreciation of how paradigm shifts in LGBT+ policymaking occur (or not), and what role social, political, and institutional actors play in stimulating or opposing them.

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## Appendix

**Primary Sources: Policy Documents**

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**Supplementary Documents**

Decreto Ministeriale del Ministro per le Pari Opportunità e la Famiglia del 13 maggio 2020 istituente un "Tavolo di consultazione permanente per la promozione dei diritti e la tutela delle persone LGBT"

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# Auditing the 2020 'Christmas Decree': communicating pandemic restrictions during Italy's first 'Covid-Christmas'

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## Abstract

This article investigates the online public reception of travel restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy and the role of civil society in communicating them. In particular, it observes the '2020 Christmas Decree' provision allowing people living in municipalities with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants to move within a 30-kilometre radius from their town's border on given days during the Christmas period. To help understand these new rules, a group of three civic hackers created a tool called '30cappa', providing a map visualisation for citizens to check where they could legally travel, triggering online and press debates on the new rules. By analysing these online and media debates, this article finds that the Italian authorities' communication around the 'Christmas Decree' rules was unclear to the general public. In this context, local news outlets sought to play a clarifying role, drawing from communication actions by civil society actors. Through these findings, this article contributes to the literature on the public communication role of civil society in times of emergency.

## 1. Introduction

In February 2020, Italy became the first European country to be hit by Covid-19 and enter a national lockdown soon after. As Covid-19 contagion was widespread across the country in December 2020, the central government established rules through the so-called 'Christmas Decree' to allow people to gather for Christmas, while seeking to control the spread of the disease (Council of Ministries of the Italian Republic, 2020).

This article investigates instances of public discontent over travel restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy – taking a specific provision of the 2020 'Christmas Decree' as a case study – and observes the role of civil society in steering the debate and clarifying information. In this view, we take the '30cappa' project as a case in point. While providing a general ban on travel outside one's municipality of residence, a specific provision of the Christmas Decree allowed people living in municipalities with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants to move within a 30-kilometre radius measured from the town borders on given days. This prompted a group of three civic hackers[1] to create a website called *30cappa*, providing a map visualisation for citizens to check where they could legally travel to, from their respective towns of residency (Napolitano et al., 2022).

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[1] A civic hacker is a tech expert who uses open-source solutions to address social issues.

This tool obtained visibility in the local press of north-eastern Italy and Sicily, these being the developers' places of origin, and contributed to the debate on clarifying the Decree's provisions.

This research uses a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods to observe the public opinion's reaction to the 30-kilometre issue raised by the Christmas Decree. The texts analysed are social media posts and newspaper articles relating to the issue in question. Through this approach, this article is grounded in the literature on the role of civil society during public emergencies (see, for example, Cai et al., 2021). Here, the authors address 'trust' in an actor (and its authority) as a person's or group's willingness to accept this actor's statements as true and/or its impositions (such as regulations) as reasonable (Solomon, 2021). On this basis, the authors explore the relation between trust in authorities and authoritative information sources, on the one hand, and disobedience, on the other. Beyond its own peculiarities, the Italian case is relevant for observation owing to the extent of the health emergency in the pandemic's early months, Italy's pioneering role in nation-wide restrictions in Europe, and the size of the Italian population, making it one of the European Union's five most populous countries. As such, this article allows for case-specific observations, which are yet transferable to similar cases, on public opinion (and its potential effects on law abidance) in times of emergency.

This article finds that the Italian authorities' communication around the Christmas Decree rules was unclear to the general public. In this context, civil society initiatives such as 30cappa sought to play a clarifying role. The next section provides a summary of the socio-political context in which 30cappa and the Christmas Decree are situated. The article then provides a methodological discussion. The subsequent section illustrates the findings, while then moving to a discussion of their meaning and relevance for issues of communication and disobedience in times of emergency. The final section brings this article to conclusion.

## 2. Context and literature review

The constraints imposed by local and national governments to contrast the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic were the greatest restrictions of individual freedom in Italian history since World War II (Camporesi, 2020). While Italy suffered one of Europe's strongest Covid waves in early 2020 and its national restrictions were among the most stringent in terms of limitation to individual movement (Malandrino and Demichelis, 2020), there was a general acceptance among the population of the exceptional need for special measures throughout the pandemic. Indeed, the literature on online debates on Covid-19 shows evidence (in Italy and elsewhere) of increased disinformation circulation prior to pandemic outbreaks, but also a rise in scientifically-sound information circulation during the actual emergency phase (Gallotti et al., 2020), as well as a rally-round-the-flag effect in support of the incumbent national government (Loner, 2022). This arguably motivated the general acceptance of restriction measures between February and May 2020. Indeed, similar effects are visible elsewhere in Europe: Kritzinger et al. (2021) observed the rally-round-the-flag effect during the early stage of the pandemic in Austria and France, whereas Johansson et al. (2021) observe such effects disappearing when cohabiting with the pandemic became a 'new normal'. This article observes the role of civil society in

conveying information on government-mandated anti-Covid restrictions in this latter phase of normalisation of 'pandemic life', looking at 30cappa as a case in point.

During the first national lockdown, initial locally oriented measures were followed by a fully-fledged national lockdown. However, from autumn 2020 onwards a region-based approach was taken. Regions with the highest level of contagion entered full lockdown (red zone) while regions below this threshold underwent tough restrictions such as forbidding movement across municipalities (orange zone). In regions with controllable levels of contagion, milder obligations such as wearing masks applied (yellow zone). At a later stage, a white zone was introduced indicating 'Covid-free' regions. This taxonomy remained in place until 31 March 2022, when the state of emergency ended. By 1 May 2022, the EU Digital Covid Pass was no longer compulsory. Among the examples of how the population of Italy accepted strong exceptional measures, the World Health Organisation (WHO) reported that Italy was one of the best-performing countries in Europe in terms of vaccination, with 68.62% of the population having received a booster dose by October 2022 – a figure higher than that of economically comparable countries such as France, Spain, Portugal, Germany and the Scandinavian countries (World Health Organisation, 2022). To be sure, the ranking changes if we observe first doses only, which may be the result of different policies in terms of what sectors of the population were recommended to take the booster dose. Nonetheless, the percentage of people vaccinated with at least the first dose in Italy was over 84% by October 2022, one of the highest percentages in Europe (World Health Organisation, 2022). As vaccination was never made compulsory for the whole population, these data signal the high level of abidance of Italian citizens by governmental rules and policies amid widespread recognition of a situation of necessity.

Nonetheless, the evidence illustrated does not ignore case-specific, possibly local, anti-Covid measures. Indeed, even the strictest abidance by the rules does not necessarily imply normative acceptance. For example, fear due to the strong impact Covid-19 had on Italy in its earliest phase, as well as pressure due to the restrictions (for example, the need for constant testing) in place for non-vaccinated people, may have played a role in increasing vaccinations. However, the literature finds that such restrictions did not yield a complete push for vaccination, and countries with similarly strong measures, such as Austria, had a lower vaccination rate compared to Italy (World Health Organisation, 2022; Stefanizzi et al., 2022).

Discontent, however, arose during the various phases of the pandemic, as Italy witnessed the surge of a relatively small but noisy and, in some contexts, influential 'no vax' movement, which conflated a number of groups who opposed the vaccine and anti-Covid restrictions tout-court or even just one of the two elements. Indeed, the media referred to them as 'no-vax, 'no-mask', and 'no-greenpass' interchangeably. Other than expressing opposition to the vaccine rollout, the movement opposed the closely related adoption of the European Union's (EU) Digital Covid Certificate (that is, the 'green pass') that was used as proof of vaccination or as proof of a negative test. Until 1 May 2022, the certificate was necessary to conduct most indoor activities in Italy (including taking public transport across cities) (Euronews, 2022). The Italian 'no vax' movement received media coverage internationally because, despite the adherence of the vast majority of the population to the vaccine campaign, it caused major public disorders and

its positions found sympathies within the far-right inside and outside Parliament (Broderick, 2022). At the end of 2022, the then newly elected far-right government reintegrated no-vax medical personnel within the service, defining the move as a 'peace act' (Agenzia Giornalistica Italia, 2022).

The no-vax movement played a role in expressing discontent amid the regulatory chaos that followed the 2020 Christmas Decree. As shown in the analysis, the most vocal Twitter/X[2] users criticising the Decree were members and supporters of far-right, vaccine-sceptical political parties such as Italexit, which started as a Eurosceptic party and took several other anti-systemic stances (Luo, 2022). This took place in a context of emergency and numerous unknowns around the vaccination campaign that was about to start. By Christmas 2020, Covid-19 vaccine acceptance in Italy fared as low as 53.7% (Sallam, 2021). However, eight months later vaccine hesitancy was reduced to 25% (Moscardino et al., 2022). The year 2021 and the first half of 2022 were characterised by numerous, noisy, and at times violent no-vax demonstrations across Italy (Broderick, 2022), but the movement failed to affect the results of the vaccination campaign despite being influential in online criticism against anti-Covid regulations. The no-vax movement is illustrative of how high levels of abidance by the rules (including non-mandatory recommendations) can cohabit with violent and non-violent forms of militant disobedience.

Specifically, this article explores public opinion towards the 2020 Christmas Decree, which introduced restrictions to prevent contagion during the 2020 Christmas holidays while allowing restricted numbers of people to gather and celebrate. In particular, it looks at reactions triggered by the Decree itself and the 30Cappa initiative. The latter is a web app created by three Italian civic hackers, illustrating on a map the distance that residents of municipalities with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants could travel according to the Christmas Decree (Napolitano et al., 2022).

In particular, the Decree mandated that in Italy people could not leave their municipality of residency throughout the Christmas period to avoid contagion, whereas residents of municipalities with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants could travel within a thirty-kilometre radius from their municipality's borders on 28, 29, 30 December and 4 January (that is, all the non-festive and non-pre-festive days of the Christmas period). Such travel could extend beyond regional borders as long as citizens did not enter provincial capitals. To leave the Italian borders, rules for foreign travel applied (Council of Ministries of the Italian Republic, 2020). At least three layers of complexity were added: first, some municipalities contain enclaves and exclaves. Second, the municipality of Campione d'Italia (featuring fewer than 5,000 inhabitants) is an Italian enclave within Swiss territory. Third, Italian regional governments (a total of twenty) enjoy strong autonomy (with five of them enjoying even further prerogatives under a 'special statute'). One such special statute region, namely Trentino Alto Adige, is further subdivided into two autonomous provinces (Trento and Bolzano). In the wake of the Christmas Decree, the province of Trento raised the population limit imposed by the Decree to 6,000 inhabitants (Napolitano et al., 2022). In this multi-layered regulatory context, a general

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[2] The platform X was called Twitter at the time the research was conducted, hence the use of the double name in this article.

sense of confusion emerged among the citizenry through both the press and social media. In short, government regulations were unclear to the general public and the civil society initiative 30cappa helped to clarify them (Napolitano et al., 2022).

The 30cappa initiative triggered debates on the effectiveness and potential discriminatory effects of the Christmas Decree, eliciting critical positions vis-à-vis the then Conte government. This debate provides a relevant case study for display of public discontent (and potential disobedience) relating to Covid-related restrictions. Contextually, the use of 30cappa as a clarifying instrument by the local media is observed as a means to promote understanding of and abidance by the law, coherently with the literature on the media's role during emergencies, addressed below in this section (Vermeer et al., 2022). The role of civil society in communicating anti-Covid measures has been addressed by a number of scholars. Cai et al. (2021) conducted case studies in China, Japan and South Korea and found that civil society contributed to contrasting Covid-19 by supporting and communicating governmental efforts or by filling the institutional voids left by the government. On a more critical note, Brechenmacher et al. (2020) found during the early stage of the Covid-19 pandemic that civil society actions were not necessarily democratic – as demonstrated by the aforementioned violent no-vax protests that characterised the Italian political landscape across 2021. Nonetheless, they find that a number of civil society initiatives helped pandemic response despite the disruption caused by lockdowns and the efforts of antidemocratic political leaders to weaponise lockdowns to silence civil society organisations. In a study focusing on the Netherlands, Kemper et al. (2023) find that civil society initiatives 'have fulfilled various roles such as providing alternative management policies, producing equipment, representing the needs of vulnerable populations, and supporting citizens and providing citizens with other viewpoints and information.'

Each of the above perspectives elaborates on specific aspects of the relationship between public reactions to emergency measures and civil society's role in supporting the government's communication, also considering a diverse range of cultural, historical, and political contexts. This article relates to this literature.

## 3. Approach and methods

As illustrated above, a growing body of literature finds a connection between trust in media and (health) authorities, on the one hand, and abidance by Covid-prevention measures on the other. This is, however, mediated by the sense of emergency that the general population feels or, by contrast, the sense of normalisation. In this view, a stronger rally-round-the-flag effect is visible during emergency inception and peaks (Loner, 2023). Furthermore, depending on the characterisation of the media used, trust in authorities is affected in different ways. For example, in a study of citizens' behaviour in Covid-19 prevention in China, it was found that the use of central government information and WeChat as a social media are positively correlated with abidance by prevention measures, whereas consumption of local news and the use of Weibo as social media are negatively correlated with it (Wu and Shen, 2022). Coherently, media outlets seek to build trust among the population through the provision of clear-cut information. However, this is not necessarily for the best when it comes to contrasting pseudo-science in times of health emergencies (Limaye et al., 2020). This notwithstanding, there is a

general acceptance of the role of both social and traditional media (mainly newspapers and TV) in influencing trust towards authorities and abidance by Covid prevention measures (Vermeer et al., 2022).

On these grounds, a growing body of literature explores the role of civil society in supporting the government's communication of anti-Covid measures (Cai et al., 2021). This article takes its starting point within the wisdom provided by this literature, exploring the role of civil society in the Italian information ecosystem.

Starting from this body of literature and an already existing analysis of the 30cappa initiative provided by its curators (Napolitano et al., 2022), this article follows a two-phase approach. First, quantitative data were collected, then a qualitative analysis was conducted on selected media sources.

Quantitative data consist of Twitter/X data with the hashtag #decretonatale (Christmas Decree) and traffic statistics for the 30cappa website (Napolitano et al., 2022). Twitter/X is a politics-oriented platform and as such it is relevant to this article. Indeed, for the sake of completeness, Facebook posts should also have been analysed as it is Italy's most used platform (Dixon, 2021). However, at the current stage the Facebook Graph API does not allow for the bulk collection of posts and the analysis of opinion trends (Breuer et al., 2022). Twitter policies have also changed with the latest change in ownership and its rebranding as X. However, data collection was conducted prior to this. On these grounds, Twitter/X was used as a proxy on which to build a basic understanding of the Italian public opinion stances over the Christmas Decree. Such an understanding, being only partial, cannot be generalized. Indeed, Twitter/X is used less in Italy compared to other countries, although its relevance to the study of political debates has been proven in the literature (Cossard et al., 2020). This is why the study of the Twitter/X debate was then complemented by a qualitative analysis on media outlets on the more specific topic of the 30cappa initiative. This way, the 30cappa debate is contextualised within the broader debate on the Christmas Decree.

Tweets containing the hashtag #decretonatale (Christmas Decree) were collected for the period between 1 December 2020 and 7 January 2021 included. The latter is the date Christmas restrictions ended, but the choice of the start date was not as straightforward: as a number of anti-Covid restrictions were already in place, discussion over the likelihood of tough restrictions over Christmas started in early autumn, although no such thing as the Christmas Decree was devised until later in the year. Indeed, the Decree entered into force on 18 December 2020 (Council of Ministries of the Italian Republic, 2020). This made it difficult to pinpoint a start date for the Christmas Decree debate. Therefore, the authors opted for including the whole Christmas month in the analysis.

A total of 7,625 tweets were collected, corresponding to 6,649 valid tweets analysed. The tweets that were eliminated were simply automated, often off-topic, tweets using trending hashtags to advertise products and services. Therefore, they were deemed irrelevant for this analysis. The authors conducted an author network analysis of the tweets. This allowed the authors to observe the political characterisation of the profiles who led the Twitter/X debate and their expressions of discontent. This provided the basis for qualitative observations on media outlets. The tweets were cleaned and made ready for analysis by lemmatising the text using the textstem package (RDocumentation

2023), that is, by converting each word to the inflected form (for example, the word 'vuoi' – verb, second person singular, present tense – was converted to its infinitive form 'volere'). Stopwords were then eliminated using three different packages: 'stopwords-iso', 'nltk', and 'snowball' (RDocumentation 2023). This was to ensure all stopwords were eliminated, as most packages are English-proof but not as effective in other languages such as Italian. A further manual cleaning was conducted to eliminate or convert words with diacritic signs (such as accents) which were at times not detected by the aforementioned packages.

The analysis of the tweets was conducted in R. To conduct author network analysis, the 'textnets' package was adopted (Bail, 2016). This tool enabled observation of the most central authors within the Twitter/X debate on the Christmas Decree, detecting whether the debate was led by politicians and other public figures or by private citizens. While such observations will be illustrated, strict anonymity will be maintained around the identity of the tweet authors. This is both an ethical choice and a legal obligation under the General Data Protection Regulation and the Twitter/X API terms and conditions. The most central nodes are identified in terms of betweenness centrality, that is, centrality is higher when a network node (i.e., a tweet author) is more often on the shortest 'path' between two other nodes. Betweenness centrality is a key indicator in Twitter/X debates as it is generally higher for authors who are retweeted more often, post more, or retweet a higher number of tweets from much-followed sources (Riddell et al., 2017). In the case of this article, the network is built on words co-occurring across tweet authors; therefore, the authors who retweeted each other more often are more closely connected. The higher a node's betweenness centrality, the bigger its size in the network graph. The various nodes in the network are then grouped by colour, which indicates modularity. A module is a 'community' of nodes that entertain a stronger relationship within the network (for example, interacting with each other's tweets) (Blondel et al., 2008). This can be due to a common political belonging or to following the same news sources. These characteristics of the network are visually represented in Figure 1, illustrated and discussed in the 'Findings' section. For the sake of readability, only 56 nodes and the respective edges (150 in total) are represented. The analysed nodes are users that posted at least five tweets using the hashtag #decretonatale. Betweenness centrality and modularity have been calculated on this reduced network, considering the graph is mixed (with directed and undirected edges). Retweeting one's own tweet is considered a self-loop, whereas original tweets are not (Zhao et al., 2021). Running the analysis on the full network would have yielded 3,426 nodes and 544,924 edges, increasing computational needs and creating noise in the interpretation of data. The network analysis is merely exploratory and further qualitative analysis is built on it.

The choice of the media outlets to observe was based on traffic statistics of the 30cappa website. Through these, it was possible to observe the sources from which most of the access to the 30cappa website came. This way, the local and national online newspapers to include in the analysis were selected. The media outlets observed include the online version of traditional newspapers as well as Covid-specific websites such as 'covidzone.info', an Italian website started in December 2020 to provide clarity on the ever-changing anti-Covid regulations. The website has been unavailable since May 2022,

but its content was retrievable through 'archive.org'. Qualitative thematic coding has been applied to both articles and comments.

Based on this twofold methodological approach, the authors first built general knowledge of online discontent over the Christmas Decree. Next, the authors conducted analysis of the 30cappa initiative to explore the entrenchment of information, trust, discontent, and disobedience. The next section illustrates this article's empirical findings. All the quotes reported in the findings and the discussion sections are translated from Italian by the authors.

## 4. Findings

The exploratory analysis conducted on Twitter/X suggests rising discontent among users around the Christmas Decree. Right-leaning, vaccine-sceptical groups featured visibly in the Twitter/X discussion: among the most central nodes (bigger in size) in the tweet author network illustrated in Figure 1 there are followers of the anti-EU, antivax political party Italexit. Labels have been attributed to the most central nodes so as to characterise them politically while preserving their privacy, with the sole exception of 'The Italian Times' which is the profile of a news outlet and not a person. Table 1 shows the network statistics in relation to Figure 1 for better readability and interpretability of the network. Followers of far-right parties who criticised (to any extent) the government's vaccine policy are also present. These profiles feature numerous tweets and retweets in support of Lega and Fratelli d'Italia, of Putin's government, and of theories denying the efficacy of vaccines against Covid-19. While this does not provide any direct information on these users' will to disobey anti-Covid rules, it does show a deeply rooted lack of trust in Italian and European authorities, both in terms of health authorities and governmental authorities in general. Left-leaning voices – whether in favour of or against vaccinations – also featured in the discussion. Tellingly, the most central liberal/left-leaning voices in the debate are concentrated in one group (black in Figure 1), whereas the other main modules (pink, green, blue) all feature overlapping topics and political belongings among their most central nodes. The sole exception among left-leaning voices is an individual playing a satirical role and entertaining stronger relations with a right-leaning module (pink in Figure 1).

Interestingly, none of the most central tweet authors is a senior politician or public figure, although a liberal-leaning journalist is featured as well as the alternative right-wing outlet 'The Italian Times'. On the contrary, they are private citizens and perhaps secondary profiles within small but vocal anti-system parties. In short, the Twitter/X debate on the Christmas Decree was strongly politicised, with a prominent presence of non-primary, small but vocal anti-system parties.

To be sure, two disclaimers need to be made. First, as anticipated, the Twitter/X usership is not representative of the whole Italian public opinion. Second, as illustrated in the literature, critical views are overrepresented in social media posts and comments, with toxic language carrying a silencing effect over other users (Theocharis et al., 2020). Nonetheless, the Twitter/X debate provides the gist of the polarised environment in which the Christmas Decree was approved and in which the 30cappa initiative was launched.

**Figure 1.** Tweet authors network
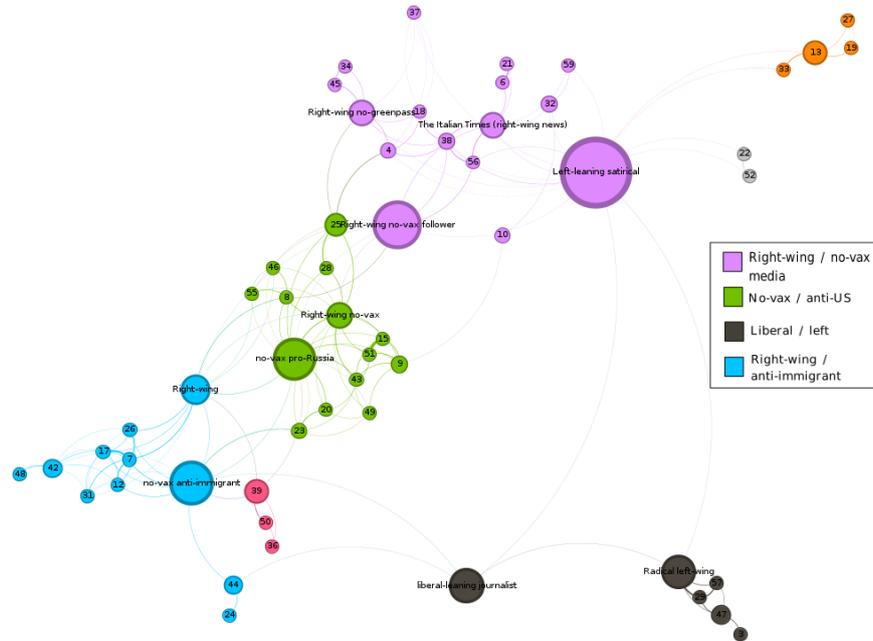


Source: own elaboration. Size: betweenness centrality. Colour: modularity. Visualised with Gephi (ForceAtlas 2).

To retrieve media coverage for 30cappa, the authors used the 30cappa website statistics provided by the website owner and then observed the social media reactions to the articles. Such articles on social media were retrieved through the hashtag #30cappa and analysed qualitatively. It emerged that most criticisms expressed in the comments focused on doubts on the functioning of the tool rather than open criticism or personal attacks when the article was shared on the 30cappa curators' social media pages. However, sharper attacks and criticisms appeared in comments to local media coverage as better illustrated below. One essential observation is that most press coverage for the 30cappa initiative came from local news outlets. With the sole exception of Affari Italiani, Covidzone, and the Italian edition of Mashable, a large share of press coverage (and access to the 30cappa website) came from the online edition of local newspapers (Figure 2). As per Figure 2, extracted from the 30cappa website statistics, Covidzone is the website from which most accesses came (48.4%), followed by RAI News (7.7%). RAI is the Italian national broadcaster, but it features regional services. The main accesses to 30cappa through RAI came from regional services of RAI News.

**Table 1.** Network statistics in relation to Figure 1

| Label | Betweenness Centrality | Modularity class |
|---|---|---|
| **Left-leaning satirical** | 0.3429072388745095 | 4 (pink) |
| **Right-wing no-vax follower** | 0.20504067982150975 | 4 (pink) |
| **No-vax anti-immigrant** | 0.18243021346469623 | 1 (blue) |
| **No-vax pro-Russia** | 0.17215728294045063 | 7 (green) |
| **Liberal-leaning journalist** | 0.12821936489382427 | 2 (black) |
| **Radical left-wing** | 0.11922852133255406 | 2 (black) |
| **Right-wing** | 0.09566808605382536 | 1 (blue) |
| **Right-wing no-vax** | 0.07653094356776413 | 7 (green) |
| **Right-wing no-greenpass** | 0.07346836065421687 | 4 (pink) |
| **The Italian Times (right-wing news)** | 0.07267030326644587 | 4 (pink) |

Source: own elaboration.

Among the local news outlets listed in Figure 2, one can see newspapers from a number of provinces: Padova, Treviso, Trento, Udine, and Venice. Coverage was also present on Palermo Today. The visible overrepresentation of north-eastern Italian provinces is explainable by the origin and place of establishment of the 30cappa curators: Maurizio Napolitano is from Trento, while the two other curators (Salvatore Fiandaca and Andrea Borruso) are from Sicily, as pointed out by the local news outlet Palermo Today in its press coverage of the 30cappa initiative (PalermoToday, 2020). Other than this, media outlet ownership matters in the news distribution: the listed newspapers from Treviso, Venice and Padova belong to the same publisher, thus news and articles circulate more easily from one website to the other.

In short, the 30cappa project achieved national relevance, with the highest share of accesses being from the national website Covidzone, established in the wake of the Christmas Decree to provide ad hoc information on rules, exactly like 30cappa, and made popular by its appearance on RAI's main TV channels. However, it was local news outlets that sought to harness the tool provided by 30cappa to place themselves as the source of reliable information on what citizens could do during Christmas 2020. Indeed, 30cappa provided mapping services for the whole of Italy, and therefore local news outlets could use it to build visualisations related to their local area.

Reactions to articles by the local press on 30cappa were mixed. On the public social media pages of the 30cappa curators, commentators are supportive or merely ask questions. On the newspaper's social media pages, however, comments are more numerous and often angry, both against the Christmas Decree and the 30cappa mapping tool. Interestingly for the objective of this article, much criticism against the 30cappa initiative is that it calculates a radial distance from the municipality's border rather than

30 kilometres on a street graph. However, this way of calculating distances is accurate according to the Decree (Council of Ministries of the Italian Republic, 2020). Therefore, this is a sign of the lack of clarity that characterised the Christmas 2020 anti-Covid regulations. Indeed, a user commented: 'So lucky [ironic] that when I called the local police they said 30 kilometres must be calculated as road distance', signalling uncertainty even within public institutions.

Overall, four main attitudes emerge from the qualitative analysis conducted on reactions to media coverage of 30cappa. First, enthusiasm for the initiative (mainly visible on the project curators' pages); second, resignation regarding the new round of restrictions; third, anger against the restrictions; fourth, confusion around the content of the restrictions, as exemplified by the widespread doubts on how to calculate the 30-kilometre distance.

In some of the local news outlets, 30cappa was instead promoted as a tool to clarify a complex and unclear (for many) piece of legislation. For example, the north-eastern newspaper Il Dolomiti presents the 30cappa as follows: 'How do you calculate the 30km radius? To help the residents of small municipalities, three computer scientists [...] created a web platform to offer the solution [to this question]' (Leveghi, 2020).

In this context of widespread – though by no means universal – uncertainty and distrust, local news outlets sought to provide clarity through locally-oriented information around the Christmas Decree. Titles underlined that the idea came from three hacktivists and articles contained examples of data visualisation on the newspaper's geographical area of competence, thus raising local interest in the project (PalermoToday, 2020).

**Figure 2.** Websites from which users accessed 30cappa (6 December 2022).

| SITO | | ▼ VISITE | AZIONI NEL SITO | AZIONI PER VISITA | TEMPO MEDIO SUL SITO | % RIMBALZI |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| covidzone.info | ⤴ | 48,4% 178.165 | 343.232 | 1,9 | 29s | 38% |
| www.rainews.it | | 7,7% 28.450 | 91.214 | 3,2 | 2 minuti 3 secondi | 28% |
| mattinopadova.... | | 3,3% 12.088 | 54.014 | 4,5 | 11s | 28% |
| tribunatreviso.g... | | 2,9% 10.571 | 50.650 | 4,8 | 8s | 26% |
| www.trentotoda... | | 2,2% 8.228 | 21.938 | 2,7 | 58s | 31% |
| it.mashable.com | | 2% 7.402 | 20.956 | 2,8 | 58s | 30% |
| www.udine20.it | | 1,6% 6.059 | 12.789 | 2,1 | 38s | 35% |
| nuovavenezia.g... | | 1,6% 5.836 | 29.325 | 5 | 8s | 28% |
| www.affaritalian... | | 1,5% 5.658 | 16.606 | 2,9 | 1 minuti 51 secondi | 28% |
| www.covidzone.... | | 1% 3.771 | 7.399 | 2 | 30s | 36% |

Source: data provided by the 30cappa website owners, updated to 6 December 2022. The website was closed due to the end of its use after the pandemic.

## 5. Discussion

The characterisation of social media reactions to the Christmas Decree and 30cappa shows diffused frustration towards the lack of clarity in the authorities' communication and thus the latter's delegitimization in the eyes of sectors of the public. Lack of clarity emerged prominently in the analysed comments, especially relating to how to measure the 30 kilometres. Frustration was thus visible and several user comments showed mistrust in the government's competence amid the lack of clear-cut rules as exemplified above. As throughout the Covid-19 pandemic the relationship between trust in the authority and compliance with prevention measures was found to be statistically significant by the literature (Travaglino and Moon, 2021), this discussion section focuses on the clarifying and trust-building role played by civil society with 30cappa as a case in point.

The local newspapers who provided press coverage to the 30cappa initiative presented it as a tool for their local readership to check where they could travel during the Christmas break. The local newspaper from the province of Padova 'Il Mattino' is an example: 'There are 289 municipalities with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, one can move within a 30km radius and never to a provincial capital. [See] the list and the map. Find out where you can go' (Pucci, 2021). The same applies to local press from the province of Trento, as this territory applied slightly different rules by raising the population limit to 6,000 inhabitants. This aspect is in fact stressed by the local newspaper L'Adige in its press coverage of the 30cappa initiative, also in view of the fact that similar rules were reintroduced locally in 2021 during periods of widespread contagion (L'Adige, 2021).

While north-eastern provinces are overrepresented in the press coverage of 30cappa, press coverage in other regions of Italy took the same approach: that is, building lists and providing mapping tools for locals to calculate where they could travel to. This can be seen in the local media of Napoli and Palermo, southern Italy's most populated cities (NapoliToday, 2020; PalermoToday, 2020).

In itself, the fact that press coverage by the local press targets a local readership is unsurprising. However, in so doing, in the context of the Christmas Decree, local newspapers played a clarifying role for their local readership to understand what they were allowed to do under the existing restrictions. The press coverage provided to 30cappa as a means to this end is one example of this kind, but others can be found. For example, following the first full national lockdown (March to May 2020), the literature found evidence of a growing demand for local news (including TV, which in Italy is still the main medium of communication) in response to national pandemic-related events (Castriota et al., 2021). This is in line with findings from other countries (see for example: Wu and Shen, 2022).

Furthermore, the 30cappa map was embedded in several institutional websites,[3] signalling how even government levels acknowledged the growing trust of the

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[3] For example, the north-western municipality of Campo Ligure used its official social media channels to publicise 30cappa as a tool for its citizens during the 2020 Christmas holidays. See: shorturl.at/iFGW6 (accessed 14 March 2023). The same applies to the Alpine Municipality of Cavedine: shorturl.at/tuTUZ (accessed 11 April 2023).

population in civil society-led initiatives and locally-oriented sources of information over institutional communication, which by Christmas 2020 had become chaotic in the eyes of many.

The regionalised management of the Covid-related health emergency, with regional administrations maintaining wide autonomy for establishing their own rules within those mandated by the central government, pushed many to rely on local news outlets and informal sources of information on the rules applicable where they lived and/or worked – to the point where even local levels of government themselves relied on civil society-produced, locally-oriented means of communication in given situations. In the words of the 30cappa curators as cited by the local news outlet PalermoToday: "When we saw the decree, we wondered how it should be interpreted and reasoned around how to create the maps […] We certainly have no intention of incentivising the inhabitants of 'small municipalities' to move freely: common sense is fundamental. [We believe] that when words are insufficient to explain concepts, it is perhaps best to provide tools such as maps for comprehension".

In conclusion, in a context in which searching for local news had become relevant to understand pandemic-related rules (Castriota et al., 2021), civil society initiatives such as 30cappa helped to clarify institutional communication.

## 6. Conclusions and implications

Due to the differences in local rules that characterised the Italian anti-Covid strategy, locally-oriented information became paramount. This pushed local health authorities and government levels to step up their communication (Lovari et al., 2021), with civil society initiatives such as 30cappa playing a role in this and being relaunched by local media. Based on the observations illustrated in this article, the authors maintain that building trust in local authoritative information sources – both among the media and the institutional channels – can arguably increase clarity around locally specific regulations and therefore enhance trust in the authorities. As trust in the authorities is positively correlated with abidance by anti-Covid measures in Italy (Castriota et al., 2021), such trust-building measures might contribute to reducing disobedience in times of emergency. This also resonates with existing literature on other countries, where a connection between news consumption from certain types of news outlets and law abidance has been found across countries with different political and cultural backgrounds, although the types of news consumption correlated with obedience changed contextually (Wu and Shen, 2022). Civil society has a role to play in this as showcased by the 30cappa experience.

To be sure, this article leaves some questions unanswered. For example, future research could focus on survey data to explore changes in (local) news consumption during the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy and across other countries to draw new insights into the media's role in building scientific trust. Besides, debates on platforms other than Twitter/X should be analysed, such as Facebook, Instagram and even Tiktok, which experienced a sharp rise in usership starting right before the Covid-19 pandemic. Among the limits of this article, local news outlets tend to provide more coverage of a piece of news when locals are involved, coherently with their mission as locally-relevant media. Therefore, the news outlets observed in this article over-represent certain

regions of Italy owing to the provenance of the 30cappa developers. Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic is still a fresh experience in everyone's memory, including that of researchers, thus yielding deep and polarising feelings in analysts and observers. Future research on Covid-related phenomena in the years to come may benefit from a higher degree of detachment from the object of study.

Overall, through the analysis of 30cappa as an informative tool and popular reactions to it, this article cast new light on the role local media can play in ensuring correct and reliable information and, ultimately, abidance by the law in times of emergency. On these grounds, the authors maintain that trust-building measures in authoritative media sources and reliance on civil society initiatives in (institutional) communication can help to reduce disobedience in times of emergency.

## Acknowledgements

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

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## Abstract

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

## 1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

## 2. Methodological remarks: discourse analysis and securitization

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Source: own elaboration.

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

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

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

## 3. Results of the study

### 3.1. Statements made during official visits

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 3.2. Parliamentary hearings: Interior Ministers

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 3.3. Parliamentary hearings: Defence Ministers

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 3.4. Parliamentary hearings: Foreign Ministers

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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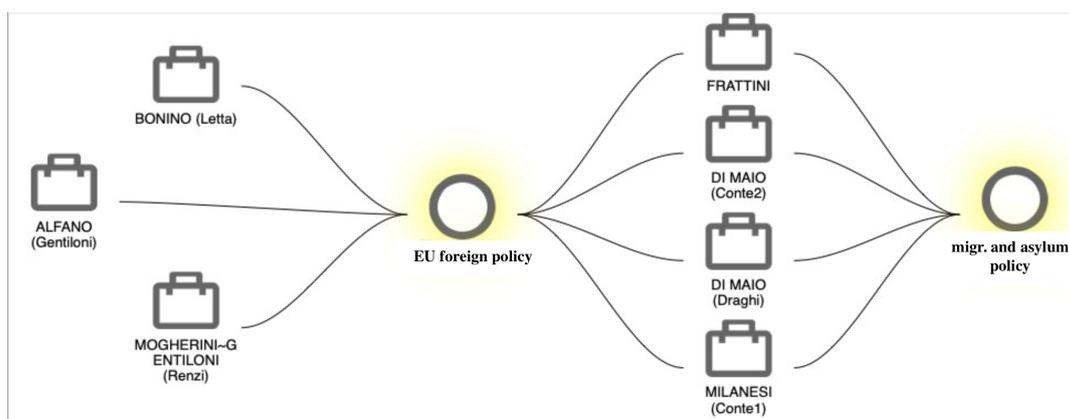


Source: own elaboration. The graph shows which governments' foreign ministers dealt with EU foreign policy AND migration and asylum policy during their parliamentary hearings, and which governments dealt only with EU foreign policy.

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

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

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

## 4. Summary and discussion

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

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

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

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

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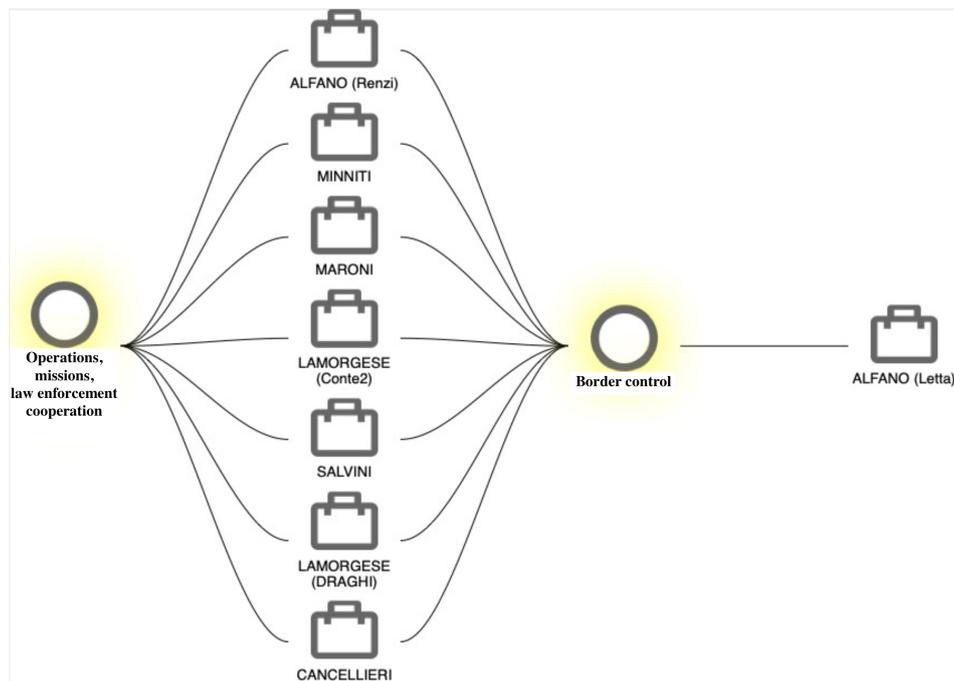


Source: own elaboration. The figure shows which governments' interior ministers have linked border control tasks to EU operations.

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

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

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

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

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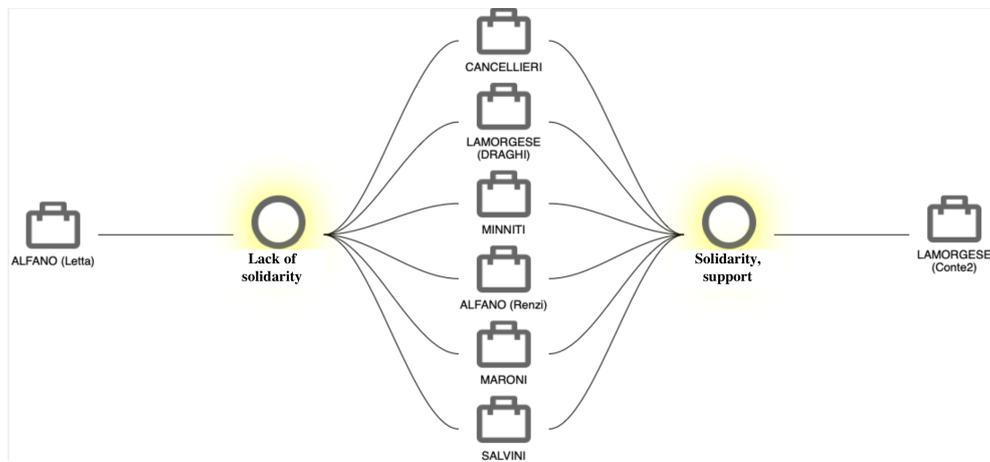


Source: own elaboration. The figure shows which governments' interior ministers criticised EU migration and asylum policies during their parliamentary hearings, and which governments' interior ministers were more concerned about the existence of solidarity.

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

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

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

## Acknowledgements

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