



From denial to domestication: Unpacking Italy's right-wing approach to climate migration and security

Giovanni Bettini^a, Anna Casaglia^{b,*}

^a Lancaster Environment Centre, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YQ, United Kingdom

^b School of International Studies & Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Trento, Via T. Gar 14, Trento 30122, Italy

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Eco-fascism
Climate security
Climate migration
Italy
Right-wing populism
Post-denialism

ABSTRACT

The rise to power of right-wing political formations in numerous countries opens new questions on how they relate to the climate emergency. Now that outright climate denial has become a residual position, the intersection of climate change, migration, and security might prove a litmus test of how the right wing 'digests' climate change. And indeed, while humanitarian narratives portray 'climate refugees' as victims deserving protection, the spectre of a 'climate exodus' has been mobilised also to justify border militarisation and reinforce racial lines.

Aiming to advance debates on climate migration, security and political ecologies of the right, we examine the articulation of 'climate migration' in the Italian political landscape, a case made particularly relevant given the ruling right-wing coalition and its track-record of anti-migration rhetoric and policies.

Drawing on a qualitative analysis of parliamentary debates, electoral programs, social media feeds, and other sources, we show that the Italian right, rather than waiving the spectre of a climate exodus, has been attempting a 'domestication' of climate change, taming the debate on the impacts of global warming and reducing it to a domestic matter. These findings, while underscoring the need for situated and nuanced understandings of how political actors address the climate crisis in relation to security and borders, also highlight the danger that right wing formations, on top of responding to the climate emergency by pushing explicit forms of eco-fascism or ecobordering, can resort to less spectacularised repertoires that aim at blocking climate action while still pursuing anti-migrant and racist agendas. This research thereby not only sheds light on the Italian case but also contributes to broader discussions on climate security and the diverse responses of right-wing political formations to the climate emergency.

1. Introduction

The gradual fading out of climate denial – with the scientific evidence of global warming now unquestionable and impacts already dramatically tangible – opens pressing questions on how right-wing political formations, which in many parts of the world (not least in Europe) have ascended to power, will signify climate change. How is global warming being inscribed into conservative policy agendas and rhetoric? Will we see attempts to relativise the threat posed by climate change and de-prioritise it (Wullenkord, 2022; Skoglund and Stripple, 2018), or attempts to delay action (Carton, 2019; Lamb et al., 2020)? Or could forms of eco-fascism become widespread?

The way in which the right-wing signifies the nexus climate-migration-security can be seen as a litmus test. Indeed, the idea that

large-scale displacement could become a threat multiplier igniting conflict and thereby menacing regional or international security has widely circulated – with less progressive observers waiving the spectre of a climate exodus to legitimise the tightening and militarisation of borders. While in a humanitarian framing climate refugees are portrayed as the victims of global warming in need of rescue and deserving legal protection (Byravan and Rajan, 2022), the figure of the climate refugee has also been one of the key vehicles for the securitisation of climate change (cf. White, 2011; Boas, 2015; Boas and Rothe, 2016). Social scientists and migration scholars have been sceptical about the discourse since its inception (Suhre, 1994; Black, 2001; Castles, 2002), and narratives on a climate exodus from the global South have been stigmatised for reproducing racial lines (Baldwin, 2022; Ahuja, 2021; Telford, 2018) and for justifying a militarisation of borders (White, 2011).

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: g.bettini@lancaster.ac.uk (G. Bettini), anna.casaglia@unitn.it (A. Casaglia).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2024.104079>

Received 25 March 2024; Received in revised form 1 July 2024; Accepted 17 July 2024

Available online 24 July 2024

0016-7185/© 2024 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

While a rich scholarship offers more nuanced understandings of climate mobilities (e.g. Boas et al., 2019; Durand-Delacré et al., 2021), pressing questions are still open, not least regarding how climate mobilities concretely figure in actual political contexts, how notions of security are changing in the face of the climate emergency, and how climate migration enters the everyday performance of right-wing populism in (re)shaping the geographies of borders, climate vulnerabilities, and (in)security. Indeed, critical scholars have started exploring the prospect that environmental protection and climate adaptation could foster or justify forms of ecobordering (Turner and Bailey, 2021), and exacerbate the already profound inequalities that some refer to as forms of climate or eco-apartheid (Rice et al., 2021; Heron, 2023).

Our contribution to such debates is twofold. First, we argue for a decentring of the spatialities of debates on climate mobilities and in/security. The wealth of research on Anglophone contexts stands out against the scant attention devoted to how the same matters are articulated within non-English speaking countries, which are most often objectified into ‘case studies’ on vulnerability and displacement. Second, we suggest focusing on the national political level, a site in which several domains of security are shaped and enforced. This scale is rather overlooked in debates on climate change and security, where most work (with notable exceptions, see e.g. Boas, 2015; Cons, 2018; von Lucke, 2020; Nash, 2023; Nash, 2024) has focussed either on the supranational or international scale or on local contexts.

Contributing to filling this gap, this paper investigates how climate migration has entered the lexicon and agendas of Italian political parties, and how this is negotiated as a security issue. The Italian case is extremely relevant considering Italy’s role in European migration processes. Indeed, the securitisation of migration and the enforcement of borders have been defining traits across the Italian political spectrum. In this context, the alleged ‘fight against illegal immigration’ is a billboard issue for the ruling right-wing coalition, charged with heavily securitised and racialised terms. Furthermore, the recent series of climate extremes in Italy has contributed making climate denial a residual position, since the unfolding of the climate crisis has become manifest and tangible. This mainstreaming of the climate emergency marks a new, ‘post-denial’ phase, which deserves close investigation.

The rich literatures on the resurgence of eco-fascism, on the political ecologies of the (far-)right, and on the narrative repertoires that could pave the way for forms of climate apartheid (Bulli, 2019; Malm and Zetkin Collective, 2021; Bailey and Turner, 2023; Forchtner, 2019; Lockwood, 2018) offer precious tools to conceptualise how right-wing formations are and will be ‘absorbing’ the climate emergency. However, and to state the obvious, the specific articulation of ecology, migration and security pushed at a certain time by a movement or party (e.g. whether they mobilise the spectre of a ‘climate exodus’) is highly contingent and contextual, and also dependent upon discursive struggles among and within political formations. It is in light of this contextual processes that the article focuses on one specific political context, the Italian.

The findings we present invite a further articulation of current theorisations on climate security and securitisation, signalling the need to account for – both empirically and conceptually – the diversified ways in which political actors are addressing and framing the climate crisis in relation to security and borders.

Methodologically, the article draws on a qualitative analysis of Italian political parties’ position on climate, migration and security based on a rich set of materials – including transcriptions of Parliamentary debates, electoral programs and party manifestos, social media feeds and press releases, web pages of relevant Ministries and Departments. For the analysis of the right-wing governing coalition, we develop an analytical framework around the concept of ‘domestication’, which allows us to interpret the post-denial move of the right not as a full embracement of climate science and climate security discourses, but, rather, as a way to fold climate issues into their rhetoric through a strategy that both simplifies and nationalises the climate crisis and

climate science.

We start by gathering insights from existing critical studies on the climate-migration-security nexus, focussing on the geographies of knowledge that structure such debates and imaginaries, and on right-wing responses to the climate crisis. After detailing our methodological approach, the article analyses the opposition parties’ and the government coalition’s positions on climate mobilities and their security significance. We end with some reflections on the importance of the Italian case for debates on security in the face of climate change, the role of mobility in such discourses, and the diverging ways in which right-wing political formations might respond to the climate emergency.

2. Climate change, security, human mobility

The climate crisis and more broadly the Anthropocene have invited a profound re-thinking of security. New threats, but also scales, temporalities and subjectivities have entered the scene, shaking established theories and praxes of security. Most immediately, we have witnessed an exponential growth of initiatives (in research, advocacy, policy) on the security implications of climate change (von Uexküll and Buhaug, 2021; Schäfer et al., 2015; ch12 in IPCC, 2014), and the association of climate change and security has been echoed by heads of state, security and intelligence departments, as well as by the UN Secretary-General (WBGU, 2008; Department of Defense of the United States, 2021; Sky-News, 2015; United Nations, 2023). The implications of climate change on security have attracted growing attention also in academia: the number of publications on the theme shows a steep increase with the publication of IPCC’s fourth Assessment Report in 2007 (Sharifi et al., 2021). Critical literature has extensively analysed the securitisation of climate change and more broadly environmental issues, underlying the risks implied in such a framing (Clark, 2014; Dalby, 2014; Hartmann, 2010; Selby, 2014; Zografos et al., 2014).

2.1. Climate migration: imaginaries, numbers, and myths

Climate-induced displacement is among the potential threats identified in environmental security discourses (White, 2011), with displacement feared to be inevitably destined to increase due to climate impacts in vulnerable regions in the global South. The figure of the climate refugee embodies such concerns, which have often been popularised via apocalyptic scenarios of mass migration towards Northern/Western countries, presented as the next global threat to territorial integrity and human security. The ‘numbers game’ (Brown, 2008) – with numerous attempts to produce models forecasting climate-induced displacement – has strongly contributed to the formation of those apocalyptic scenarios, starting from Myers’ prediction of 200 million climate migrants by 2050 (Myers, 2005), uprooted from parts of the world particularly vulnerable to climate change.

Such numbers and the underlying conceptualisations of the links between conflict, migration and climate are problematic (Boas et al., 2019; Salehyan, 2008; Selby, 2014; White, 2011; IPCC, 2014). The very identification of migration as a threat multiplier (key ingredient to the securitisation of the matter) builds on the assumption that displacement leads to political instability and conflict (Hough, 2021; Chalecki, 2013), a causal inference that has been defined “at best suggestive” (Dalby, 2020: 120), at worst simply misconstruing what are in fact complex dynamics (Selby, 2014). Furthermore, the framing of climate change and migration in relation to conflict and security risks reinforcing “boundaries of collective identity, behaviour, political activity, security and, most importantly, power and resource distribution” (Chaturvedi and Doyle, 2015: 134). The risk is that, as environmental security answers are increasingly concerned with preventing peripheral instabilities and disruption, nation state borders assume increased relevance as a defence to the presumed threat posed by climate change.

2.2. The uneven geography of climate migration debates

Debates on climate migration have also been symptomatic of the skewed geographies of knowledge on climate change (Chaturvedi and Doyle, 2015; Sultana, 2022). Discourses tend to be structured as a Northern/Western gaze over what is represented as a problem of and in the global South. As Piguet and colleagues convincingly show, a vast majority of research outputs consists of ‘case studies’ on and in the global South carried out by institutions and funders from the global North (Piguet et al., 2018). This polarisation is not an innocent ramification of the uneven geographies of vulnerability. Rather, this imbalance is a symptom of the framing that has dominated international debates, epitomised by the figure of the climate refugee and the climate exodus against the gradient of affluence expected to take place in the near future. Such framing, with displaced populations from the global South represented both as victims and threats, has had strong echoes in media and campaigns, and reproduces (post-)colonial tropes and geographical imaginaries (Giuliani, 2021; Methmann and Rothe, 2014). These uneven geographies of representation (in research, advocacy campaigns, popular culture) bring to the surface the racial lines structuring imaginaries on climate change and migration (Baldwin, 2022) and the coloniality of climate change (Sultana, 2022), recognised explicitly now even in the rather austere and depoliticised IPCC register (IPCC, 2022). These very skewed geographies and imaginaries have also informed the association of climate mobilities to security: tendencies or attempts to securitise climate migration have been structured around the geographic dipole described above, with climate migration represented as a catastrophe threatening to spread across the global South, with effects that risk spilling over to the global North (see the notion of threat multiplier), and all the racialised undercurrents flowing beneath such narratives and imaginaries (Baldwin et al., 2014; Boas and Rothe, 2016; Telford, 2018).

To be sure, there is also a solid body of literature that deconstructs and counters these problematic articulations of climate (migration) and security. Several authors have highlighted not only the agency but also the political subjectivity of groups framed in the dominant discourse as ‘silenced victims’ – most notably, with reference to Pacific islands (Ransan-Cooper et al., 2015; Kitara and Farbotko, 2023; Fair, 2020; McNamara and Farbotko, 2017). Research has also aimed to revert the spatial logics of climate security by not taking ‘the international’ as for-granted scale, but rather interrogating how climate (in)security is intertwined with regional or city-level political processes in the global North (Bettini et al., 2021; Turhan and Armiero, 2019). This article contributes to this ‘provincialisation’ of discourses on climate security and climate mobilities, by focussing on the shape security takes in the face of climate change in a context that does not fit the dominant ‘north-south’ gaze.

2.3. The right-wing and climate change: ecobordering or domestication?

The concurrent proliferation of right-wing political formations and the mainstreaming of the climate emergency opens pressing questions (e.g. Pietiläinen and Kellokumpu, 2024). Put simply, now that climate denial is largely a residual position, how will right-wing parties and movements relate to and articulate an own agenda on climate change? Will they attempt to securitise the matter and push for the enforcement of ‘eco-borders’? Given the current government, Italy is an ideal case study to investigate how right-wing populist and alt-right political formations signify the links between climate change, migration, and security.

We should avoid a simplistic application of critical theories on the securitisation of climate change. Most political parties across the Italian political spectrum have accepted the association of border enforcement and security, and the Italian right-wing has a long track-record of attempts (often successful) to securitise migration by pushing an alarmist rhetoric on an alleged migration crisis or invasion. However, this does not per se guarantee they will invoke securitising repertoires also on

climate migration. As we shall see, both existing literature and our findings suggest that things are more complicated: the invocation of ‘eco-borders’ and climate security figure in some formations’ repertoire but is not a constant. We rather encounter idiosyncrasies, discursive tensions, and contradictions. While most right-wing populist political actors used to share a position of climate denial or scepticism (on the Italian case, see Ghinoi and Steiner, 2020; Biancalana and Ladini, 2022), they are now responding to the mainstreaming of climate change in very different ways.

In relation to right-wing parties’ traditional position, various authors have analysed the many facets of climate denial and ‘doubt’ against the increasing evidence of climate change. Notably, Wullenkord (2022) confirms that right-wing ideological convictions are one of the main predictors of *literal* or *interpretative* climate denial. The former consists of the absolute refusal to accept climate science and anthropogenic climate change, while the latter regards the distortion of facts explaining it. One salient trait common to all forms of denial is the attempt to preserve privilege (in terms of class, race, gender, etc.). Another feature connected to conservative ideological convictions (see Klein, 2011; Fischer, 2019; Bailey and Turner, 2023) is the refusal to accept what deniers frame as ‘liberal’ knowledge, with scientific evidence disparaged as a conspiracy to benefit ‘global elites’ (Turner and Bailey, 2021: 1). This aligns with the general definition of right-wing populism as a movement promoting a generic ‘will of the (pure) people’ against the ‘global conspiring (corrupted) elites’ (Casaglia and Coletti, 2021; Brubaker, 2017; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012). The ‘elites’ undermining the will of the ‘people’, in relation to climate science, are represented by global liberal politics. Scepticism is based on the presumed political affiliation of scientists and IPCC members, and on the role of the UN in shaping climate science, since “for the deniers, this construction [of climate knowledge] can be attributed to the liberal environmental political biases of climate scientists and activists” (Fischer, 2019: 143).

However, absolute denial – whether literal or interpretative – is increasingly becoming a rare and rather eccentric position even in the far-right: with the manifestations of global warming now impossible to ignore, climate change has become important for most electorates (see also, on the Spanish case, Hanson, 2024). The rise of average temperatures has a documented impact on scepticism, especially when the latter is correlated with political conservatism (Hornsey et al., 2022). Scholars suggest a shift towards an acceptance of climate science, accompanied either by a form of *implicatory* denial – refusing to accept climate change implications and policy requirements (Wullenkord, 2022), delaying decisive action (Carton, 2019; Lamb et al., 2020), or instrumentalising of its implications (Bailey and Turner, 2023).

The term ecobordering was introduced to designate the trend “to encourage reactionary nationalistic responses to the environmental crisis” (Turner and Bailey, 2021: 3). As right-wing formations envelop climate change within conservative agendas, a resurgence of eco-fascist ideologies or a fuelling of eco-apartheid are concrete risks (Malm and Zetkin Collective, 2021; Heron, 2023). The tendency to “speak in territorial terms” and to use the space of the nation to define good and evil, a well-known trait of right-wing populism rhetoric¹ (Casaglia and Coletti, 2021: 2), can re-emerge in the context of the environmental crisis with the ‘bordering of ecology’, a form of econationalism (Aronczyk, 2023) that reaches the extreme in the eco-fascist version.

¹ In this paper we only focus on right-wing populism. We acknowledge the existence of features which characterise populism more in general, such as territorialization practices and sovereignty, through “the idea of taking politics to the people [...], and the framing of the people in the entirely territorial sense of a founding or native group” (Agnew and Shin, 2019: 7). In the Italian case, the example of the Five Star Movement (M5S) populist party is indeed fitting, but an articulated examination of this case would go beyond the purpose of this paper. For more detailed analysis, see Agnew (2019); Agnew and Shin (2019); Casaglia and Coletti (2021).

Eco-fascism, promoted by extreme right-wing movements (although often associated with more moderate right-wing parties), has a clear racialised understanding of ecology and brings ecobordering to its most radical fashion, by linking racial features to environmental awareness and behaviours. The recognition of environmental issues and climate change has indeed been mobilised in support of anti-immigration agendas (Bailey and Turner, 2023: 3). Immigration is said to inevitably lead to overpopulation by non-white communities, leading in turn to environmental degradation and depletion of resources. This position is often mobilised in pair with the Great Replacement conspiracy theory, in which the protection of ‘nature’ and of the nation converge (Turner and Bailey, 2021). These tendencies have started manifesting in the US and in Europe, documented in statements by political figures linked to the British National Party, the National Front in France, Alternative for Germany and others (Küppers, 2024; Turner and Bailey, 2021).

However, there are also other less extreme – while not necessarily less concerning – ways in which the right-wing is ‘digesting’ climate change. For the purposes of our analytical framework, we use the term domestication to identify how right-wing parties and formations are making the reality of climate change compatible with their ideological platforms and policy visions.

First, we adopt the term in the sense of its meaning of ‘taming’ when climate change is nominally accepted but its implications are downplayed (Capstick and Pidgeon, 2013). This often results in forms of cynicism (Skoglund and Stripple, 2018) and the downgrading of the climate crisis to an issue that does not require radical societal and economic transformations. Other matters, considered more urgent and in line with right-wing populist parties’ discursive style, are used to reduce climate issues to a leftist and activist ideological concern. This form of domestication also entails the simplification of complex aspects of climate science, with the twofold aim of regaining control on the debate by trivialising it, and of ridiculing or discrediting science and its supporters. For right-wing populist parties, defining science as inaccessible and subjugated to the elites (identified in supranational scientific institutions or leftist intellectuals) is functional to asserting their closeness to the people and their capacity to offer easier and more immediate solutions to the people’s problems, in contrast to the long-term and technocratic optic of climate science and policy. As we shall see, we encounter this form of domestication in the Italian right-wing coalition and some of its political leaders: after a phase of denial, they have stopped rejecting climate science but still condemn as alarmist any call to address the ‘climate emergency’, and refuse committing to any decisive policy intervention.

Secondly, the term domestication highlights another discursive move: the rescaling of international, global, or supranational issues within the borders of the nation. Less extreme versions of ecobordering – rather than mobilising the Great Replacement conspiracy theory or other forms of white suprematism – link climate security concerns to the restricted and exclusive space of the nation, framing climate change in relation to domestic matters. This is not unique to Italian right-wing populist parties: for VOX in Spain, Hanson observes a process of ‘reterritorialisation’ (Hanson, 2024) of climate change, while Küppers highlights how Alternative for Germany operates a similar form of ‘environmental nationalism’ (2024). Our analysis, as we shall see, shows how Italian right-wing parties mobilise this form of domestication and lighter versions of ecobordering without mobilising, at least for now, explicit forms of eco-fascism (Bruno and Downes, 2023: 138).

In sum, our brief review of the body of scholarly work on the spectrum of ‘conservative environmentalism’ testifies the growing interest (and concerns) over these matters in scholarly debates and beyond. The Anglophone bias within existing research on climate change and its securitisation, most clearly documented in relation to the climate-migration nexus, does not only reveal problematic imaginaries and skewed knowledge geographies, but also entails a lack of engagement with how right-wing political formations in non-English speaking contexts are addressing climate migration and security. The analysis of the

Italian context that follows aims to contribute to addressing this gap.

3. Methodology

To investigate how the climate-migration-security nexus is discussed in the Italian context, we assembled a dataset that triangulates different materials²: transcriptions of parliamentary debates, parties’ manifestos for the 2022 national elections and the 2024 European ones, social media posts, press releases, web pages of relevant Ministries and Departments.³ We included also grey literature, media coverage of climate issues, statements, and campaign material by think tanks and NGOs.⁴ Our methodological approach takes stock of existing literature on the Italian parliamentary political scene (Aru, 2023; Ghinoi and Steiner, 2020). Following these studies, we tapped into the database of the proceedings of the Chamber of Deputies’ verbatim reports, available online on the dedicated website.⁵ We limited our analysis to the current parliamentary term: the 19th Italian Legislature that started in October 2022. From the transcription database, through a set of keywords⁶ we selected relevant interventions that were structured and analysed via qualitative coding.

While our prime interest lies on the governing right-wing coalition, we also examine the position of the opposition. This is crucial given that, as we will see, statements on climate change, migration and security are often heavily shaped by the dialectic between government and opposition parties.

The current Italian government was formed by the coalition that won the September 2022 national elections,⁷ and comprises four parties: *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brothers of Italy, FdI), *Lega* (League), *Forza Italia* (Let’s go Italy, FI), and *Noi Moderati* (Us Moderates, NM). Giorgia Meloni is FdI’s leader and prime minister (formally, president of the Council of Ministers, the Italian cabinet). Another key political figure in the coalition is Matteo Salvini, the leader of the League. FdI and the League can be defined as radical right populist parties (Bruno and Downes, 2023) and they are “in control of about 80 percent of the votes⁸ cast in favour of the governing coalition” (Garzia, 2023: 1046). FI and NM gather Berlusconi’s accolades and escapees from other parties but have marginal influence on the government’s decision given their limited number of seats. While commonly referred to as a centre-right coalition, many authors suggest it should be plainly recognised as a right-wing one, given the far from moderate political line currently prevailing (Griffini, 2023; Bruno and Downes, 2023).

There is no unified coalition opposing the right-wing, and the centre-left side of the political landscape is splintered and unstable. The three main parties opposing the government are the *Partito Democratico* (Democratic Party, PD), the *Movimento 5 Stelle* (5 Star Movement, M5S), and the *Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra* (Greens and Left Alliance, AVS).

Before proceeding, we acknowledge some analytical and methodological limitations related to the scope of our investigation and to

² All materials are in Italian, and quotations were translated by the authors.

³ We searched selected press releases and official statements for the following departments: Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of the Environment and Energy Security.

⁴ This material was not systematically analysed but provides further context and grounding to our investigation.

⁵ https://banchedati.camera.it/tiap_19/ctrStartPage.asp.

⁶ Keywords include: “migranti climatici”; “clima + sicurezza”; “cambiamento climatico”; “sicurezza climatica”; “ambiente”; “rifugiati”; “riscaldamento globale”; “Piano Mattei” (all in Italian and, when relevant, declined in both singular and plural forms).

⁷ For a detailed analysis see Garzia (2023).

⁸ To clarify this figure: Giorgia Meloni’s FdI won the elections, increasing its votes sixfold (compared to the previous elections) and securing an absolute majority within the centre-right coalition. Matteo Salvini’s League came second with 8.8 percent of the votes.

technical aspects ascribable to the database we employed. In particular, the Chamber of Deputies' web archive does not allow downloading all transcripts at once; therefore, in building our corpus we had to rely on the website's search engine and trust its reliability.⁹ Moreover, the corpus is necessarily limited, as it would be impossible to collate all statements, declarations, and social media feeds by Italian party representatives on climate, security, and migration. Furthermore, the analysis is time-sensitive, as the political landscape is fragmented and parties frequently change denominations, with conspicuous numbers of Deputies changing party. We took these limitations into careful account given that we are presenting the analysis of an 'absence' and 'domestication' of references to climate migration in the repertoire of the right-wing coalition. The triangulation of various sources and forms of data is a key mitigating strategy that contributes to the robustness of the analysis.

4. The 'Italian job': Between reluctance and hollow rhetoric

Before delving into a detailed account, we highlight two tendencies that emerged from the dataset and that will inform our analysis. First, climate change (and its links to migration and security) is nested in the fierce dialectic between the right-wing government and the opposition. Here, we build on Ghinoi and Steiner's analysis of debates in the penultimate legislature (Ghinoi and Steiner, 2020). While they identify cross-party and ideological convergences in how climate policy is framed and in policy proposals, they note how the question of 'climate migrants' resulted highly polarising. Our work confirms the clear division identified by Ghinoi and Steiner between a more sceptical right-leaning political discourse and a more concerned and mobilised left-leaning one.

Secondly, and perhaps more surprisingly, a key overall finding is the paucity of explicit references to the links between climate change, migration and security across the political spectrum. This confirms the finding by existing literature that, despite inevitable growing attention to environmental matters – due to both European environmental policies and the country's increasing exposure to extreme climatic events – climate change is still a 'secondary' topic in public, media, and political discourse in Italy (Biancalana and Ladini, 2022).

As we will see, the right-wing sector, known for its belligerent voice on issues related to migration and border enforcement, exhibits a remarkable 'silence' regarding the nexus between climate, security and mobility. This unexpected quietude from the right-wing is coupled with a rather superficial engagement with the matter by the centre-left. Parties in that broad area tend to refer to the climate-migration-security theme mainly rhetorically, without investing any substantial political weight on the matter. They do not formulate any legislation proposals nor put forward specific policy approaches, but they appear to raise the issue of climate migration and security rather instrumentally, to dismiss the government's stance on climate change or to criticise their approach to migration. Another notable observation is the absence of any original articulations of the terms mirroring the cultural and geographical specificities of the country: what we find is the recurrence of discursive elements and framings that can be traced back to international, anglophone debates. We now move to a more detailed analysis of the position of parties in the opposition and in the governing coalition respectively.

4.1. The opposition parties: dim shades of green

While they sporadically coalesce in local elections and around specific policies, opposition parties do not present an agreed programme and are split by severe frictions. Still, they largely articulate rather

⁹ As mentioned, our approach follows existing work, which also faced the same technical limitations.

similar positions on the climate-migration-security nexus. As we will see, the narratives mobilised by the opposition parties reproduce the repertoires on climate displacement that have proliferated internationally and in particular at the EU level (Nash, 2024), and that have been stigmatised by critical scholarship (see section 2). The canonical ingredients are all passively reproduced: the identification of climate impacts as driver of mass displacement across borders and the 'numbers game'; the racialisation of vulnerability and Othering of places of origin; the pathologisation of migration through the framing of the migrant as victim/threat.

4.1.1. Adding climate to the 'root causes' of migration

A first element to note is the explicit recognition of climate impacts – present and future – among the drivers of global displacement and migration. However, rather than in debates focussed on climate change, the point is made more frequently in discussions on 'migration crises' and border enforcement in general. The link climate-displacement is often emphasised in rather dramatic tones – also a trait highlighted in section 2 – to challenge the government's rhetoric on border enforcement. For instance, Zaratti (AVS) described the latest government's proposal to curb the operations of NGOs rescuing migrants at sea as "a *measure of social meanness against people escaping hunger, war, famine, geopolitical crises in Central Africa and the consequences of climate change*" (Session 51, 14/2/23). The statement serves the purpose of re-contextualising migration towards Italy as part of epochal transformations and crises. We find numerous statements by members of the opposition parties along these lines. While the tone is often emphatic, calling attention to mounting humanitarian crises, such statements are justified as based on what is portrayed as factual and science-based evidence on the root-causes of mobility:

You are denying the evidence of history and the very reasons for emigration [...] You are training yourselves to deny another cause of movement of peoples that is, unfortunately, bound to grow in proportion to the dramatic condition of the planet, namely climate migration. You prefer to create chaos, fears and uncertainties, rather than attempt any governance of a phenomenon that – I repeat – is a constant in history (Berruto, PD, Session 95, 2/5/23).

At times, more 'radical' versions explicitly hold the West accountable for its responsibilities in creating the crises it then tries to govern:

today, migrations are due to the economic-financial crises of your system, to the climate-environmental crisis, which you fuel with your policies; to wars you [...] contribute to by fuelling the conflict with weapons and, then, you want to empty the ocean with a teaspoon, the ocean of suffering that is produced, by means of a naval blockade or issuing the 'Cutro decree' (Mari, AVS, Session 95, 2/5/23).

These statements counter the framing of migration as a series of temporary emergencies, and the idea that they can and should be governed through border enforcement. 'Curbing migration' through stricter border control is depicted – and we would agree – not only as hampering human rights, but also as an effort made in vain.

4.1.2. Vulnerability, victimhood, Othering

Together with the characterisation of migration towards Italy as structural and epochal, a key discursive element in declarations that stigmatise the government's harsh approach towards migrants is an emphasis on the vulnerability, dispossession, and instability characterising migrants' regions of origin. The imaginaries mobilised deserve attention. Even here, the repertoires mirror international debates, and the concerns raised by international critical scholarship (see section 2) remain highly relevant. Migration is said to stem from poverty, instability and hopelessness faced 'at home', and thereby migrants are constrained within a figure of victimhood and vulnerability. The ingredients and implications of those narratives are problematic even when mobilised in support of more 'human' approaches to migration, e.g. in

statements that stigmatise the government's restrictive line on migration because it "attacks [...] desperate people arriving by land and sea from countries at war or in the grip of the effects of climate change" (Auriemma, M5S, Session 203, 27/11/2023). Mobility is explained as the result of dispossession in an Othered 'over there' (cfr. Giuliani, 2021), replicating well-studied sedentary stereotypes that pathologize African migration (Bakewell, 2008) and the West's 'civilizing mission':

it is necessary to encourage stabilisation, democratisation, economic development of the countries of origin of the flows, to ensure better living conditions for the local populations (Carmina, M5S, Session 95, 2/5/23).

Such narratives, on top of de-historicising vulnerability and pathologizing migration, represent Africa as an undifferentiated space ridden by intertwined and spiralling crises, on the verge of collapse. In the analysed debates we find textbook tropes that Other and racialize African contexts. A striking example:

Colleagues, I have had the honour of working with international cooperation, and thus I can ask you: have you ever been to, say, Africa? Go there. You will understand what it means in the 21st century to live in huts, to have water only from a well, to farm with subsistence agriculture, which with drought no longer even guarantees subsistence. It doesn't cost much for an MP: with a 6, 7, 8-hour flight you will be catapulted back to the Neolithic. If you will be taken to some sub-Saharan village, you will wonder how it is possible for people to live like this today (Ferrari, PD, Session 96, 3/5/2023).

This statement is rather extreme but representative of a toxic repertoire on the global South as comprised of spaces of crisis and disaster, in a chain that binds together victimhood, climate vulnerability, dispossession, with danger, chaos, and instability (Giuliani, 2021). This binary victim-threat is one of the key ingredients of discourses on climate security identifying the global South as source of danger, in which climate-induced displacement and the figure of the migrant are portrayed as transferring the 'chaos' from 'over there' to 'here' (Bettini, 2013). Even when mobilised without openly bellicose purposes, such imaginaries go hand in hand with a racialisation of climate change and vulnerability (Telford, 2018; Baldwin, 2013), and emanate from a (sup)position of (threatened) Western superiority (Baldwin, 2017).

4.1.3. A climate exodus?

The same repertoires also appear in less frequent discussions focusing on climate change. The three opposition parties converge on the invocation of the figure of the climate refugee as a symptom of the global inequalities and injustices linked to climate change, reproducing a repertoire widespread in international debates (Bettini, 2019). As highlighted in the literature (Bettini, 2013; Baldwin, 2022; Ahuja, 2021), such mobilisation of the figure of the climate migrant/refugee and of the spectre of the 'climate exodus' reside in the toxic tropes discussed in the previous section, around which both conservative and progressive invocations of the idea of mass climate-induced displacement from the global South to Europe converge. The following statement by a member of the most left-leaning formation in the Italian Parliament is illustrative. The lack of incisive action to mitigate climate change is said to:

exacerbate the climate crisis that produces new, huge and desperate cohorts of refugees, the climate refugees, those who flee not because they are persecuted for religious reasons or because the bombs that we keep selling fall on their heads, but because their countries are simply now uninhabitable, nothing can be cultivated and harvested anymore that allows life to go on, even in the most humble dimension. (Fratoianni, AVS, Session 97, 4/5/2023).

The debates held in November 2023, ahead of the 28th Conference of

Parties to UNFCCC are revealing. The question of displacement is mobilised to emphasise the structural character of climate change and Italy's responsibility to contribute averting the human suffering caused by climate impacts, advocating for a more proactive approach on the part of the government. The reference to scientific evidence and the structural nature of displacement are pivotal for advocating Italy's and Europe's responsibility to tackle climate change. This argument is supported also via explicit references to climate-induced displacement and the need to address the new 'emergency':

There is a clear correlation between the climate crisis, loss of biodiversity, desertification, pollution, degradation of lands, waters and oceans. All these phenomena affect our society by producing poverty, inequality, geopolitical instability, insecurity, and massive migration flows. On September 8, 2023, the secretary of the UNFCCC released a technical report [...] stating that the world is not on the right trajectory to address global warming and prevent the devastating effects on the environment and humanity (Lomuti, M5S, Session 198, 20/11/23).

Climate migration is presented as a dramatic example of the impacts of unmitigated global warming on human rights and dignity. But the reference also alludes to the destabilising effects of climate displacement, conjuring up the picture of a world in climate chaos:

Decisive international action, to avert climate disaster, is the most serious promise of dignity we can make to millions of people who would like to have the right, the choice, often denied today, not to migrate, to stay in their homes, while, instead, today, they are often forced to flee. (Scarpa, PD, Session 198, 20/22/23).

However, these narratives appear to primarily fulfil a dialectical function in opposition to the government, and seldom translate into concrete proposals to provide legal recognition to those displaced by climate change.

4.2. The right-wing: From denial to domestication

Moving to the right-wing governing coalition, we begin our analysis by further clarifying the concept of *domestication* (see section 2.3). We draw on the twofold meaning of the term, intended both as a process of taming and normalisation, and an act of political rescaling. This allows us to appreciate the right-wing coalition's position as somehow coherent and linear. On the one hand, domestication entails the transformation of a 'wild' and unruly element into a tamed and controllable one, implying a reduction of its complexity. This process can be applied to intractable political issues, which are normalised and rendered manageable through domestication. On the other hand, the domestication of a matter also regards its adaptation to fit the national context, therefore entailing a spatial rescaling. The tendency of right-wing populist parties to rescale all issues to the national level has been explored in the literature (Casaglia et al., 2020; Casaglia and Coletti, 2021) as an exercise which reinforces and reproduces the ideological style of these political actors, centred on the nation and its citizens and paired by the populist performance of "taking back control" (Kallis, 2018: 285).

In the context of climate change politics, security, and mobility, we observe this double process of domestication carried out by the right-wing governing coalition. Up to a few years ago, Matteo Salvini, leader of the League party, was still openly expressing his climate denial on social media, with statements like the following:

what is a climate migrant? Where does he [sic] go? If one is cold in winter and hot in summer, does he migrate? Let's be serious... Enough, we already have too many [migrants] (Facebook, 25/01/18).

In 2024, global warming cannot be denied anymore, not even by Salvini. Sustaining a position of outright denial has become difficult, and the strategy has shifted to that of domestication, in the sense of both

normalisation and nationalisation. This shift implies the use of well proven “simplifying discursive strategies such as the idea of ‘*buon senso al governo*’ (common sense government)” as opposed to technocratic elites (Casaglia and Coletti 2021: 9). Indeed, the program for the 2024 European elections of the League has a section titled “*Surpassing the Green Deal, the Return of Common Sense*”, while FdI’s one says “*Defending Nature without Eco-madness*”.

The first strategy, normalisation, is apparent in the approach to climate issues showcased in the four governing parties’ electoral programs for both national and European elections: they criticise what they call ‘ideological approaches’ and alarmism on the climate emergency, in favour of more pragmatic pathways. The coalition’s parties tend to focus on extreme weather events such as floods, drought and landslides, features of the present Italian reality that cannot be ignored anymore. This conceptual movement proposes a ‘reasonable approach’ as opposed to the ‘ideological’ extremism of ‘greens’ and ‘leftists’, as in calls to decarbonisation. This translates also into a policy focus on energy security, energy autonomy and self-sufficiency, in a very similar fashion to the example of VOX in Spain analysed by Hanson (2024). Rescaling and reducing climate security to a matter of national interests and infrastructural development is in line both with right-wing populist rhetorical style, as well as with the need to propose pragmatic interventions to the electorate. This corresponds to the theoretical reflections and research findings we traced in section 2 that show how right-wing formations tend to dismiss climate science as an elitist, leftist, liberal and inaccessible knowledge.

This is also observable in statements in parliamentary debates that present ‘climate ideology’ as an old, regressive, and unsustainable position that needs to be overcome by a “*productive ecology*” and the “*protection of national interests*” (Lampis, FdI. Session 198, 20/11/23). The idea is to invest on “*energy independence*” and the safeguarding of “*our country’s beauty*” (Messina, FdI. Session 45, 30/01/23), through “*a clear strategy of energy politics and environmental politics*” that does not “*penalise Italian businesses*” (Donzelli, FdI. Session 73, 22/03/23).

These extracts also introduce the second kind of domestication processes, which rescales and reduces climate issues to the national level of interests and security, through continuous references to the interests of Italy, its business and its citizens, in contrast to forms of transnational cooperation or the supranational imposition of environmental policies. As outlined in section 2, this is a typical and recognisable populist strategy that bears similarities with forms of ecobordering, although without always mobilising openly racist ecologies.

Moving to the more specific topic of climate-induced migration, we note a shift from the mere denial informing Salvini’s post from 2018 reported above. A deputy of FdI for instance acknowledged climate change as a driver of human migration suggesting that:

climatic transformations in the African continent are a factor of increase of migratory fluxes towards Europe (Lampis, FdI. Session 198, 20/11/23).

However, this rather dry declaration stands in solitude. Similarly sanitised references to climate impacts among the drivers of displacement can only be found in official communications by the prime minister in the context of the International Conference on Development and Migration held in Rome in 2023. Giorgia Meloni invested significant political capital in the initiative that gathered representatives from over twenty countries in the Mediterranean region, Africa and Middle East, as well as numerous organisations. The preamble of the concluding declaration emphatically states:

Their shared commitment to addressing the political, socio-economic and climate drivers of migration and forced international

displacement and foster legal and safe pathways for migration and more effectively counter human trafficking and migrant smuggling.¹⁰

These are among the very few explicit mentions of the climate-migration link, which appear more the result of a reluctant and instrumental alignment to the lexicon of international policy and governance frameworks than a convinced investment on a specific term or framing.

The overall silence stands out especially in contrast to these parties’ loud position on migration issues more in general. Their successful attempt to securitise migration and instrumentalise border rhetoric does not seem to overlap with their scant references to climate change and its potential consequences. This finding mirrors research conducted on other European contexts that shows the surprising lack of concern on the matter of climate migration by the populist right, for example in the case of Spain (Hanson, 2024) and Germany (Küppers, 2024; Forchtner et al., 2018).

4.2.1. *Shrinking the space of climate action and migrant rights*

It is worth mentioning that, in the absence of a legal recognition of the status of environmental/climate refugees, Italian legislators in recent years have in most cases been using the rather large application of the so-called ‘special protection’ mechanism to recognise the right of protection to people declaring environmental reasons.¹¹ This form of protection was introduced in 2020 after the abrogation of humanitarian protection in 2018 through a security decree promoted by the then Ministry of Interior Salvini. Evidence of the rejection of the climate-migration link by the governing coalition, and more specifically by Giorgia Meloni and the Brothers of Italy party, appeared in March 2023 with the approval of a Legislative Decree, named the ‘Cutro Decree’.¹² The declared objective of the decree was to curb ‘irregular migration’ and fight smugglers, but in fact the outcome has been the reduction of legal avenues for obtaining protection, including the withdrawal of the recognition of the link between environmental issues and displacement (Stevanato, 2023). This move represents a tightening of bordering measures, while also confirming our findings on the refusal of a discussion on climate migration.

Our interpretation of this result is twofold and, as mentioned earlier, draws on the notion of domestication as conceptualised above. One explanation to the scarce emphasis of right-wing Italian parties could be related to what we define as ‘post-denial recalcitrance’, referred to the difficult relationship they still have with the acceptance of climate change on a broad level and as a matter radically changing both domestic and external politics. The emphasis on energy security and autonomy, likewise on preparedness for hydrogeological disasters, would therefore represent an attempt to domesticate (reduce and contain) the security discourse on climate change to matters that are national in nature, and respond to the urge to care for ‘the people’.

The second explanation we propose regards the more general standpoint of the governing coalition and the parties composing it on migration and bordering. There is no doubt about the strongly securitising character of these parties’ narratives and practices on migration: bordering processes are presented as the solution to the diverse threats associated by these political actors to the movement of people, and the government has often used the geographical position of Italy as a ‘point of entrance to the EU’ as a leverage tool to promote increasingly strict border control. The long-standing political construction of migrants as

¹⁰ Conclusions, International Conference on Development and Migration, Rome, 23/07/2023, available here.

¹¹ On March 8, 2023, the Italian Court of Cassation asserted the relevance of climate change in the country of origin in the decision of the international protection application (Corte di Cassazione, Ordinanza n.6964).

¹² The name derives from a tragic shipwreck that occurred on the night of February 26, 2023 near Cutro in Calabria, where 94 migrant individuals lost their lives, including 35 minors.

scapegoats for various social and security issues at the domestic level is by now strongly embedded in the media and popular discourse and imaginaries, to the point that, we argue, the bugbear of climate exodus would be almost redundant. If anything, presenting the threat of climate refugees would entail a discussion on responsibility, both in relation to climate change causes and to reception and asylum of climate refugees. Additionally, the securitisation of climate in relation to displacement would require the governing coalition to admit that climate change might have consequences at the global level that require the adoption of appropriate policies. This, in turn, would require acknowledging the need for a transnational governance of the climate crisis, and the role of supranational institutions like the EU in the management of such a crisis. All these potential consequences are in stark contradiction with the very core of right-wing populism's rhetoric and discursive style, based on a juxtaposition with international actors seen as imposing their rules against the sovereignty of nation-states. We define this second explanation as a form of 'depoliticisation through reticence', which, in fact, corresponds to the typical stance of right-wing populist parties towards supranational institutions seen as 'technocratic elites': the absence of a discussion on climate migration opposes the EU discourse on climate refugees and potential legal recognition, as well as the imposition of a duty to protect and to comply with EU legislation on asylum.

In her analysis of Spain's VOX party's standpoint on climate change, Hanson briefly refers to the absence of attention on climate migration by the party and she comes up with a similar explanation referred more in general to right-wing populist parties, hypothesising that "discussing the catastrophic impacts that could drive displacement around the world would challenge the parties' efforts to delay and temper climate action and again territorialize climate change as a global issue" (Hanson, 2024: 51). The topic is not central in her study, therefore she does not enquire it further, but we find the convergence of our explanations very interesting and promising in making sense of the post-denial positioning of the right. This suggests not only that the securitisation of climate is not an obvious outcome of post-denialism, but also that right-wing parties' recalcitrance to address climate security and climate migration does not equal a humanitarian move or just disinterest in the issue. Rather, it most likely signifies the difficulty currently encountered by these parties when faced with the impossibility to deny climate change. The risk is that, if and when they find a way to rearticulate climate security in their own terms – that is, without contradicting their core values – it might become another weapon against progressive politics and migration rights.

4.2.2. The danger of an eco-fascist turn?

The Italian case is also a good example in relation to this risk, since, despite the current domestication operated by the governing coalition (which tempers their invocation of climate security), other more radical positions might gain prominence in the future. Given the volatility of the Italian political landscape, a U-turn on their approach to climate security would not be surprising.

Indeed, currently, we can trace several differences between the parties composing the Italian governing coalition and other European far right parties – such as Vox, Fronte National, and the British National Party, whose leaders have made declarations directly linking immigration from the Global South with environmental issues, invoking the closure of borders as a form of environmental protection, therefore presenting elements of eco-fascism (Bailey and Turner, 2023; Turner and Bailey, 2021). As we saw, neither Meloni nor Salvini make explicit connections between migration and ecology, despite the importance they both attribute to migration politics. However, together with their parties' members, they "appear to have increasingly closer ties with extreme right-wing alongside neo-fascist, neo-Nazi groups, alongside ultraconservative religious groups" (Bruno and Downes, 2023: 138). Indeed, for example, they do have bonds with *CasaPound Italia*, a neo-fascist party that has an internal environmental movement called *La Foresta che Avanza* (The Advancing Forest). This movement shows

similarities with others related to far-right parties in Europe, for example, New Ecology in the French National Front and Green Wing in the Greek Golden Dawn. These organisations promote environmental values attached to those of family and race, where nature is associated with homeland, something to be preserved and protected from non-white immigrants (Bailey and Turner, 2023). The danger of an eco-fascist drift, therefore, must be seriously taken into consideration, also given the increasing presence of right-wing populist and far right parties in governing positions all over the world – and, for the sake of our analysis, especially in Europe, confirmed by the 2024 EU parliament elections – that are normalising racism, xenophobia, and white nationalism (Pietiläinen and Kellokumpu, 2024: 6). As Dalby correctly points out, "[t]he fantasies of using territorial strategies to control change persist" (Dalby, 2021: 28) and bordering remains a rather easy and fast way to create an illusion of control and address increasing paranoia and fear.

5. Conclusions

A key finding of this study is that in the Italian political scene 'climate migration' is seldom invoked, and almost exclusively by the centre-left opposition parties. In that camp, unsurprisingly perhaps, the idea of a 'climate exodus' from the Global South is mobilised to stigmatise the right-wing parties' restrictive approach to cross-Mediterranean migration by highlighting the 'root causes' of displacement. But rather than drawing on the nuanced accounts of climate mobilities offered by recent scholarship (Boas et al., 2019), these parties utilize generic scientific evidence and reproduce the simplistic models criticised by critical literature. They mobilise approximate geographies of vulnerability in origin countries in the Global South and reproduce colonial imaginaries, notably in the stereotyping of African contexts as an undifferentiated space on the verge of collapse. The result is a faded version of the now well-studied alarmist or 'securitised' narratives imported from anglophone debates, without any own rearticulation. Instead of enabling new visions on future mobilities in the Mediterranean in the face of climate change, they reproduce (neo)colonial and racialised imaginaries.

Perhaps more surprisingly, if read through standard theorisations of climate securitisation, the governing right-wing coalition very seldom, if at all, refers to the intersection of the climate crisis, security and migration. These parties' longstanding securitised position towards migration does not acquire an ecological character, and climate or 'the environment' are not among the 'crises' that so often figure in the parties' repertoires. We read this absence of the figure of the climate migrant from the discursive repertoire of the right-wing coalition as related to their domestication of climate change. This comprises at least two dimensions, a 'post-denial recalcitrance' and a 'depoliticisation through reticence'. On the one hand, the coalition is recalcitrant to any framing of the climate emergency that goes beyond (national) energy security and (local) disaster risk management, probably still echoing now declining forms of climate denialism. On the other hand, the right-wing does not 'exploit' the possibility to securitise climate mobilities, as one could expect based on their usually fierce stance towards migration. In our view, this move would entail stark contradictions for right-wing populist parties such as FdI and the League: depicting climate displacement as a threat would cast climate change as a global concern, imply a recognition of the EU's role, and suggest far more climate commitment. All these elements would be at odds with the ideological and discursive repertoires these parties thrive on, based on nationalism, sovereignty, and the opposition against 'global corrupted elites'. Cynically, the securitisation of migration and the caustic emphasis on bordering trademark of the right-wing have become so hegemonic that they do not 'need' further legitimisation via the spectre of a climate exodus, especially if at the cost of contradicting core principles.

This relative marginality of climate change (including in relation to migration and security) is symptomatic of a systemic trait of the Italian political landscape. The 'silence' among right-wing factions and the

absence of a substantive investment by the 'centre-left' can be linked to a 'latency' in acknowledging the centrality of climate change within the country's policy and political debates (on this and more broadly the limited influence of Green parties in Italy, see [Biancalana and Ladini, 2022](#)).

Our findings should not be seen as 'good news', from a progressive/climate justice angle. First, this is not the end of the story. Changes in right-wing parties' position on climate migration are not unlikely, and we would not be surprised if, even in the near future, the threat of climate change started being invoked as justification for more bordering and racism, with more explicit forms of eco-fascism becoming mainstream.

Second, the absence of securitising tones on the climate emergency by Italian governing parties should not be read as a 'moderate turn'. Eco-fascism and other extreme answers to climate mobility are not the only possible right-wing articulations of the matter. To put it bluntly, while climate change (migration) might not be securitised by the Italian right-wing, migrants are still left to die in the Mediterranean or on Alpine passes, border enforcement and its externalisation are still presented as the solution, legal protection keeps being rediscussed and downsized, while migrants are criminalised. Incisive climate action is avoided by the government. Indeed, the lack of an explicit securitising narrative and the domestication operated by right wing political formations goes hand in hand with a depoliticisation of the issue – not via an invocation of 'environmental determinism' shortcutting the political, but rather as a foreclosure of references to structural dimensions, responsibilities, and blame. The outcomes are almost equally frightening for those on the frontlines of climate change, as for the prospect of solidary responses to the climate emergency and its intersections with human mobility. While increasing attention is rightly devoted to the risk that the climate emergency might lead to the affirmation of reinvigorated forms of eco-fascism, also less 'loud' and spectacularised right-wing articulations of the matter deserve attention and concern.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Giovanni Bettini: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Anna Casaglia:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

Acknowledgments

We thank the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive critiques and useful suggestions. Our thanks also go to Christine Hentschel, Delf Rothe and Ursula Schroeder - editors of the special issue on "Climate Security" out article is part of - for their support through feedback and suggestions. Finally, we thank James Fraser for his comments.

References

Agnew, J., 2019. *Soli al Mondo: The recourse to "Sovereignism" in contemporary Italian Populism*. *California Italian Studies* 9 (1).
 Agnew, J., Shin, M., 2019. *Mapping Populism: Taking Politics to the People*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, London.
 Ahuja, N., 2021. *Planetary specters: race, migration, and climate change in the twenty-first century*. The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill.

Aronczyk, M., 2023. Branding the nation in the era of climate crisis: Eco-nationalism and the promotion of green national sovereignty. *Nations and Nationalism*.
 Aru, S., 2023. 'Battleship at the port of Europe': Italy's closed-port policy and its legitimizing narratives. *Political Geography* 104, 102902.
 Bailey, D., Turner, J., 2023. The Anthropocene as framed by the far right. *IPPR Progressive Review* 30 (1), 28–32.
 Bakewell, O., 2008. 'Keeping Them in Their Place': the ambivalent relationship between development and migration in Africa. *Third World Quarterly* 29 (7), 1341–1358.
 Baldwin, A., 2013. Racialisation and the Figure of the Climate-Change Migrant. *Environment and Planning A* 45 (6), 1474–1490.
 Baldwin, A., 2017. Climate change, migration, and the crisis of humanism. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 8 (3).
 Baldwin, A., 2022. The other of climate change: racial futurism, migration, humanism. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, London.
 Baldwin, A., Methmann, C., Rothe, D., 2014. Securitizing 'climate refugees': the futurology of climate-induced migration. *Critical Studies on Security* 2 (2), 121–130.
 Bettini, G., 2013. Climates barbarians at the gate? A Critique of Apocalyptic Narratives on Climate Refugees. *Geoforum* 45, 63–72.
 Bettini, G., 2019. And yet it moves! (Climate) Migration as Symptom in the Anthropocene. *Mobilities* 14 (3), 336–350.
 Bettini, G., Beuret, N., Turhan, E., 2021. On the Frontlines of Fear: Migration and Climate Change in the Local Context of Sardinia, Italy. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 20 (3), 322–340.
 Biancalana, C., Ladini, R., 2022. Climate Change in Italian Public Opinion, Media, and Parties: State of the Art and Research Agenda. *Polis* 36 (3), 455–472.
 Black R (2001) Environmental refugees: myth or reality? *New issues in Refugee Research - UNHCR working paper* 70.
 Boas, I., 2015. Climate Migration and Security: Securitisation as a Strategy in Climate Change Politics. Routledge, New York.
 Boas, I., Farbotko, C., Adams, H., et al., 2019. Climate migration myths. *Nature Climate Change* 9 (12), 901–903.
 Boas, I., Rothe, D., 2016. From conflict to resilience? Explaining recent changes in climate security discourse and practice. *Environmental Politics*. 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2016.1160479>.
 Brown, O., 2008. The Numbers Game. *Forced Migration Review* 31, 8–9.
 Brubaker, R., 2017. Why populism? *Theory and Society* 46 (5), 357–385.
 Bruno, V.A., Downes, J.F., 2023. The Radicalisation of the Italian Mainstream. *Populist Radical Right Parties and Extreme Right-Wing Movements in Italy (2012–2022)*. In: Kondor, K., Littler, M. (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Far-Right Extremism in Europe*. Routledge, London, pp. 129–144.
 Bulli, G., 2019. Environmental Politics on the Italian Far Right. Not a party issue? In: Forchtner, B. (Ed.), *The Far Right and the Environment: Politics, Discourse and Communication*, 1st edition. ed. Routledge, London, pp. 88–103.
 Byravan, S., Rajan, S.C., 2022. Cross-border migration on a warming planet: A policy framework. *Wires Climate Change* 13 (2), e763.
 Capstick SB and Pidgeon NF (2013) What is climate change scepticism? Examination of the concept using a mixed methods study of the UK public. *Global Environmental Change* forthcoming.
 Carton, W., 2019. "Fixing" Climate Change by Mortgaging the Future: Negative Emissions, Spatiotemporal Fixes, and the Political Economy of Delay. *Antipode* 51 (3), 750–769.
 Casaglia, A., Coletti, R., 2021. Territorializing threats in nationalist populist narratives: an Italian perspective on the migration and Covid-19 crises. *Space and Polity*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562576.2021.1991783>. 1-21.
 Casaglia, A., Coletti, R., Lizotte, C., et al., 2020. Interventions on European nationalist populism and bordering in time of emergencies. *Political Geography* 82, 102238.
 Castles S (2002) Environmental change and forced migration: making sense of the debate. *New issues in Refugee Research - UNHCR working paper* 70.
 Chalecki, E.L., 2013. *Environmental security : a guide to the issues*. Praeger, Santa Barbara.
 Chaturvedi, S., Doyle, T., 2015. *Climate terror: a critical geopolitics of climate change*. NY Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
 Clark, N., 2014. Geo-politics and the disaster of the Anthropocene. *The Sociological Review* 62, 19–37.
 Cons, J., 2018. Staging Climate Security: Resilience and Heterodystopia in the Bangladesh Borderlands. *Cultural Anthropology* 33 (2), 266–294.
 Dalby, S., 2014. Rethinking Geopolitics: Climate Security in the Anthropocene. *Global Policy* 5 (1), 1–9.
 Dalby, S., 2020. *Anthropocene geopolitics: globalization, security, sustainability*. University of Ottawa Press, Ottawa, Ontario.
 Dalby, S., 2021. *Unsustainable Borders: Globalization in a Climate-Disrupted World*. *Borders in Globalization Review* 2 (2), 26–37.
 Department of Defense of the United States (2021) Department of Defense Climate Risk Analysis. Report Submitted to National Security Council. Report, Washington: Department of Defence, Office of the Undersecretary for Policy (Strategy, Plans, and Capabilities).
 Durand-Delacré, D., Bettini, G., Nash, S., et al., 2021. Climate Migration Is about People, Not Numbers. In: Bohm, S., Sullivan, S. (Eds.), *Negotiating Climate Change in Crisis*. Open Book Publishers, Cambridge, UK.
 Fair, H., 2020. Their sea of islands? Pacific climate warriors, oceanic identities, and world enlargement. *The Contemporary Pacific* 32 (2), 341–369.
 Fischer, F., 2019. Knowledge politics and post-truth in climate denial: on the social construction of alternative facts. *Critical Policy Studies* 13 (2), 133–152.
 Forchtner, B., 2019. Climate change and the far right. *Wires Climate Change* 10 (5), e604.

- Forchtner, B., Kroneder, A., Wetzel, D., 2018. Being Skeptical? Exploring Far-Right Climate-Change Communication in Germany. *Environmental Communication* 12 (5), 589–604.
- Garzia, D., 2023. The Italian parliamentary election of 2022: the populist radical right takes charge. *West European Politics* 46 (5), 1038–1048.
- Ghinoi S and Steiner B (2020) The Political Debate on Climate Change in Italy: A Discourse Network Analysis. *Politics and Governance; Vol 8, No 2 (2020): Policy Debates and Discourse Network Analysis* DOI - 10.17645/pag.v8i2.2577.
- Giuliani, G., 2021. Monsters, catastrophes and the anthropocene: a postcolonial critique. *Routledge environmental humanities*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London; New York, NY, 1 online resource.
- Griffini, M., 2023. Walking on the tightrope between moderation and radicalisation: the first 100 days of the Meloni government. *Italian Journal of Electoral Studies (IJES)* 86 (1), 67–80.
- Hanson, J., 2024. Looking beyond climate contrarianism: nationalism and the reterritorialization of climate discourse in Spain's Vox party. *Nordia Geographical Publications* 53 (1), 39–61.
- Hartmann, B., 2010. Rethinking climate refugees and climate conflict: Rhetoric, reality and the politics of policy discourse. *Journal of International Development* 22 (2), 233–246.
- Heron, K., 2023. Capitalist catastrophism and eco-apartheid. *Geoforum*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2023.103874>. 103874.
- Hornsey, M.J., Chapman, C.M., Humphrey, J.E., 2022. Climate skepticism decreases when the planet gets hotter and conservative support wanes. *Global Environmental Change* 74, 102492.
- Hough, P., 2021. *Environmental security: an introduction*, Second edition. ed. Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY. 1 online resource.
- Ippc, 2014. *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Part A: Global and Sectoral Aspects. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (UK) and New York (NY, USA).
- Ippc, 2022. *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (UK) and New York (USA).
- Kallis, A., 2018. Populism, Sovereignism, and the Unlikely Re-Emergence of the Territorial Nation-State. *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 11 (3), 285–302.
- Kitara, T., Farbotko, C., 2023. Picking fruit is not climate justice. *npj. Climate Action* 2 (1), 17.
- Klein, N., 2011. CAPITALISM VS. THE CLIMATE 293, 11.
- Küppers, A., 2024. 'Climate-Soviets', 'Alarmism', and 'Eco-Dictatorship': The Framing of Climate Change Scepticism by the Populist Radical Right Alternative for Germany. *German Politics* 33 (1), 1–21.
- Lamb, W.F., Mattioli, G., Levi, S., et al., 2020. Discourses of climate delay. *Global Sustainability* 3, e17.
- Lockwood, M., 2018. Right-wing populism and the climate change agenda: exploring the linkages. *Environmental Politics* 27 (4), 712–732.
- Malm, Zetkin Collective, 2021. *White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Danger of Fossil Fascism*. Verso, London.
- McNamara, K.E., Farbotko, C., 2017. Resisting a 'doomed' fate: An analysis of the Pacific Climate Warriors. *Australian Geographer* 48 (1), 17–26.
- Methmann, C., Rothe, D., 2014. Tracing the spectre that haunts Europe: the visual construction of climate-induced migration in the MENA region. *Critical Studies on Security* 2 (2), 162–179.
- Mudde C and Kaltwasser CR (2012) *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Myers N (2005) *Environmental Refugees: An Emergent Security Issue*. Report, Prague: 13th Economic Forum, 23-27 May.
- Nash, S.L., 2024. Climate Protection for Migration Prevention: Comparison of Policy Discourses on Climate Change and Migration in Austria, Germany, Denmark, and Sweden. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13876988.2024.2304835>. 1-29.
- Nash SL (2023) The perfect (shit)storm: Discourses around the proposal to introduce a 'climate passport' in Germany. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*. DOI: 10.1177/23996544231216015. 23996544231216015.
- Pietiläinen, S., Kellokumpu, V., 2024. Political Geographies of the Far-Right: The Environment, Space and Ideology in a Warming World. *Nordia Geographical Publications* 53 (1), 5–12.
- Piguat, E., Kaenzig, R., Guélat, J., 2018. The uneven geography of research on "environmental migration". *Population and Environment* 39 (4), 357–383.
- Ransan-Cooper, H., Farbotko, C., McNamara, K.E., et al., 2015. Being(s) framed: The means and ends of framing environmental migrants. *Global Environmental Change* 35, 106–115.
- Rice, J.L., Long, J., Levenda, A., 2021. Against climate apartheid: Confronting the persistent legacies of expendability for climate justice. *Environment and Planning e: Nature and Space*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848621999286>. 2514848621999286.
- Salehyan, I., 2008. From Climate Change to Conflict? No Consensus Yet. *Journal of Peace Research* 45 (3), 315–327.
- Schäfer, M.S., Scheffran, J., Penniket, L., 2015. Securitization of media reporting on climate change? A cross-national analysis in nine countries. *Security Dialogue* 47 (1), 76–96.
- Selby, J., 2014. Positivist Climate Conflict Research: A Critique. *Geopolitics* 19 (4), 829–856.
- Sharifi, A., Simangan, D., Kaneko, S., 2021. Three decades of research on climate change and peace: a bibliometrics analysis. *Sustainability Science* 16 (4), 1079–1095.
- Skoglund, A., Strippel, J., 2018. From climate skeptic to climate cynic. *Critical Policy Studies* 13 (3), 1–21.
- SkyNews (2015) Charles: Syria's War Linked To Climate Change - 23 November. Available at: <http://news.sky.com/story/1592373/charles-syrias-war-linked-to-climate-change>.
- Stevanato A (2023) I migranti ambientali nel decreto-legge n. 20 del 2023. Che cosa resta della loro protezione? *Corti supreme e salute* 2.
- Suhrke, A., 1994. Environmental degradation and population flows. *Journal of International Affairs* 47 (2), 473–496.
- Sultana, F., 2022. The unbearable heaviness of climate coloniality. *Political Geography* 99, 102638.
- Telford, A., 2018. A threat to climate-secure European futures? Exploring racial logics and climate-induced migration in US and EU climate security discourses. *Geoforum* 96, 268–277.
- Turhan, E., Armiero, M., 2019. Of (not) being neighbors: cities, citizens and climate change in an age of migrations. *Mobilities* 14 (3), 363–374.
- Turner, J., Bailey, D., 2021. 'Ecobordering': casting immigration control as environmental protection. *Environmental Politics* 31 (1), 110–131.
- United Nations S-G (2023) Secretary-General's remarks to the Security Council Debate on "Sea-level Rise: Implications for International Peace and Security. Statements on 14 February 2023.
- von Lucke, F., 2020. *The Securitisation of Climate Change and the Governmentalisation of Security*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
- von Uexkull, N., Buhaug, H., 2021. Security implications of climate change: A decade of scientific progress. *Journal of Peace Research* 58 (1), 3–17.
- Wbgu, 2008. *Climate change as a security risk*. Earthscan, London.
- White, G., 2011. *Climate change and migration: security and borders in a warming world*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Wullenkord, M.C., 2022. From denial of facts to rationalization and avoidance: Ideology, needs, and gender predict the spectrum of climate denial. *Personality and Individual Differences* 193, 111616.
- Zografos, C., Goulden, M.C., Kallis, G., 2014. Sources of human insecurity in the face of hydro-climatic change. *Global Environmental Change* 29, 327–336.