Chapter 3
'And Yet It Moves': A Long-Term Analysis of Italian Immigration Policies

Armando Vittoria and Giuseppe Sciortino

3.1 Introduction

The vicissitudes of Italian migration policy are often difficult to understand. When they are discussed in the international press—and often even in national news—the natural complexity of immigration policy is heightened by the strength of two inherited stumbling blocks. The first is the enduring, entrenched, pervasive connotation of the country as a 'new country of immigration'. The second is the fascination with the extraordinary intricacies of the Italian political system: its ever-changing party politics, the strangeness of its political coalitions, the impermanence of any governing majority. Owing to the former, many features of Italian migration policy are prematurely explained away as a matter of inexperience or bureaucratic ineptitude. Because of the latter, the situation is often described as chaotic; observers frequently magnify superficial shifts as tremendous structural changes, while substantial continuities are kept latent.

The time is ripe for a very different assessment of the Italian case: the late timing of the Italian migration transition and the byzantine dynamics of its political systems are important, but far from determinant, drivers of Italian immigration policy.

Historically, there are few doubts that emigration looms large in Italian history. It is still routinely evoked in institutional decisions.[1] Italy, however, has never been

[1] Still today, an astonishing number of emigrants and their descendants are (somewhat) members of the Italian polity. Thanks to an extraordinarily generous citizenship law, many descendants may still claim residence rights, an EU passport and even access to some social allowances rather easily.

A. Vittoria
Università degli studi di Napoli Federico II, Napoli, Italy

G. Sciortino (✉)
Università degli studi di Trento, Trento, Italy
e-mail: giuseppe.sciortino@unitn.it

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C. Bonifazi et al. (eds.), *Beginners No More*, IMISCOE Research Series,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-37942-9_3

'only' an emigration country: immigration, mobility, and emigration have always co-existed (Colombo & Sciortino, 2004). Its post-war history, for example, has also been marked by the inflows of hundreds of thousands of IDPs, by the massive 'return' of hundreds of thousands of former settlers from lost African colonies and the territories along the Adriatic. The Italian economic miracle has been fueled by the massive internal migration from Southern (and Northeastern) Italy to the industrial triangle in the northwest (Gallo, 2012). Unsurprisingly, Italian authorities had some experience with the challenges posed by territorial mobility even earlier than the start of massive inflows (Einaudi, 2007). As it has been stressed in the introduction to this volume, Italy, as a country of immigration, is solidly middle-aged. Italy's migratory balance turned positive in 1973. It has also been stressed how, as far as policies are concerned, a main difference from European countries who had experienced the migration transition earlier is that Italy has never experienced a latency phase. Immigration had become a national political issue when foreign workers numbered a few hundred thousand, becoming a *contentious* political issue when they still numbered less than half a million.

The early politicization of migration contributes to explaining why the communicative function of policymaking soon acquired (and never abandoned thereafter) priority over more technical considerations. Many legislative acts concerning immigration are rushed, and often ill-conceived, following the exigencies of political circles more than the evolution of the phenomenon. Even policymakers themselves often acknowledge that many legislative norms are put forward without considering if they can ever be implemented. Instability also pervades policy attitudes, in which shifts may be extraordinarily rapid: international initiatives that have never received significant public attention may suddenly become a hallmark of civilization at one moment and illegitimate authoritarian orders in the next. Still, as we will demonstrate, there is a method to the madness. Contrary to widespread prejudice, several dimensions of Italian migration policies—particularly concerning immigration controls—have always been consistent, and sometimes very effective. Certainly, they have always been more a variant of the European pattern than an exotic anomaly.

Once these two stumbling blocks are removed, it becomes possible to observe some elements in the structure of Italian migration policies that remain heavily understudied. We will show that understanding Italian migration policy requires acknowledging the important change in the migration regime that has taken place in the last two decades, because of the long recession experienced by the Italian economy since 2008 (not to mention the related changes in the geopolitical configuration of the Mediterranean). Before 2010–11, the Italian migration regime was shaped by the need to participate in evolving European asylum and migration policies (Paoli, 2018; Finotelli & Ponzo, 2023). Many of the features usually attributed to Italy's 'Southernisms' were simply ways of managing massive migration systems with tools designed for a completely different set of problems (see Sect. 3.1). Since the

They can even elect their own representatives to the Houses. These 'diaspora' representatives are well known for their uncanny ability to wreak havoc, not always honorably, on Italian governments.

economic crisis—from which Italy has not yet fully recovered—Italian migration systems have become more similar—and interconnected—to those involving the Northern European countries that have historically designed European control systems (see Sect. 3.5). At this point, when the prevention of asylum-seeking become *the* pressing issue in Italy, however, Italian governments quickly discovered the 'Beggar-thy-neighbor' architecture of some of the key pieces within the EU architecture, particularly the Dublin regulations, which they had previously accepted (Sciortino, 2017). The derived strains were initially managed informally, through the toleration of a sizeable gap between norms and practices, particularly concerning identification and reception. It was a relatively effective tactic, even if it implied the weakening of reciprocal trust with several key partners. When this tactic turned out to prove increasingly difficult, Italy had to shift to a more explicit confrontational stance, as exemplified in the 2022 decision to suspend all returns of 'Dubliners'. Thus, a notable feature of the new regime is that, ironically, precisely when the Italian migratory situation has become more similar to others, European policies (previously a powerful legitimation factor) have become controversial and conflictual. The most visible change in this regard has been the shift of the core issue of Italian policy proposals from the bargaining with other European countries over 'solidarity' and 'redistribution' to the promotion of strongly restrictive changes in control policies (see Sect. 3.6).

3.2 When Icons and Reality Do Not Match

Before reconstructing the evolution of Italian migration policy, it is crucial to dispel three myths, nearly always represented by powerful icons, concerning the 'failures' of Italian migration control. Three images predomiate: (1) long queues of undocumented migrants waiting to file their applications for 'extraordinary' amnesties, (2) crowded boats landing, if not sinking, along Italian shores, and (3) the irritated faces of some Northern European ministers during EU council meetings. All these images, besides their media potential, find their plausibility in the dynamics of migration to Italy. As shown in the introduction, and better detailed below, undocumented or irregular statuses have been widespread—indeed endemic—among Italy's foreign population for quite a long time. Sea landings have been—most evidently with the arrival of the Albanian flag cargo ship Vlora in August 1991—a main challenge to the Italian system of migration control, bound to produce quite an impact on Italian—and European—public opinion. There have surely been several serious strains on the implementation of various aspects of EU migration policy. Still, these images are also misleading.

Italian amnesties have not been a surrender to chaos, but rather a crucial (and relatively successful) model of migration management (Barbagli et al., 2004). Immigrants who have participated in these programs are by now a large portion of the stable Italian working class (Sciortino, 2015). They are regularly employed,

have a high activity rate, and millions of them satisfy all the requirements for renewing their papers year by year or have acquired long-term residence status.

In the early phases of the migration transition, most industrialized countries utilized regularization programs or amnesties repeatedly (Levinson, 2005; Sunderhaus, 2007). Its frequent use must be seen in the context of the migration regime that operated in Italy until the economic crisis of 2010–11. Repeated amnesties were a (relatively reasonable) form of back-door policy. Prospective foreign workers would enter the country, usually with a tourist visa, find a job, overstay, and wait for the next regularization program. Once regularized, they would move to areas in which the demand for unskilled workers was stronger, apply for family reunification, and start the arduous work of settling down permanently. As immigration to Italy was at the time *nearly* exclusively labor migration, driven by basic demographic and labor-market factors (Colombo & Dalla-Zuanna, 2019), this back-door policy contributed to the reproduction of the shrinking Italian working class, particularly in the Northern regions. Later, it also provided Italian households, increasingly sandwiched between the aging of the population and the lack of affordable services, with badly needed care workers (Catanzaro & Colombo, 2009; Cvajner, 2019).

The problem was that this sizeable labor demand had to be managed within a 'European' policy framework inspired, nearly exclusively, by the goal of preventing the arrival of asylum seekers (whose numbers, at the time, were in Italy negligible). Unsurprisingly, all the timid attempts to design some kind of active labor migration policy have always been short-lived. Even the limited supply of work permits, far from being the consequence of economic policy choices, has been linked to control goals. Until 2009–10, the Italian migration regime was thus largely dualistic: a 'European' restrictive regime (mostly targeted to prevent the unwanted arrival of potential asylum-seekers) coexisted with a (less visible) back-door policy providing a much-needed influx of unskilled workers into the Italian economy. The much-maligned amnesties taking place every four years or so, far from being epiphanies of mistaken policies, were a key tool for managing and stabilizing a migratory inflow that, before the economic crisis, was very intense. In recent years, however, the overall size of the irregular population has shrunk, and semi-compliance and visa-based migration systems have become more common. Amnesties have gradually lost most of their appeal, becoming residual in the evolution of the foreign population in Italy.[2]

Equally misleading are the endemic references to unauthorized sea landings. Although news of unauthorized sea landings can be already found in the 1980s, the only moment at which unauthorized sea border crossing contributed to the development of a major migration system was in the mid-1990s, during the 'Albanian crisis' (Sciortino, 1998). Since the end of the 1990s, sea landings have involved nearly only refugees. Their entry is made possible not by ineffective controls—boats are usually identified long before their see land—but rather by the legal protection

[2] https://www.neodemos.info/2020/02/11/linevitabile-strategia-della-sanatoria-per-regolarizzare-gli-immigrati/

guaranteed by the non-refoulement principle of international refugee law. The newly arrived, moreover, traditionally think of Italy as a as a transit country (Belloni, 2019). Albeit major European partners—supported by EU norms—would consider Italy as the country responsible for their asylum requests, this scenario was not the way refugees, and Italian authorities, perceived them. After all, their contribution to the five million strong immigrant population in the country was—and is—rather limited (Istat, 2023a). This discrepancy contributes to explaining why Italy has been historically recalcitrant in implementing key parts of the EU control strategy, particularly concerning the identification of the newly landed and their acceptance within a national system with adequate standards. On the contrary, the Italian governments, since the beginning of European involvement in the issue, have always considered the containment of these flows an important policy priority. Italian authorities had realized early on that the prevention of unauthorized sea arrivals cannot be carried out at the border, but only through the externalization of controls in the sending and transit countries. This is precisely what Italy did along the Adriatic at the end of the 1990s, with Tunisia in 2011, and with Egypt several times. The 2017 'pact' with a long string of Libyan actors is surely muddled, controversial, and morally problematic, but it is far from being a novelty (Baldwin-Edwards & Lutterbeck, 2019).

The third misleading image concerns Italy as a perpetual recalcitrant junior partner in the EU's attempts to establish an effective migration regime. For most of the history of EU migration policy, Italy has never been recalcitrant. In fact, it can be considered an early adopter of a restrictive attitude toward migration regulation. Gaining inclusion into the Schengen club had been the leading goal of most Italian immigration policymaking (Paoli, 2018). Furthermore, Italy had been willing to pay a heavy price for such membership. In 1990, when foreign migrants in Italy were just a tiny group, Act. 39/90 introduced systematic visa requirements. The main impact of this choice was to suddenly transform the circular migration systems linking Italy and North Africa into permanent settlements. With the same act, moreover, Italy was asked to remove the geographical limitations it had originally applied while signing the 1956 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Such change transformed Italy overnight into an ideal 'first safe country' (Petrovic, 2013). After much cajoling, Italy become a full-fledged Schengen member only in 1998.

Since then, the priorities of EU migration policy have always dominated the policy frame of Italian debates, even when they contrasted with the migration dynamics involving the country. Little opposition was registered even during the various Dublin negotiations, although they potentially placed quite a heavy burden on countries at the external borders of Europe (Monzini et al., 2006). Only recently, starting with the refugee 'crisis' of 2015–16, the European rhetoric has largely dissolved, as some of the existing cleavages have started to become visible and exploitable in party competitions. The result has been a more explicitly 'national interest' attitude in the negotiation of important acts, including the 2024 Pact on Migration and Asylum (see Sect. 3.6).

3.3 Defined by the Policy Gap? The Polarization of Control and Integration Policies

In one of the few classics in migration studies, Tomas Hammar described the difficulties with the institutionalization of migration policy in Northern European countries after the massive recruitment of foreign workers associated with *les trente glorieuses*. He observed that immigration challenged 'both the nation-state and the democratic system', as large numbers of foreign citizens had been recruited to the labor market bringing with them new languages and cultures. Moreover, there were increasing indications that a large part of this new population was going to stay as permanent immigrants. While some states were ready to accept this as a fact, other states maintained the original idea that the foreign workers and their families were only temporary 'guests', and not future members of the nation-state (Hammar, 1990: 2).

Italy was not included among the countries Hammar had in mind; still, the difficulty he identified in accepting immigration as a fact lies also at the core of the Italian experience (Pastore, 2023). Many of the strains between migration dynamics and immigration policies bear the mark of the reluctance to accept the role of Italy as a migration state (Hollifield, 2007). Reluctance drives a relatively precise model of migration governance, more effective than generally assumed. Within such a model, control policy is sharply distinguished from integration policy, thus creating room for the popularity of both claims of unconditional acceptance and requests for universal restriction. It covers the development of measures targeted at managing the consequences of the arrival of a sizeable number of migrants, but also the visible neglect, if not diffidence, for actions designed to accompany long-term settlement. The mix is further enriched by a paternalistic conception of social membership and a vision of social citizenship privileging social assistance over the protection of individual rights.

Among scholars, the debate has often centered on the persistence of a 'gap-hypothesis' featuring immigration policy analysis as a large and skillful theoretical debate focused on the substantial failure or un-effectiveness of policies in democratic states for governing migration (Castles, 2004; Boswel, 2007; Czaika & De Haas, 2013; Finotelli & Ponzo, 2023). For some scholars, particularly among those more committed to policy analysis, this policy gap is intended to emerge in the trade-offs between regulation and integration policies. They have highlighted the weakness of the 'supply' side, in terms of naturalization policies (Zincone & Caponio, 2006; Zincone, 2010; Caponio & Cappiali, 2018), the importance of specific forms of multilevel governance (Caponio & Borkert, 2010) and, last but not least, the role played by the politicization of migration (Urso, 2018; Terlizzi, 2021). Other scholars have analyzed the same policy gap as an expression of a larger migration regime, defined by the interaction of labor markets, social institutions, and local cultures (Reyneri, 1998; Ambrosini & Triandafyllidou, 2011; Ambrosini, 2013). Still others have analyzed the Italian situation in comparative terms (Finotelli, 2009). Many have seen Italian immigration policy as constrained by economic

crises and constantly pressured by EU-level developments (Freeman, 1995: 881), while others have highlighted how Italian migration policies follow a specific logic to deal with migration challenges in a condition of low economic growth (Colombo, 2012; Sciortino, 2013). From these perspectives, Italy—with its difficult relationship between integration policy and citizenship—due to the increasing blurring of the separation between migration and non-migration policies—is far from being a radical European anomaly (Czaika & De Haas, 2013; Huddleston & Vink, 2015).

3.4 The Policy Path of a 'Latecomer' (1986–2009)

During the 1980s, immigration was discussed within Italian public opinion in largely non-conflictual terms (Sciortino & Colombo, 2004). Humanitarian considerations, albeit often with a patronizing attitude, defined the position of nearly all political parties. The first immigration law (Act. 943/86) was approved by the Houses nearly unanimously. In contrast, only four years later, the subsequent Act (39/90), although approved with a large majority, was accompanied by heated confrontations and by widespread public perception that immigration had become or was soon to become an 'emergency'. Two years later, the same Houses approved a reform of the citizenship law (Act. 91/92) that made it significantly more difficult to naturalize on the grounds of residence. As can be seen in Fig. 3.1, such changes were not due to sudden increases in the number of immigrants. Still in 1992, after the fall of the Iron Curtain and the war in former Yugoslavia, the stock of foreign residents in Italy was 648,000, two generous amnesties notwithstanding.

The initial seeds of Italian migration policy were planted in the 1980s, with the ratification, in 1981, of the 1975 ILO Convention promoting the Equality and Treatment of Migrant Workers (Reyneri, 1999). The signing of the convention created the ground for bringing to light the lack of a systematic legal framework for

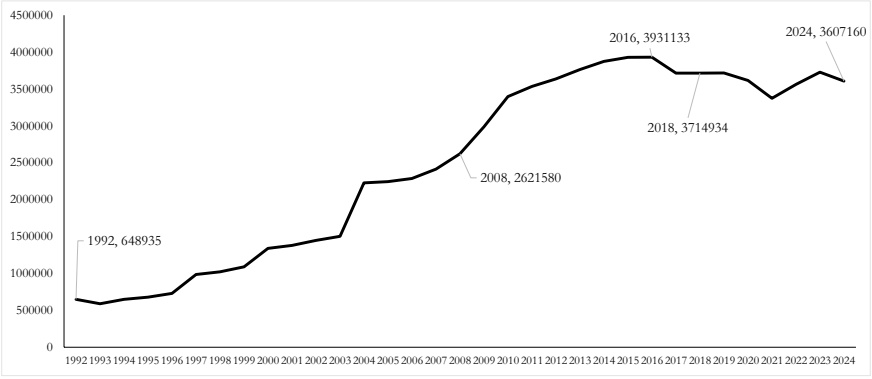


Fig. 3.1 Number of permits-to-stay (a) in Italy, 1992–2024, (absolute values). Note: (a) from 2009, only non-EU citizens are considered. Source: ISTAT (2023a)

foreign workers. A lobbying campaign by trade unions, NGOs, and Catholic Charities succeeded in pushing the political agenda of an immigration act (943/1986) that raised, at the time, very little public attention. The Act, produced both by client politics and by several forms of embedded liberalism, was targeted at 'workers and their families'. It introduced the principle of equal work for equal pay and formalized the access of foreign workers to most social services and welfare provisions (Einaudi, 2007). The Act wanted clearly to incorporate migrant workers within the neo-corporatist regime that defined Italian policymaking at that time. It also established, however, the blueprint for all subsequent immigration reforms: it blamed irregular migration on the lack of a rational recruitment system for foreign workers and promoted an amnesty for the irregular workers who were already in the country while announcing the future introduction of new procedures for recruiting workers while they were still abroad. While the amnesty allowed a substantial number of workers—a little less than 120,000—to enter the official economy, the new recruitment system, modeled after a quickly disappearing Fordist economy, never materialized. Four years later, Act 39/90 reproduced the same narrative to justify a new regularization initiative. In contrast to Act 943/86, which was not concerned with restrictive measures, Act 39/90 accompanied the new amnesty with a set of measures meant to prepare Italy to be admitted into the Schengen system. Among them was the full application of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the introduction of visa requirements for many North African countries. In this case, the new amnesty was justified by the previous failure of immigration controls and was accompanied by a promise that new, more effective systems would soon be in place. The policy gap between proclaimed restrictive targets and laissez-faire outcomes was evident and largely accepted (Finotelli & Sciortino, 2009).

Besides the demand for foreign low-skilled workers, the assemblage of Italian migration policy was sensitive to other factors. The most important, starting at the end of the 1980s, was the collapse of the communist regimes, particularly (from the Italian point of view of the period) those in the Balkans. Such collapse opened a phase of humanitarian emergencies that were addressed through *ad hoc* provisions. Inflows from Albania, and the former Yugoslavia (and from the former Italian colony, Somalia) were managed by granting those arriving from these countries temporary permit-of-stay for 'humanitarian reasons'. Such permits could be turned into 'regular' work permits as soon as an employer was willing to hire the refugee (Zincone & Caponio, 2006). From a certain point of view, these procedures were rather effective: the newly arrived moved rather smoothly into the labor market. They also contributed, however, to the emergence of another script: the fear of the sudden arrival (the 'invasion') of unassimilable migrants. A few years later, a new act (LD 489/95) opened another regularization program, and introduced a mixed set of provisions, some targeted at increasing control, in particular, making expulsion easier, and others directed at improving the access of foreign workers to the national health system and family reunification (Colombo, 2012). In retrospect, the legislative measures introduced from 1986 to 1995 are a typical example of incremental reform, introducing new mechanisms and statuses in piecemeal fashion.

In the mid-1990s, however, the idea of an 'organic' reform of all migration legislation gained momentum. Based on a systematic review of previous proposals, Act n. 40/98 was purported to be a middle ground for the management of the Italian migratory context (Finotelli & Sciortino, 2009:125). It was also an explicitly "European" act, aligning Italy with a progressive integration philosophy while trying to strengthen the control capability over future inflows. The Act was predicated on three pillars: an effective system of controls preventing irregular migration and making expulsion of irregular migrants easier; a yearly system of contingent making it possible to recruit workers from abroad; and a set of measures targeted to speed up the integration of immigrants holding a valid permit-of-stay (Zincone & Caponio, 2006). As with previous acts, the implementation of the bill was accompanied by a new amnesty. While several measures were quite effective (and are still on the books), the overall ambition of the Act did not materialize. The recruitment system, predicated on the idea of hiring people while they were still abroad, was not compatible with the characteristics of Italian labor demand for foreign workers. The repressive measures were weakly implemented and hardly effective; integration policies at the local level did not prevent the solidification of areas of urban marginality.

The introduction of Act 40/98 marked, however, the appearance of two features that have remained present in all subsequent developments. The first was the end of even the most tenuous bipartisanship on migration issues: the conflict over the Act established a strong definition of integration policy as a 'leftist' issue while making stricter control policies, as well as doubts about the opportunity of inclusion measures, a feature of conservative mindsets. Second, the 'worker', as in 'migrant worker', quickly disappeared. The September 11 attacks in the United States represented an occasion for further defining this political positioning of immigration. For the right, social fear and the need for tighter controls took center stage, becoming a stable trademark.

The second Berlusconi government, elected in 2001, won an election in which migration had figured among the hot topics. Unsurprisingly, the government championed a new law (Act 189/02) with an explicitly restrictive frame. The law shortened the spell of validity for permits-of-stay, weakened the possibilities of receiving a sponsor visa, and introduced mandatory imprisonment for expelled migrants while weakening the protective tools of judicial review. Many of these measures, however, were never implemented, due to their costs, their poor design, or because they were judged illegitimate by the courts. During the period, the most effective control measure was the strong investment in the externalization of border control across the Mediterranean, along lines already pursued, less explicitly, by the previous governments. The government signed a bilateral agreement with Tunisia and invested energies in making effective previous agreements with Libya.

Although Act 189/02 is usually remembered as an utterly repressive law, its actual substance was aligned with the balanced tradition of previous laws (Colombo & Sciortino, 2003). The existing integration measures were left intact, but without providing any funding for them. They were accompanied by a very large amnesty, which legalized the status of 634,000 applicants, almost equal to the total number of

foreigners regularized by the previous four amnesties. And it created, answering to European pressures, the first kernel of an Italian system for the integration of refugees and asylum seekers.[3]

The main repressive impact of Act 189/02 was the diffusion and legitimation of a narrative of immigration as a matter of security, centered on the image of the migrant, particularly if Muslim, as a threat. It was an approach that found, for the first time, open support among highly visible figures within what had been considered the 'progressive' camp, such as the writer Oriana Fallaci (Fallaci, 2001) and the political scientist Giovanni Sartori, who had already attacked Act 40/98 vehemently (Sartori, 1997).

For most of the first decade of the new millennium, the increasing adoption—and electoral success—of this explicitly negative, and often openly xenophobic, rhetoric was forced to co-exist with the expansionist pressures deriving from the huge demand for foreign labor emanating from the Italian economy. Between 2001 and 2009, the foreign population in Italy more than doubled (see Fig. 3.1). Increasingly anti-immigrant rhetoric notwithstanding, right-wing parties promoted a large amnesty in 2002, a very generous decree 'admitting' 170,000 foreign workers (formally 'from abroad') in 2006 and another amnesty, which received 294,000 applications in 2009. The short-lived center-left government led by Romano Prodi (2006–08), although it did not last long enough to modify significantly the legislative framework, was still able to provide—albeit through a rather tortuous procedure—a further 350,000 new permits-of-stay. Further, the Eastern Enlargement of the EU worked *also* as an indirect amnesty: Romanian migrants, who had been numerous among the unauthorized migrants present in Italy, found themselves in 2007 enjoying a wide range of rights.

The increasingly bellicose rhetoric did not translate into a consistently repressive attitude. In 2008–9, a recently elected center-right government approved, with much fanfare, two new acts (125/2008 and 94/2009, also known as *Pacchetto sicurezza*, or 'Security package') exclusively focused on introducing more stringent internal and external controls. The new measures did not have much of an impact. The ability of the Italian state to deport unwanted migrants further weakened (see Fig. 3.2).[4]

With all their differences and apparent abrupt changes, the various policies designed and implemented in the period from 1982 to 2009 maintained some important commonalities: they all used amnesty as the main tool for managing the irregular population, they all promoted some shy attempts to develop an active labor policy, they all constantly worried about the compatibility of their programs with the incoming European developments. The various Italian governments all used

[3] The Act established the so-called SPRAR (*Sistema di protezione per richiedenti asilo e rifugiati*), a system that has been renamed subsequently several times (SIPROIMI, SAI) as well as restricted to smaller and smaller categories of potential beneficiaries. It is a policy providing for the integration of asylum seekers through a national platform for integration (PNA or National Plan for Asylum) co-managed by the Home Minister, local governments, and the UNHCR.

[4] See also https://lavoce.info/archives/55913/immigrazione-irregolare-il-fallimento-e-tutto-interno/

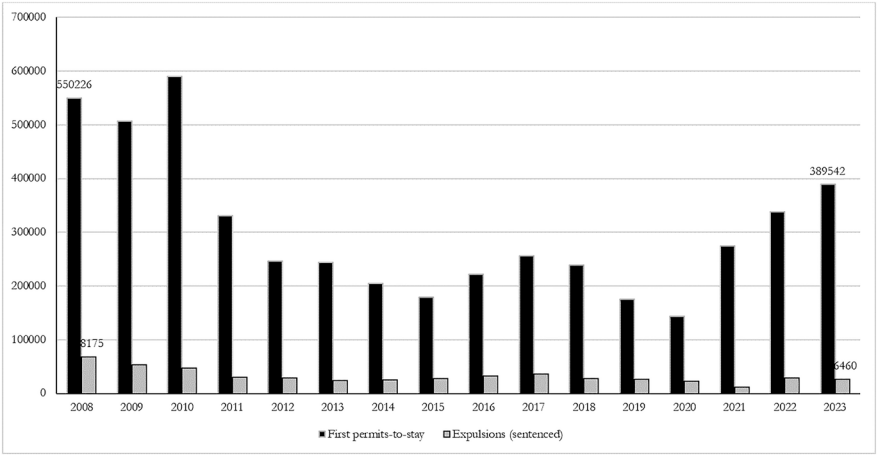


Fig. 3.2 Number of first permits-to-stay (all reasons) and third-country nationals ordered to leave (sentenced expulsions) in Italy, 2008–2023, (absolute values). Source: Eurostat (2025)

border externalization as the main strategy to contain unauthorized arrivals. While incrementally enriching the social measures for the foreign population, such developments were always matched by an entrenched resistance to design policies able to steer their long-term settlement. The different (many) governments alternating in the period clearly gave different priorities to some of these elements over others. Still, even when proclaiming their desire for radical change, they were unable, or even unwilling, to abandon completely the other elements. The main change taking place during these decades was consequently mostly in the role of immigration as a political object. Starting at the end of the 1990s, migration was increasingly viewed as an issue of identity politics, not only in openly nativist parties such as the Northern League (or openly internationalist parties, such as some formations of the extreme left) but also across the board.

3.5 The Times they Are A-Changin' (2010–2018)

Starting in 2009, the migration regime that had slowly evolved in the previous decades began to crumble. The main reason behind this deterioration was Italy's deep economic crisis. Emerging and escalating between 2009 and 2011, the crisis is still far from over: Italy's GDP returned to 2007 levels only in 2023. Since its beginning, the crisis has hit the labor-intensive, innovation-scarce sectors of the Italian economy—agriculture, tourism, and construction, the traditional employers of

foreign labor, particularly hard.[5] From 2009 onwards, new arrivals, both official and irregular, have significantly slowed. The unemployment rate among the foreign workforce has increased and many of the gains made by the foreign population in previous years have been eroded. Labor migration to Italy has severely diminished, and substantial numbers of return and secondary migrants are likely to have taken place (Istat, 2019). Even the last two amnesties, launched respectively in 2012 and 2020, have received a limited number of applications, well below the expected (or feared).

In the same years, however, the geopolitical situation in the Mediterranean changed rather dramatically. Starting with the Arab Spring and the Libyan civil war, the externalized controls that had been painfully built along the Southern Mediterranean rim in the previous two decades collapsed. After years of neglect, Italy was bound to go through a crash course on unwanted humanitarian migration. Already in 2011, the fall of the Ben Ali and Gaddafi regimes, and the beginning of the flow of refugees from Syria, brought to the fore a new kind of migration. Although it was already common in various European countries, it was a novelty in Italy: migrants participating in mixed flows in which a large percentage of new arrivals did not qualify for asylum but were, anyway, protected from deportation thanks to Article 33 (*non-refoulement*) of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Since 2010, and with intensity since 2015–16, Italy has entered a new migration regime, in which refugees, as opposed to labor migrants, are at the center of the political firestorm (Sciortino, 2015). In this period, the image of worn-out boats crowded with refugees searching for hope in Europe (and frequently finding their death in the Mediterranean Sea) becomes the issue around which the whole debate on migration coalesces.

The growth in the number of *sbarchi* (unauthorized sea arrivals) was initially defined as a humanitarian issue. In 2013, following an accident in which several hundred migrants had died, the (center-left) government decided to launch a search-and-rescue operation called *Mare Nostrum.* The operation was supposed to pursue both humanitarian and security goals (although the latter were left largely undefined). *Mare Nostrum*, however, was very expensive, and the Italian requests for the involvement of other EU states went unheard—with the exception of Slovenia. The mission was often accused by other European partners of acting as an incentive, lowering the risk of the crossing, to further irregular migration. *Mare Nostrum* was consequently terminated in October 2014, and substituted with a smaller operation, *Triton*, managed by Frontex.

The situation in the Mediterranean was further complicated by the growing importance of the humanitarian fleet. The involvement of private actors in the search and rescue of refugees is not necessarily new (FitzGerald, 2019). Still, the presence in the Mediterranean of several vessels armored by NGOs, and supported by philanthropic resources, changed the scenario. In 2017, more than one third of the migrants

[5] On the contrary, the labor demand for care-work and household services has remained strong. Salaries and working conditions have, however, worsened (Cvajner, 2018). For a broad overview, see Chap. 5.

rescued had been saved by NGO vessels, more than three times what *Triton* had achieved. Their presence, moreover, implied a whole new level of visibility for control operations. Unsurprisingly, the accusation of creating an incentive for unauthorized migration, originally leveled against *Mare Nostrum,* was quickly transferred to the functioning of the private humanitarian fleet.

The emergence of the new migration regime, centered on the control of refugee flows, has also transformed the relationship with European migration policies. Traditionally, Italian public opinion had always seen EU activities on migration issue very positively.[6] The mix of indecisiveness, hypocrisy, and shortsightedness revealed by the refugee 'crisis' of the mid-2010s has radically modified the idea that 'Europe' automatically means good. Paradoxically, just when the country had entered a migration regime much more like the one envisaged in the design of EU policies, Italy started to see itself as a 'victim' of European regulations. From one side, the refugee 'crisis' of 2015–16 made the restrictive tendencies in Italian policy action highly resonant—and legitimized—by the heightened emphasis on border controls and migration prevention marking the adoption by the European Commission of the European Agenda on Migration. On the other side, the substantial costs imposed on the countries with external borders by the Schengen and Dublin rules (well known to the experts but studiously ignored in the public debate until then) become suddenly visible. The new EU measures following the refugee 'crisis', particularly the intensification of EURODAC and the introduction of the hotspot approach, were explicitly designed to identify uncontroversially the disembarking migrants, thus curtailing the transit migration of refugees and enforcing the primary responsibility of the countries with external borders, such as Italy. These policy developments created the fear of being forced to settle a much larger portion of the new arrivals, as well as to have to readmit a large number of 'Dubliner' refugees who had been denied protection in Northern Europe by virtue of having encountered Italy as their first safe country. When even the timid attempts to establish a relocation scheme also failed, it triggered both the strengthening of a (already diffuse) negative view of immigration and immigrants, and the legitimation of openly xenophobic policies. Already in 2018, if public attitudes were geography, Italy could have been a leading member of the Visegrad Group.

The subsequent years have been nearly entirely absorbed by the containment of unwanted arrivals by sea. Center-right parties have been increasingly outspoken on their outright opposition to new arrivals. Wide sectors of center-left parties were also increasingly doubtful about the actual character of the flows (a large number of asylum applications being turned down). Many feared the *sbarchi* were also bound to trigger dangerous waves of xenophobia. In 2017, the center-right government introduced a new set of 'tough' measures meant to increase the effectiveness of deportation procedures for ineligible applicants and to reduce the legal provisions for asylum seekers with a previous rejected application. They were, however, largely

[6] In 2010, the Transatlantic Trends survey revealed that Italy was the only country in which a majority of interviewees would have been more than happy to transfer all the key immigration decisions to Brussels (as long as it meant taking them away from their own government).

a failure, as most ineligible applicants could not be deported anyway due to the non-refoulment provision (see Fig. 3.2). The control of the new flow was achieved only by returning, with a vengeance, to the traditional Italian policy of externalizing controls. Already in 2016, the government had signed a new agreement with the recognized Libyan government providing 'support' to the Libyan National Guard, an actor that had been repeatedly accused of violating the human rights of the migrants they detained. It was only in the summer of 2017 after making a deal with a large set of Libyan actors, that a serious effort at preventing departures started. The agreement curtailed subsequent sea landings (Baldwin-Edwards & Lutterbeck, 2019; Ceccorulli, 2022).

Since then, the prevention of new arrivals has become the main (actively pursued) goal of immigration policy. While the center-right and the center-left clash often, and very visibly, on integration policy, particularly concerning the reform of the Italian citizenship law, both sides are careful to leave the issue within the safe arenas of parliamentary speech and talk show participation.[7] It is important to stress that the 'toughening' of Italian migration policy has been largely symbolic. In the period between 2013 and 2023, the volume of the flows remained higher than in the EU as a whole, while the number of expulsions slightly decreased (Eurostat, 2026).

3.6 Riding the Populist Wave (2018–2024)

The border externalization carried out by the center-left government in 2017 was—technically—an astonishing success. Within a few weeks, the warm weather of summer notwithstanding, the number of migrants disembarking dropped dramatically. In the whole of 2018, less than 25,000 arrivals were recorded. In 2019, the number further dropped to 12,000.[8] Such success, however, did not translate into political consensus. Even if the moral panic surrounding *sbarchi* somewhat receded (see Fig. 3.3), it has remained the cornerstone of Italian public opinion, ready to be activated at short notice. Even if immigration has always been a controversial issue in Italian politics, since the mid-2010s refugee 'crisis', it has become a defining element, 'linked with increasing issue conflict among the political parties' (Urso, 2018:366). As in other European countries, but with a particular intensity, migration has quickly merged with the increased suspicion (if not utter hostility) toward the European project and the equally strong suspicion towards uncaring and self-serving elites (Terlizzi, 2021). Such a merger has made the issue of migration particularly precious for a cluster of new actors fighting to mobilize public opinion against the 'establishment'. Among them was a revitalized Northern League that supported its

[7] Similarly, the campaigns for the regularization of unauthorized migrants (including failed asylum seekers) have largely disappeared. There have been two further amnesties—in 2012 and 2020—that have been, on paper at least, much more selective and reserved to specific categories of 'non-threatening' migrants such as care workers and farmhands.

[8] https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/migrazioni-nel-mediterraneo-tutti-i-numeri-24892

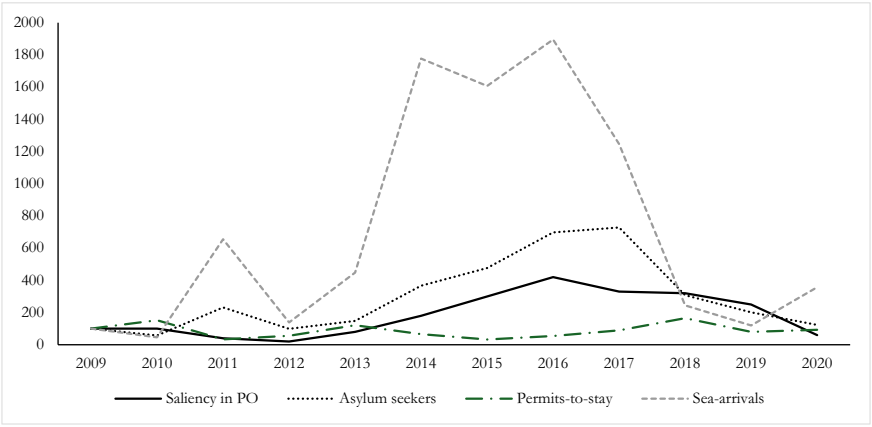


Fig. 3.3 Sea-arrivals, asylum seeking, demand of permits-to-stay and saliency of immigration in public opinion, 2009–2019, (index numbers 2009 = 100). Sources: Eurostat (2025), for data on asylum seekers, on first application for a permit-to-stay (for work reasons) and sea-arrivals. Eurobarometer 2025, for data about saliency of the immigration in public opinion are extracted from the Standard Eurobarometer surveys, numbers 72 (autumn 2009) to 94 (winter 2020–21). The value per year is developed as the simple average of autumn (or winter) and spring Eurobarometer's collections. The key indicator here used is the percentage of the sample responding 'immigration' to the question 'What do you think are the two most important issues facing Italy at the moment'?

morphing into a country-wide party with a systematic xenophobic campaign, and the Five-stars movement, which claims to locate itself beyond left and right. A third emerging actor was the post-fascist Brothers of Italy, who played equally hard on the migration card (Vittoria, 2023).

As can be seen in Fig. 3.3, the saliency of immigration within Italian public opinion started to grow rapidly around 2013, up to the point of becoming the top issue of concern. After 2017, attention remained high, far above the pre-crisis levels. The disembarking migrants were systematically portrayed by all three new actors as tricksters or 'fake' refugees. In the best case, they were considered naïve people duped by immoral smugglers. Their arrival was considered a consequence of the weak resolve and shortsightedness of Italian and European elites, if not even of an outright conspiracy. As we have demonstrated above, their narrative was the climax of a longer cultural trend. As can be seen in Table 3.1, starting in 2013, the new migration flows, and their politicization, increasingly affected Italian public discourses and agendas. Foreign *workers* disappeared from view, while the emphasis on refugees (increasingly seen as welfare scroungers) became increasingly popular. For each point of increase in first-time applicants for asylum, the saliency of immigration in public opinion has grown nearly one point (0.9637).

Sources: data on inflows (X_1), asylum seekers' (X_3) and on first application for a permit-to-stay (X_2) from Eurostat 2022. Data about saliency of immigration in public opinion (Y) are extracted from the Standard Eurobarometer surveys, numbers 72 (autumn 2009) to 92 (autumn 2019). The value per year is developed as the simple

Table 3.1 Saliency of immigration regarding managed migrations and asylum applications, OLS model using all the observations, 2009–2020

	Y = Saliency of immigration in Public Opinion (2009–2020)
X_1 = Inflows (2009–2020)	0.7938 (0.6471)
X_2 = Total permits-to-stay (2009–2020) **X_3 = first-time asylum applications (2009–2020)**	−1.1705* (0.5663) 0.9637*** (0.1936)
T	12
R^2	0.9470

average of autumn and spring Eurobarometer's collections (Eurobarometer, 2022). The key indicator here used is the percentage of the sample responding 'immigration' to the question "What do you think are the two most important issues facing Italy at the moment?" EB 2022. All the values are displayed in logarithms. *p < 0.10, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01. Robust standard errors, variant HAC Kernel's Bartlet, in parentheses.

This image of the refugee explains the success of the slogan *Prima gli italiani!* [*Italians first!],* which had been around for years, but suddenly became a highly successful rallying cry and hashtag.[9] It also helped some populist actors—such as the Five-stars and the Brothers of Italy—to distance themselves from the gross—and frequently openly racist—xenophobic tropes, to define their opposition to immigration as a form of solidarity with the Italian working class, betrayed by the cosmopolitan left. Populist discourses evolved, often, but not always, in forms of 'neoliberal' nationalism—to use Christian Joppke's (2021) term.

The 2018 national elections were a triumph both for the Five-stars and the center-right coalition, in which the populist component was much stronger than previously (Valbruzzi & Vignati, 2018). The ensuing government, based on an unstable alliance among competing populist actors, adopted an explicitly tough stance against asylum seekers, based on the two-pronged strategy of sharply reducing the assistance they could get after arrival and making the working of the humanitarian fleet more difficult. Both tasks were entrusted to two 'security decrees' (113/18 and 53/19) promoted by Matteo Salvini, the leader of the League and Home Minister. Humanitarian vessels were now explicitly defined as fellow travelers of, if not complicit with, traffickers. As for those already arrived, the reforms were explicitly targeted to make the reception system more precarious and, if possible, even more unpleasant (Bello, 2022). Between 2018 and 2020, the housing assistance system

[9] On the power of images to shape immigration perceptions within European public opinion, see Jaworsky et al. (2022). The power of the slogan *Prima gli italiani* was such that the slogan remained popular and politically effective even after a blogger discovered that the 'Italians' portrayed in a series of posters put out by the League were actually Czech and Slovak models hired through a multinational platform. See https://thevision.com/attualita/manifesti-prima-italiani-salvini/

lost more than 20,000 beds. Similarly, the government operated explicitly to make the working of the humanitarian fleet more difficult. Between 2018 and 2020, the waiting period before disembarking the rescued migrants became twice as long, eleven ships were sequestered for long periods, and eighteen criminal proceedings were opened against the NGOs organizing them. The conflict with the NGOs was implicitly designed to dissuade migrants from leaving Libya, making the trip more dangerous. At the end of June 2019, the new norms were highly dramatized by the Sea-Watch incident.[10] All these measures, although highly dramatized, were largely ineffective and short-lived. Of the many prosecutions opened against NGOs, none ended up with a guilty verdict. Even in the case of Italy, the embedded liberalism of the country has shown to be more resilient than expected.[11]

The populist government, less than a year and three months later, failed. The new 'emergency' government returned to the previous tradition of border externalization, low visibility, and 'voluntary', if muddled, coordination with other EU states. Although the new government was supported also by center-left parties, there were very few attempts to change the course of migration policy, both in terms of control and integration. Even during the extraordinary Covid-19 crisis, which hit Italy particularly hard, the government largely abstained from any attempt to improve the governance of migration.[12]

In 2022, a new general election delivered a strong majority to the center-right, strongly reducing the role of the League in favor of the post-fascist Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) party, headed by Giorgia Meloni. In general, Meloni had traditionally presented herself as a strong supporter of 'tough' border controls, even putting forward the idea of a (not-better-defined) 'naval blockade' of Libya. She has been able to assume an important role in the emerging coalition aiming to reform EU immigration policy in strongly restrictive direction. Such role has been developed both launching national initiatives that could be presented as pivotal to future EU

[10] The German captain Carole Rackete, guiding the NGO ship Sea-Watch, refused to disembark a large number of rescued migrants in the harbor of Tripoli, judged unsafe for them, and decided to move to Lampedusa, the closest safe harbor according to international law. After having waited for several days the permission to land, she decided to dock unauthorized, crashing with a patrol boat that was trying to stop the docking. After being arrested, she was released in a few days and found, in due course, not guilty. The Rackete case showed in a nutshell all the paradoxes embodied in the new Italian legislation.

[11] A general argument may be made about the importance of Italy's high level of embedded liberalism. Whatever the restrictive preferences of Italian citizens (and the rhetoric of its leaders), the main stumbling block in the adoption of harsh measures of immigration control has hardly ever been the opposition of parties or social movements. The actual obstacles to the adoption of highly restrictionist stances has always been Italy's highly independent judiciary. A great number of restrictive measures approved by center-right cabinets (and quite a few approved by center-left ones) have been struck down by the courts.

[12] A new amnesty was launched in 2020, to offer a path of regularization to the much-needed foreign workers employed in agriculture and household services. The conditions granted were less generous than in the previous amnesties and the administrative management remarkably slow (two years later, half of the 220,000 applications filed had yet to receive a decision).

development (such as the offshoring of rescued refugees to Italian-run center in Albania[13]) as well as promoting EU wide-initiatives (such as the Italian-Danish initiative, now supported by 27 EU member states, to 'rebalance' the European Convention of Human Rights). At the same time, the Meloni government has also adopted, on certain issues, a more explicit confrontational stance versus EU's partners, as shown in the case of the return of the 'Dubliners' (refugees in a member state that should actually be protected in the country of first arrival). As Table 3.2

Table 3.2 First-instance asylum applications (pending and new) by acceptance and refusal rate, Italy, France and Poland, 2020–2023 (processed 2021–2024) (absolute and percentage values)

	Pending	New	Processed	Refugee (accept. rate) (%)	Subsidiary protection and others (accept. rate) (%)	Refusals (rate) (%)
Italy						
2021	33,636	29,693	44,183 (66.6%)	10.0	12.0	78.0
2022	32,800	56,388	52,897 (59.3%)	15.0	29.0	56.0
2023	84,290	77,200	53,065 (32.8%)	14.3	34.1	51.6
2024	146,940	135,820	47,150 (16.7%)	10.4	36.0	54.0
Avg				**12.4**	**27.8**	**59.9**
France						
2021	0	62,067	70,036 (N.C.)	11.3	8.5	80.2
2022	0	120,865	137,015 (N.C.)	15.5	9.2	72.3
2023	142,940	150,455	129,465 (44.1%)	22.6	4.8	72.6
2024	146,175	166,880	132,695 (42.4%)	23.7	7.6	68.6
Avg				**18.3**	**7.5**	**73.4**
Poland						
2021	3577	2803	2431 (38.1%)	6.6	9.1	84.3
2022	3850	7698	3611 (30.5%)	28.2	31.4	40.4
2023	2829	9933	3299 (25.8%)	5.6	65.0	24.4
2024	3766	9513	4088 (30.8%)	10.0	72.0	28.0
Avg				**12.6**	**44.3**	**44.3**

[13] Albeit the program is temporarily frozen owing to legal challenges, the government has repeatedly claimed that it will not back down (Echeverría & Finotelli, 2024).

shows, the Italian government approach has become increasingly similar to those of some Eastern European countries in the former Visegrad group. Even if Italy has not been overburdened by a extraordinary number of applications (France, for example, has had to manage higher numbers), the organizational criticisms of the Italian asylum process contributed to the creation of a huge backlog. In December 2022, invoking capacity issues in its reception system, Italy suspended the incoming transfers of asylum seekers from other European countries. The stop was later extended up to the incoming entry into force, in 2026, of the new Regulation on Asylum and Migration Management (RAMM).

Sources: data are from AIDA, 2025a, 2025b, country reports from 2021 (data 2020) to 2024 (data 2023). Rates about subsidiary, special and humanitarian protection are customized together, due to the inhomogenous style in reporting them adopted by the three countries, and generally refers from 2021 to Ukrainian refugees. Data about pending requests declared by the three countries—and mostly in France for the years 2021–2023—are manifestly not coherent (N.C.).

In February 2023, a new maritime shipwreck, which could have very likely been avoided through adequate surveillance, caused the death of (at least) 93 migrants. The Meloni government had to quickly change the narrative. The government has adopted a lowly visible re-opening of foreign labor recruitment, maintaining however the priority of sharply reducing new sea arrivals through strong controls as well as making it increasingly more difficult for failed asylum-seekers to obtain residence permits on humanitarian grounds. In other words, the core of Meloni's migration policy is a border externalization policy on steroids: the overall goal is involving all the states of the Southern rim of the Mediterranean (also thanks to the activation of European resources) in preventing departures (Echeverría et al., 2024). Meloni's consistently restrictive migration policy against asylum-seekers is made possible by a strong parliamentary majority and by deep divisions among the opposition parties on the issue. It can operate, moreover, in a European political climate in which the Italian emphasis on arrival prevention and restrictive interdiction resonates widely. In the shadow of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the right-wing successes in the 2024 European elections, most European governments share a growing emphasis on securitization, externalization and inflow-prevention, as most visible in the June 2024 Pact on Migration and Asylum. The fear that migration could become a new geopolitical weapon in the hands of neighboring dictatorships has taken center stage. Meloni's new migration measures –the several repressive measures of the *Cutro Decree* or the controversial protocol with the Albanian government for the offshore processing of asylum-seekers claims—are no longer perceived as particularly extreme. On the contrary, it is often seen in many European chancelleries as a potentially useful avant-garde, as it is testing measures that could be subsequently generalized. But, definitively, it would be a mistake to assume that such increased convergence on control policy has weakened the structural tension between Italy and the Northern European countries. The attempted reform of the Dublin regulation has stalled for years owing to the difficulties in finding a balance between the contrasting interests of the countries having external and internal borders.

3.7 Conclusion

The previous pages have documented the muddled path of Italian immigration policy, its frequent turns, and its highly visible conflicts. At the same time, we have also documented the existence of some important continuities.

To understand the paths of change in Italian migration policies, the key is recognizing the existence of two quite different periods. The first, from the mid-1980s to the end of the first decade of the new millennium, had as its main challenge the management of flows of foreign workers. Its migration regime had to manage the challenges deriving from the well-known strain between demand for foreign labor, (arising from labor-intensive sectors of the Italian economy and quickly aging households) and opposition to newcomers from political and social groups and communities. It is a well-known strain, already identified in virtually all democratic market societies (Freeman, 1994; Hollifield et al., 2022). This classic strain was further compounded by the fact that Italy had to develop its migration policy in the context of an evolving European policy that had very different migration priorities. It had to learn how to manage classical labor migration with an 'European' policy framework inspired, nearly exclusively, by the goal of preventing the arrival of asylum seekers. Unsurprisingly, the core of the migration regime was its back-door policy (Finotelli & Sciortino, 2009).

The initial Italian migration regime crumbled under the weight of the economic crisis that started in 2009 and the geopolitical changes in the Mediterranean. Labor migration to Italy has been reduced to a trickle and substantial returns and secondary migration has occurred (Istat, 2023b). At the same time, the number of asylum seekers and refugees has grown, while the tightening of EU rules has made it more difficult for refugees landing in Italy to move quickly to Northern European countries. A new migration regime has been emerging, defined by a more outspokenly repressive stance. If previously the introduction of new layers of control had always been balanced with the development of some integration measures, in the new regime, control is explicitly paramount. Integration has largely disappeared from the radar. Even the always more visible presence of half a million minors has not triggered the momentum necessary to reform the highly restrictive citizenship law, as highlighted by the failed referendum call of June 2025 to institutionalize a speedier mechanism for citizenship acquisition (Vittoria, 2024).

The new regime enjoys wide popularity, strengthened by its resonance with similar tendencies in the public opinion of other European states. It is not, however, necessarily more effective: the available data on the concrete control outcomes do not show particular improvement in efficacy and effectiveness. In some key cases, such as deportations, they have even worsened.[14]

[14] https://www.openpolis.it/aumentano-i-fondi-per-la-detenzione-dei-migranti/

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