



Much ado about nothing? Giorgia Meloni's government and immigration

Gabriel Echeverría & Claudia Finotelli

To cite this article: Gabriel Echeverría & Claudia Finotelli (2024) Much ado about nothing? Giorgia Meloni's government and immigration, Contemporary Italian Politics, 16:2, 233-247, DOI: [10.1080/23248823.2024.2330805](https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2024.2330805)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2024.2330805>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 20 Mar 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 591



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

ARTICLE

 OPEN ACCESS

 Check for updates

Much ado about nothing? Giorgia Meloni's government and immigration

Gabriel Echeverría and Claudia Finotelli

Department of Applied Sociology, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Madrid, Spain

ABSTRACT

Italy as an immigration country has been characterized by high rates of irregular migration due to the weak legal admission channels available and the combination of a powerful internal demand of foreign workers and intense external pressure on its borders. Despite the growing salience of migration issues in the political arena, the country has shown a marked inertia in addressing the structural causes of the phenomenon. The gap between political grandstanding and effective governance has been highlighted by numerous studies. This article analyses the first year of Giorgia Meloni's government by assessing the coherence between the highly restrictive electoral promises and the implemented policies, and by weighing the degree of novelty of its approach in relation to migration management over the last twenty years. Results show that, beyond the multiplication of proclamations and emergency interventions with respect to recurring border crises, there has been an overall pragmatic and rather open attitude, far from the radical stances of the opposition years. In addition, the full confirmation of that model of 'reluctant openness' that has characterized the Italian approach to immigration, combining irregularity as the main route of access with an almost complete overlook of other important dimensions like migrants' integration.

ARTICLE HISTORY


7 December 2023
30 January 2024

KEYWORDS

Migration policy; far-right; Giorgia Meloni; migration politics; Fratelli d'Italia; irregular migration

Introduction

The inauguration of the government led by Giorgia Meloni caused a wave of concern about the future of migration policy. With the arrival of a prime minister belonging to a party as right-wing as Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI), many had predicted hard times for migrants in Italy.¹ Nonetheless, a year after the elections, at the height of the wave of arrivals from Tunisia, the deputy mayor of Lampedusa, a representative of the Lega (League), hinted at a certain degree of dissatisfaction within the majority with the Government's policy in this area: 'What has become of the Prime Minister's "naval blockade"? [...] I had hoped, now that the left is no longer in power and we finally have a centre-right government, that the situation would change; but the right is becoming worse

CONTACT Claudia Finotelli  cfinotel@ucm.es  Department of Applied Sociology, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Madrid, Spain

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

than the left'.² Shortly thereafter, on 27 September, the Cabinet approved a decree on immigration that was the most generous since the early 2000s insofar as it granted entry to over 450,000 migrants for the three-year period, 2023–2025. This was not exactly the halt to immigration that many had expected. One is reminded of an iconic scene from Italian cinema in which the protagonist asks a well-known representative of the left to 'say something left-wing'. For, in the face of a migration crisis which has caused concern both among the governing parties and citizens, it would almost seem that Meloni is being asked by her followers to 'do something right-wing'.

In fact, when the current prime minister was in opposition, she promised a firm and resolute solution to the migration problem. This would include a naval blockade, the closure of ports, the limitation of temporary protection for humanitarian reasons, restrictions on the arrival of citizens of Muslim countries. Immigration was said not to be 'a right but a privilege granted by the State in relation to its own needs' and every migrant who entered Italy irregularly was 'to be considered an illegal immigrant until proven otherwise'.³ Once installed in Palazzo Chigi, however, Meloni seems to have drastically moderated her anti-immigration rhetoric, to have embraced an unexpected and pragmatic degree of openness in seeking to manage the phenomenon, and to have avoided any noteworthy restrictive *coups de force*. Though a year is too short a period of time to evaluate a government's migration policies definitively, it is sufficient to enable us to pose the following questions. Is there any evidence of the promised discontinuity compared to the past in the management of migration? How consistent has the Prime Minister's approach been with what she promised before the election?

The gaps between political discourse, implementation and the effectiveness of measures is a recurring theme in the study of international migration. The logics underlying the three areas respond to different and not always overlapping imperatives (Boswell 2007; Echeverría 2020). In the case of Italy, the gap between political grandstanding and effective governance of migration has been the subject of numerous studies (Colombo and Sciortino 2003; Geddes 2008; Sciortino and Finotelli 2009; Zincone 2006). By trying to answer the questions above, this contribution aims to offer some elements for reflection on this complex tangle. The analysis draws on both primary and secondary sources, including FdI policy documents and the text of the legislative decrees the Government approved from its inauguration in October 2022 until mid-November 2023. The first part of the article briefly examines the migration policies of Italian governments over the last 20 years. The second reconstructs the evolution of FdI's positions on migration up to the 2022 election victory and analyses in detail the main decisions taken in this area by the new government. Finally, the third part compares the migration policies of the Meloni government both with FdI's pre-election promises and with the actions of its predecessors. From this examination, a picture of substantial continuity emerges. On the one hand, therefore, there was a multiplication of proclamations and emergency interventions with respect to recurring border crises, particularly in the Mediterranean. On the other, there was full confirmation of that model of 'reluctant openness', combining irregularity as the main route of access to the country, with an almost complete lack of attention to the other dimension of the phenomenon, namely migrants' integration into the host society.

The context: the migration regime between inertia and extreme politicization

Managing the demand for foreign workers

In the past 20 years, the number of foreigners in Italy has increased from 1.3 to 5 million, representing 8.5% of the resident population.⁴ In 2023, well over half of resident foreigners had a long-term residence permit (Istat 2024). These numbers clearly show that Italy is no longer a latecomer to the field of immigration, but a country increasingly similar to European countries with longer immigration histories. The continuous growth and progressive stabilization of the migrant population in Italy, however, has not occurred in a manner consistent with the migration policies adopted. Indeed, one could say that this profound social transformation has occurred ‘despite’ the obstacles imposed by politics, and despite the restrictive aims politicians have come to articulate.

Although Italian governments have recognized since the 1980s the need for foreign workers to respond to the requirements of the labour market and the effects of population ageing, the policies actually introduced have pursued this objective only in a residual manner. Law no. 40/1998 – the so-called ‘Turco-Napolitano law’ – was the first attempt to create a regulatory framework responding to all aspects of migration: from the suppression of irregular migration to an active migration policy responding to the social and economic needs of the country. It introduced an innovative entry mechanism for foreign workers through annual quotas based on estimates from a three-year planning document. It also provided that foreign workers residing abroad, who have received the offer of a contract in Italy or have found a sponsor guaranteeing their employment in the country for a period of one year, can obtain a visa and be given a residence permit. The so-called *decreti flussi* (literally, ‘flows decrees’) issued by the Government, establish, for a range of categories – from employed labour, to self-employment and seasonal work – the maximum number of migrants per year in each. The decrees also provide for special quotas for countries that agree to take back irregular migrants.

Just three years later, with the arrival of the centre-right in power in 2001, law no. 182/2002, the so-called ‘Bossi-Fini’ law, heavily amended the ‘Turco-Napolitano’ law. The former strengthens border control and tightens entry conditions for workers, eliminating the provisions for sponsorship and tying the issue of visas and residence permits to the existence of current employment contracts, restricting the validity of the former to the duration of the latter.

The system the 2001 reform put in place to regulate the entry of foreign workers quickly ran into difficulties. The ‘flows decrees’ were unable to reflect the country’s actual need for labour due to the difficulties involved in estimating requirements in sectors of insecure employment; due to cumbersome administrative procedures, and due to unacceptable waiting times for those in urgent need of staff (Finotelli and Echeverría 2017). Furthermore, the abolition of the sponsorship provisions and the strict linking of the granting of residence permits with the existence of current employment contracts – something extremely difficult to guarantee remotely – undermined the functioning of the central means of entry provided for by law. The consequence was that the irregular employment of workers already present became more attractive than the recruitment of workers through official channels (Sciortino and Finotelli 2009).

The combination of the ineffectiveness of the provisions for regular entry, and heavy domestic demand for foreign workers – thanks to the significance of the underground economy – made irregular immigration the distinctive characteristic of the Italian migratory regime (Colombo 2012; Ambrosini 2013) and constituted an exemplary case of the institutional construction of irregularity. It is therefore not surprising that the irregular migrant population in Italy has been constantly growing. In response, both centre-right and centre-left governments have had to resort to ex-post regularization as an essential tool for alleviating the dysfunctionality of the system. The ‘flows decrees’, unable to fulfil their originally intended function – allowing the regular entry of foreign nationals – were improperly used to regularize those already present, both through the temporary return of irregular migrants to their countries of origin to start the procedure for regular entry, and through emergency measures obviating this need (Devitt 2023). Particularly significant, in this regard, was the decision of the Berlusconi III government (2005–2006) to expand the number of entries provided for by the 2006 ‘flows decree’ from 170,000 to 600,000, *de facto* creating a second major regularization after the one approved in 2002 by the Berlusconi II government (2001–2005).

With the onset of the Great Recession in 2009 and the dramatic fall in demand for foreign workers, the annual ‘flows decrees’ were limited to seasonal workers only. The heavy contraction of the economy and its impact on the labour market fed the idea that these tools had become superfluous, since arrivals via family reunification and intra-European immigration would be sufficient to meet labour requirements for the foreseeable future (*Ibidem*).

Against this background, the inability to design effective labour immigration policies was undoubtedly influenced by important structural limitations and the lack of political will to reform the immigration system (Pastore 2023). The political inertia and the inability to innovate in this area is confirmed by the fact that, more than 20 years after its approval, the ‘Bossi-Fini’ law remains, despite widespread criticism, the main legislative framework for the management of migration in Italy.

Border management and humanitarian migration

Inaction regarding the management of labour migration contrasts with the political and media attention devoted to border control and refugees, and with the numerous legislative initiatives taken in these areas. Together with the domestic demand for foreign workers, the pressure on external borders is the second structural element that has shaped Italian immigration policy (Geddes and Pettrachin 2020). This area has again been managed mainly by reference to the ‘Turco-Napolitano’ and the ‘Bossi-Fini’ laws, though as we shall see, change has been constant. A characteristic and constantly debated element of the Italian approach in this area is the provision of a temporary protection permit for humanitarian reasons (conflicts, disasters, serious events). This is granted, in addition to the residence permit for asylum based on the Geneva Convention, to those who do not qualify for the latter. Initially unique in Europe, the permit for humanitarian reasons has somewhat ambiguous qualifying criteria and is therefore an extremely flexible tool, one that has become central to the management of the many arrivals at the border that are not easy to categorize (the majority).

The arrival of irregular migrants on the Italian coast has attracted media attention since the early 1990s, despite the fact that entries via that route are notoriously lower than those via others (such as visa overstaying). However, the start of the ‘Arab Spring’ in 2011 saw a substantial increase in sea arrivals and, consequently, in asylum applications (Ponzo 2023). The Lampedusa tragedy,⁵ with the loss of 368 lives, was an inflection point in Italian governance in this area. Its impact on domestic and European public opinion led the coalition government headed by Enrico Letta, of the Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD), to launch Operation *Mare Nostrum*. This sea rescue operation was followed by others with fewer resources but with the unprecedented involvement of the Italian navy. The rescue of 457,000 people between 2015 and 2017 shows that the classic dilemma between humanitarian imperatives and national interests in the governance of maritime borders was clearly resolved in favour of the former in this period (Abbondanza 2023). Unfortunately, this effort was not supported by any European Union agreement for a redistribution of migrants recovered at sea among member countries. The peak of 170,000 landings in 2016 had a significant impact on public opinion, pushing immigration to the top of Italians’ concerns.⁶ Domestic pressure and stalemate in Brussels led the centre-left government of Paolo Gentiloni (PD) to replace humanitarian imperatives with the national interest (Ponzo, Giannetto, and Roman 2022). In 2017, the Minister of the Interior, Marco Minniti (PD), concluded an innovative but very controversial cooperation agreement with Libya providing resources and equipment to the Libyan coast guard to block the flow of migrants from this country. The agreement, which would be extended for another three years by the Draghi government in 2022, significantly reduced the number of sea arrivals but was harshly criticized by a not-insignificant number of commentators on the left due to the lack of protection of the fundamental rights of migrants intercepted and taken to Libyan refugee camps.

The 2015 migration crisis and centre-left governments’ inconsistent management of the phenomenon led to further radicalization of the anti-immigration rhetoric of the centre-right and in particular of the League. This coincided with and significantly contributed to a notable increase in the salience of immigration in public debate (Dennison and Geddes 2019). The League’s strategy bore fruit in the form of its electoral advance in 2018 and the nomination of its leader, Matteo Salvini, as Minister of the Interior in the Conte I government. The new minister’s initiatives invariably focused on the issue of borders and led to the rapid approval of Decree-law no. 113/2018 and Legislative Decree no. 53/2019 (the so-called *decreti sicurezza*, or ‘security decrees’). These measures ended temporary protection for humanitarian reasons and modified the law relating to rescue at sea, making it possible to prohibit the docking of NGO vessels in Italian ports. The measures attracted harsh criticism not only for their effects in hampering sea rescue, but also for the risk of an increase in the presence of irregular migrants and therefore of a further increase in negative perceptions of immigration among the public (Geddes and Pettrachin 2020). The partial restoration of temporary protection for humanitarian reasons by the Conte II government (Law Decree no.130 of 18 December 2020) was insufficient to reduce irregular immigration due to a recovery in demand for foreign labour following the end of the pandemic. It is in the context of the resumption of demand for foreign labour and the new increase in the numbers of irregular arrivals that the Meloni government took office.

Between words and deeds: Giorgia Meloni and immigration

The words: the years in opposition (2012–2022)

Fratelli d'Italia, the party of the current prime minister and the largest party in Parliament following the 2022 elections, was born in 2012 from a split in the then main centre-right party led by Silvio Berlusconi, the Popolo della Libertà (People of Freedom). The new formation faced an immediate electoral test. If its performance in 2013 could not be considered entirely encouraging – it obtained 1.96% of the vote – its trajectory in subsequent years was extraordinary. It took 3.67% at the 2014 European Parliament elections; 4.33% at the 2018 general election; 6.46% at the 2019 European Parliament elections, and 26% at the general election of September 2022. The success of FdI, which finally brought its leader, Giorgia Meloni, to Palazzo Chigi on 22 October 2022, was accompanied and supported by a process of organizational and ideological-programmatic restructuring. From its birth until the 2022 elections, the party remained firmly in opposition to the various governments that succeeded one another in office. Through the presentation of programmes, policy documents and pamphlets, and the ceaseless activism of its leader in public debates, each successive electoral contest was an opportunity for FdI to consolidate its profile in the collective imagination, rightly or wrongly, as a force offering straightforward and radical solutions, alternative to those of the other parties.

Migration was a central theme in the party's first election manifesto, *Le sfide per l'Italia* (*The challenges for Italy*), produced for the general election of 2013. The issue was presented as one involving a dual challenge: control of the flow of arrivals and an 'intransigent struggle against undocumented migration' on the one hand; the integration of migrants, 'so that Italy is the land of those who love it, understand it, and respect its Constitution and cultural and religious traditions', on the other.⁷ At the 2014 European Parliament elections, the party's manifesto for the first time interpreted the issue from a continental perspective, through an attack on the European Union, which, it asserted, had 'refused to organize and finance a common programme to contain landings and guarantee solidarity with those in danger of losing their lives'.⁸

The proposals put forward up to that point largely reflected measures and proposals previously presented by other centre-right parties and were devoid of a more detailed vision of the complexities of the migration issue. In contrast, the *Tesi di Trieste per il movimento dei patrioti* (*Trieste Theses for the movement of patriots*), adopted at the party's national congress in 2017, represented a significant step forward from this point of view. The long and detailed introduction explained the profound crisis European countries were experiencing as the result of mismanagement of the migration issue and the weakening of national identities. 'A Europe that denies its Judeo-Christian and classical roots, subordinates the identity and autonomy of its peoples to a radical universalism operating in harmony with an abstract multiculturalism, leading to the indiscriminate and uncontrolled access of people from other continents in numbers that will lead to ethnic replacement'. Weaknesses of identity, the document claimed, would make European nations 'more susceptible to the aggression of militant radical Islam, refractory to integration'. European nations would be 'incapable of understanding the growing intolerance of native populations towards migrants', and incapable of recognizing 'the hatred an increasingly large number of foreigners (and even second or third

generation citizens of foreign origin) have towards the populations that have welcomed them'. Responsibility for this development was laid at the door of 'the old-communist internationalist utopia, the pauperist third worldism and the global commercial practices of the large multinationals', guilty of spreading multiculturalism, political correctness, the tendency towards self-blame and the rhetoric of otherness.

In terms of specific proposals, the document addressed five main issues, the first of which was the defence of borders and the unflinching struggle against irregular immigration. 'We intend to restore the basic principle, without exceptions, that Italy's borders cannot be crossed illegally. Italy has all the diplomatic and military means necessary to stop the flow of vessels arriving on our coasts. This is what we intend to do, in collaboration with the North African authorities, but without excluding the possibility of a naval blockade to counter the unacceptable behaviour of NGOs operating in the Mediterranean. If necessary, we intend to establish an international land mission to take control of the ports from which the vessels of death depart and establish hotspots directly in North Africa to evaluate the asylum applications of refugees, to be divided among all European states'. The second issue was the more restrictive definition of refugee status and refugee reception policy. 'Anyone who succeeds in crossing the Italian border illegally must be considered an illegal immigrant "until proven otherwise", and therefore detained in an identification and expulsion centre, rather than being automatically hosted in reception facilities as happens currently'. Furthermore: 'We intend to abolish the Italian anomaly of "humanitarian protection" and consider only the few asylum applications of vulnerable people such as women, children and families arriving from full-blown war zones and without any possible destination other than Italy'. The third issue was the reform of regular immigration policies with the aim of selecting for entry culturally similar migrants. The 'flows decrees' had to favour 'those nationals that have integrated easily without creating security problems, and to block the immigration of those nationals that have proven less inclined to accept our laws and our culture, as in the case of Islamic immigration'. The fourth issue was the blocking of any attempt to simplify access to Italian citizenship for migrants. 'We do not accept the principle of *ius soli* or any automatic procedure in obtaining citizenship. For us, only those who love Italy, speak Italian, understand and respect our laws, our culture, our historical and religious traditions can become citizens'. The final issue was the limitation of access to welfare by foreigners and the imposition of the principle of national preference. 'Those who have contributed with their labour, over the years, to making Italy the nation it is today must not find themselves systematically overtaken by the latest arrival'.⁹

The manifestos FdI and Meloni presented for the 2018 general election and the 2019 European Parliament election reflected the Trieste proposals. Some of the proposals put forward for the latter contest are worthy of note; in particular: the EU's withdrawal from the UN Global Compact; the creation of a European mission to guarantee the naval blockade of North Africa, and the fight against French neo-colonialism which impoverishes the countries that suffer it and fuels emigration.¹⁰

A further opportunity for the development of policy came with the publication of the prime Minister's autobiography in 2021, *Io sono Giorgia. Le mie radici, le mie idee (I am Giorgia. My roots, my ideas)*, in which an entire chapter is devoted to the migration issue.

The main novelty is a fairly clear shift in overall interpretation. If the *Trieste Theses* portrayed migration almost exclusively as a danger to be combated in order to avoid European nations' loss of identity and the risk of ethnic replacement, Meloni now explicitly supports the idea that Italy needs migrants. 'The demographics are terrible. [...] Deaths outnumber births. We are destined for extinction as a people. [...] A priority for FdI has always been the most impressive plan to support families and the birth rate in the thousand-year history of the Italian people. A U-turn [...] which, unfortunately, will not bear fruit for several decades or even a few centuries. Therefore, at least at the moment, Italy actually needs an immigration quota, and no one has ever denied this'. This leads to the proposal to reopen legal immigration channels by reactivating the 'flows decrees' and establishing quotas appropriate to the demographic and economic needs of the country. '... a responsible State cannot send the message that those who arrive by breaking the law will be favoured over those who respect the rules, diligently queuing to enter with a regular residence permit, as has consistently happened in recent years with elimination of the "flows decrees", i.e. the means by which the State establishes the numbers of legal migrants, divided by nationality'. Having accepted the need for migrants, the priority now becomes, even more emphatically, that of choosing the 'best' migrants. Priority should be given to those culturally compatible with the national community, encouraging in particular the return of people of Italian origin (the Berlusconi II government had already provided in the 'flows decrees' for (very modest) quotas for descendants of Italian emigrants) and the arrival of families. Finally, Meloni places new emphasis on the need to reduce push factors in migrants' countries of origin and advances the idea of an integral plan for the development of Africa (Meloni 2021).

Many of the ideas presented in Meloni's autobiography appear in the manifesto, *Pronti a risollevere l'Italia (Ready to revive Italy)*, FdI prepared for the September 2022 elections. This promised to combat irregular immigration and manage legal flows in an orderly fashion. It called for defence of national and European borders as provided for by the Schengen Treaty and required by the EU, with border control and blocking of landings in order, in collaboration with the North African authorities, to stop human trafficking. There would be the creation of hotspots in non-European territories, managed by the EU, to evaluate asylum applications, and the fair distribution, among the 27 member countries, only of those entitled to asylum (the so-called 'naval blockade'). 'Flows decrees' were presented as instruments of international cooperation, and the management of regular border crossings. There was to be encouragement to return to Italy on the part of Italians resident abroad and those of Italian origin. The document promised to end the activities of NGOs that encourage irregular immigration.¹¹

The deeds: a year in government (2022–2023)

Confirming pre-election forecasts, on 25 September 2022, the centre-right coalition exceeded 43% of the votes cast and obtained large majorities in the two houses of Parliament. This was a widely anticipated victory and an epochal change for Italian politics, bringing to office the first government in the country's history led by a woman and supported by a large, radical-right majority ([Donà 2022; Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2023]). The balance of power within the coalition was clear and assigned the leading role to FdI and its general secretary. In voting for the Chamber of Deputies, FdI had obtained

25.98%; the League, 8.79%; Forza Italia, 8.11%; Noi moderati (We moderates), 0.9%. Just under a month after the elections, the President of the Republic entrusted Meloni with the task of forming the government, which took office on 22 October.

Thanks to the significant resumption of flows along the Mediterranean corridor and the tragic return of drownings at sea,¹² during its first year the Meloni government was distinguished for its hyperactivity in the field of migration and by the Prime Minister's hyper-exposure on the issue. Between 22 October 2022 and 15 November 2023, 13 of the 58 meetings of the Cabinet dealt with issues directly related to migration management. In the same period, eight specific decree-laws were approved. Furthermore, the Prime Minister gave numerous *ad hoc* interviews to national and international media outlets. She participated in two official visits to Tunisia; organized the International Conference on Development and Migration in Rome; organized a joint press conference with the President of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, on the island of Lampedusa. Her speech to the annual meeting of the United Nations General Assembly centred on the theme of migration. Finally, a joint press conference was organized with the Albanian Prime Minister, Edi Rama, in order to present a memorandum of understanding between the two countries for the management of asylum seekers.

This hyperactivity was concentrated on two fronts. The first, which included most of the Government's actions and was at the centre of its political communication, was that of border control and the suppression of irregular immigration. In this area, the Government pursued three main objectives. First, it sought a further tightening of sea rescue, reception, identification and expulsion policies. In particular, Legislative Decree no. 1/2023 introduced new, more stringent conditions for NGOs involved in rescue operations at sea. They were required to ascertain migrants' intentions to request asylum; to ask the authorities to designate a port of disembarkation and to proceed there without delay. Harsher pecuniary and administrative sanctions were to be imposed on the commanders and owners of vessels detained due to a failure to comply with the new legislation.¹³ Legislative Decree no. 20/2023, called the 'Cutro decree', approved following the shipwreck of a migrant vessel off the Calabrian coast and the death of 94 people, provided for harsher penalties to be imposed for aiding and abetting irregular immigration. It introduced a new crime of causing 'death or injury as a consequence of crimes relating to illegal immigration', with penalties ranging from 10 to 30 years imprisonment for those found guilty. It abolished the requirement for validation by a justice of the peace for the execution of expulsion orders issued following criminal convictions. It imposed a new, significant restriction on temporary protection for humanitarian reasons, partly restored by the Conte II government after the restrictions contained in the 'security decree' introduced by Salvini.¹⁴ On 11 April 2023, the Government also declared a state of emergency covering the entire national territory for six months, extended for another six months on 5 October, to deal with 'overcrowding in reception centres and, in particular, at the Lampedusa hotspot, and in anticipation of further increases in the number of departures in the coming months'.¹⁵ The declaration, by no means a novelty,¹⁶ allows the Government to shorten the timescales and simplify the administrative procedures involved in decongesting existing structures and creating new ones. Finally, Legislative Decree no. 124 of 19 September 2023 provides for an increase to 18 months in the maximum allowable period of incarceration in Repatriation Detention Centres

(CPR) and a plan for the exceptional construction of one new detention facility in every region.¹⁷

Secondly, the Government sought to strengthen cooperation policies with the European Union and non-EU countries aimed at controlling irregular migrant departures. After a first joint visit by Meloni, EU Commission president, Ursula Von der Leyen and Dutch Prime Minister, Mark Rutte, to Tunis on 11 June, the three returned to the Tunisian capital on 16 July to sign the 'Memorandum of Understanding on a strategic and global partnership between the European Union and Tunisia'. The document provides for bilateral cooperation in various areas, including: economic and financial development, energy and the digital transition, sustainable use of water resources, and, most important of all, at least from a European point of view, the governance of migration. In this field, the agreement provides, in exchange for regular channels of entry for Tunisian workers and students and financial support from the European side to equip and train local security forces, Tunisia's commitment to cooperate in the repatriation of its own nationals irregularly present in the EU and, more generally, to improve the control of its borders. The Europeans presented the agreement to the media as a success in the battle against irregular migration. However, both the absence of clear financial commitments and Tunisia's insistence on the inclusion of wording to the effect that Tunisia 'is not a country of settlement of irregular migrants' and that their forces intend to 'control only their own borders'¹⁸ suggests the weakness of the agreement. Subsequently, on 6 November 2023, Meloni met the Albanian Prime Minister, Edi Rama, at Palazzo Chigi where they presented the 'Protocol between the Government of the Italian Republic and the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania for the strengthening of collaboration on the matter of migration'. The agreement between the two governments provides for the concession to Italy, at no cost to Albania, of two areas for the construction and management of centres for the detention of up to 3,000 migrants per month arriving in Italian waters by sea. The first area is located in the port of Shengjin and is envisaged as a centre for an initial screening of landed migrants, the second in the Gjader area for the detention of migrants until their migration status has been ascertained. Italian jurisdiction would apply in such areas. According to the two leaders' joint statements, the planned facilities were expected to come into operation in the spring of 2024.¹⁹

Finally, there was a review of cooperation policies, in particular with African countries, with the aim of supporting their development and reducing departures from them in the medium term. On 3 November 2023, the Cabinet approved Legislative Decree no. 162/2023. As explained in the accompanying press release, 'the 'Mattei Plan', lasting four years, [would] have the objective of strengthening collaboration between Italy and the states of the African continent, promoting the sustainable and enduring economic and social development of the latter and preventing the root causes of irregular migration'.²⁰ The text of the decree, however, was limited to presenting the generic aims of the plan and defining its governance, postponing the definition of the specific objectives and their possible financing to a joint process together with the African states involved.

The second main area of Government intervention in the field of migration was the management of regular flows. Considering the visibility given to the initiatives on the first front, one could say that on the second the government acted almost silently. The

first measure to be approved was the Legislative Decree of 29 December 2022.²¹ The ‘flows decree’ provided for the admission of a maximum of 82,705 foreign nationals and authorized the actual entry of 38,705.²² Given FdI’s pre-election promises on the topic, the provision for a quota of only 100 workers of Italian origin residing in Venezuela is striking. The final quota of foreign nationals admitted for 2022 would be expanded by another 40,000 units with the passage of the Legislative Decree of 19 July 2023.²³ The ‘Cutro decree’ introduces, in addition to the provisions already mentioned, a series of interesting provisions regarding regular immigration. In particular, it establishes that the quotas of foreign nationals to be admitted for work in the period 2023–2025 will be determined for periods of three years rather than annually as hitherto; that quotas reserved for workers from states that have collaborated with Italy to promote media campaigns on the risks of irregular migration will be preferentially assigned. Furthermore, the decree simplifies the procedure for obtaining work permits. These will be issued automatically if, after 60 days, the police have failed to complete the necessary applicant background checks required by law. The decree also provides for non-quota admission for foreign nationals who in their countries of origin have successfully completed training courses recognized by the Italian government; and it extends from two to three years the periods of renewal of residence permits issued for the purposes of permanent employment, self-employment or family reunification.²⁴ Finally, as a consequence of the provisions of the ‘Cutro decree’, on 27 September 2023 the Prime Minister issued the decree entitled, ‘Planning of the legal entry of foreign workers for the three-year period 2023–2025’. The total expected number of entries were 136,000 in 2023, 151,000 in 2024 and 165,000 in 2025.

Discussion and conclusions

The preceding paragraphs have analysed how the positions on the issue of immigration of the Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, evolved during the years in opposition, and examined the initiatives taken by her Government. This makes possible an initial evaluation of the consistency between opposition stances and government actions and of how innovative the latter have been.

With regard to the first point, Meloni’s positions and those of her party have become more moderate with the passage of time. Although some of their voters probably expected the ‘fire and brimstone’ portrayed in the collective imagination, from 2021 – perhaps because she was aware of the possibility of coming to power drawing nearer – Meloni toned down the radical proposals that had distinguished the rhetoric of previous years. For example, in her autobiography, which preceded the elections by a year, she spoke openly about immigration as a necessity for the country; of the need to combat irregular migration by reactivating channels of access for regular migrants through ‘flows decrees’; of the need to promote the social and labour-market inclusion of regular migrants. These positions would stand out in FdI’s manifesto for the 2022 elections, in which the flagship policies of the *barricadera* era – an end to immigration, a naval blockade, the criminalization of asylum seekers, the ethno-cultural selection of migrants – make only a marginal appearance. Therefore, any contradictions between words and deeds must be sought, not in relation to the most spectacular policies, but, in relation to the more low-key ones concerning migration management.

From the latter perspective, there are important inconsistencies both between words and deeds and between actions and results (though evaluation of the latter inconsistency is less straightforward and will require more time). The Prime Minister's hyperactivity and hyper-exposure on migration issues reflected her desire to show determination and resolve in this area and to follow up on her promises to manage the issue firmly. In the space of just over a year, the Meloni government adopted measures with respect to almost all the points contained in the election manifesto: border control; the strengthening and prolongation of administrative detention; agreements with third countries; involvement of the EU; penalization of NGOs; the limitation of humanitarian protection; activation and expansion of 'flows decrees'; the 'Mattei plan'. However, looking closely at the various initiatives, clear ambiguities and weaknesses emerge. Regarding the commitment to stop irregular immigration through the reactivation of regular flows, the return to three-year planning and the simplification interventions introduced by the 'Cutro decree' can be considered steps in the desired direction. However, substantial confirmation of the system introduced by the 'Bossi-Fini' law and therefore of the need for a current employment contract for the receipt and renewal of residence permits, ensures that the 'flows decrees' remain, as in the past, instruments of *ex-post* regularization and therefore, once again, facilitators of a model of irregular immigration. Furthermore, although the quotas have been significantly increased compared to previous years, they remain far from being able to satisfy the needs of Italian employers who will invariably have to recruit through other routes. Moreover, in the battle against irregular immigration, the restriction of temporary protection for humanitarian reasons removes an important tool for managing arrivals at the border, opening the doors of irregularity for all those who fail to qualify for refugee status.

Regarding the proposal to select migrants on the basis of cultural compatibility, the criteria introduced in the construction of the three-year planning quotas reflect other priorities, in particular the demands of employers and the existence of agreements with the countries to which the quotas are assigned. There is no trace, therefore, of special quotas for Catholic countries or for those with large communities of Italian descendants. With respect to the promise to curb the downward pressure on wages of migrant labour, the Government has taken no specific action and has opposed, for example, the introduction of minimum wage legislation, which could have an important role in this respect. With regard to the issue of control of migrant departures and the promise to collaborate with non-EU countries for this purpose, for various reasons, both the agreements with Tunisia and the memorandum of understanding with Albania raise a number of doubts. In the first case, Tunis' explicit refusal to carry out border control on behalf of Europe, as well as the lack of clarity on funding has already shown the operational limits of the agreement. In the second case, the complexity of the operation, both from a material and legal point of view, as demonstrated by the temporary suspension of the agreement by Albania's Constitutional Court and the failure of similar attempts by other European countries – notably the United Kingdom – suggest the existence of significant obstacles in the way of success.

Regarding the degree of innovation of the Meloni government with respect to migration management over the last 20 years, none of the multiplicity of initiatives have departed substantially from those of previous governments. In terms of control policies, the adoption of emergency *ad hoc* measures in response to news events and new

restrictions on humanitarian reception, typical of centre-right governments, have been combined with the search for bilateral agreements with third countries for the limitation of departures. Centre-left governments initiated the latter in their day. In terms of regular migration, in addition to the confirmation of that dysfunctional entry regime for migrant workers via ‘flows decrees’ on the basis of the existence of an employment contract, the limited attention to other issues was also confirmed; in particular, access to citizenship and integration policies. If anyone was expecting, therefore, a profound change of pace and more restrictions in the field of migration, these expectations have so far been disappointed. The Italian right, in its latest incarnation, has shown itself, once again, to be highly effective in riding popular fears and promising drastic solutions when in opposition, and then reacting with extreme open-minded pragmatism (e.g. the ‘flows decrees’) and with harmful, outwardly restrictive initiatives (e.g. the new crackdown on temporary protection for humanitarian reasons) – once in government. Such ambiguity reflects the profound contradiction between the rejection of foreigners and interest in their economic contribution that informs the right’s ideology.

In conclusion, the experience of the Meloni government demonstrates that governing is very different from propaganda, especially in the field of migration (Finotelli and Ponzo 2023). The complexity of the phenomenon, with respect to which states find themselves acting in the midst of a tangle of heterogeneous actors, levels, interests and dynamics, both domestically and internationally, frustrates any attempt at rapid and decisive decision-making. If we add to this the internal complexity of each administration and the further complexity relating to the dynamics of politics, between discourse and implementation, between propaganda and government, between opposition and majority, we obtain a picture of the difficulties distinguishing this area.

Aside from assessments of the contingencies of migration management, the Meloni government’s actions offer material for a broader reflection on the management of migration in Italy, where, since the end of the 1980s, extreme politicization has significantly influenced governments’ abilities to manage the phenomenon. The parties’ needs constantly to compete on this issue have prevented rational debate, stimulating, in its place an ‘arms race’, in which each is a prisoner of the need to defend abstract principles and then to have to deal with the difficulties and limits of migration management once in government. Thus the distance between discourse and reality, between proposals and the actual feasibility of action, between ideals and necessity, has grown constantly. This has made consistency impossible and resulted in the rather bizarre situation whereby if the left manages migration, it is accused of promoting the policies of the right, and if the right manages it, it is accused of promoting the policies of the left. The reality is that for the past 20 years, governance of the phenomenon has been essentially bipartisan. This has perpetuated a model of reluctant openness that satisfies no one, that creates problems, and which no one, a victim of their own discourse, has been able actually to change. Giorgia Meloni seems, so far, to have been no exception.

Notes

1. See, for example, J. Williams, ‘Italy’s New Prime Minister: Why Immigrants Should Far-Right Giorgia Meloni’, *International Business Times*, 10 October 2022; ‘Giorgia Meloni: Migrants’ Fear over Italy’s New Far-Right Prime Minister’, *BBC News*, 22 October 2022.

2. *Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno*, ‘Da governo ancora nessuna posizione’, 26 August 2023.
3. *Tesi di Trieste per il movimento dei patrioti*, <https://www.giorgiameloni.it>.
4. Italy is therefore in line with the European average and above some countries with older immigration histories (UN 2023).
5. On 3 October 2013, a boat carrying migrants from Libya sank off the island of Lampedusa.
6. Standard Eurobarometer 86, Autumn 2016, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2137>.
7. FdI, *Le sfide per l'Italia*, <https://www.fratelli-italia.it>, 2013.
8. FdI, *Programma elezioni europee*, <https://www.fratelli-italia.it>, 2014.
9. *Trieste thesis for the patriot movement*, cit.
10. *Programma elezioni europee*, <https://www.fratelli-italia.it>, 2019.
11. *Pronti a risollevar l'Italia*, <https://www.fratelli-italia.it>, 2022.
12. At the end of 2023 there had been more than 2,200 deaths at sea in the central Mediterranean (IOM 2024).
13. *Gazzetta Ufficiale – Serie generale*, n. 52, 2 March 2023.
14. *Gazzetta Ufficiale – Serie generale*, n. 104, 5 May 2023.
15. Council of ministers, n. 28.
16. The previous state of emergency due to the ‘migration crisis’ had been declared in 2011 by the last Berlusconi government.
17. *Gazzetta Ufficiale – Serie generale*, n. 268, 16 November 2023.
18. *Memorandum of Understanding on a strategic and global partnership between the European Union and Tunisia*, Tunis, 16 July 2023.
19. Protocol Ita- Alb 6/2023.
20. Comunicato stampa del Consiglio dei ministri n. 57.
21. *Gazzetta Ufficiale – Serie generale*, n. 1, 2 January 2023.
22. *Gazzetta Ufficiale – Serie generale*, n. 21, 26 January 2023.
23. *Gazzetta Ufficiale – Serie generale*, n. 189, 14 August 2023.
24. *Gazzetta Ufficiale – Serie generale*, n.104, 5 May 2023.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Gabriel Echeverría is “Maria Zambrano” Research Fellow at the Complutense University of Madrid, Department of Applied Sociology. Claudia Finotelli is Associate Professor at the Complutense University of Madrid, Department of Applied Sociology.

Claudia Finotelli is Associate Professor at the Complutense University of Madrid, Department of Applied Sociology.

References

- Abbondanza, G. 2023. “A Sea of Difference? Australian and Italian Approaches to Irregular Migration and Seaborne Asylum Seekers.” *Contemporary Politics* 29 (1): 93–113. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2022.2080959>.
- Ambrosini, M. 2013. *Irregular Migration and Invisible Welfare*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Boswell, C. 2007. “Theorizing Migration Policy: Is There a Third Way?” *The International Migration Review* 41 (1): 75–100. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2007.00057.x>.
- Colombo, A. 2012. *Fuori controllo? Miti e realtà dell’immigrazione in Italia*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

- Colombo, A., and G. Sciortino. 2003. "The Bossi-Fini Law: Explicit Fanaticism, Implicit Moderation, and Poisoned Fruits." *Italian Politics* 18 (1): 162–179. <https://doi.org/10.3167/ip.2002.180111>.
- Dennison, J., and A. Geddes. 2019. "A Rising Tide? The Salience of Immigration and the Rise of Anti-Immigration Political Parties in Western Europe." *The Political Quarterly* 90 (1): 107–116. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12620>.
- Devitt, C. 2023, March 13. "Continuity and Change in Immigration Regimes: An Institutional Analysis of Italian Labor Immigration Regulations 1990–2020." *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2023.2180128>
- Donà, A. 2022. "The Rise of the Radical Right in Italy: The Case of Fratelli d'Italia." *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 27 (5): 775–794. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2022.2113216>.
- Echeverría, G. 2020. *Towards a Systemic Theory of Irregular Migration: Explaining Ecuadorian Irregular Migration in Amsterdam and Madrid*. Cham: Springer.
- Finotelli, C., and G. Echeverría. 2017. "So Close but Yet so Far? Labour Migration Governance in Italy and Spain." *International Migration* 55 (S1): 39–51. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12362>.
- Finotelli, C., and I. Ponzio, eds. 2023. *Migration Control Logics and Strategies in Europe: A North-South Comparison*. Cham: Springer.
- Geddes, A. 2008. *Immigration and European Integration: Beyond Fortress Europe?* II ed. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Geddes, A., and A. Pettrachin. 2020. "Italian Migration Policy and Politics: Exacerbating Paradoxes." *Contemporary Italian Politics* 12 (2): 227–242. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2020.1744918>.
- IOM. (2024). Missing Migrants Project. <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>.
- Meloni, G. 2021. *Io sono Giorgia. Le mie radici, le mie idee*. Milano: Rizzoli.
- Pasquino, G., and M. Valbruzzi. 2023. "The 2022 General Italian Elections: The Long-Awaited Victory of the Right." *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 28 (1): 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2022.2150805>.
- Pastore, F. 2023. *Migramorfosi. Apertura o declino*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Ponzo, I. 2023. "Looking into Policy Change: How the Italian Asylum Regime Came of Age." In *Migration Control Logics and Strategies in Europe*, edited by C. Finotelli and I. Ponzio, 283–302. Cham: Springer.
- Ponzo, I., L. Giannetto, and E. Roman. 2022. "The Variance in Multilevel Governance of Asylum Seekers' Reception in Italy." In *Coping with Migrants and Refugees*, edited by T. Caponio and I. Ponzio, 90–119. London: Routledge.
- Sciortino, G., and C. Finotelli. 2009. "The Importance of Being Southern: The Making of Policies of Immigration Control in Italy." *European Journal of Migration and Law* 11 (2): 119–138. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157181609X439998>.
- United Nation. (2023). Migration to the EU: Facts Not Perceptions. Accessed December 14, 2023. <https://unric.org/en/migration-to-the-eu-facts-not-perceptions>.
- Zincone, G. 2006. "The Making of Policies: Immigration and Immigrants in Italy." *Journal of Ethnic & Migration Studies* 32 (3): 347–375. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830600554775>.