Radical Right-Wing Populism and the European Migration Crisis: Explaining The Transformation of the Lega between 2013 and 2019

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Abstract

Between 2013 and 2019, Matteo Salvini, Italy’s radical-right populist leader, successfully transformed the *Lega* from a regionalist into a nationalist party. This transformation culminated in June 2018 with the formation of a coalition government led by the *Lega* and the anti-establishment Five Star Movement. Salvini’s electoral success was mainly determined by his emphasis on immigration during the electoral campaign. By 2018, voters regarded the *Lega* as the only party capable of stopping irregular migration to Italy and of opposing the European Union. Salvini skillfully built such image of his party during the so-called European migration crisis begun in late 2013. With this context as a premise, this thesis investigates the following question: What is the role played by the migration crisis in *Lega*’s transformation into a national party? The research conducted in the thesis shows that the migration crisis offered Salvini a vehicle for channeling anti-immigrant, Eurosceptic, nationalist, and sometimes xenophobic sentiments. To show why this is the case, the thesis analyzes the policies adopted by the EU and by the Italian government in response to the migration crisis and Salvini’s rhetoric in reaction to them. Such analysis is mainly based on material gathered from politicians’ social media accounts and from the main left- and right-wing Italian newspapers. While recognizing that immigration is not the *raison d’être* of radical-right populist parties, this thesis suggests that it acted as a major catalyst for success in the Italian context.
# Table of Contents

Abstract .........................................................................................................................ii

Table of Contents ...........................................................................................................iii

List of Figures .................................................................................................................iv

List of Tables ..................................................................................................................v

1. Introduction .................................................................................................................1

2. The Evolution of *Lega’s* Anti-EU and Anti-Immigration Sentiment ......................8


4. The Securitization of the Migration Crisis by the EU (2015-2016) .........................20
   The EU's Response to the Crisis .................................................................................20
   The Politicization of the Crisis in European Countries ...........................................26
   The Politicization of the Crisis in Italy .....................................................................28

5. The Securitization of the Migration Crisis by the Italian Government (2017-2018) ...33
   Minniti's "Philosohy of Immigration and Security" .................................................33
   Minniti's Immigration Policies ..................................................................................35
   Salvini's Response to Governmental Policies .........................................................37

   Salvini's Immigration Policies ..................................................................................41
   Salvini's Rhetoric ......................................................................................................43

7. Conclusion and Final Remarks ..................................................................................46

Bibliography ....................................................................................................................49
List of Figures

Figure 1: Facebook post by Matteo Salvini, 4 October 2013 ................................................................. 14

Figure 2: Facebook post by Matteo Salvini, 4 October 2013 ................................................................. 17

Figure 3: Twitter post by Matteo Salvini, 27 April 2014. ................................................................. 18

Figure 4: Facebook post by Matteo Salvini, 11 February 2015......................................................... 29

Figure 5: Facebook post by Europe of Nations and Freedom, 16 July 2016 ........................................ 31
List of Tables

Table 1: Sea Arrivals from 2013 to 2019................................................................. 5
Table 2: Dead and Missing in the Mediterranean from 2014 to 2019.......................... 5
### List of Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AfD</td>
<td>Alternative für Deutschland</td>
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<tr>
<td>ERP</td>
<td>Extreme Right Party</td>
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<td>EAPN</td>
<td>European Alliance of Peoples and Nations</td>
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<td>LN</td>
<td>Lega Nord</td>
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<td>M5S</td>
<td>Movimento Cinque Stelle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PD</td>
<td>Partito Democratico</td>
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<tr>
<td>SAP</td>
<td>Social Democratic Party</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Introduction

In an article of 1999, Cas Mudde rejects the claim that immigration is the sole issue explaining the rise of extreme right parties (ERPs) in Europe in the mid-1980s. At best, he concludes, “immigration has been a catalyst for most ERPs in certain periods of time” (182). In other words, he suggests that immigration may act as a catalyst of electoral success for some, but not all, ERPs, and only under specific circumstances. This is the case because immigration enables them to link nationalist and xenophobic discourses to increasing resentment about social and economic issues among the electorate. At the time of writing the article, Italy represented an exception which confirmed Mudde’s thesis, as the Movimento Sociale Italiano (Italian Social Movement), a neo-fascist party, remained silent on the issue of immigration during the 1980s. This exception does not come as a surprise, because ERPs, like other parties, tend to adapt to “issue attention cycles” (190), changing their focus according to the salience of an issue at a certain point in time.

Almost twenty years after Mudde published his article, Italy has turned into a fertile ground for research on ERPs, populism, and immigration. The Italian general election of 4 March 2018 marked the decline of the incumbent center-left Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD) and paved the way for a coalition government formed by two populist parties, the Lega (League) and the Movimento 5 Stelle (5-Star Movement, M5S). The vote share of the PD dropped by 6.7% compared to the 2013 election, going from 25.4% to 18.7%, mainly because it lost votes to the Lega in Northern regions and to the M5S in Southern regions. The success of the Lega, which increased its vote share by 13.2%, going from 4.1% in 2013 to 17.3% in 2018, is due to its
undisputed victory in Northern regions and to its ability to appeal also to part of the electorate in Central and Southern Italy. On the contrary, the M5S increased its vote share by 7.1%, going from 25.5% in 2013 to 32.6% in 2018, by prevailing in the South, the islands, and in some parts of Central Italy (Pritoni and Vignati 2018). Such an overwhelming victory by populist forces reflects Italians’ uneasiness about the issues on which the M5S and the Lega focused during their electoral campaigns, respectively unemployment and immigration (Emanuele and Maggini 2018).

For the purpose of investigating the link between immigration and populism in Italy, this thesis will be focused on the Lega and not on the M5S. The reason for this choice can be explained by distinguishing between the distinct variants of populism embraced by the two parties. While scholars disagree on the proper definition of such an elusive concept as populism, Mudde (2004) provides a definition which identifies a common denominator for all populist parties. He understands populism as “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people” (453). In other words, he considers populism as a “thin-centred ideology” (454), namely, as having a simplistic ideology which mainly relies on the juxtaposition between “the people”, or the “us”, and its enemy, “the elite” or the “them”. With its minimalist ideological component, populism can be combined with different other ideologies, ranging from extreme-left to extreme-right ones. Over the past decade, European countries have also experienced an increasing correlation between populism and Euroscepticism, although these are distinct concepts and do not necessarily coincide. As Kneuer (2018) explains, hostility toward the European Union (EU) can originate from economic factors (e.g. unemployment), identity factors (e.g. civic versus ethnic identity), and
institutional factors (e.g. distrust towards European institutions). This theoretical framework is particularly useful for understanding populism(s) in Italy.

With respect to the M5S, scholars of Italian populism note that this party identifies itself as an anti-establishment movement without a clear position on the political spectrum (Franzosi et al. 2015). Such a “thin-centred ideology” enables the party to appeal to a heterogeneous electorate, relying on the widespread distrust among Italians towards both national and European institutions. Moreover, the M5S mainly frames the us-versus-them distinction in socio-economic terms (Caiani and Graziano 2016). The “us” usually denotes ordinary citizens, who are exploited by the “them”, a group which comprises supranational institutions, such as the EU and the World Bank, as well as other Italian parties and institutions. Given the M5S’s call for direct democracy and its commitment to fighting corruption, Anselmi (2018) puts the party in the category of “democratic populism” (68). As appears evident from this brief analysis of the party’s tenets, the agenda of the M5S has mainly focused on the issues of unemployment and corruption, adopting an unclear stance towards immigration (Bulli and Soare 2018).

Unlike the M5S, the *Lega* has been identified as a populist radical right party since its foundation in 1991 (Albertazzi et al. 2018). Until 2013, when its name was still *Lega Nord* (“Northern League”, LN), the *Lega* was also defined as an ethno-regionalist party in order to account for its federalist component, whereby it called for the independence of a Northern region known as Padania (McDonnell 2006). The *Lega* has always framed the us-versus-them distinction in both economic and ethnic terms. From an economic point of view, the “us” designates ordinary and virtuous people of Northern Italy, of Italy as a whole, and of Europe, as opposed to the corrupt elite of Rome and of European institutions (Caiano and Graziano 2016). With respect to ethnicity and cultural identity, the *Lega* embraces a form of nativist nationalism whereby it identifies the
“us” with the hard-working people of the Padania and the “them” with unproductive Southerners, at least until 2013, and with culturally diverse immigrants (Albertazzi et al. 2018). Consequently, the party’s emphasis on immigration as a threat to the cultural homogeneity of “the pure people” makes it more adequate than the M5S for the study carried out in this thesis.

In particular, the purpose of this thesis is to investigate the role of immigration in Lega’s transformation from a small regional party into a major national party. This study is particularly relevant because the beginning of the party’s transformation in 2013 coincides with the beginning of the so-called European migration crisis. The expression “migration crisis” will be used in this thesis to refer to the inability of European countries to respond adequately to the significant number of migrants who reached Europe from the Middle East and North Africa from 2013 to 2019. Being the second country of arrival after Greece, Italy has been particularly affected by the crisis. Table 1 and Table 2 (see next page), which report the number of sea arrivals and the number of dead and missing people during this time frame, respectively, show the magnitude of the humanitarian emergency in the Mediterranean. As appears evident, arrivals remained relatively high from 2013 to 2016, when the PD adopted a humanitarian approach. It then decreased suddenly from 2017 onwards, a period which corresponds to the securitisation of migration policies by the PD and to the establishment of the Lega-M5S government.
Both as an opposition and as a mainstream party, the *Lega* has presented itself as the true defender of the socio-economic and cultural interests of “the pure people”, namely ordinary Italians. Scholars who study this party are mainly interested in the differences between pre- and post-2013 *Lega* and in the definitional implications of its transformation into a national party (Brunazzo and Gilbert 2017; Albertazzi et al. 2018). In doing so, they focus on the inflammatory
rhetoric of its leader, Matteo Salvini, and on how, in a populist fashion, he appeals to people’s anger and resentment without having a programmatic agenda. However, as Bale (2008) correctly observes, it “is the real world …, and not just the fevered imaginings of demagogues and ill-informed, culturally threatened voters, that poses real policy questions for politicians” (319). In other words, by not analyzing systematically the process through which the *Lega* became a national party, the scholarly literature on political parties does not pay enough attention to the concrete problems which made the success of the *Lega* possible. At the same time, the scholarly literature on immigration does not take into account the role of the *Lega* in shaping immigration policy in Italy (Caponio and Cappiali 2018). The question which underlies the research conducted in this thesis is thus the following: What is the role played by the migration crisis in *Lega’s* transformation into a national party?

In order to identify the relation between the migration crisis and *Lega’s* transformation between 2013 and 2019, this thesis is divided into five parts. The first section will provide a historical overview of the *Lega* and identify the roots of Euroscepticism and anti-immigrant sentiment in its ideology. This overview is useful because it provides a background against which to assess the innovations brought by Matteo Salvini. Sections two to four will explore the *Lega’s* reaction to Italian and European migration policies and how it helped the party to fuel anti-European and anti-immigrant sentiments. In particular, section two will look at the period from 2013 to 2014, section three from 2015 to 2016, and section four from 2017 to mid-2018. Lastly, section five will examine the policies of the *Lega* in government and assess how much they correspond to its electoral promises. Concerning methodology, the material used in this thesis is based on speeches and texts gathered directly from politicians’ social media accounts and from interviews with both left- and right-wing Italian newspapers, such as La Repubblica, La Stampa,
and Il Giornale. By highlighting the instrumental use of Italian and European migration policies in politicians’ rhetoric, this thesis does not mean to suggest that immigration is the *raison d’etre* of radical right populism in Italy. It suggests instead that, following Mudde’s insight, immigration in Italy has had implications for socio-economic and cultural issues which are typically “owned” by the extreme right and which become particularly relevant in times of crisis.
2. The Evolution of *Lega’s* Anti-EU and Anti-immigration Sentiment

Born in 1991 in Northern Italy, the *Lega Nord* (LN) is the oldest party of the so-called Second Republic, a period which began in 1994 following a change in the Italian party system. The LN was initially a small radical right party, which emerged from the merger of minor regional parties and which counted only 18,000 members (Cento Bull 205). Under the charismatic leadership of Umberto Bossi, the Party Secretary until 2012 and lifetime President afterwards, the LN made its debut on the Italian political scene in the elections of 1992. Riding the wave of popular distrust towards the political class of the time, caused by a major corruption scandal known as *Tangentopoli*, the LN secured enough votes to become the fourth party in the country. In the following years, the LN became a key player in the elections of 1994, 1996, 2001, 2005, and 2008, and an important component of the subsequent center-right governmental coalitions.

Since its inception, Bossi’s party made the autonomy of the Padania one of its core tenets. Inspired by the political philosopher Gianfranco Miglio, who argued in 1945 that the Padania constituted a distinct geographical, economic, and ethnic entity deserving self-government, the LN put forth a programmatic federalist project (Brunazzo and Gilbert 627). This project was based on the belief that “the pure people” of Padania were culturally different from the rest of Italy, that they were economically exploited by unproductive Southerners because the disproportionate amount of resources which they produced were used to finance the South, and that politicians in Rome, who were mainly corrupted Southerners, were responsible for such situation. Consequently, in its early years the LN framed the us-versus-them distinction both in terms of the hard-working people of Padania versus the parasitic, lazy, and Mafiosi people of the South and in terms of the virtuous people of Padania versus the corrupt elite of Rome.
Euroscepticism and anti-immigration were almost absent in Bossi’s original project. On the contrary, until 1998, right before the adoption of the Euro, the LN regarded European integration as highly desirable. The party went as far as to advocate the secession of the Padania from Italy, whose debt was too high, in order to join the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) (Huysseune 67). The reason for such a strong pro-European position lies in the belief held by the LN that globalization and European integration would weaken the traditional nation-state and thus pave the way for regional emancipation. From 1991 to 1998, the LN strongly favored EU anti-corruption directives and measures which would limit the power of Italy’s central government, as well as the Maastricht criteria which forced the government in Rome to reduce its expenditures.

The LN turned Eurosceptic when it became clear that the EU would not grant it autonomy after Italy successfully entered the EMU (Brunazzo and Gilbert 633). Bossi’s speech during a party meeting in March 1998 is a watershed in this Eurosceptic turn. The LN’s leader portrayed Europe as a “monster” which “is undeniably a mere defence of the European market, that is to say an act of protectionism, and like all protectionist measures it will favour big business, the great enterprises who have the nation state as their interlocutor” (8). In other words, the disenchanted members of the LN understood that the EU would defend the nation-state and its economic interests, at the expense of “the true people of Europe”, namely ordinary citizens of European states. Although the distinction between the true people of Europe and the bureaucrats in Brussels closely recalls Salvini’s later openly anti-EU stance, the LN of the early 2000s was not completely against European integration. On the contrary, Bossi’s LN was open to support EU legislation on issues of low salience and ready to oppose it on issues which caused popular discontent. Rather than opposing the EU, the party called for a different, less technocratic Europe, where people could express their opinion on issues such as the Euro (Brunazzo and Gilbert 634).
Meanwhile, an anti-immigration stance gradually penetrated the LN’s agenda during the 1990s. During that decade, Italy suddenly turned from a country of emigration into one of immigration, being faced with the arrival of almost 200,000 asylum seekers mainly from the Balkans (Bulli and Soare 130). In response, the LN began to apply its criterion of exclusion not only to Southern Italians, but also to immigrants, perceived as both a cultural and an economic threat. The party thus cultivated a “sense of victimhood” (140), whereby it depicted the native community as being abandoned by the elites to the immigrant invasion. This early anti-immigrant attitude reveals the nativist component present in the ideology of the LN since the beginning. Nativism can be defined as an ideology “which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (‘the nation’) and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening the homogeneous nation-state” (Mudde 2007 19). In other words, the LN immediately presented itself as the party which would defend the cultural homogeneity of “the nation”, a term which initially was limited to the Padania.

The nativist ideology of the LN explains the immigration policies which it actively promoted during its participation in governmental coalitions. In particular, during the center-right governments of 2001-2005 and of 2008-2011, both led by Silvio Berlusconi, the LN was able to pass two landmark laws in the area of immigration which still affect immigrants today. It is the case of the so-called Bossi-Fini law of 2002 and of the “Pacchetto Sicurezza” (“Security Package”) of 2009 (Colucci 24). The Bossi-Fini law introduced strict prerequisites for labor migrants to regularly reside in Italy, limited the number of family members for which a resident immigrant can request family reunion, and facilitated the expulsion of irregular immigrants from Italy. Even more controversial was the “Pacchetto Sicurezza”. This law, strongly advocated by Roberto Maroni, an influential member of the LN and at the time Minister of Interior, introduced the crime
of irregular migration and irregular stay, increased the necessary time to get Italian citizenship, and introduced mandatory proofs of integration, such as knowledge of Italian language, in order to obtain a residence permit of at least one year (26-27). These two laws paved the way for the criminalization of irregular migrants, whose condition has been considerably weakened as a consequence.

While anti-immigration and Euroscepticism do not appear to be correlated in the agenda promoted by the LN during its participation in Berlusconi’s governments, they started to be strongly interrelated since 2013. The LN’s need to rebrand its image was determined by at least three factors. The first factor is an empirical one, as 2013 coincides with the beginning of the European migration crisis. As this thesis will examine in greater detail, the inability of European institutions to deliver appreciable solutions caused popular resentment against them. Supranational institutions therefore provided an excellent scapegoat for the LN of Salvini to combine anti-immigration and Eurosceptic discourses. The second factor concerns pragmatic electoral calculations, as the raise of the M5S challenged the LN’s exclusive ownership of anti-elitist and anti-globalist arguments and forced it to adapt its strategy (Brunazzo and Gilbert 630). The third factor is internal to the LN itself, which lost its aura of an honest party fighting against the corrupt elite after a major financial scandal in 2012. The scandal involved Bossi’s son, who had used public funds for personal purposes. As a consequence, the party was obligated to return €49 million to the state, a thing which it still has not done, and Bossi was forced to resign as Secretary.

The desire to renovate the party enabled Matteo Salvini to be elected as Secretary of the LN in 2013. Under his leadership, the LN became the first regionalist populist party in Europe to turn into a nationalist one (Albertazzi et al. 646). Despite opposition from Bossi, Salvini abandoned the party’s federalist dream and was able to receive votes from parts of Italy where the LN generally
lacked support during the 2014 European elections. He succeeded in doing so especially by reformulating the traditional us-versus-them distinction. The “us” expanded to include Italians from all over the country, whereas the “them” ceased to represent solely Rome and became especially Brussels, the EU, and its institutions. Salvini transformed the LN’s nativist ideology by considering “the nation” as comprising a homogeneous Italian people and by intensifying the rhetoric against non-natives.

As part of this new strategy, Salvini founded a movement called Noi con Salvini (“Us with Salvini,” NcS), which served as a counterpart of the LN in central and southern regions from 2014 to 2018. Additionally, he replaced the word “Nord” with his name in the party’s electoral symbol, with the result of Lega Salvini Premier (Albertazzi et al. 649-650). With regards to immigration, Salvini’s Lega clarified its position in an official document of 2015, in which it claimed to endorse regular migration and committed to stop irregular migration (Bulli and Soare 140). As the following chapters of this thesis will show, Salvini’s fight on irregular migration allowed him to transform the Lega into an openly anti-EU party and to establish close ties with other extreme right populist parties in Europe, such as the French Front National and the Dutch Party for Freedom. The Lega, one of the parties which opposed Italy’s political unity for over two decades, has thus become the most fervent advocate of national sovereignty.

As identified in the previous chapter, Salvini took the first steps towards rebranding the *Lega* in 2013. During this year, the first signs of what would become the European migration crisis were perceived especially in Greece and in Italy. Just in 2013, more than 40,000 people reached Italy by sea, while in the following year arrivals topped 170,000 (see Table 1). Such a huge inflow of migrants caught both Italy and the EU unprepared to deliver efficient and swift solutions. As deaths at sea constantly increased and negotiations within the EU proved to be ineffective, the Italian government, led by Prime Minister Enrico Letta, a member of the PD, decided to launch a military and humanitarian naval operation in October 2013, without the involvement of the EU nor of the European agency for border control, Frontex. The operation was called *Mare Nostrum*, and it had the explicit purpose of searching and rescuing migrants in the Mediterranean. Such an open approach to the escalating humanitarian emergency in the Mediterranean was praised by NGOs and various international organizations for its ability to save lives, but it received harsh criticism both from EU member states and from political forces in Italy mainly because of its high costs.

This chapter will examine how the Italian government handled the crisis between 2013 and 2014, focusing on *Mare Nostrum* and on Salvini’s rhetoric built around it. It will appear evident that Salvini used *Mare Nostrum*, and immigration in general, as a scapegoat to connect nationalism, Euroscepticism, and anti-immigrant sentiment during his first year as Secretary of the *Lega*.

The government’s decision to start *Mare Nostrum* came as a response to the tragic shipwreck of Lampedusa, an Italian island in the south of Sicily, which caused the death of 366 migrants on
3 October 2013. In the wake of the incident, both European and Italian authorities reacted with symbolic acts expressing solidarity with the victims and a desire to cooperate in order to prevent such tragedies from happening again (Cetin 377). For example, Premier Letta decided to grant citizenship to those who had drawn at Lampedusa one day after the event. Meanwhile, he organized a visit to the island on the following week together with President of the European Commission José Barroso, EU Commissioner for Home Affairs Cecilia Malmström, and Italian Interior Minister Angelino Alfano. In their speeches, Barroso promised “additional funding for Italy of 30 million euros” (para.18), while Malmström advocated “a wide search and rescue Frontex operation covering the Mediterranean from Cyprus to Spain” (para.9). Despite such a humanitarian rhetoric, by the end of the month the European Council granted Italy meagre funds compared to what had been promised and did not take any concrete decision on a search and rescue operation (Campesi 2014 2).

While the tragedy and the subsequent European impasse spurred Letta to take action with Mare Nostrum, Salvini depicted the events of Lampedusa in a different light. Figure 1 shows the post which the leghista leader published on Facebook on the following day.

![Figure 1](image)

*Translation: A national mourning is not enough to clear one’s conscience, instead we need to enforce laws and make them stricter in order to prevent such disasters. Irregular immigration is a CRIME, one cannot be indifferent after these events. We cannot give these people the false hope that Italy is the Promised Land. Let us help them IN THEIR COUNTRIES!*
As appears evident, Salvini regards the symbolic steps, in particular the national mourning, taken by the Italian Prime Minister and other government officials close to him, as an expedient to clear their own conscience. In other words, he blames them for being both *buonisti* (“naïve”), a recurrent term in his rhetoric, and murderers. This is the case, his argument goes, because they do not enforce Italian laws, such as the previously examined law passed by the LN which criminalizes irregular migration. The underlying reasoning is that, had Italy had stricter regulations on irregular entry, migrants would not have attempted to cross the Mediterranean in the first place, and therefore they would not have died. Such position on immigration policies corresponds to what has been defined as the “rescue-through-interdiction approach” (Moreno-Lax 122). This model suggests that migrants should be rescued by preventing them from embarking on a journey across the Mediterranean in the first place. Along these lines, Salvini concludes his post by recommending that migrants should be helped “in their countries”, namely by favoring development in countries of origin in order to reduce push factors¹.

Salvini’s clear stance on immigration policies in the early stage of the migration crisis was perfectly in line with his plans for the *Lega*. He intended to turn the party into a “populist insurgency”, namely a “populist party that marries the traditional populist evocation of the virtues of the people against the corrupt elites, with a pervasive *glibness* of analysis” (Brunazzo and Gilbert 626). To this end, Salvini began to align the *Lega* with other European populist parties which gained momentum during the crisis. Unlike Bossi, who combined his populist rhetoric with a programmatic agenda and a clear federalist goal, Salvini transformed his party’s populism into an ideology devoid of a clear program and purpose, hence its “pervasive *glibness* of analysis”. His

¹ A push factor is the reason why somebody decides to leave his or her own country of origin. Push factors include war, famine, environmental disasters, but also poverty and lack of job opportunities.
rhetoric, especially during the years 2013 and 2014, was purely aimed at criticizing the elites, identified as both Rome and Brussels. By abandoning the programmatic aspect of the LN, Salvini could speak to citizens of all parts of Italy and pave the way for his party to enter the family of radical right populist parties of Europe.

Although the level of politicization of migration in other European countries was not as high as it became at the height of the crisis in 2015, immigration gradually penetrated political debates and the agenda of populist forces already between 2013 and 2014. For example, a study shows that immigration was already a highly politicized issue in the Netherlands during the 2012 elections (Grande et al. 11). Even more significantly, the Eurobarometer of 2013 shows that the saliency of immigration was particularly elevated in Greece and Malta, two countries which received a high number of migrants compared to their population (Juhász et al. 13). 17% of the population in Greece regarded immigration as one of the main challenges faced by the EU, while the percentage was 36% in Malta. A political debate about immigration started also in Hungary, where it culminated with the building of a barrier on the border with Serbia and Croatia in 2015 in order to close the Balkan route. This choice was motivated by the fact that Hungary, led by the right-wing populist Viktor Orban, had become the main country of transit for migrants trying to reach other European countries, and in particular Germany, from Greece and through Balkans. Within such a heated political climate, Salvini shared the open hostility to European institutions embraced by other European radical right populist parties.

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2 Politicization is defined as “a discursive phenomenon: it is not sufficient that actors are aware of an issue, or able to form opinions about it; what is required is rather that an issue becomes salient in political communication that seeks to influence – or responds to – collective decision making” (Hurrelmann et al. 45). Consequently, the politicization of migration refers to the saliency of migration in political communication able to influence policies.
While economic factors, as discussed in the previous chapter, had been the major driving force of Euroscepticism among members of the *Lega* prior to 2013, they became closely interrelated with immigration issues under Salvini’s leadership. Since the abovementioned tragedy of Lampedusa, the new leader of the *Lega* portrayed the death of migrants at sea as a proof of the failure of the European project and of the need for a strong nation-state. Figure 2, which shows a Facebook post of 4 October 2013, offers a clear example of Salvini’s rhetorical strategy.

In this post, Salvini blames the Europe of technocrats for not being able to find common solutions on immigration and prevent such tragic events. He urges Europe to “step aside” and Italy to “enforce the law”, namely, to enforce the hardline provisions of the 2002 Bossi-Fini law. In other words, given the EU’s inability to enforce law and order, Salvini urges Italians to claim their national sovereignty.

The claim for greater sovereignty appeals to many Italians, who have never fully recovered from the 2008 financial crisis. In fact, the post-2008 period corresponded to an increased effort by both Italian politicians and EU institutions to promote policies of securitization of migration (Bulli and Soare 128). Between 2013 and 2014, the widespread, understandable perception in Italy, which had an unemployment rate of above 12% and a negative annual growth rate (OECD), was
that hosting growing numbers of immigrants would be financially unsustainable without adequate support from the EU and other European countries. In building a new image for his party, Salvini skillfully addressed Italians’ economic concerns on his social media accounts. Figure 3 shows a Twitter post in which he denounces the governments’ irresponsible expenditures.

The clear target of this tweet is the excessive cost of *Mare Nostrum*. Given the vast maritime territory covered by this operation, which comprised Italian and part of Libyan and Maltese territorial waters, its monthly cost amounted to approximately €9 million per month (Carrera and Hertog 3). Salvini lamented that Cécile Kyenge, Minister of Integration of the Letta Cabinet and member of the PD, wanted to increase the funds designated to *Mare Nostrum* while ignoring millions of unemployed Italian citizens. He thereby drew a close connection between immigration and unemployment by portraying immigrants as unfair competitors in the job market. In doing so, Salvini revived what de Haas would call the “myth of invasion”, which portrays “a wave or ‘exodus’ of ‘desperate’ Africans fleeing poverty at home in search of the European ‘el Dorado’ crammed in long-worn ships barely staying afloat” (1305). In other words, the perceived invasion
of African people, who hoped to steal the jobs of native Italians, provided citizens with an explanation for their economic uneasiness and restored the aura of honesty of the Lega, which it had lost in the abovementioned 2012 corruption scandal.

As emerges from Salvini’s posts analyzed in this chapter, the beginning of the migration crisis in 2013 opened Pandora’s Box of Italian radical right-wing populism. The crisis and the initial response by the Italian government enabled Salvini to rebrand the Lega and attract support from all over the country. With his anti-immigration rhetoric, he redefined the us-versus-them distinction in a more incisive way than Bossi had done until then. Technocrats in both Rome and Brussels became the clear enemy of “the people”, as they devolved public funds to the “non-natives”, namely immigrants, instead of using them to solve Italians’ financial problems. Despite its high cost, operation Mare Nostrum helped to rescue 150,810 migrants between October 2013 and October 2014 (Carrera and Hertog 4). When Matteo Renzi, who replaced Letta in 2014, decided to end it amid the continuous pressure of both internal political opponents and other European countries, a new phase of the migration crisis began. This phase, which will be examined in the next chapter, was marked by an increasing involvement of the EU in migration control and by the subsequent intensification of Euroscepticism in Lega’s populism.
4. The Securitization of the Migration Crisis by the EU (2015-2016)

In the period following the end of *Mare Nostrum*, migration policy in Italy evolved within the framework of the broader European legislation and policy. The humanitarian emergency in the Mediterranean reached its height between 2015 and 2016, when arrivals to Italy rose to 153,842 and 181,436, and the death toll amounted to 3,771 and 5,096, respectively (see Table 1 and Table 2 in the Introduction). In response, the European Commission presented a six-step action plan, outlined in the European Agenda on Migration, in May 2015. Meanwhile, EU member states started bilateral talks with Turkey, the main country of transit for migrants coming from the Middle East. As a result, in May 2016 they signed a controversial agreement, the EU-Turkey Statement, and closed the Eastern Mediterranean route. While the securitization of migration by EU member states was not a new phenomenon, this period can be identified as the beginning of a process of securitization of the migration crisis (Moreno-Lax 121). This chapter will first examine the response of the EU, and then it will analyze their consequences on the political debate in several EU member states and on Salvini’s rhetoric connecting immigration to Euroscepticism.

The EU’s Response to the Crisis

The European Agenda on Migration included both internal and external responses to the crisis (European Commission 2015 5-6). The former group comprised the so-called “hotspot approach”, the temporary emergency relocation scheme, and the resettlement scheme. The “hotspot approach” consists in providing financial and operational support to frontline countries,

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3 Securitization is “the process of integrating an issue into a security framework that emphasises policing and defence” (Bourbeau 187).
thus to Greece and Italy, in key point of arrival\(^4\). To this end, the EU agencies Frontex, the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), Europol, and Eurojust cooperate with local authorities in order to “swiftly identify, register and fingerprint incoming migrants”, as well as to process asylum requests, facilitate the return of migrants who are not entitled to protection, and to unmask smuggling and trafficking networks (6). However, these efforts fell short of initial expectations. In a report of 2016, Papadopoulou et al. found that reception conditions were often inadequate to accommodate the growing number of migrants, and that “coercive measures, physical force and extended detention” were used “to obtain fingerprints, in violation of international and European law” (11). Moreover, the slow implementation of the relocation scheme, which consisted in transferring migrants to other EU member states, prolonged the detention of migrants in hotspot facilities.

The relocation scheme had as a goal the “distribution among Member States of persons in clear need of international protection” (European Commission 2015 19). In other words, its goal was, at least on paper, to reduce the pressure on Greece and Italy by transferring 160,000 newly arrived asylum seekers to other EU member states. The Commission adopted specific criteria for such redistribution, including the size of each state’s population (40%), its GDP (40%), the number of spontaneous asylum applications over the previous four years (10%), and its overall unemployment rate (10%). A group of countries, comprising Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Romania, sued the Council for having made the relocation binding upon states, but the European Court of Justice ultimately dismissed their actions (ECJ 1). However, in practice these countries refused to meet their legal obligation, with Hungary and Poland not relocating any asylum seeker. Even Germany, which has relocated the highest number of asylum seekers, was compelled to face criticism for its handling of the situation.

\(^4\) In Italy, the “hotspots” are located in the south, more precisely in Lampedusa, Trapani, Pozzallo and Taranto.
seekers (10,837), fell short of its legal obligation (27,536) (European Commission 2018a). As a result, only 34,710 asylum seekers have been relocated from Italy and Greece to other member states as of March 2019 (European Commission 2019 1). The failure of the relocation scheme made evident the inadequate coordination among EU agencies and, more crucially, states’ unwillingness to cooperate on such salient issues as immigration (Costello and Moreno-Lax 52).

Compared to the relocation scheme, the resettlement scheme has been slightly more successful. Such resettlement consisted in “the transfer of individual displaced persons in clear need of international protection, on submission of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and in agreement with the country of resettlement, from a third country to a Member State” (European Commission 2015 19). In other words, the 2015 scheme made available 22,504 places for refugees coming mainly from North Africa, the Horn of Africa, and the Middle East in EU member states, following the same criteria for redistribution used in the relocation scheme. Scholars have criticized such plan on the basis of the lack of a mandatory quota and of states’ discretionary selection of asylum seekers (Bamberg 6-7). Despite these shortcomings, between 2015 and early 2019 more than 50,000 people were resettled to 25 EU member states, according to data provided by the European Commission (2019 1). Although such numbers are still relatively low, they reveal that states are more willing to accept people in need of international protection when they can control the selection process.

While states generally failed to fulfil their obligation with respect to internal responses, they invested many resources on the external responses established in the Agenda of 2015. Such external responses consisted in reinforcing Frontex-led operations of border control in the Mediterranean, in fighting trafficking and smuggling networks, and in promoting development in migrants’ countries of origin. As a result, the budget of Triton, a naval operation which replaced
Mare Nostrum in 2014 and which had a monthly cost of just €2.9 million, was tripled. Unlike Mare Nostrum, Triton was a joint operation led by Frontex and the Italian navy, and it had a more restricted operational area. Its main purpose was to surveil Europe’s southern border and dismantle criminal networks, while search-and-rescue (SAR) operations were mainly left under the responsibility of individual states and NGOs (Carrera and Hertog 9). From a humanitarian perspective, Triton proved to be highly problematic, as its officials were not trained to act in compliance with international refugee and human rights law (Moreno-Lax 126). For example, there have been cases of Frontex officials shooting at migrant boats in order to stop suspected smugglers and justifying their actions on the basis of their right to self-defense (129).

In May 2015, the EU launched also another, more ambitious naval operation, EU NAVFOR Med Sophia. Unlike Triton, whose officials were expected to carry out sporadic SAR operations even though their main task was to stop irregular migration and to fight criminality, Sophia was conceived specifically to disrupt smuggling and trafficking networks. This goal was clearly stated in its mandate, which was “to undertake systematic efforts to identify, capture and dispose of vessels and enabling assets used or suspected of being used by migrant smugglers or traffickers” (Operationsophia). To this end, the UN Security Council allowed Sophia to operate also in the high seas. However, its overall effect was just to make migratory routes shift, as flows moved, at least initially, from the Central Mediterranean to the Aegean route, where smuggling and trafficking became more lucrative (Moreno-Lax 128). The securitization process initiated with Triton and Sophia culminated in 2016 with the intervention of NATO in the Mediterranean. Such a great focus on the criminal implications of irregular migration inevitably overshadowed concerns over migrants’ human rights.
Following a similar securitarian logic, the EU created several trust funds aimed at improving migrants and refugees’ living conditions in countries of origin and transit. The two most important funds are the EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis, established in December 2014, and the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, established in October 2015 (Niemann and Zaun 9). The former had the purpose of providing relief to Syrian refugees and their neighboring host countries, such as Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Similarly, the latter, to which Italy is the second major contributor after Germany, was destined to development projects in the Sahel and Lake Chad regions, the Horn of Africa, and the North of Africa. However, as Hertog notes, it is not clear “whether such allocations will serve the long-term development interests of third countries or rather the short-term security interests of the EU” (13). This is the case because EU member states, which set underdefined eligibility criteria for trust funds, can easily make their contributions dependent upon the recognition of readmission agreements by migrants’ countries of origin, without which those who are already in Europe cannot be returned. Consequently, despite the positive humanitarian impact of such trust funds, the motivations of EU member states in establishing them remain of a securitarian nature.

Overall, the impact of naval operations and of development funds proved to be insufficient in the short-term, as the number of arrivals continued to grow between 2015 and 2016. As a consequence, in late 2015 EU member states started working on bilateral agreements with third countries to reduce new arrivals. The most important and controversial agreement thereby concluded was the EU-Turkey Statement, signed on March 18th, 2016. The main purpose of such agreement was to stem the flow of migrants from Turkey to Greece, which had been the main doorway to the EU until then. To this end, Turkey agreed to take any necessary measure to contrast irregular migration from its territory to the EU in exchange for funds from the EU. Additionally,
it agreed to the so-called 1:1 resettlement scheme, which established that, for every Syrian returned to Turkey from Greece, another Syrian would be resettled from Turkey to EU member states on the basis of the UN Vulnerability Criteria (European Council 2016). These provisions were extremely successful, as arrivals to Greece dropped by 97% as of April 2018 (European Commission 2018b).

On the other hand, the EU-Turkey Statement had a “bottleneck effect”. Many migrants, most of whom are Syrians, remained blocked in Turkey, a country which does not recognize them as refugees and which offers precarious living conditions. As of February 2019, 3,639,705 Syrians were living in Turkey under temporary protection (Turkish Ministry of Interior). From a political perspective, by allowing Turkey to play such a key role in migration control, EU member states have made themselves increasingly dependent on a government with clear authoritarian leanings. President Erdogan used the agreement to blackmail the EU on multiple occasions. For example, in early 2017 he threatened to withdraw from the agreement after European nations forbade his officials to campaign on their territory for his constitutional referendum (Barnes para. 12). Despite these many humanitarian and political drawbacks, the EU-Turkey Statement became a model for other similar agreements. It is the case of the 2016 “Joint Way Forward” (JWF), an agreement in which EU member states considered Afghanistan to be safe enough for migrants to be returned there. In 2015 and 2016, Afghani immigrants represented the largest group, after Syrians, found to be irregularly present in the EU, with more than 400,000 irregular residents. Under the JWF, over 10,000 Afghani immigrants were returned to their country of origin by 2017, for an average cost of 15,000 euro per person (Eurostat para. 5).
The Politicization of the Crisis in European Counties

The economic, humanitarian, and political costs of the measures identified so far contributed to intensifying the saliency of immigration in many European countries. In particular, the year 2015 corresponded to new and rapidly escalating tensions in the Visegrád countries. Among these countries, Poland and Hungary were the most strenuous opposers of the abovementioned relocation scheme, and they refused to admit any asylum seeker despite their legal obligation of 6,182 and 1,294 relocations, respectively. Such non-compliance with EU policies, which caused the European Commission to launch an infringement procedure against these countries in 2017, reflected the growing success of right-wing populist parties in the domestic political arena.

In Poland, the PiS (Law and Justice) party became one of the largest parties in the country in 2015, mainly because of its anti-immigration rhetoric. Poland has traditionally received refugees from neighboring countries, such as Russia and Ukraine, and thus belonging to white and Christian ethnic groups. When the EU imposed the admission of such culturally heterogeneous immigrant groups as those present in Italy and Greece, the PiS promptly mobilized public opinion through Eurosceptic, Islamophobic, and at times racist discourses (Krzyżanowski 2018a 84-87). In Hungary, Viktor Orbán lamented the inefficacy of EU policies and began building a border barrier to prevent immigrants from entering the country by August 2015. With his strategy, he successfully divided the political arena into the “pro-nationals” and the “anti-nationals”. By labelling those who opposed his anti-immigration policies as “anti-nationals”, Orbán was able to increase the support base of his party, Fidesz, by 5-6% during 2015 (Juhász et al. 19).  

5 The Visegrád group is a political and cultural alliance comprising Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. This group of countries has adopted a strongly anti-immigration stance ever since 2015.
As the migration crisis became an increasingly polarizing topic among Visegrád countries, it generated mixed sentiments also in countries which admitted the greatest number of refugees, such as Germany and Sweden. In Germany, the year 2015 was characterized by an overall positive public attitude towards welcoming asylum seekers and refugees. However, the terrorist attacks which took place in Paris in November 2015 generated uneasiness about new arrivals among some parts of German society. The rising Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), a far right-wing populist party, used the Paris events to blame Angela Merkel for the growing insecurity caused by immigration. In such an increasingly tense atmosphere, the humanitarian spirit which had characterized the media’s portrayal of immigration during 2015 began to gradually fade away from early 2016 onwards (Vollmer and Karakayali 9). On the other hand, in Sweden the saliency of the migration crisis increased not only because of the rhetoric of right-wing populist parties, but also because of the policies pursued by the ruling Social Democratic Party (SAP). By the end of 2015, over 170,000 asylum seekers were registered in Sweden, a number which was becoming unsustainable for the Swedish state system. As a result, in November 2015 the SAP introduced slightly stricter regulations on asylum seekers’ entry and temporary residence and intensified document controls (Krzyżanowski 2018b 8).

While EU member states were divided on the issue of immigration, tensions escalated in the two frontline states, Greece and Italy, which felt overburdened and abandoned by other states. The Greeks, who had already grown disenchanted with the EU in the wake of the economic crisis and the subsequent austerity measures, were blamed by the European Commission for being unable to control their borders. Worse still, in January 2015 they were threatened to be expelled from the Schengen area, namely the area of free movement of people among EU member states (Boukala and Dimitrakopoulou 8). In this context, Greek politicians remarked the importance of EU
solidarity with Greece to handle the migration crisis. Such calls came from the entire political spectrum, both from left-wing politicians such as Alexis Tsipras, then Prime Minister, and from the conservative leader Mitsotakis (9). Similar calls for European solidarity abounded in the speeches of Matteo Renzi, Italy’s Prime Minister and member of the PD. Renzi vowed to make the crisis one of the primary issues on the EU’s agenda, and he worked towards this end since early 2015 (Colombo 14). His strategy to tackle the migration crisis deserves its own treatment, as it illustrates the context within which the Lega used the crisis to insert itself into the abovementioned “insurgency” of European right-wing populism.

**The Politicization of the Crisis in Italy**

Aware of the polarizing effect that the migration crisis had on Italian politics, Renzi sought to maintain as much as possible a neutral position with regards to humanitarian and securitarian discourses. In other words, he avoided championing a purely humanitarian or a purely securitarian response to tackle the crisis. The former approach had already failed during Letta’s government with *Mare Nostrum* and had attracted harsh criticism from Italian voters, whereas the latter approach would run counter the PD’s traditionally open stance on immigration. Renzi’s approach has been effectively defined with the expression “turning a blind eye” (Caponio and Cappiali 125), meaning that he attempted to shift responsibility for the management of the crisis both to the EU, at a supranational level, and to local administrations in Italy, at a national level.

In a speech before Italian Parliament in April 2015, which he held after around 1,000 people drowned in the Channel of Sicily, Renzi made clear the requests which he was to advance at the upcoming summit of the European Council. He called for a “political approach” from the European Union, intended as “the capacity to give responses to a complex world”, which he contrasted with
the merely rhetorical sympathy for immigrants which many EU member states had expressed until then (translation in Colombo 11). More precisely, a “political approach” did not refer to the need for the EU to strengthen SAR operations in the Mediterranean, as would be the case if his appeal were solely a humanitarian one. It referred instead to the need to reinforce common efforts in the fight against human traffickers and smugglers and in the creation of legal pathways for those fleeing persecution and war. Such focus on preventing irregular migration from happening in the first place denotes a more securitarian- than humanitarian-oriented approach. On the other hand, at a national level Renzi’s government was unable to enforce the reform of its immigrant reception system notwithstanding the law which was passed in August 2015 to this end. With the new law, the Ministry of Interior devolved more power than before to regional and local administrations in the governance of the reception system, de facto putting them in charge of improving it without offering adequate incentives and carrying out effective monitoring activities.

Despite the departure of the Italian government from its initially humanitarian approach, which was examined in chapter III of this thesis, the growing salience of the migration crisis allowed the Lega to portray the governmental line as fundamentally unchanged. However, criticism levelled against the central government in Rome became increasingly intertwined with criticism of the EU. The following Facebook post, which Salvini published in February 2015, exemplifies this point:

![Matteo Salvini](image)

Naufragio nel Canale di Sicilia, ci sarebbero più di 200 IMMIGRATI morti. Ennesima dimostrazione che Mare Nostrum, Triton o comunque si chiamino, sono OPERAZIONI DI MORTE, da fermare subito! Oggi stesso lo proporrò a Strasburgo. Renzi e Alfano, ci siete o dormite?

*Figure 4*
This post refers to a shipwreck which occurred on 11 February 2015 in the Channel of Sicily and in which more than 300 people lost their life. In this case, the event serves as a sign of continuity between the misguided policies of Letta and those of Renzi. While many NGOs and international organizations criticized Renzi and the EU for the inadequacy of Triton to save as many lives as Mare Nostrum did (UN Italy para.5), Salvini equated the two operations through simplistic language (“whatever the name is”). Both were, in his view, “operations of death”, namely, they acted as a pull factor for migrants, who embarked on such a perilous journey because they knew that Triton officials would save them and take them to Italy. Salvini presented himself as the only one who truly cared for migrants’ lives, and therefore he proposed to stop migrants from leaving in the first place. In this sense, he stands in contrast with the Italian government (“Renzi and Alfano”), which represents the elites who are “sleeping” instead of solving the problem. Italian elites, from Salvini’s perspective, are merely puppets of the EU and execute its orders without caring about the true interests of the people.

If the EU’s policy of border control in the Mediterranean allowed the Lega to blame EU institutions for the numerous deaths at sea, the 2016 deal with Turkey enabled the party to present itself as a bastion of freedom and democracy, two values supposedly neglected by EU bureaucrats. In July 2016, the representatives of the Lega to the European Parliament, where the party was a
member of the far-right group Europe of Nations and Freedom, explained their leader’s line as shown in Figure 5.

This post was published after the failed military coup against Erdogan’s government on 15 July 2015. The repression of political opponents in the aftermath of the coup challenged the definition of Turkey as a “safe third country”\(^6\), which EU member states had upheld in order to justify the EU-Turkey Statement. Following the coup, the Lega strengthened its position against the admission of Turkey to the EU, as the deal also established renewed negotiations to this end. Lega’s traditional view of Turkey has been that the latter is not “historically and culturally not European” (Caiani and Graziano 248), drawing a cultural distinction between the “us” as Christians and the “them” as Muslims. The authoritarian and Islamist leanings of Erdogan reinforced the identification of Turkey as a culturally non-European country. Moreover, the post presents a clear distinction between “deserving” immigrants, such as Turkish political opponents (“real political refugees”), and “undeserving” ones, such as the boat people reaching Italy through the Mediterranean. In

\(^6\) According to EU legislation, a “safe third country” is a country where “life and liberty are not threatened on account of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” and where “the possibility exists to request refugee status” (Art. 38.1(a-e) L 180/80).
voters’ imaginaries, the EU thus appears to be the defender of “underserving” immigrants and of authoritarian rulers instead of the “pure people”.

Having examined the policies adopted by the EU and the reaction they provoked in multiple EU member states, this chapter has shown how Lega’s rhetoric sought to insert the party into the European family of right-wing populism that rose up in reaction to the EU’s handling of the crisis between 2015 and 2016. On his social media accounts, Salvini identified the Italian government as a puppet of the EU, incapable of defending the true interests of the country. Additionally, the Lega showed that the EU acted as an authoritarian supranational government by accusing it of complicity with Erdogan’s government. The incorporation of such a strong anti-EU component in Lega’s ideology helped the party to move away from its regionalist identity, whose target of attacks was the Italian government, and assume a nationalist one, whose main target became the EU.
5. The Securitization of the Migration Crisis by the Italian Government (2017-2018)

Such a skillful manipulation of the migration crisis for electoral purposes by the Lega prompted the center-left Italian government to adapt its strategy accordingly. Following Renzi’s resignation in December 2016, Paolo Gentiloni and Marco Minniti, both members of the PD, became the new Prime Minister and Interior Minister, respectively. During his period in office, Minniti reacted to the growing politicization of the migration crisis by adopting restrictive immigration policies. As a result, arrivals dropped drastically in 2017, when they decreased by almost 35% compared to the previous year. Although it would be misleading to assume that mainstream parties adapt their stance on immigration purely as a strategic response to extreme right parties (Bale 320), the Italian case shows that even center-left parties tend to become more restrictive in reaction to political competition. This chapter will analyze the policies implemented by Minniti and their consequences, and it will show how Salvini was able to maintain an electoral advantage with regards to immigration despite the government’s new approach.

Minniti’s “Philosophy of Immigration and Security”

Before examining Minniti’s policies in detail, it is necessary to outline the motivations behind his preference for a securitarian response to the crisis. While Minniti’s policies resemble very closely those advocated by right-wing parties, the rhetoric by means of which he justified them was based on arguments which he claimed to belong to the left-wing tradition. In his public speeches, Minniti emphasized the nexus between security and freedom and between immigration and security. The underlying logic of such nexus is that, if the government can guarantee security
to citizens, then it enables them to act freely and without fear. On the other hand, irregular migratory flows from the Mediterranean are linked with criminal networks of smugglers and traffickers, and, since the state is unable to ensure that criminals do not enter the country together with other “deserving” migrants, they generate fear among Italian society. In turn, such fear, be it well-founded or just perceived, causes insecurity.

In interviews with Italian newspapers, Minniti explained why this line of reasoning is different from traditional right-wing concerns about immigration and security. When the newspaper *La Repubblica* asked him whether his claims helped populists to spread a culture of fear, Minniti answered as follows:

I cannot fight fear by blaming those who feel fear. I must help them to free themselves from fear. Security is a feeling. The hardest thing, thus, is the feeling, which is something close to a sentiment. Where one reasons with statistics, there is no sentiment. I am with those who take the bus every morning. I have to go out and feel their same feeling. I am not with those who have three escort cars like me. Security is a problem that affects the vulnerable. (2017 para. 7)

In this passage, Minniti associates security with a feeling, a sentiment, which is pervasive especially among the weakest layers of society. It is the role of the state, in his view, to protect vulnerable citizens against their fears, even when they are unfounded. His claim that security concerns fit into the left-wing tradition is therefore based on the belief that caring about people’s fears means to stand with vulnerable ordinary citizens in a socialist spirit. Nonetheless, with this approach Minniti drew a distinction between “the people”, namely Italian citizens who deserved protection, and “the other”, namely immigrants who were less deserving of protection, which echoes right-wing populist discourses. By doing so, he sought to appeal to voters who had grown
disenchanted with the PD, “not renouncing the dialogue with, but instead trying to obtain the consensus of, those who have alternative views” (Gargiulo 152). Such attempt to bridge the divide between left- and right-wing conceptions of immigration inevitably led to the implementation of increasingly restrictive immigration policies.

**Minniti’s Immigration Policies**

Within this ideological framework, the most important and controversial policies which Minniti adopted in 2017 were the Memorandum of Understanding with Libya, the Minniti-Orlando law, and the Code of Conduct for NGOs. By signing the agreement with Sarraj’s Government of National Accord in February 2017, the Italian government resumed bilateral talks with Libya, which had played a key role in preventing migrants from reaching Italy before the ousting of Muhammar Gaddafi in 2011. The Memorandum established that both parties would cooperate to the following ends: complete the system of border control in Southern Libya, adapt Libyan reception centers through Italian financing and medical support, train the Libyan personnel working in reception centers, enhance programs in migrants’ countries of origin, support international organizations operating in Libya in order to facilitate the return of migrants to countries of origin, and create employment opportunities in parts of Libya affected by smuggling and trafficking as “income replacement” (Art. 2). In other words, the Memorandum had the goal of both controlling irregular migration and promoting development in migrants’ countries of origin by means of Italian financial and operational resources. In practice, however, Italy mainly focused on achieving only the former objective. By training the Libyan coast guard to patrol its SAR region, the Italian government hoped that migrant boats would be returned to Libya before leaving its
territorial waters and thus without violating the principle of non-refoulement⁷ (Sunderland para.10). While problematic from the perspective of migrants’ human rights, the agreement was welcomed by other EU member states as a successful step towards stemming inflows (Reynolds para.3).

Shortly after signing the Memorandum with Libya, Minniti issued a law, known as the Minniti-Orlando law, which introduced a series of restrictive measures into the Italian asylum system. Among such measures, a controversial one is the decision not to allow migrants to appeal the judicial decision if their asylum request is rejected (Savio 22). Such measure was motivated by the need to speed up the examination of asylum requests, whose number had grown drastically since the beginning of the crisis and which had thereby overburdened the Italian judicial system. Furthermore, the law established that new centers for the detention of irregular migrants had to be opened throughout the territory. In practice, this law reduced the number of asylum requests approved between 2017 and 2018. In 2017, 58% of the 81,527 examined asylum requests had a negative outcome, whereas in 2018 the percentage rose to 67% of the 95,576 requests received (Ministry of Interior 2018 2). The Minniti-Orlando law thus succeeded in making it more difficult for immigrants to obtain international protection in Italy.

Concerns over the consequences of Minniti’s policies for migrants’ rights increased in mid-2017, when he issued the Code of Conduct for NGOs. The Code of Conduct had the purpose of limiting the SAR operations carried out by NGOs in the Mediterranean. At the time, around ten NGOs were patrolling the Mediterranean, including the Maltese Migrant Offshore Assistance Station, Médecins sans Frontières, Sea-Watch, Sea-Eye, Jugend Rettet, Lifeboat, Boat Refugee Foundation, ProActiva Open Arms, SOS Méditerranée, and Save the Children (Cusumano 2019 7

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⁷ The principle of non-refoulement, which is enshrined in customary international law, prohibits states from returning migrants to countries which are not safe.
Despite NGOs’ enormous contribution to saving human lives, the Italian government accused them of constituting a pull factor for migrants and, sometimes, also of collaborating with human traffickers and smugglers. To reduce their presence, the Code of Conduct established that NGOs had to collaborate with states in the fight against criminal networks and receive police officers on board (Ministry of Interior 2017 2-4). Since such requests collide with the “principles of independence, neutrality and impartiality that underlie humanitarian action” (Cusumano 2017 5), very few NGOs continued SAR operations in the Mediterranean. Alongside the Memorandum with Libya and the Orlando-Minniti law, the Code of Conduct marked a clear transition towards securitization in the Italian migration policy.

Salvini’s Response to Governmental Policies

With this restrictive approach, as the Italian media liked to point out, Minniti “seduced” the M5S and the Lega (La Stampa 2017). In an interview with the newspaper La Stampa, Salvini admitted his sympathy with Minniti’s policies:

Minniti is the least bad. He understood that also part of the PD’s electorate wanted landings to be stopped and that NGOs went to pick up migrants almost on the shores, in collaboration with human traffickers. However, it’s a big leap from this to saying that we are his fans. We are happy that, after three devastating years, landings have decreased. We have demonstrated that it is possible to reduce them. (para. 5)

These words reveal the proximity between right-wing views on migration management and Minniti’s view. Salvini recognized that his political opponent understood what was in the interests of the Italian people and put into practice policies which the Lega had championed since the beginning of the crisis. By the time of the interview, in September 2017, arrivals had decreased by 81% with respect to nine months earlier. However, praising such an achievement would have been
counterproductive for the *Lega* in view of the approaching electoral campaign. The attack on NGOs and EU naval operations as well as the outsourcing of the migration crisis in third countries had been the main points on which Salvini had criticized the EU and the Italian government until then. Responding to electoral calculations, Salvini adapted his rhetorical strategy and spotted new issues on the basis of which Minniti’s policies could be criticized.

In a speech delivered at the traditional gathering of the *Lega*, which takes place every year in mid-August in Ponte di Legno, a city in Northern Italy, Salvini accused Minniti of lying on the results achieved through his policies. He affirmed the following:

Minniti says that we are out of the woods with regards to migrants and that numbers are decreasing? This year landings outnumber those of last year. There are 178 thousand fake asylum seekers in Italian hotels and, after years of insults against the *Lega*, they [the PD] realized that we must stop NGOs. If we were governing in place of the Gentiloni Cabinet, these numbers would not be so impressive. (Il Giornale 2017 para. 4)

In this case, Salvini openly contradicted the declaration made to *La Stampa* and told his supporters that, contrary to what Minniti wanted them to believe, the situation was actually getting worse. By doing so, he presented himself as a strong leader and the LN as the only party which, if elected, would act in the best interests of all Italians. He reached this goal by distorting reality as he saw fit. In fact, landings in 2017 (119,369) were far less than those in 2016 (181,436). Through a similar simplification of reality, he accused the European Parliament on 15 March 2017 of not being “capable of getting anything done: record of deaths, record of landings” (1:17). In reality, the deaths recorded in 2017 (2,873) were far less than those recorded in 2016 (4,578). What emerges is that Salvini’s strong and simplistic rhetoric, which voters perceived as spontaneous and truthful,
enabled him to continue portraying the migration-security nexus as a distinctive priority of the
Lega.

The reaction of Minniti and Salvini to each other’s stance on immigration suggests that
dynamics of party competition played a major role in determining the radical shift towards the
securitization of the migration crisis in Italy during 2017 and early 2018. The increasing
 politicization of the crisis and the culture of fear generated by Lega’s anti-immigration and
Eurosceptic rhetoric prompted Minniti to implement policies aimed at reducing the sense of
insecurity among part of Italian society at the expense of migrants’ rights. Despite the PD’s efforts,
Salvini’s effective rhetoric on immigration allowed him to mobilize the electorate in the 2018
general election in his favor. In fact, the Memorandum of Understanding with Libya, the Minniti-
Orlando law, and the Code of Conduct for NGOs had the effect of reducing the number of arrivals
more than Salvini did after replacing Minniti in mid-2018, as the following chapter will explain.

The securitarian approach of Marco Minniti contributed to reinforcing the nexus between immigration and security in voters’ imaginaries of the migration crisis. Nonetheless, as the introduction of this thesis has shown, Salvini’s *Lega* remained the party which best represented, in voters’ view, Italians’ dissatisfaction with immigration and with the EU. Since its success in the elections of March 2018, the popularity of the Lega and, in particular, of Salvini has increased. Surveys published in May 2019 show that, if elections for the Chamber of Deputies were to be held today, the *Lega* would be the first party, with 29% of the votes (Demopolis 2). Furthermore, the leaders whom Italians appear to trust the most are Matteo Salvini and Giuseppe Conte, the Prime Minister (Istituto Ixé 2)\(^8\). While it would be inappropriate to assume that immigration is the only determinant of such popularity, it is plausible to expect that *Lega*’s ability to deliver its electoral promises on immigration is an important explanatory factor. This chapter will examine Salvini’s policies and rhetoric since June 2018 and show how both enabled him to maintain the image of a consistent and thus trustworthy leader. In doing so, the chapter will identify a certain continuity between Salvini’s and Minniti’s policies. In fact, the perception that the former marked a drastic change in Italy’s approach to immigration is mainly a result of Salvini’s inflammatory rhetoric, which amplifies the effects of his policies in the common imaginary.

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\(^8\) Both surveys can be found at [http://www.sondaggipoliticoelettorali.it/GestioneSondaggio.aspx](http://www.sondaggipoliticoelettorali.it/GestioneSondaggio.aspx).
Salvini’s Immigration Policies

Since June 2018, Salvini’s immigration policies have focused mainly on three aspects, namely, strengthening domestic security, increasing the number of returns, and preventing new irregular migrants from entering Italian territory. Domestic security and the return of migrants to countries of origin are at the core of the so-called decreto sicurezza (“security decree”), which Salvini was able to turn into law through emergency procedures in December 2018. The most controversial measure of the new law is the repeal of the residence permit on humanitarian grounds (art.1), which used to be a two-year form of protection giving access to employment, health services, social assistance, and housing. This permit has now been replaced with limited special permits, which are granted to people in need of special protection (one-year permit), to those fleeing natural disasters (six-month permit), to those with severe health conditions (one-year permit), and to victims of severe violence or labor exploitation (one-year permit) (art. 1.2.g). Given the strict eligibility criteria for these special permits, it is likely that fewer asylum seekers will be granted protection under the new law. Already in November 2018, one month after the issuing of the decree, three migrants out of four were denied asylum, whereas thousands of holders of humanitarian protection were expelled from SPRAR facilities (La Repubblica 2018 para. 1). The SPRAR (“System for the Protection of Asylum Seekers and Refugees”) is a network of reception facilities offering integration services to which holders of humanitarian protection could previously access. By restricting access to such services, the new law is likely to increase the number of irregular migrants on Italian territory.

Salvini tackled the challenge of returning irregular migrants especially with two provisions of the new law. Art. 2 establishes that the detention of migrants in centers for repatriation (“Centri di permanenza per il rimpatrio”) be prolonged from 90 to 180 days. This provision, while violating
migrants’ right not to be detained arbitrarily, will give more time to Italian officials to identify them. Moreover, additional funds are to be allocated to the Return Fund in order to make the expected increase in the number of returns sustainable (art. 6). The yearly projected allocations are €500,000 in 2018, €1,500,000 in 2019, and €1,500,000 in 2020. Such emphasis on returns does not constitute an element of novelty compared to Minniti’s policies. As this chapter will discuss, the number of returns between late 2018 and early 2019 remained almost the same as in 2017 and early 2018. However, unlike Minniti, Salvini decided to increase the funds for returns by using €42,000,000 previously allocated to the reception system. He called this decision an “investment on security” (La Stampa 2018a para. 1). In fact, it penalizes the only institution capable of integrating migrants into Italian society, namely the reception system.

This effort to reduce the number of irregular migrants was coupled with hardline policies of border control. With a tweet of 10 June 2018, Salvini announced his intention to close Italian ports to NGO ships and non-Italian merchant vessels carrying rescued migrants from Libya. Since then, ships such as the Aquarius, with 629 people onboard, and the Lifeline, carrying 259 rescued migrants, have been denied access (Cusumano and Gomber 3-4). The same happened with ships carrying only a small number of migrants, such as the Sea Eye (17 migrants) and the Sea Watch 3 (32 migrants). Even the Italian Coast Guard patrol vessel Diciotti was forced to wait for 11 days before being allowed to disembark 177 rescued migrants in August 2018. Such attack on NGOs conducting SAR operations in the Mediterranean is not a new strategy. On paper, also Minniti’s Code of Conduct discouraged NGOs from taking migrants to Italy. In practice, however, Minniti never took measures against those NGOs which did not sign the Code of Conduct.

In this respect, Salvini’s unprecedented decision to close Italian ports intensified tensions with both the EU and the M5S. It raised once again the issue of European solidarity, which became
a heated topic of debate among EU member states. As Salvini threatened to keep migrants at sea unless the EU relocated them to other member states, the governments of France, Malta, and Spain initially refused to take responsibility for them. A weak sign of solidarity appeared in July 2018, when some European countries, including France, Germany, Malta, Portugal, and Spain, agreed to relocate the migrants (Cusumano and Gombeer 8). Although the Italian government depicted this event as a diplomatic victory, in reality the EU did not establish any binding solidarity mechanism. Domestically, Salvini’s refusal to allow the Diciotti to dock created frictions with members of the M5S, some of whom opposed his decision. While the M5S leader Luigi Di Maio urged his party to remain united and respect the government’s line, he also welcomed with relief the order of President Mattarella to allow the ship to disembark (La Stampa 2018b). Despite such a tense political atmosphere, the growing popularity of Salvini among the Italian electorate put the M5S in a disadvantaged position and pushed its members to accommodate Salvini’s hard line.

**Salvini’s Rhetoric**

Such popularity is attributable to the direct and provocative tones of Salvini’s messages on social media and of his speeches. By pursuing the strategy of Prima gli Italiani! (“Italians First!”), modelled after his American counterpart Donald Trump and coupled with a firm opposition to the EU, Salvini appears to be an extremely coherent leader, capable of maintaining the promises he made since he became party secretary of the Lega in 2013. After taking the place of the governing elites whom he criticized, Salvini identified the “other” with the politicians who preceded him and claimed that he would remedy their misguided policies. In his first year in power, he strengthened his electoral base by perfecting his communication on social networks. His posts on Twitter and Facebook draw a clear-cut distinction between friends, namely his followers (“Our community is really strong, my Friends!”), and enemies, such as immigrants, the Roma, the press, and left-wing
politicians. Moreover, his posts often remind the audience that his policies are not determined by racism, but by *buonsenso*, or common sense. In this vein, he explains that “saying ‘ITALIANS FIRST’ is not RACISM, but COMMON SENSE” (Salvini 2018). By presenting the abovementioned immigration policies as a matter of *buonsenso*, Salvini is able to attract the favor of many Italians and thereby confirms the ability of the *Lega* to remain the party of the people even when it takes the place of the elites it used to criticize (Passarelli 232).

Rhetoric plays a key role in creating the perception that Salvini’s policies have delivered concrete results. For example, he often reports on his social media accounts the number of sea arrivals to show that they have decreased enormously since he became Interior Minister. In March 2019, he noted triumphantly that arrivals were only 262 in the first months of the year, a stunning decrease compared to the 5,247 arrivals in the same period of the previous year (Salvini 2019). However, in reality the highest decrease in arrivals was recorded when Minniti was Interior Minister. Arrivals dropped from 532 to 117 per day under Minniti’s policies (July 2017 – May 2018), and they dropped further to 43 per day under Salvini’s policies (July 2018 – January 2019) (ISPI para. 6). As figures show, it is true that the number of arrivals became gradually lower since Salvini took office, but they decreased much more as a result of Minniti’s policies (-78%) than Salvini’s ones (-37%). Similarly, the number of returns has not increased under Salvini as much as he claims. From June to December 2018, approximately 600 migrants per months were returned to countries of origin, an increase of just 5.5% compared to the 567 returns per month from January to May 2018 (Gazzetta del Sud). Despite such similarities, Salvini’s portrayal of his achievements as drastically different from those of Minniti gives to the electorate a sense of coherence between words and facts.
The securitization of the migration crisis by the Italian government in 2017 thus played a significant role in increasing the popularity of the *Lega*. The emphasis which Minniti placed on the security dimension of the crisis contributed to categorizing immigrants as a threat to public order. This categorization played in the favor of the *Lega*, which has traditionally opposed immigration on the grounds of both ethnic and security concerns. In other words, the securitization of migration contributed to creating a favorable environment for right-wing populist arguments against immigration to appeal to the electorate. Thanks to such favorable environment and to the rhetoric built around his policies, Salvini has been able to resist pressures from the EU and from the M5S and therefore to transform the *Lega* into the most popular party in Italy.
7. Conclusion and Final Remarks

The research carried out in this thesis has shown that the migration crisis was a catalyst of Lega’s evolution into a nationalist party and of its subsequent electoral success. While hostile attitudes towards immigrants and the EU were present in the party’s ideology already in the 1990s and the 2000s, they became much more explicit since Salvini assumed the leadership in 2013. In fact, as long as the Lega pursued the federalist project of its historic leader Umberto Bossi, it prioritized issues related to the autonomy of the northern region of Padania over those related to immigration and to the EU. A gifted demagogue, Bossi distinguished between “the pure people” of Padania and the parasitic people of Southern Italy, and he accused the corrupted government in Rome of exploiting the former to the benefit of the latter. In order to abandon such regionalist identity and appeal to all Italians, Salvini adapted the us-versus-them distinction and identified immigrants and the EU as the new main targets of the Lega. With this respect, the migration crisis offered Salvini a vehicle for channeling anti-immigrant, Eurosceptic, nationalist, and sometimes xenophobic sentiments.

To show why this is the case, the thesis has identified different phases of the migration crisis. The first phase, from 2013 to 2014, corresponds to Salvini’s initial attempts to rebrand the Lega. By emphasizing the high costs and the pull effect of the military and humanitarian operation Mare Nostrum, Salvini sought to persuade his followers on social media that the Italian government did not care about Italians’ economic uneasiness. Attacks on EU institutions and member states abounded between 2015 and 2016, when the EU’s responses to the crisis failed to alleviate the migratory pressure on Italy and thereby generated a widespread feeling of abandonment among Italians. During this period, Salvini aligned himself with other European far-right populist leaders.
He portrayed the EU as a despotic supranational government responsible for the human tragedy in the Mediterranean and for supporting authoritarian leaders like Erdogan. When the Italian center-left government decided to shift towards an explicitly securitarian approach to the crisis in 2017, it implemented policies which seemed to vindicate Salvini’s hardline stance. In fact, the Memorandum of Understanding with Libya, the Minniti-Orlando law, and the Code of Conduct for NGOs consolidated the idea of immigration as a danger to state security in collective imaginaries of the crisis. In such a tense atmosphere, the popularity of Salvini and of his party, which was renowned for its opposition to immigration, grew rapidly. Such popularity enabled Salvini, once in government, to maintain a stance which was consistent with his electoral promises despite frictions with the EU and the M5S.

As radical right-wing parties similar to the *Lega* become increasingly popular throughout Europe, the future of European integration in the field of immigration policymaking seems quite grim. Voters’ preference for populist parties reveals a profound dissatisfaction with the EU on economic and migratory issues and a desire to bring these two policy areas back under the sovereign control of the nation-state. In view of the European elections of 23-26 May 2019, Salvini established and took the leadership of a new group, the European Alliance of Peoples and Nations (EAPN), which attracted other far-right populist parties such as the German AfD and the French Rassemblement National. All the parties in this extreme-right alliance are in favor of tightening immigration and border policies and endorse varying degrees of Euroscepticism. According to the latest projections, the EAPN may become the fourth largest group in the European Parliament\(^9\). To overcome the existential threat posed by populists in the wake of the migration crisis, the EU will have to thoroughly rethink its immigration policies. Africa’s population is expected to be thrice as

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large as that of Europe by 2050, while gradual global development is likely to put more people in a position to afford the cost of migrating to advanced economies. Given such expectations, it is fundamental that EU member states establish a framework for a structured management of future migratory flows.
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