

IMMIGRATION IN ITALY "RISK" AND "RISK COMMUNICATION"

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ABSTRACT

Italy, historically a country of emigration, has seen an increase in immigration since the 1980s. However, in recent years, Italian emigration has resumed, with young professionals leaving the country in search of better opportunities. The immigration debate is highly politicized, with restrictive laws such as the Bossi-Fini law (2002) and the Salvini Decree (2018). The Meloni government has implemented measures to limit landings, collaborating with Tunisia and Albania to outsource migration management. However, data shows that Italy receives fewer migrants compared to other European countries. Migration policies are often used for electoral purposes, while the country's real demographic issue is the exodus of young people and the declining birth rate, which threaten the pension system and welfare.

Keywords: Italy; Emigration; Immigration; Communication

MIGRATION AND EMIGRATION.

Historically, Italy has been a country of emigration, with millions of Italians leaving the country between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. In recent decades, however, Italy has changed from a country of emigration to a country that also welcomes immigrants.

Contrary to the perception of immigration as a constant threat, emigration has been on the rise over the last 20 years.

The 2010s have seen a revival in Italian emigration, mainly due to the economic crisis following the 2008 financial crash. Many young professionals, students and workers have left Italy in search of better job opportunities, particularly in Northern Europe, North America and Australia. Increasing numbers of people are leaving Italy with increasingly diverse and complex work and educational profiles. Since 2006, the number of Italians abroad has almost doubled (+97.5%), reaching over 6.1 million citizens registered in the Register of Italians Resident Abroad (AIRE), according to the Migrants Foundation report. The main destinations of Italian emigrants in 2010 were Germany, which remained a major attraction thanks to its strong economy and labour market. However, since 20/23 this perception has changed due to multiple problems (mainly the crisis in the automotive industry) and a resurgence of xenophobia; the UK, especially London, which became a magnet for young Italian professionals before Brexit; Switzerland, where both seasonal and permanent migration is driven by proximity (especially for cross-border workers) and high wages compared to Italy. The largest Italian community will be in Switzerland, with 338,050 people by the end of 2023. Surprisingly, the largest increase in the number of immigrants to Switzerland has been in the German community: the number of people from Germany has almost tripled in two decades, rising from around 126,000 in 2003 to over 323,000 in 2024.

France and Spain remain attractive destinations, especially for young people (students and workers), but Spain is increasingly the main destination for the under-35s. Together with Brazil and the United States, these countries will receive a total of 65.5% of Italian emigrants (around 136,000 out of more than 207,000 in absolute terms in 2022 and 2023).

This "new wave of emigration" is obviously different from the mass migration of the early 20th century. Today's emigrants tend to be highly educated and qualified professionals, as well as young people (aged between 20 and 40) in search of better salaries and professional growth. At the same time, a growing number of older Italians are moving to countries such as Portugal and Spain to enjoy a lower cost of living and pension benefits, while others are choosing destinations outside Europe such as Albania and Tunisia.

There are currently more than 317,000 pensioners living outside Italy and receiving their pensions abroad. According to ISTAT (National Statistics Institute) and AIRE (Italian Register of Italians Living Abroad), at the end of the 2010s more than 5 million Italians were officially registered as living abroad. Between 2010 and 2020, almost 1.8 million Italians emigrated. Many emigrants do not register, so the real number could be even higher.

Italians have become increasingly aware of this new wave of emigration because they see it in their daily lives: many have friends, relatives or acquaintances who have moved abroad. However, the official media's focus on immigration often neglects this phenomenon in favour of emphasising both the arrival of foreign citizens and the importance of recognising this urgent problem.

Although Italy has a long history of migration, its experience as a country of immigration is relatively recent. It was only in the 1980s and 1990s that Italy began to receive large numbers of immigrants from North Africa, Eastern Europe and Asia. In 2010, there were more than 5 million foreign residents in Italy, representing about 8-9% of the population, excluding irregular immigrants.

The shift from emigration to immigration has triggered social and political debates on integration, citizenship rights and the labour market. However, these debates often fail to address fundamental realities, such as the growing number of retired people returning to their places of origin and the increasing tendency of second-generation Italians to opt for emigration, just like their peers. A fundamental reason for the reluctance to discuss migration is undoubtedly linked to an old social "wound", which explains the fear of accepting both emigration and immigration. At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, no other European country had as many emigrants as Italy. The number of people leaving the country rose from 130,000 a year in 1880 to 540,000 in 1901 and a staggering 872,000 in 1913.

However, the Fascist regime severely restricted permanent emigration, favouring temporary emigration instead. A 1931 law even imposed prison sentences of one to five years and fines on those who encouraged emigration with false promises or who left for destinations other than those officially approved.

The average number of emigrants per year was 382,000 in the decade from 1911 to 1920 (despite the interruption of the First World War from 1915 - for Italy - to 1918). This number then fell to 285,000 between 1921 and 1930, and to 70,000 between 1931 and 1940, when the Fascist regime had consolidated its power. A significant proportion of emigrants during this period were political dissidents.

There were two exceptions to the trend of forced emigration: firstly, in order to reduce demographic pressure and increase emigration to the Italian colonies in Africa, and secondly, in 1930, the deterioration of the economic situation led to an agreement with Germany for the transfer of half a million Italians. However, between 1939 and 1942 there was also an increase in repatriations.

Emigration resumed in 1946, involving around 8 million people. This period can be divided into three main phases: a rapid increase in emigration, which peaked in 1961 with 390,000 departures, out of a total of 5.6 million Italians who left the country (1946-1965); departures fell to 77,000 in 1974, then rose to almost 93,000 in 1975, before gradually declining over the following decade. In addition, millions of people emigrated from southern Italy to northern Italy (1966-1985); emigration stabilised at around 50,000 people per year, so that Italy was still an emigration country in the 1980s. However, it was not until the 1990s that this phenomenon became a widely recognised public issue (1986-2000).

During the economic boom, Italy began to attract foreign workers, especially from former colonies such as Somalia and Eritrea, and from neighbouring countries such as Tunisia and Morocco. The influx of foreign students and domestic workers also became more pronounced. By the 1980s, the arrival of workers from Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe was significant enough to prompt Italy to introduce its first immigration law, the Foschi Law (1986), which legalised many foreign workers. In the 1990s, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the main Italian political parties of the post-war period (1948-1994), the country began to feel the beginnings of its decline, accompanied by an exponential increase in immigration. In addition, wars and economic crises in the Balkans and Africa exacerbated migratory flows.

The Martelli Law (1990) marked the beginning of a legislative process that led to the Consolidated Immigration Act (1998), which regulated the entry of foreign workers outside the traditional sectors of agriculture, construction and domestic help.

Italy felt increasingly vulnerable. The country's decline, linked to public debt, industrial crises and the loss of strong ideological reference points (such as the Italian Communist Party and the Christian Democrats), made public opinion more sensitive to structural immigration. The steady increase in the resident foreign population, as well as the arrival of refugees and economic migrants, became a focus of public concern. Fears of national instability were projected onto immigrants, echoing the historical memory of Italian emigration.

IMMIGRATION LEGISLATION, CITIZENSHIP IN THE LAST 30 YEARS

Between 1999 and 2008 (the year of the first major economic crisis), Italy was both surprised and alarmed by the influx of immigrants arriving or settling in the country. After 2009, politicians - who were already very active on this issue - began to constantly exploit the immigration trend, while the phenomenon of emigration was only occasionally addressed. Since 1999, a significant number of laws and decrees have been introduced to control and/or limit immigration. A decree is a normative or administrative act issued by a public authority (such as the President of the Republic, the Government or a Ministry) that has the force of law or executive value, depending on the type of decree. In Italy, decrees are widely used to regulate various aspects of public life, including immigration policy.

There are numerous immigration decrees and laws that define the country's approach to managing the issue.

Over the years, immigration legislation in Italy has been shaped by numerous laws and reforms. The main legal frameworks governing the entry, stay and rights of immigrants are

1. Legge Martelli (Law No. 39/1990): The first comprehensive immigration law, which introduced residence permits and entry quotas.
2. Turco-Napolitano Law (Law 40/1998, then Legislative Decree 286/1998 - Consolidated Immigration Law). Establishes Temporary Residence Centres (CPT, now CPR), introduces residence permits for work purposes and attempts to reform the Immigration Quota Law (legal immigration quotas).

3. Bossi-Fini Law (Law No. 189/2002): This introduced the residence contract, stricter rules on residence permits, faster expulsion procedures for illegal immigrants and greater use of temporary detention centres.

4. Security Package (Law No. 94/2009): This introduced the crime of illegal immigration and stricter rules on citizenship.

5. Minniti-Orlando Decree (Decree-Law No. 13/2017, converted into Law No. 46/2017): reformed the international protection system and abolished the second level of appeal for asylum seekers. Marco Minniti, minister of a centre-left government) signed on 2 February 2017 the agreement known as the Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation in the field of development, the fight against illegal immigration, human trafficking and the strengthening of border security. This memorandum was signed by the Italian government led by Paolo Gentiloni and the Libyan Government of National Accord led by Fayeze al-Sarraj.

The main points of the agreement are: support for the Libyan Coast Guard in patrolling the coasts and intercepting migrants; funding and technical assistance for border control; reception and detention centres for migrants in Libya, with the support of Italy and the EU; training of Libyan security forces.

The agreement has been strongly criticised by NGOs and human rights organisations for the inhumane conditions in Libyan detention centres, and reports have highlighted human rights abuses, including torture, rape and inhumane treatment of migrants. The Libyan coastguard has been accused of abuses and collusion with traffickers.

The agreement, signed by a centre-left government, was automatically renewed in 2020 (by a centre-left government) despite criticism and remains the subject of political debate in Italy and Europe.

The Security and Immigration Decree (D.L. 113/2018 - Salvini Law) abolished humanitarian protection, increased the use of deportation centres and imposed stricter rules on residence permits.

7. The Lamorgese Decree (Legislative Decree No. 130/2020, converted into Law No. 173/2020) reintroduced special protection and strengthened the rights of asylum seekers, along with some CPR regulations.

8. The Cutro Decree (Decree-Law No. 20/2023, converted into Law No. 50/2023) introduced new restrictions on irregular immigration, revised entry quotas (Flows Decree) and restricted reception policies for asylum seekers.

An important turning point came with the government of Giorgia Meloni, leader of Fratelli d'Italia and former exponent of the extreme right.

The Meloni government (22 October 2022), in press release no. 92 of the Council of Ministers, highlights a 64% reduction in landings compared to 2023, thanks to a change in migration policy and 'cooperation' with countries such as Tunisia and Libya. This cooperation (based on an agreement that has never been made public, not even in Parliament) clearly includes the detention of men and women in these countries on their way to southern Europe.

Giorgia Meloni is the leader of a far-right Italian political party founded in 2012. It is certain that the flame symbolising the nationalist-fascist fire that continues to burn in Meloni's party emblem is seen by many as a reference to Mussolini's tomb. This choice characterises almost all Italian neo-fascist and post-fascist parties, even after the dissolution of the Italian Social Movement (heir to the National Fascist Party). As a result, it remains a symbol with which many right-wing voters identify.

The party is also strongly defined by the dominant leadership of Giorgia Meloni (as front-woman) and her close circle of loyalists, some of whom are even related to her family. During the 2022 campaign, which led to Meloni's victory, two key issues emerged: stopping illegal immigration and restoring security for citizens. In this, her party aligned itself with the other two future governing parties: La Lega (led by Matteo Salvini), which took an even harder line, and Forza Italia, the party founded by Silvio Berlusconi, which positioned itself slightly closer to the centre.

CITIZENSHIP IN ITALY

To this day, Italy is one of the countries that has adopted the *Ius Sanguinis* (the 'right of blood'). Fratelli d'Italia strongly supports the maintenance of the current law on citizenship: a person is considered Italian if at least one parent is Italian. This principle also allows thousands of people living abroad with Italian ancestry to retain their Italian citizenship.

The requirements for this recognition are based on two main conditions: 1) Proof of descent from the original ancestor to whom Italian citizenship was granted (the emigrant ancestor). 2) continuity in the transmission of the nationality, that is, the ancestor must not have acquired a foreign nationality before the birth of his/her child, and none of the descendants must have formally renounced the Italian nationality before the birth of the next generation.

These conditions ensure that the chain of transmission of citizenship remains unbroken.

Many intellectuals and lawyers have reflected on this approach, tracing it back to the process of national unification. Italy was unified with the idea that all Italians formed one 'big family', and that even those who had emigrated should remain part of it - an idea that was reinforced during the Fascist era.

The principle of *Ius Sanguinis* served to reinforce the notion of a united Italy, a country that had been divided for centuries, that had no common language and that had previously been considered only as a 'geographical expression'. Before unification, Italy was made up of a dozen pre-unification states, many of which were ruled by foreign empires (such as the Austro-Hungarian Empire) or foreign dynasties (such as the Bourbons in southern Italy), as well as several small independent states.

A unique but dangerous unifying factor was the Catholic faith. However, it was still controlled by the Papal States, which made it not only a spiritual but also a political authority.

According to some historians, there is a symbolic and ideological continuity between the Risorgimento, Fascism and the modern Italian Right. This is reflected in the belief that the homeland must be defended, a concept linked to Italy's short

post-unification history (just over 150 years) and the idea of defending the homeland with blood. The call to 'defend the frontiers' - similar to the rhetoric used during the First World War - was seen as the final step towards the true unification of Italy (especially during the First World War).

In this perspective, immigrants, who often do not share the same faith, heritage, language, religious and folkloric traditions, cannot automatically obtain citizenship. To obtain it, they must reside in Italy for at least 10 consecutive years (without interruption in the official registers of residence), or 4 years if they are already citizens of an EU country.

Fratelli d'Italia reinforces the historical link between blood identity and (sometimes) cultural identity - especially tradition and faith - as the basis for Italian citizenship.

This approach is in line with one of the party's key narratives: presenting itself as an outsider to Italian republican politics. Party leaders often refer to the violent political clashes of the 1970s, emphasising the extremism of the far left, while largely avoiding talking about the right's involvement in the so-called 'stragi di Stato' (state massacres). This is what distinguishes Fratelli d'Italia, which claims a historical and ideological lineage not shared by the League.

Giorgia Meloni also positions herself as a person who has been politically marginalised but remains undefeated, unlike other parties that do not come from the fascist tradition.

Currently, the only party positioned further to the right of Fratelli d'Italia is the Lega per Salvini Premier, known for its strong leader identity.

Founded in 1989 as the Lega Nord per l'Indipendenza della Padania, the party was initially an independence movement for northern Italy. Over time it became a national party. Today it is the oldest active party in Italy, and has evolved significantly since Matteo Salvini took over from Umberto Bossi in 2013. Bossi was ousted following family and financial scandals, allowing Salvini to reshape the party's direction. Matteo Salvini replaced the old Northern League with the new Lega per Salvini Premier party, marking a definitive abandonment of the Padanian independence movement. A significant change was the removal of the word 'Nord' from the party symbol, signalling a shift from regional separatism to nationalist politics.

Despite these changes, the League has been part of the Italian government, with interruptions, since 1994.

The Carta di Roma: political, institutional and social communication

The Rome Charter is a code of ethics adopted in 2008 by the National Federation of the Italian Press (FNSI) and the National Council of the Order of Journalists (CNOG). This document provides guidelines to ensure correct and responsible information regarding asylum seekers, refugees, victims of trafficking and migrants. The main recommendations include the use of legally appropriate terms, avoiding the dissemination of inaccurate or distorted information and protecting the identity of the people involved.

To monitor the effectiveness and application of the Rome Charter, the Rome Charter Association publishes an annual report analysing how the Italian media deals with migration issues. The latest available report, entitled 'Contrasting News', was published in December 2024. This report highlights a 42% decrease in migration-related news on the front pages of Italian newspapers compared to the previous year. Furthermore, only 7% of the news gave a direct voice to migrants, while most of the media space was occupied by political statements.

These data suggest that, despite efforts to promote balanced information, the voices of migrants remain marginal in the Italian media landscape, indicating the need for a continuous commitment to improve the representation of and attention to their stories and perspectives.

The 12th Report of the Carta di Roma Association, entitled 'Notizie di contrasto' (News in Contrasts), highlights a general decrease in the attention paid by the Italian media to migration in 2024. The front pages of newspapers recorded a 42% reduction in articles on the subject compared to the previous year, while on prime time news programmes there was a 41% drop.

Despite this general trend, the catholic newspaper *Avvenire* stands out for having devoted greater attention to the migration phenomenon, with 254 front-page articles and a total of 870 headlines, maintaining an average of 2.9 articles per day.

Furthermore, the report emphasises that, in the TV news, about 26% of the news on migration included statements from political or institutional representatives, with a predominance of government voices. However, only 7% of the reports gave direct space to the protagonists of migration, highlighting a scarce representation of their personal experiences.

The representation of migration in the Italian media tends to emphasise a 'permanent crisis', using alarmist language with terms such as 'emergency', 'crisis', 'alarm' and 'invasion'. However, there has been a slight decrease in the use of such expressions over the past year. Furthermore, the association between immigration and crime is less central than in the past, although significant differences remain between the different media.

In terms of media type, television has historically devoted more attention to the migration phenomenon than the print media. In recent years, however, the use of social media as a source of information has also increased, in some cases surpassing print media and approaching television levels. This change reflects the transition to a more digital media ecosystem dominated by online platforms.

In conclusion, while television has traditionally followed the Charter of Rome more closely, the growing influence of social media and the declining attention of print media suggest the need to adapt ethical guidelines to the new dynamics of digital information.

2017-2024

Between 2017 and 2020, despite a lower number of landings compared to previous years, Salvini has focused on immigration in his communications, mainly on social media. On the one hand, during the first government of Giuseppe Conte (leader of the 'young' and populist Italian party Five Star Movement), supported by the League, the then Minister of the Interior Salvini often claimed credit for the government's measures against NGO ships, summarised by the slogan 'closed ports'.

On the other hand, during the second Conte government, once back in opposition, Salvini criticised the work of then Interior Minister Luciana Lamorgese, also making false claims about the arrival of migrants and the spread of the coronavirus.

It could be pointed out that although Salvini has been in government for about two years, he has never stopped talking mainly about landings, because he holds the office of Minister of Infrastructure and Transport. In fact, the League leader is vice-president of the Council and the Minister of the Interior, Matteo Piantedosi, was appointed head of the cabinet of the Ministry of the Interior in 2018, just when Salvini was minister. Piantedosi was not elected to parliament with any party, but among the ministers in Meloni's government he is considered to be close to the Lega.

It should also not be forgotten that Salvini, as Minister of Infrastructure and Transport, is responsible for the work of the Coast Guard, which, among other things, rescues migrants off the Italian coast.

Since 2002, the League has been 'targeted' (from its point of view) by the Council of Europe for its extremely racist and xenophobic propaganda. However, the first accusations date back to the very beginning of the movement, which was not only xenophobic but also based on stereotypes that isolated the inhabitants of southern Italy.

At the moment, the League is trying to move even further to the right in order to carve out its 'electoral space' against the (so far successful) competition of the Brothers of Italy. Salvini's League is positioned to the right, even further to the right than Fratelli d'Italia, and close to the world of the ultra-conservative Catholic right, the European far right, as well as Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin.

The Northern League tries to distance itself from the already extreme right-wing position of the Fratelli d'Italia by focusing on racist, xenophobic, homophobic and anti-abortion 'propaganda' and exploiting the stereotype of immigrants as 'thieves, rapists and murderers' against migrants (especially the 'visible' ones). The League also uses the idea of borders, which are increasingly defined and narrowed from an 'ethnic' perspective, and fights against NGOs, which it describes as 'sea taxis' for illegal immigrants and as facilitators of the 'replacement' of Europeans. Finally, the League makes 'superficial' references to Catholic symbolism, such as the rosary.

The European counterparts of the Lega and the Fratelli d'Italia cover the entire spectrum of the right and the far right.

The numbers.

In reality, however, the figures reveal another truth: between 2020 and 2024, Italy will experience considerable fluctuations in the number of migrants arriving on its shores. Here is a summary of the available data for each year.

First of all, from 2020 to 2024, Italy will be governed by three governments

Conte II government (2019 - 2021)

Draghi government (2021-2022)

Meloni government (from 2022 to date)

During these governments

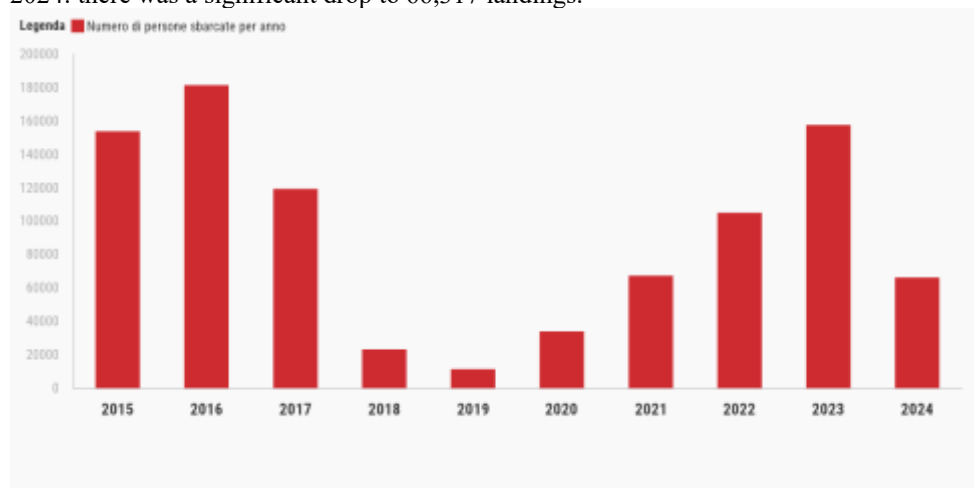
2020: 34,154 people arrived in Italy.

2021: The number of landings increased to 67,477.

2022: The number of landings reached 105,140.

2023: Italy saw a further increase, with 157,652 arrivals.

2024: there was a significant drop to 66,317 landings.



Migrant landings per year (Openpolis)

These figures show a peak in 2023, followed by a decline in 2024. The annual variations can be attributed to a number of factors, including changes in migration policies, socio-political conditions in countries of origin and transit, and weather conditions affecting migration routes in the Mediterranean and, to a lesser extent for Italy, the Balkan route.

It is always important to remember that there are types of migrants who are less visible than those who are rescued or who disembark alone in the Mediterranean. It is difficult to determine how many migrants have actually entered Italy without disembarking from the boats, as official counts are usually limited to the more visible arrivals by sea. However, there are other ways of entering: a large number of migrants reach the Italian coast on their own, in small boats, often evading the authorities' controls. In 2019, around 80% of migrants arriving in Italy did so independently by small boat or dinghy - beyond the reach of official surveillance; however, although Italy is largely surrounded by water, it shares land borders with France, Switzerland, Austria and Slovenia. Some migrants still enter via these borders, mainly via the Balkan route, but even these specific routes contain limited flows; many of the irregular migrants in Italy are people who first entered legally, documented as tourists or with another type of visa, and then overstayed their permits. According to the Ministry of the Interior, between 590,000 and 1 million irregular migrants in Italy are overstayers, and less than 15% of irregular migrants entered the country by sea. According to the latest estimates, there were around 519,000 irregular migrants in Italy on 1 January. However, these figures do not distinguish between entry procedures.

Giorgia Meloni has opted for a simplified approach and launched two plans to tackle immigration: the so-called Mattei plan and the outsourcing of migrants to non-European third countries.

The first project involves bilateral agreements with some African countries to detain migrants in transit and/or limit the migration of their citizens to southern Europe (mainly Italy).

The second initiative involves the creation of a hotspot in Albania, where migrants from 'safe countries' - presumably 'economic' migrants - would be transferred to non-European territory before being repatriated in safer conditions.

After a year, some facilities were built in the areas granted by Albania and subject to Italian law, but only about fifteen people temporarily resided there before returning to Italy due to legal issues related to European and international law. Similar policies are also emerging in the EU and Europe in general: for example, the UK's plan to transfer migrants to Rwanda under conditions similar to those in Italy, Denmark's intention to outsource immigration management to Kosovo, and the Netherlands' attempts to negotiate agreements with Uganda.

It is no coincidence that the countries chosen for these agreements are also in the Balkans, countries that have experienced more or less recent conflicts or turbulent political situations, that are facing serious economic difficulties and, above all, that have applied for EU membership between 10 and 20 years ago. This solution therefore implies - even if not officially - an exchange: through these agreements, the EU countries can support the Balkan countries by bringing them closer to the process of joining Europe and by providing them with financial resources.

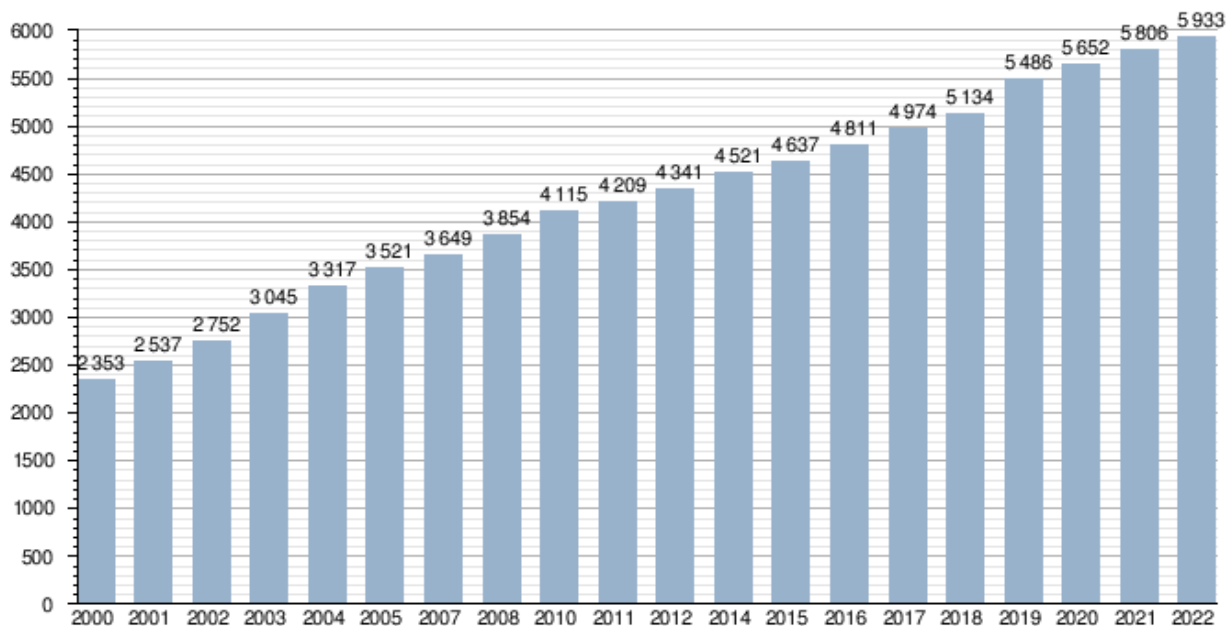
It may seem that 'fear' and xenophobia are being exploited to cover up external problems, especially given the relatively modest numbers involved. It is also worth noting that since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Italy has accepted a significant number of Ukrainian refugees with almost no problems. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 185,000 people from Ukraine had applied for temporary protection in Italy as of 22 February. More than 87% of them are women and minors, making their total number equivalent to all the arrivals from the Mediterranean in 2022. In this context, the fight against so-called 'illegal' immigration, perceived as a threat to Italy, may in fact reflect deeper internal issues. One of these is the conflict with the judiciary, which is accused of using the human rights of migrants as a political tool against the government, in particular against Matteo Salvini. The former Minister of the Interior has faced investigations and trials for detaining migrants at sea in the Mediterranean before allowing them to disembark, a policy also applied to shipwrecked people rescued by an Italian military vessel that was banned from approaching the national coastline.



Matteo Salvini during an election campaign holding a rosary in his hand. A rosary is a string of prayer beads used in the Catholic faith to count prayers, especially during the recitation of a series of specific prayers known as the Rosary. These repeated clashes with the judiciary seem to serve a broader objective: to delegitimise the judicial system in line with the political strategy of the Meloni government. The aim is to create the conditions for two important internal reforms: one concerning the careers of magistrates, framed as a response to the so-called 'left-wing magistrates', and another that concentrates greater executive power at the expense of Parliament, which is increasingly being bypassed on the pretext of urgency. The ultimate aim is to reinforce the constitutional reforms that would significantly strengthen the authority of the Prime Minister and weaken the role of the President of the Republic.

THE NEW EMIGRATIONS.

According to recent trends, Italy's real emergency in recent years has been the growing number of young Italians leaving the country, a problem that even the government is struggling to address. Italy's youth population is shrinking and many are 'fleeing' abroad. The challenge is to implement a pro-natalist policy that deliberately excludes the 'new Italians' - children of immigrants born in the country - who, as legal workers, could help support the national pension system (INPS).



The evolution over the years of the number of AIRE members (in thousands) (Wikipedia)

This ideological approach reflects the political evolution of the League. Born as a regionalist and anti-southern party, the Lega has now adopted an ultra-nationalist and ultra-conservative Catholic identity in order to attract voters mainly from southern Italy. The party has shifted towards promoting a rigid concept of Italian identity, rooted in ethnicity and tradition. Like Fratelli d'Italia, it emphasises an 'imagined' version of national and Catholic identity. For both parties, allied but competing, the challenge is to capture and divide the anti-immigration electorate, while supporting family values and religious traditions.

Fratelli d'Italia, however, seems to have greater appeal. It plays on nationalist rhetoric, presenting itself as the party of the 'fight for Italy', emphasising a patriotic and combative identity. It also tries to position itself as the defender of social welfare, even though welfare policies continue to decline.

Despite their rivalry, the two parties cooperate on some key issues: the detention of migrants in extra-territorial centres such as those in Libya and Albania - a policy that recalls Italy's colonial past - and the promotion of pro-natalist policies that make it even more difficult for children born in Italy to foreign parents to acquire citizenship. Both the Lega and the Fratelli d'Italia present themselves as 'close to the people' (populist) and, above all, as in tune with the deep-rooted fears of many Italians. In this political trajectory, the two parties (as well as Forza Italia) have also united in a sensational case such as the arrest of Almasri. This link was further strengthened in January 2025, when Italy released and returned to Libya Najeem Osema Almasri Habish, known as Almasri, the head of the Libyan judicial police. Almasri had been arrested in Turin on the orders of the International Criminal Court (ICC), which accused him of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including torture and ill-treatment in Libyan detention centres, in particular Mitiga prison. However, the arrest was not validated due to a 'procedural error': the Turin Digos (Central Directorate for Anti-Crime Services) carried out the arrest without prior authorisation from the Ministry of Justice, as required by Italian law in relation to ICC requests.) As a result, the Rome Court of Appeal ordered Almasri's release. Almasri was subsequently returned to Libya

on an Italian Air Force flight, sparking criticism from the political opposition and human rights organisations, who accused the Italian government of favouring the impunity of an international criminal.

The International Criminal Court has asked Italy for clarification regarding the release and repatriation of Almasri, underlining the obligation of member states to cooperate fully with the Court in its investigation and prosecution of international crimes. This case has raised questions about Italy's handling of ICC requests and the implications of bilateral relations with Libya in the context of the fight against human trafficking.

Outsourcing affects communication: the case of Albania

In November 2023, the Italian and Albanian governments reached an agreement on the management of migratory flows, which includes the construction of two migrant centres in Albania. These centres will be located in Shëngjin and Gjadër, in the north of the country.

Shëngjin is a hub for the identification of migrants rescued at sea by the Italian authorities. The migrants are then transported from this port to the main facility in Gjadër, after undergoing identification procedures and medical checks. Gjadër is a treatment centre, located in a former air base, where migrants are accommodated while their asylum claims are being examined. It has a centre for asylum seekers with a capacity of 880 people, a CPR (Detention Centre for Repatriation) with 144 places and a detention facility with 20 places.

Financed by Italy (with an estimated investment of between 120 and 150 million euros per year for the next five years), the project provides for Italian jurisdiction over the centres, with Albanian law enforcement agencies providing external security.

The adoption of the project has faced legal challenges. In November 2024, the Court of Rome suspended the transfer of some migrants to Albania, questioning the legality of administrative detention on non-Italian territory. This meant that the centres in Shëngjin and Gjadër remained empty for months.

In February 2025, the Italian government considered the possibility of using the centres in Albania as detention centres for repatriation (CPR), without waiting for further decisions from the European Court of Justice. However, this proposal triggered internal political debates, with different opinions within the government majority.

The communication on return centres in Albania has developed through a series of official announcements, government statements and media coverage. The Italian government made public the agreement with Albania for the creation of two facilities for border procedures and the repatriation of migrants. The Minister of the Interior emphasised that the initiative had aroused the interest of several European countries and stressed the importance of 'international cooperation' in the management of migratory flows.

However, the implementation of the project has been criticised by human rights organisations and legal experts, who have raised concerns about the conditions of migrants and the legitimacy of the procedures adopted. In addition, some court rulings have suspended the detention of migrants transferred to Albania and ordered their return to Italy. In response to reports of alleged staff redundancies in the Albanian centres, the Minister of Foreign Affairs denied these claims and reiterated the government's commitment to the project. Communication on this issue has been characterised by intense public debate, with divergent positions between the government, the opposition and civil society organisations, reflecting the complexity of migration and return policies.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have strongly criticised the return centres set up by Italy in Albania. Their main concerns are the violation of fundamental rights, the lack of transparency and the exclusion of NGOs from the process. According to the Asylum and Immigration Roundtable (TAI), these centres present 'serious procedural problems' that undermine fundamental rights such as the right to asylum, health care and legal defence. The TAI has stated that these structures are 'incompatible' with the protection of these rights and has called for their immediate suspension.

NGOs and activists have also criticised the lack of public consultation and civil society involvement in the decision to open these centres. Erida Skendaj, Executive Director of the Albanian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, stressed that the government should have involved NGOs in the decision-making process in order to avoid authoritarian models of governance. NGOs have expressed concerns about the conditions in the centres and their remote location, which could limit migrants' access to legal and support services. Kristina Millona, a journalist and academic, noted that access to the facilities is restricted and that information is often filtered through official channels, preventing an independent assessment of conditions inside the centres.

In addition, politicians and activists have organised protests and monitoring missions to assess the situation in the Albanian centres, further highlighting concerns about the management of migrants and the protection of their fundamental rights.

The Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, has strongly emphasised the importance of the Albanian detention centres as a key element in the Italian government's strategy to manage illegal immigration. Despite the legal challenges, Meloni stressed her determination to overcome all obstacles to move the project forward, responding to public demands to curb illegal immigration and ensure security and law enforcement.



"The President of the Council of Ministers, Giorgia Meloni, talks about the migrant centers in Albania during the Atreju festival." Atreju is the historic political event organized by *Gioventù Nazionale*, the youth wing of *Fratelli d'Italia*, founded in 1998 on the initiative of Giorgia Meloni, who at the time was a leader of *Azione Giovani*.

He also stressed the need for a more effective European legal framework on return and hoped that the European Court of Justice would support return policies not only for Italy but for all EU member states. In order to ensure the effectiveness of the centres in Albania, the government has approved a decree establishing a list of 'safe countries', with the aim of strengthening the legitimacy of operations in migrant detention centres in Albania.

The Meloni government has also announced its intention to transform the facilities in Albania into "Centri di permanenza per il rimpatrio" (CPR), in order to improve the effectiveness of the repatriation policy and to overcome the legal challenges it has faced so far.

These statements and actions underline the Meloni government's commitment to a stricter migration policy, with the aim of reducing irregular immigration and ensuring more efficient management of migration flows.

However, the data contradicts the narrative that Italy is flooded with immigrants: in 2023, out of 1,130,000 asylum applications in the EU, Italy received 136,000, fewer than Germany, France and Spain. Instead, the government has focused its efforts on reducing arrivals by sea by making rescue operations by NGOs more difficult and expensive, imposing restrictions such as the obligation to carry out only one rescue per trip and assigning distant ports. Measures against NGOs, including seizures and administrative detentions, have limited rescue operations and are likely to contribute to an increase in the number of victims in the Mediterranean, estimated at 1,600 by 2024, according to SOS Humanity.

A statement by the Prime Minister went viral on social media: *'The centres in Albania will work, even if I have to spend every night there until the end of my government'.

CONCLUSIONS

The Meloni government, in office since 2022, has focused much of its electoral and institutional communication on the 'immigration problem', while trying to promote pro-natalist policies. However, these efforts have clashed with the decline of the Italian welfare system, which is being tested by low birth rates and an ageing population, making it increasingly difficult to sustain pensions.

At the same time, the government has developed a parallel narrative about the risks of granting citizenship to the children of immigrants born in Italy, particularly those from the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa, regions where Christianity is less widespread.

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