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ARTICLE



The 'refugee crisis' in Italy as a crisis of legitimacy

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ABSTRACT

The so-called 'refugee crisis' marks a crucial juncture in Italian politics. Tapping into the crisis of legitimacy of contemporary European politics, the controversy over migration has triggered discussion of socioeconomic, cultural and security issues. Pressured by public opinion, the EU and Italy have followed the logic of exceptionality, trying to put a halt to the inflow of asylum-seekers rather than pursuing the logic of normalcy that must apply to migration at a global level. Institutional and mainstream actors have mirrored public anxieties and security concerns, endorsing emergency narratives, aggressive policing and militarised border control. Unable to engage with citizens' concerns, they have helped to conflate migration with insecurity, creating a fertile breeding ground for xenophobic, populist reactions. The paper suggests that the refugee crisis is best understood in relation to other ongoing crises in the EU, and that the way it is handled will have significant consequences for future action, shaping the way European societies cope with forthcoming crises and transforming the relationship between states and citizens. Accordingly, it argues that the permanent state of emergency characterising governmental responses so far does not bode well for the future of liberal democracy in Europe.

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Introduction

Migration is certainly not a new phenomenon in Europe. Over the past three decades, various streams of migrants and refugees have helped to reshape European societies to a considerable degree. The guest-worker programmes that characterised immigration policy in Western and Northern Europe from the 1950s onwards were replaced in the 1990s by new inflows of migrants arriving in countries like Britain, France, Germany and the Netherlands as a result of wars and humanitarian crises within and outside Europe. Conversely, traditional countries of emigration on the southern borders of the European Union (EU) – such as Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal – have been progressively transformed into new destinations for international migrants. This trend has been further enhanced by the so-called 'European refugee crisis', with large numbers of asylum seekers and migrants streaming into southern Europe from the Middle East and Africa.

While the key drivers of the current situation are generally identified as the conflict in Syria and Libya, and instability in countries such as Afghanistan, Eritrea and Iraq, other

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general factors have also played a crucial role, including economic inequalities, demographic change and global social networks, as well as environmental and climate change. The growth in migration flows across the Mediterranean had in fact been foreseen by migration experts for decades, as a result of population growth, low incomes and structural unemployment in various parts of the world (see e.g. Castles, de Haas, and Miller 2013). Nevertheless, governments in Europe have proven completely unprepared for the humanitarian and political consequences of increased immigration, paving the way for much debate on the allegedly unexpected nature of the refugee 'crisis'.

Italy is a case in point. Holding a position of crucial geographical importance in the Mediterranean, it is among the countries most directly affected by migration to Europe, besides being heavily involved in maritime search and rescue operations. After Greece, Italy is the main 'country of first arrival' for refugees that reach Europe by sea. Of the one million refugees that crossed the Mediterranean in 2015 alone, 154,000 landed in Italy, resulting in a 31 percentage-point increase in annual asylum application rates (EASO 2016). The increasing number of migrants reaching Italy, as well as the chronic unpreparedness of the Italian authorities in attempting to cope with migrant reception and transit, has triggered tensions with the EU, and public controversy over the scale and cost of Italian involvement in patrolling operations. At the same time, new tensions have emerged concerning migrants escaping from temporary hosting facilities, and more generally concerning the effectiveness and sustainability of welcome and integration policies (Berry, Garcia-Blanco, and Moore 2016). These debates have had profound effects on Italian politics, as the refugee crisis has put pressure on border control, heightened conflict over cultural and religious diversity, and generated new costs in an already tightly constrained fiscal setting.

In recent years, Italy has faced some of the greatest challenges in its republican history: an enduring economic crisis in the context of the Great Recession, the collapse of the two-decades long polarised bipolar party system in 2013, the transition to grand-coalition executives, and the contested implementation of austerity policies by centrist-mainstream coalition governments. In this setting, the issue of immigration has rapidly become a major public concern (Carvalho 2014). Indeed, while Italian governments have taken action on the migration crisis in reaction to EU-level policies, and have demanded common crisis management, radical-right political entrepreneurs and the solidarity movement have competed with one another on how to cope with migrants in transit, and on the public definition of the humanitarian emergency (Zamponi 2018). As the issue of migration has been at the core of the public agenda, it has eluded the dismissive tactics that mainstream parties often opt to pursue with respect to debates on complex policy issues, and forced all the major political actors to engage in public debate. The feeling of emergency that has characterised public discussion on migration in recent months, therefore, is not exclusively a consequence of the sheer number of refugees actually reaching Europe, but also of the perception that governments in the EU, and in Italy in particular, are unfit to tackle what is presented as a crisis.

The refugee crisis has thus tapped into the ongoing legitimacy crisis in western democracies, marking a crucial juncture in Italian and European politics. The unfolding of the public controversy on the arrival of migrants in Italy has, in fact, triggered public discussion of other relevant issues, including the socioeconomic, cultural and security consequences of immigration (e.g. Castelli Gattinara 2016). Debates on how to cope

with a humanitarian emergency have progressively evolved into a conflict around ethno-cultural differences in multicultural societies (Favell 1998; Morawska 2003). This, in turn, has shaped discussions on national identities and the EU (including the Italian nationality law), on how governments should respond to the concerns of citizens, and more broadly on how societies should be organised in terms of who is to be included and who, instead, is to be excluded.

To analyse in detail all aspects of the ongoing migrant and asylum crisis in Europe is probably beyond reach of any single article. Without hoping to be exhaustive, in what follows I shall focus on two crucial dimensions: the regulatory dimension, which facilitates understanding the way in which the current crisis has been managed in Italy and the EU; and the public reaction dimension, addressing how public opinion concerning migration and refugees has evolved in Italy since the beginning of the crisis. By looking at these two aspects of migration politics, I will argue that there is a disjunction between the logic of *normalcy* explaining contemporary migration flows to Europe, and the logic of *exceptionality* characterising the response of EU governments and public opinion to the challenges of global migration. Accordingly, I will suggest that the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ is best understood in relation to other ongoing crises in Europe, most notably the crisis of legitimacy of national governments. As such, the European migrant crisis is but a facet of other ongoing unsolved European dilemmas: a rupture within a transformation of broader proportions, expanding the structural crises that European countries have been facing for decades.

The refugee crisis as a regulatory dilemma

A first crucial dimension of the refugee crisis in Europe is regulatory in nature, going to the heart of the origins of EU migration policy through the process of European integration. In fact, as pointed out by Guiraudon (2017), even though recent years have been characterised by many discussions and proposals for reforming migration policy in the EU, these have largely reproduced the security logic of the last thirty years, which has proven to increase, rather than tackle, the risks to the lives of people in need of international protection. Most of the actions taken by the European Commission to target real and imagined migration crises have emphasised criminalising migration, increasing border controls and externalising migration management outside of the European territory (e.g. Libya, Turkey), with only weak efforts to increase internal and external solidarity (Noll 2015). Their main goal has been that of stemming migration flows, with little serious effort to steer EU immigration and asylum policies in a less securitised direction.

At the origin of EU regulations are the provisions of the Schengen and Dublin conventions of the 1990s, which aimed at dismantling internal barriers to free trade, but had the corollary of introducing complementary measures regulating security and control towards the outside world. The 1985 Schengen Agreement thus facilitated internal mobility by eliminating systematic identity checks at the internal borders of the area, but also tightened controls at exterior borders. In 1990, the Dublin Convention (then replaced by the Dublin II Regulation in 2003) set out provisions for judicial and police cooperation, giving specific attention to the management of asylum requests, essentially because the signatories recognised the need to take defensive measures against the mounting number of asylum-seekers in Europe, and the increasingly

widespread practice of filing claims in different EU countries. The signatory states therefore approved the device now generally referred to as the ‘Dublin principle’ according to which legal responsibility for processing asylum claims by non-EU migrants who reach the common area illegally, rests with the first state of entry.

Considering the nature of migration flows in the past decade, this asymmetric principle has had the effect of placing most responsibility on countries along the EU’s southern border, generating political tensions between Italy and Greece on the one hand and other European states on the other. Otherwise put, the 2015 ‘long summer of migration’ marked a clash between the principles of Schengen – implying that asylum-seekers could move to their preferred destinations after entering the EU – and those of Dublin – allowing European countries to reject claims and send migrants back to the countries they first entered (Bauböck 2017). The first strain on the regulatory system emerged in 2011, which set a record of over 58,000 people reaching Europe via the Mediterranean,¹ marking a seven-fold increase on the figures for 2010 (Attinà 2017). Even though at the time most EU governments denied the distinctiveness of the crisis, the inflow triggered some initial tensions among member states – especially in April 2011, when the French government decided temporarily to re-impose border controls with Italy, after the rise in uncontrolled migration from Tunisia following the political unrest unleashed by the Arab Spring. The outbreak of conflict in Syria and Libya over the following years jeopardised the EU strategy of externalised management of migration control, while simultaneously producing a major growth in forced migration inflows. The increase in illegal crossings into Italy and Malta between 2012 and 2013 was four-fold, and several migrant ship disasters were reported by the mass media. More broadly, tensions between member states escalated, and the issue of unplanned migration reached the top of the EU agenda, because of the mismatch between responsibility for the processing of asylum claims (which rested on the countries of entry, primarily Italy and Greece), and the migrants’ preferred destinations (Germany, Austria, Sweden and the UK).

Two major shipwrecks on 3 and 11 October 2013, which resulted in over 400 victims, convinced the Italian government to appeal to humanitarian principles and disengage from the ordinary management of irregular migration. The *Mare Nostrum* operation² had the twin objectives of performing search-and-rescue activities to save lives at sea and bring migrants ashore, while at the same time gaining leverage in the call for greater European solidarity. In this respect, according to Pastore (2017, 31) *Mare Nostrum* was a ‘technical success but a political failure’, attracting criticism not only at the domestic, but also at the international level. Most European governments, in fact, considered the behaviour of the Italian government to be simply permissive towards migrants’ aspirations to reach other countries, and reiterated that migrant entry had to be managed at the common border, just as in any cross-border crisis (Attinà 2017).

While the beginning of operation *Triton*, which replaced *Mare Nostrum* in late 2014, marked the realignment of Italy with EU policies, it also led to a polarisation between the member states that recognised the necessity of welcoming asylum-seekers, and those that stressed its practical unfeasibility and popular undesirability. Considering the crucial role played by German executives in producing EU border policy, Angela Merkel’s *Wir schaffen das* declaration in August 2015 signalled a possible opening in EU strategies towards intra-European solidarity. Nonetheless, the proposal by the Commission – suggesting a more effective distribution of asylum-seekers based on the relocation of

the hundreds of thousands of refugees stuck in camps in Greece and Italy – was matched by the opposition of member states’ governments (in Hungary, but also in Denmark and Sweden), and questioned by political parties and leaders throughout the Union. Thus, EU member states failed to live up to their responsibilities of internal solidarity, as well as to their human-rights obligations towards refugees. On the one hand, they opted for a non-cooperative solution based on national control of national borders, rather than the cooperative redistribution of refugee-admission responsibilities (Bauböck 2017). On the other hand, as of July 2017, EU member states have pledged only 41,000 places for the 160,000 refugees to be relocated within the EU – while only 8000 out of 35,000 people have been relocated from Italy.³

In this respect, a crucial dimension of the refugee crisis which explains much of its impact on Italian politics and society is the incomplete and contradictory nature of Europeanisation. While some of its effects had already emerged during the Greek government-debt crisis, the current situation has exposed the same structural defects with respect to the Dublin principle and the relationship between migration and security policy (Noll 2015).

The refugee crisis as a moral panic

A second dimension of the refugee crisis, which at least in part, explains the EU’s failure to relocate applicants and the reluctance of governments to cooperate with one another, is public anxiety and the moral panic that accompanied the uncontrolled refugee movements in the summer of 2015. The crisis triggered a wave of civil-society actions and initiatives of solidarity with people seeking asylum in the EU, which came to be known in German as ‘*Willkommenskultur*’ (Zamponi 2018). At the same time, it also nourished opposition among large sectors of the population, especially amid people who were already angered by Europeanisation and the perceived loss of control over national borders and politics. While the emergence of negative attitudes towards immigrants is explained by many different factors, their development arguably derives from, but also feeds into, the rising popularity of the far right and its anti-immigrant rhetoric (see e.g. Ceobanu and Escandell 2010). The scientific literature and mass media commentators have been noting that economic strains, and concerns over terrorism and the cultural assimilation of immigrants, have encouraged the growth of populist anti-immigration parties in recent decades. By representing migrant populations and refugees as aliens who infiltrate Europe to corrode its social and cultural fabric, these actors have challenged the solidarity movement by voicing concerns about ‘unlimited’ and ‘uncontrolled’ migration (Ataç, Rygiel, and Stierl 2016; Castelli Gattinara 2018). Where these parties have attained political power, as in Hungary and Poland, they have effectively been able to halt any cooperation with the relocation agreement, offering inspiration to other right-wing parties throughout the continent, as well as lessons for Western and Northern European executives about the possible consequences of cooperative compliance in their countries.

With Italy having faced 85,000 new arrivals in the first six months of 2017 alone, a ten percent increase over 2016, the deterioration of attitudes towards migrants and refugees has shown no signs of coming to a halt or being reversed. According to Eurobarometer data, over 40 per cent of Italians consider immigration to be the most important problem facing Italy in 2017 (Figure 1). Interestingly, while the Italian

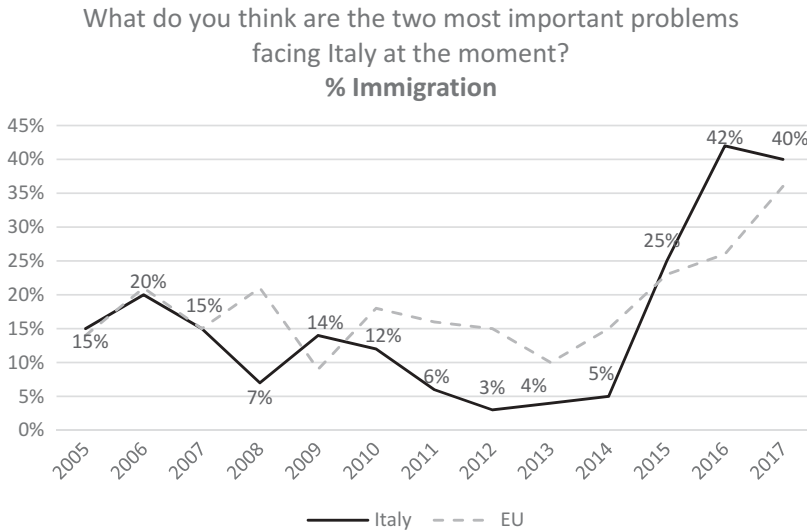


Figure 1. Share of people considering immigration the most important problem in their country (2005–2017). Source: Standard Eurobarometer 2005–2017.

average has been consistently below the European one throughout the 2000s, since the beginning of the refugee crisis Italy has been steadily above the EU average.

Similarly, if before 2014 only one in four Italians agreed that migrants represented a threat to public order and security, by 2015 the share of people agreeing with this statement had reached 35 per cent, which grew to 40 per cent of respondents in 2016.⁴ In contrast, the share of people considering migrants a resource for Italy has decreased progressively in recent years,⁵ in concomitance with the sharp increase in arrivals by sea to southern Italy. In 2016, this form of positive assessment of migration was endorsed by only one out of three Italians, the lowest score since the first measurement in 2002 (35 per cent). While only illustrative of ongoing trends, [Figure 2](#) indicates rather straightforwardly that there is an association between the increase in arrivals and the deterioration of public perceptions of immigration.

Similar trends are confirmed by a 2016 Pew Research Centre survey, according to which a broad majority of Italians believe that refugees leaving countries like Iraq and Syria represent a major threat. [Figure 3](#) below shows that attitudes towards minorities and refugees in Italy are consistently more negative than the EU median. While 60 per cent are concerned that refugees will increase domestic terrorism, no less than 47 per cent believe that they are more to blame for crime than other groups in Italy, a figure that is 17 per cent higher than the European median (Pew Research Centre 2016). When it comes to defining the specific threat from refugees, however, Italians perceive the negative economic impact of the migration crisis to be a bigger concern than either crime or terrorism (65 per cent), ranking highest (with Greece) in Western Europe and scoring about 15 points higher than the EU median. While the combination of the economic recession and the migrant crisis seems to have fuelled widespread concerns about refugees, negative attitudes towards minorities in general are common in Italy. This is clear for Muslims, about which almost 70 per cent of Italians express either

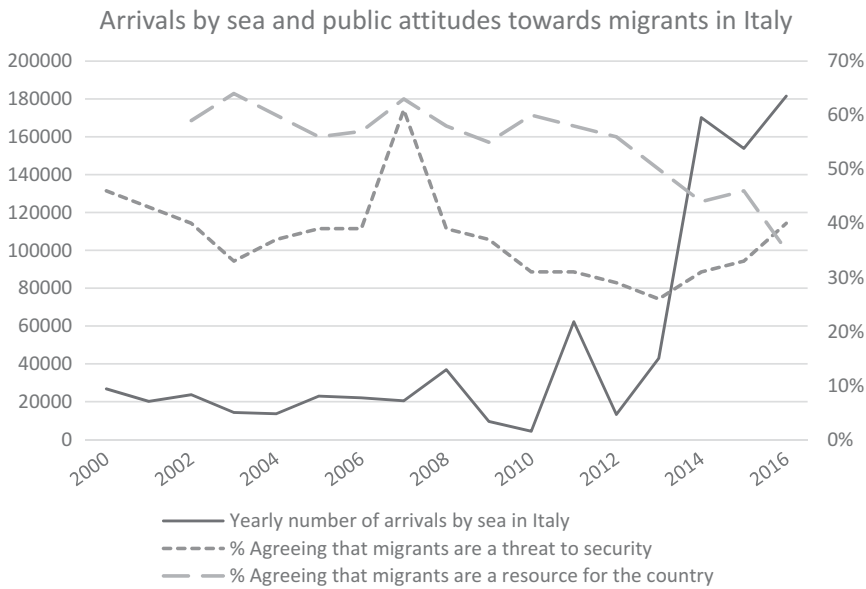


Figure 2. Arrivals by sea and evolution of public opinion on migration in Italy (2008–2017). Sources: UNHCR; DemosΠ SWG.

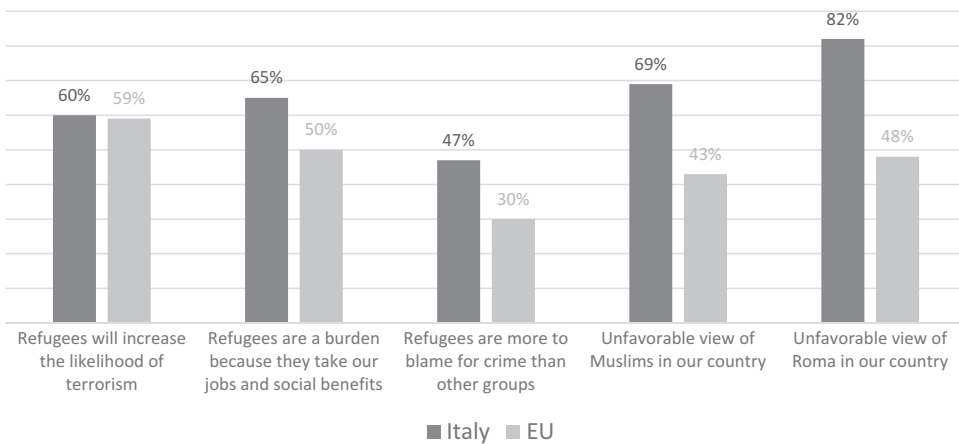


Figure 3. Attitudes towards minorities and refugees in Italy (2016). Source: Pew Research Centre.

‘mostly’ or ‘very’ unfavourable views, as well as for the Roma, who are viewed negatively by a striking 82 per cent of respondents in the Pew Research Centre study. In Italy, moreover, negative ratings for Muslims have also increased since 2015 by 8 percent (Pew Research Centre 2016).

The recent surge of asylum seekers into Europe, moreover, has featured prominently in the anti-immigrant rhetoric of right-wing parties. While Italy has been a fertile ground for far-right politics for decades, the public-opinion figures concerning refugees as well as ethnic and religious minorities have arguably reflected the popularity of anti-immigration parties. Figure 4 compares the increase in asylum applications that were

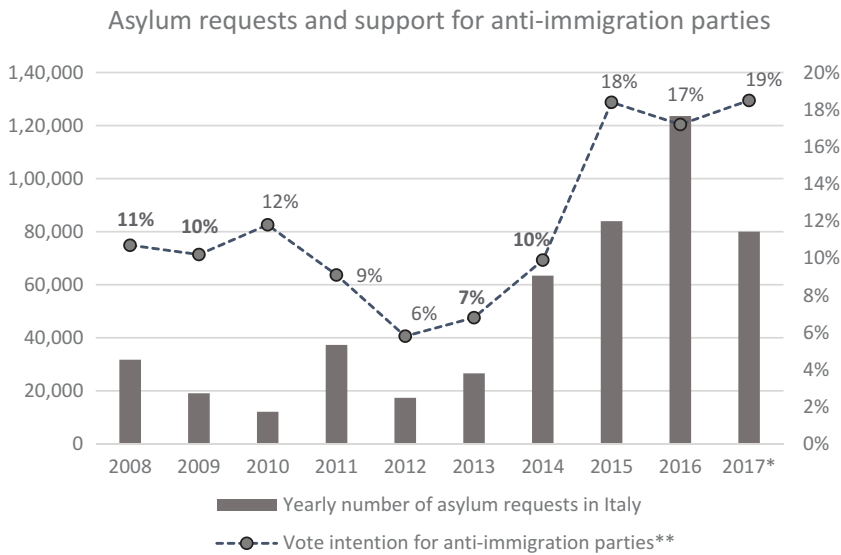


Figure 4. Asylum requests and support for anti-immigration parties (2008–2017). Sources: Ministero degli interni; YouTrend.

* Data for the period January–July 2017 only.

** Lega Nord; La Destra; Fratelli d'Italia (in bold actual election results).

processed by the Italian ministry of Internal affairs, and the evolution in voting intentions for the Lega Nord and Fratelli d'Italia,⁶ showing that exclusionist right-wing parties have gained considerable momentum, especially since the 2015 'long summer of migration'.

This is not surprising considering the presence and visibility of anti-immigration and anti-refugee campaigning in Italy in recent years. Conservative (e.g. Forza Italia), radical right (Lega Nord, Fratelli d'Italia), and extreme right-wing actors (Forza Nuova, CasaPound Italia), have been capitalising on immigration since the 1990s, especially focusing on the socio-economic consequences of migration (Cetin 2015). More recent analyses of mass-media coverage of the migration crisis show that the key areas of debate in Italy have been the responsibility for patrolling EU borders, the costs of these operations, and the question of the redistribution of asylum applicants (Berry, Garcia-Blanco, and Moore 2016). The core issue in the Italian media is thus the responsibility of the EU to help Italy, financially and logistically, in dealing with the influx of refugees and migrants. At the same time, newspapers also report extensively on tensions between newly arrived migrants and local citizens in areas hosting temporary settlements, which often pave the way for intervention by anti-immigrant political entrepreneurs.

In this respect, protests on issues associated with immigration and refugee politics represent a growing form of right-wing social movement activity in Italy. Since the beginning of the crisis, anti-refugee mobilisation has taken on a variety of different forms, ranging from direct confrontational actions challenging the opening of refugee centres in local towns, to institutional activities by established representative political organisations, and grassroots activities aimed at raising awareness and mobilisation among the citizenry (Castelli Gattinara 2017). This is generally accompanied by narratives

of backlash against multiculturalism, which is pretty much in line with a trend that has characterised western Europe in recent years (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010). Whilst the basic underlying idea is that Europe is experiencing an 'invasion' and the replacement of native populations and traditions with immigrant ones, many different discursive elements are woven into anti-refugee discourse in Italy. Most notably, these include the corruption of the political system, targeting left-wing multiculturalism, refugee aid organisations, and the disillusionment of ordinary citizens who feel abandoned by mainstream representatives. The breadth of this discourse thus enables anti-refugee protests to serve as a vehicle for an array of grievances, ranging from everyday security concerns, to the demise of European culture and widespread dissatisfaction with the political establishment, which are aspects of the immigration phenomenon that have been addressed time and again by the populist anti-establishment Five-star Movement (M5S) as well.

The most worrying aspect, however, is perhaps the reaction of the political mainstream to anti-immigration and anti-refugee campaigning. On the one hand, the mainstream right in Italy has generally modulated its attitudes towards migration based on its bargaining with Lega Nord to form governing coalitions, and on the logic of competition with political actors located on the right of the political spectrum. On the other, the mainstream left Partito Democratico (PD), which comprises the main component of the governing coalition ruling Italy since before the beginning of the crisis, has been the target of much political campaigning by opposition parties, most notably the M5S, criticising not only the way it has managed the new arrivals, but also the outcomes of the negotiations with the EU. As a result, the PD has taken an increasingly harsh stance on migration. Most notably, it played a crucial role in approving a new immigration law, promoted under the initiative of two of its leading ministers. The new law was approved having been made a matter of confidence in the government, and was harshly criticised for severely limiting the right to asylum and the protection of fundamental rights (SIR 2017). If the main goal of the so-called 'Minniti-Orlando decree'⁷ was to simplify asylum procedures and curtail illegal immigration by signing bilateral agreements and by expanding the network of administrative detention, its logic remains one in which migration is treated as an emergency phenomenon that must be repressed. Its main result is that asylum seekers now also suffer within the dysfunctional Italian judicial system. On the other hand, the secretary of the PD, as well as other senior PD officials, have sent very controversial messages on migration, including the emulation of claims by anti-immigration actors (e.g. 'help them at home'), proposals on heavier sanctions for crimes committed by refugees residing in Italy, and local administrative acts discriminating against migrants and citizens engaged in solidarity networks.

In this framework, the Italian government has opted to echo the vociferous political campaign conducted by the far right, accusing NGOs that are operating rescue ships in the Mediterranean of working in tandem with smugglers and making a profit out of migration (Castelli Gattinara 2018). According to a widespread popular opinion, in fact, immigration has over time become a business, and the refugee crisis is the result of the so-called 'business of hospitality' (*Accoglienza business* in Italian). As a matter of fact, the Italian authorities have largely outsourced to charities, private companies and cooperatives, the job of taking care of migrants upon their arrival in the country.

As this became a lucrative business, with landlords and hotel managers turning their available space into housing facilities, the system soon gave rise to numerous scandals

arising from corruption and the influence of organised crime. On the one hand, activists working with asylum seekers have long believed that the national emergency associated with the 'refugee crisis' facilitates illegal profit, and have been denouncing the poor living conditions in many asylum centres in Italy. On the other hand, right-wing actors have been arguing that the business of hosting migrants is part of a conspiracy aimed at destroying Europe and its culture, and that refugee aid organisations are not interested in the humanitarian aspects of the crisis, but only in making a profit out of European tenders. Taking advantage of this public mood, the government decided to target NGOs involved in rescue operations in the Mediterranean, insinuating that they act in cooperation with human smugglers. Most notably, it threatened to shut its ports to NGOs, and asked them to sign up to a controversial code of conduct which implies, among other things, that the Italian army will be allowed to accompany NGO rescue missions. The material and human consequences of this choice are likely to be considerable, as several NGOs are refusing to sign the code of conduct on humanitarian grounds and have thus temporarily withdrawn their ships. But the consequences in terms of the quality of public debate in Italy are going to be equally important, as the Italian executive has *de facto* endorsed the tenets of one of the most widespread and xenophobic contemporary conspiracy theories in Italy.

By placing borders at the core of the public debate, the so-called refugee crisis has resulted in major changes in Italian politics and society. Most notably, it has paved the way for a collective moral panic, where public anxieties have become widespread and allowed exclusionary actors, as well as mainstream political parties and the mass media, to perform the role of entrepreneurs of fear. If the Italian discourse has considered migration 'an emergency' for a long time, the 'migration crisis' has ostensibly taken this narrative to its extremes, portraying Italy as on the brink of collapse, and its traditions and way of life on the verge of demise. In short, and without intending to demean the relevance and breadth of refugee solidarity activism in Italy, the migrant crisis has generated widespread public panic in Italian society, the origins of which are rooted in the pre-existing problems of a country wracked by economic recession and the structural legitimisation crisis of its political system.

Conclusion: the logic of emergency and the crisis of legitimacy in the EU

EU leaders and heads of government have often said that the refugee crisis will probably become the most difficult challenge the EU has ever faced, even more serious than the euro crisis (Hansen 2017). As a matter of fact, the EU has been exposed to multiple shocks over the past decade, with virtually all member states being affected (albeit to varying degrees) by the negative consequences of the Great Recession, Brexit, and the booming popularity of populist Eurosceptic parties across the continent. Very little attention, however, has been devoted to how these political crises of the EU are related to one another. The overlap of the various crises in Europe, instead, points to structural problems of legitimacy within the EU, and thus explains at least two major aspects of contemporary European politics. First, problems of legitimacy at the national and EU levels are at the root of the disjunction between the structural drivers of migration flows and the political drivers of migration governance. Second, this progressive delegitimisation explains the disjunction between the logic of normalcy explaining contemporary

migration, and the logic of exceptionality characterising the response of national governments to the challenges of global displacement.

If the origins of the current refugee crisis can be understood in terms of conjunctural (the conflicts in Syria and Libya) as well as structural factors at the global level (economic inequalities, demographic and climate change), the drivers of migration governance in Europe are closely linked to the process of European integration and its deficiencies. Migration politics in many European countries is in fact powerfully shaped by the breakdown in trust between the people and the political establishment, which is in turn fuelled – among other things – by the lack of political opposition within EU institutions (cf. Mair 2007) and by macroeconomic austerity policies promoted by member states' governments. The effects of the economic crisis and the consequences of migration explain why people who tend not to trust political elites also tend to display the most hostile attitudes towards all forms of migration and ethnic diversity in Europe. To address this trend of structural opposition and alienation in western democracies, European governments should understand that a responsible handling of the refugee crisis must also incorporate responsible macroeconomic and institutional reform at the EU level. Instead, in the hope of stemming declining popularity they have shown a desultory form of responsiveness. Most European governments, including the Italian one, have endorsed a security approach to migration indulging the populist tendencies of increasingly proportions of the electorate.

At the same time, if there is a certain consensus that migratory pressure on EU borders is the 'new normal' in European border policy (European Commission 2016), immigration and asylum are still overwhelmingly addressed through the logic of emergency, ascribing the migration phenomenon itself to a category of exceptionality requiring action and resolution. While this is particularly compelling in Italian politics, the same holds true across many European countries, where national governments have followed, rather than opposed, anti-immigration public opinion and populist propaganda (Castelli Gattinara and Morales 2017). The state of exception is rapidly becoming the new rule to deal with migration in an increasingly militarised, law-enforcing and authoritarian fashion. Anti-terrorism measures in France, the 'Minniti-Orlando decree' in Italy and the securitisation of the EU's southern border can thus be interpreted as the building blocks of the European politics of fear. Based on a permanent state of emergency, the handling of the refugee crisis might have dramatic consequences for future action, shaping the way European societies cope with forthcoming crises, transforming the relationship between states and citizens, and contributing to the progressive erosion of fundamental democratic rights.

The response of EU governments to the recent influx of refugees, as well as the reaction of European public opinion to the crisis, does not bode well for the future of liberal democracy on the continent. Institutional and mainstream political actors have chosen to follow public anxieties and security concerns, endorsing emergency logics, aggressive policing and militarised borders. They have contributed to conflating migration and insecurity, breeding a fertile ground for xenophobic populist reactions. In Italy, mainstream parties and the executive have followed the logic of exceptionality, trying to put a halt to immigration, rather than enhancing the logic of normalcy that should apply to the phenomenon of global migration and that provides for successful policies of integration. At the supranational level, EU leaders have been incapable, if not unwilling, to grasp the interconnectedness between the political, economic and ideological crises that the

community is facing. This is also compelling in Italy, where the divide between those who have benefited from the mobility and change brought about by globalisation, and those who have been left behind in economic, social and cultural terms, is particularly acute. If this broader political question is not addressed, the refugee crisis may not only undermine the foundations of the EU project as we know it, but also bring about much more powerful tensions around political legitimacy, diversity and collective identities.

Notes

1. Source: UNHCR (2016).
2. *Mare Nostrum* is the military and humanitarian operation in the Straits of Sicily launched by the Italian government on 18 October 2013, which lasted until October 2014 when it was replaced by operation *Triton*.
3. See European Commission: 'Member States' Support to Emergency Relocation Mechanism', available at https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/europeanagenda-migration/press-material/docs/state_of_play_-_relocation_en.pdf (17 August 2017).
4. Source: Demos&PI (2017).
5. Source: SWG (2017).
6. The Lega Nord, which has long combined regionalism with radical-right populism, and Fratelli d'Italia, which emerged as a right-wing splinter in Italy's mainstream right led by former members of the post-fascist Alleanza Nazionale, represent the most visible and successful examples of populist radical-right parties in the Italian electoral arena, at least in recent years.
7. The Minniti-Orlando decree was approved thanks to a confidence vote in the spring of 2017.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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