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Ontological insecurity and securitization dynamics: the co-constitution of borders between Italy and the EU after the refugee crisis of 2015

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ABSTRACT

Italy plays a performative role in constructing the (Southern) border of the European Union (EU). The actions of Italy affect and are simultaneously affected by the European border and its connotation. Offering an original contribution from International Relations theory, this article looks at how ontological (in)security affects bordering dynamics in a context of recurrent co-constitution between the European Union and the state. Italy is analyzed in this article by looking at the main securitizing narratives, their legitimizing arguments, and matching bordering practices considered adaptive strategies. Methodologically, this article uses primary and secondary sources to retrieve securitization instances throughout three different administrations running the country from 2016 to 2020. It is argued that three bordering exercises have repeatedly surfaced: the definition of Italy's external borders as equivalent to those of the Union; the expansion of the borders of the EU toward southern Libya; and the demarcation of the borders of its national community through the allowance and/or denial of rights to immigrants already in Italy. They all come imbued with critical consequences for Italy and the EU, which are examined in this work.

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Introduction

Italy plays a performative role in constructing the (Southern) border of the European Union (EU). The moves of Italy affect and are simultaneously affected by the European border and its connotation. In fact, a border state is inevitably called upon to implement a series of rules and procedures agreed upon at the European level for the sake of the entire Union. The implementation since 2015 of the hotspot approach as a new bordering tool is a case in point and has been widely covered by the literature (cfr. Campesi 2018). In turn, Italy shapes the border of the Union whenever its discourses and practices transform it in cognitive, ideational, and material terms. The adaptation of this mutually constitutive relationship provides extraordinarily variegated images of European borders, fluid yet extremely impenetrable, expandable yet rigid, inclusive yet frequently discriminatory (Foster and Grzymalski 2022; Neuwahl 2020).

As scholars have noted, borders, bordering, and boundaries are not only sites of spatial and cognitive contestation. They seemingly set disciplines apart (Newman 2006; Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2012). Subsequently, not only do scholarly approaches adopt different perspectives on borders, which is unproblematic *per se*, but they seldom intersect to shed new light on the

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multifaceted dynamics at play. This fallacy is all the more regrettable in as much as separate investigations lead to similar findings about performative actions such as channeling, surveillance, control, filtration, confinement, and the effects of said actions, such as violence, death, vulnerability, and marginality (Squire 2020). This article's originality resides in offering a contribution from International Relations theory that endeavors to bridge literatures, looking at how ontological (in) security affects bordering dynamics in a context of recurrent co-constitution between the European Union and member states, Italy in the specific (Szalai, Parker, Lucarelli and Prodromidou 2022). As a matter of fact, bordering practices, intended as intentional or unintentional activities modifying, constituting, and sustaining borders (Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2012), seem to be inescapable for states and more so in times of crisis, when uncertainty or anxiety crumbles core belief systems and test institutional capacity and preparedness (resilience even, to use a familiar vocabulary). Bordering practices are crucial to discovering, uncovering or even reproducing ontological security, that is, the security (or reiteration, continuity) of the self (Johansson-Nogués 2018; Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020; Mitzen 2018). If insecurity looms large, the provision of security (a return to a comfortable and known definition of the self) is what is expected and aimed for: bordering practices in this sense largely depend on the securitizing measures enacted and their legitimizing arguments (cfr. Waever 1995). As explained by Rumelili (2015), ontological insecurity diminishes trust and magnifies the perception of a threat; ultimately, this allows for the manipulation of this distrust by political actors in specific directions.

Italy is no exception to this line of reasoning, having confronted multiple and parallel crises over the last several years, as many other member states of the European Union have (Guild 2021; Ramji-Nogales and Goldner Lang 2020; Wolff, Ripoll Servent and Piquet 2020). First the economic crisis, then the 2015 'refugee crisis' and lastly, the COVID pandemic repeatedly challenged the state's ontological security, priorities and sense of resolve, along with its core values.

Italy is analyzed in this article by looking at main securitizing moves, their legitimizing arguments, and matching bordering practices considered as adaptive strategies (cfr. Browning and Joenniemi 2017). Methodologically, this article uses primary and secondary sources and examines their content to retrieve securitization instances, that is, moves that place a specific issue into a security frame. Hence it mainly refers to the securitization approach which emphasizes the importance of speech acts, though it does not neglect the power of governmentality tools in security shaping (Bigo 2002), drawing hence from Critical Border Studies (CBS). It considers three different administrations running the country from 2016 to 2020 and develops as follows: first, it delves into the co-constitution of borders between the EU and member states as a reaction to perceived challenges to ontological security triggered by external events. Second, it zooms in on Italy, providing insights into its peculiar governance of migration. It then goes on to present three bordering dynamics (with legitimizing arguments drawn from securitization processes) that repeatedly surface: the definition of Italy's external borders as equivalent to those of the Union; the attempt to expand the borders of the EU toward southern Libya; and the demarcation of the borders of its national community through the allowance and/or denial of rights to immigrants already in Italy. All dynamics bear critical implications for Italy's and the EU's ontological security. The last section concludes.

The European Union and member states: the co-constitution of borders

Borders assume the traits of political institutions (Longo 2018), and it is, hence, natural to question how they become part of an actor's cognitive orbit and political conduct. According to Grzymiski (2022), the question of borders is in the limelight of the EU's and Member States' politics today (and even of EU's neighbors'). Comprehensive literature has shown how borders are related to securitization processes (Bigo 2002), that is, to the framing of an issue in security terms (Bello 2022; Huysmans 2000; Léonard and Kaurert 2022; Panebianco 2022; Waever 1995). This dynamic is hardly exclusive to migration as an issue area: the closure of borders was a distinctive trait of the governance of the SARS-COVID-19 pandemic worldwide (Twomey

2020) when health security was believed to be in lethal danger. Moreover, states have intermittently adopted policies of economic closure to achieve economic security and shield themselves from the turbulences of increasing interdependence: bringing home semiconductor production (The White House 2022) and building a more self-reliant energy system (European Commission 2022b) are among the most recent attempts to enhance security. At the same time, though, borders have been kept open to the many Ukrainians fleeing their country, showing the utmost resolve of the EU in what has been considered an attack by Russia against the European security architecture (European Commission 2022a).

Indeed, at the basis of this argument is the understanding that fundamental values are under threat (Wolffers 1952), and ontological security is at stake. As pointed out by Mitzen (2018), an ontological security lens highlights the relationship between anxiety and identity/subjectivity, drawing attention to how (auto)biographical narratives (Berenskoetter 2014) and practices constitute subjects in large part by managing existential anxiety. Ontological (in)security is, therefore, not only a signifier but also a cognitive map that guides actions. Borders (in the broadest sense) share a peculiar relationship with ontological (in)security because the two work in tandem and mutually recreate themselves. As Della Sala points out, 'ontological security argues that before actors decide what to do, they need to place themselves in a social world, define its boundaries to determine who will act and why' (Della Sala 2018, 266).

But what do we mean when we talk about borders? The literature has underlined various bordering exercises (cfr. Fontana 2022; Gargiulo 2023). Probably the most innate border is the 'hard border'. But, even in this case, the tendency is often to identify a hard border with a physical or visible one, which is reductive. In fact, hard borders may take different forms: those that are 'institutionalized' in the form of rules and regulations in legal texts, or proposed as such, might have a less visual impact than physical ones, but their effects are no less concrete. Unlike physical borders, these may operate in different and multiple spaces far away from the cartographic divide between states, inside and outside of their territory. Legal provisions of law concretely prevent or allow entrance, define fundamental values, norms, and principles, and, ultimately, the discriminatory practices at play (Casaglia 2020; Fauser, Friedrichs, and Harders 2019).¹ However, soft borders also exist and play a key role in ontological security. Soft borders, or 'boundaries', indicate who we are or want to become (or not become), contributing to identity processes (Eder 2006; Mostov 2008; Neuwahl 2020). Indeed, they stand in co-generation with 'hard borders' (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013), at times preceding and at other times following, but resting on a cognitive layer where frames and narratives of belonging (not belonging) play a relevant role. These boundaries define the political community even in the absence of a physical boundary (though the latter would reinforce the idea of a border). This perspective focuses on how borders are more socially constructed (Newman 2006) than politically mandated. Both narratives and practices contribute to shaping cognitive boundaries by adding imagery.

Indeed, all actors react to events that somehow undermine or question their ontological security. Still, in the EU such a process assumes an atypical tone (Della Sala 2018), and here comes a second contribution offered by this article. EU member states not only react to specific events according to the perceived impact on their ontological security but are also affected when engaging in this process by the very fact of being members of the EU. When this is acknowledged, the unsettled relation the EU entertains with the concept of border (either physical or functional) can't be dismissed (Schumacher 2022). A vast amount of literature has extensively discussed how shared competencies between the EU and member states – and different integration patterns – influence the domestic governance of specific issues, such as migration (cfr. Geddes and Scholten 2016). However, here, a different angle of the relationship between the EU and its member states is considered, one that looks at how the governance of an issue within the European Union might affect the very perception of security of a state and hence the role of borders. Thus, as an example, the Schengen situation of no-borders controls heightened the perceived challenge to health in the

different member states during the COVID pandemic and magnified the sensitivity associated with the issue of mobility so much so that it created an untenable level of anxiety.

The reconfiguration of states' ontological security is hence in constant association with the Union, where influence works on both sides: bordering exercises are a quintessential feature of this iteration, explored below in the case of Italy.

Italy and migration: the lack of a vision in a context that needs one

When the EU-Turkey Statement of March 2016 closed the Eastern Mediterranean corridor allegedly guilty of feeding the so-called 'refugee crisis', Italy immediately feared a diversion of the migratory flows (of the many people stranded in the Balkans) towards its territory through the Adriatic route. This would have been added to the routes along the Mediterranean corridor. Anxiety over becoming 'the parking place of Europe' was communicated by the media as EU member states fortified their internal borders out of concerns for secondary movements. Italy's apprehension at that point was based on a twofold realization: first, the requirement (now inescapable, given EU's scrutiny) that Italy entirely performed its gatekeeper role as first country of entrance according to the prerequisite of the Dublin Regulation. Second, the awareness of having to move amid a still largely imperfect internal asylum structure that would undoubtedly cause political distress. When inflows reached a new high in 2016, apprehension turned into insecurity that spilled over into the political debate. What followed in terms of both security moves and implementing practices was an attempt by different political majorities to govern the phenomenon through the drawing of different sets of borders which defined Italy's imagined position (opportunistic at times) in the European Union; the reframing of the geographical reach of the Union; and a refinement of the outlines of the national political community.

Indeed, this complex process has undergone changes, explained below, but some traits have persisted unchanged, irrespective of the political forces ruling the country in that period. In particular, Italy has tried to define a perfect match between its borders and those of the Union. This exercise focussed chiefly on creating solidarity between member states in the governance of migration, to erase the cognitive borders that still characterize the issue area at the EU level and that display relatively concrete distributional problems. Besides, and in some ways relatedly, Italy has constantly endeavored to extend the external border southward, reconfiguring the Union's geographic border and, in so doing, restructuring the relations with a new neighborhood. The bordering of the national community has been more undetermined and schizophrenic, giving rise to the alternation between an overtly generous stance and a blunt disrespect for immigrants' rights. Ultimately, ambiguity and reliance on restrictive definitions of borders have diminished rather than emboldened Italy and the Union's ontological security, perverting their supposed, imagined, and loudly heralded distinctiveness.

The five-year period of consideration proposed here, together with the alternation of different political majorities, offers a perfect occasion to appreciate continuities and discontinuities in the Italian political discourse and practice.² Between December 2016 and June 2018, Italy was run by a center-left/center-right coalition. Throughout 2016 Italy faced the largest inflow of asylum seekers ever experienced (Ansa 2016), while inflows remained low along other Mediterranean corridors. Interior Minister Marco Minniti, a veteran politician of the left, assertively shaped a Mediterranean policy aimed at governing flows that would bring the Union's attention to this geographical region (and pockets) with a 'model' or 'vision' to be implemented in Libya to avoid departures. After the aforesaid coalition government, Italy had the first fully populist Western European government ever, implemented by a contract between the Five-Star Movement and the League. The latter party had traditional anti-migration stances (cfr. Strazzari and Grandi 2019). As occurred in other historical moments when the League (previously called Northern League) entered the leading coalition, the seat of the Interior was occupied by a prominent figure in the party, Matteo Salvini on this occasion. The 'yellow-green coalition', as it was dubbed, resigned in August 2019 when Italy's rule was

conceded to a coalition between the Five-star Movement and parties from the center and the left until February 2021. At that point, Luciana Lamorgese, a long-term administrator in the Ministry of the Interior, rose to the highest seat. The final phase of this last-mentioned government was the one that saw Italy endure, first among European countries, the impact of SARS-COV-19. This situation brought immense repercussions in social, economic and political terms. Indeed, the frequent political turnabouts in Italy have not favored comprehensive and, more importantly, consistent approaches to the governance of migration. However, the issue is not new for Italy. In fact, the patchy, reactive and ever-critical (emergency) traits of its migration governance have often been attributed to the lack of a long-term vision of how properly coping with the phenomenon (Abbondanza 2017; Schiavone 2017; Sciortino 2017).

The observation period is all the more interesting in that it displays the different intensities of inflows. Ultimately, this allows us to gauge both the salience of the issue and its manipulation by political leaders, the relevance attributed to the issue as a defining element of Italy's ontology, and, lastly, the weight of relations with the Union in bordering attempts and practices.

The following sections elaborate on bordering attempts as associated with securitization logics.

Italy as the Union's border

One of the leitmotifs of Italy's political discourse is that 'Italy's border is the Union's border'. As Minister Salvini half explained and half admonished, 'the plan is that finally the EU takes care of the defense of its borders, which are also ours' (Cremonesi 2018). At first glance, this type of argument seems to stress a geographical and even territorial definition of borders, in which Italy clearly delineates the Union's 'hard lines'. Plainly, there is some truth to this interpretation, as Salvini's words were made clear through the use of military jargon. In this sense, hard borders would collimate with cognitive ones. Italy is the door to a regionally integrated organization where common values, norms, and rules that differ from other geographical spaces apply. That space has, hence, to be cocooned and 'defended' to protect the Mediterranean and Italy as well. According to Minister Salvini, defending the external border was crucial for removing controls at internal borders, which were introduced in 2015 in response to the refugee crisis and kept ever since (Walt 2018). However, rather than referring to an external audience, this argument is mostly addressed to the Union, and it maintains that Italy locates itself, perceives itself, and demands to be recognized as part of the Union. Italy's goal is to stimulate 'solidarity' in other Member States. It underlines the values constituting the Union and making up an integral part of its ontology. As explained by Minister Lamorgese, 'solidarity principles stand at the basis of European construction and integration' (Sarzanini 2019); without solidarity, it is not possible to set in motion a reception policy reflecting the EU's values and overcome the sterile binary logic of primary and secondary movements (Spagnolo 2020). Having that in mind provides an image of borders in less rigid terms than expected.

This logic has been a constant in Italy's discourse irrespective of the political party at the helm, and it is also shared by formations having markedly sovereigntist stances. That claim has been raised time and again. During the refugee crisis of 2015, the requirement was to speed up the relocation decisions by redistributing asylum seekers among member states; afterward, emphasis was put on updating the Union's ethnic profiles for relocation to include more nationalities, reflecting the new composition of flows (Ziniti 2017). But perhaps more vigorously, it has resonated in the debate about search and rescue activities in the Mediterranean. Such activities were particularly relevant in the aftermath of the refugee crisis, even if they have been largely reduced these days. All political formations have repeatedly requested a regionalization of Mediterranean search and rescue activities. Almost all the disembarkations of rescued persons have occurred in Italy, causing, at times of intense inflows, extreme hardship to the Italian reception system. As reported by Minniti, it is hard to imagine an international rescue mission and, at the same time, reception by one nation only (Democratica 2017).

The quest for a European search and rescue system would indeed push the border of the Union outwards to the sea, partly reconfiguring this space as belonging to the Union in terms of effective intervention and responsibility. This reconfiguration would however not fix new borders because the sea seldom recognizes any borders, at least not in practical terms. Such a space would be closer to what has been called in the literature a 'borderland' (Del Sarto 2021).

Despite its continuing efforts, Italy's call for solidarity has been ignored, with enormous consequences. This held true for the reiterated calls by Minniti to FRONTEX and member states to change Operation Triton's engagement rules. The hurdles experienced by Italy in the Summer of 2017 due to massive arrivals might have pressured Italy into adopting a code of conduct for NGOs operating in the Mediterranean by underlining the operative necessity to govern a 'jungle' (Martini 2017). This last move might also have been decisive in deepening and accelerating cooperation with Libya, thus shaping the bordering logic explained below. During the populist government, Italy's unheard voice accelerated the dismissal of operation EUNAVFOR MED Sophia, which was a unique and never replaced European presence of this type in the Mediterranean. Thus, the likelihood of a European reconfiguration at sea vanished. Hardening the stance against NGOs, in June 2018, Minister Salvini mandated the closing of Italian ports to these organizations, with the explanation that most of them flew the flag of other member states, which were nevertheless not sharing Italy's efforts on reception. As with Minniti, the end objective was to change the rules of engagement of the missions in the Mediterranean, allowing for the rotating of disembarkations. Salvini became more intractable and hostile towards the EU, threatening to close ports even to EU missions (Themis, Triton, and Sophia). According to experts, he orchestrated 'crises' at sea to spectacularize his moves by taking vessels hostages and questioning the urgency and the necessity of disembarkations 'in a safe place' (Cerasa 2020a).³ These missions were considered international only 'on paper', and instead only Italian regarding economic support (Romana 2018): as pointed out by Salvini, 'The European Themis mission is composed of 32 vessels, 30 of which are Italian': how can you state that it is a European mission?' (Romano 2018). If, as is probable, Salvini's actions went beyond real objectives – as testified by the skirmish with the Italian Ministry of Defence, which instead praised Operation Sophia (of which Italy had the Command) and the significance it held for Italy – the operation was finally discontinued. In fact, no European solutions emerged, and after a final phase that saw the paradoxical presence of a naval operation without a naval component (with no anti-smuggling and rescuing activities), the EU seemed to abandon the previously stated security interests, i.e. anti-smuggling efforts and saving the lives of migrants.

The last of the three governments considered here was the one that had gotten closer to a more shared system with the Malta Summit of September 2019. Minister Lamorgese explained that 'in coordination with Germany, the idea that whoever lands in Italy lands in Europe was proposed' (Ministero dell'Interno 2019b). Minister Lamorgese explained that a new cohesive environment had settled among member states, which was necessary for effective sharing the problem (Sarzanini 2019). A mechanism for the redistribution of migrants called for by the European Commission (not by Italy), based on automatic relocation procedures, was envisaged, serving two objectives: first, a more equitable distribution of burdens among member states; second, a reduced uncertainty over responsibility for reception (Sarzanini 2019). In the words of Lamorgese, the provision aimed at overcoming the Dublin Regulation (which in itself is a powerful cognitive barrier within the EU, both for migrants and among member states, as highlighted by the argument about primary and secondary movements) because, after a preliminary security and health control undertaken by Italy, the migrants who arrived would be registered in EURODAC by the receiving country (Cerasa 2020b). And yet, the system was run voluntarily and included a limited number of member states.

Moreover, the pandemic outbreak struck a lethal blow to the feeble voluntary mechanism at play, leaving Italy with increasing inflows from Tunisia to deal with and inadequate instruments to cope with them. In the summer of 2020, Minister Lamorgese reported increasing and primarily unchecked disembarkations. The compounded problem of intercepting these inflows (and also undertaking proper health checks) and the fast spreading of the Coronavirus had indeed affected perceptions

related to inflows. These perceptions were worsened by populist formations underlining the health threat posed by irregular immigrants. Minister Lamorgese explained, in an attempt to defuse concerns, that the problem of health checks seemingly applied to all persons entering Italy for work, study, or tourism (Sarzanini 2020). However, the fast spread of the pandemic throughout Italy made organizing proper reception all the more difficult because the local levels were strongly opposed to reception. Even in the case of adequately tracked inflows (undergoing, as they usually do, security and health checks), reception was rendered difficult in the available facilities because of the requirement of social distancing.

Against this backdrop, the decision to 'quarantine vessels' off Italy's ports represented a new bordering system. Together with the health threat 'imported to Italy' by immigrants, as alleged by anti-migration formations, confining immigrants afloat may have deepened the perception among Italian public opinion of asylum seekers as 'incubators' even though the measure was adopted to ward off this eventuality, by ordering proper health checks, and to alleviate pressure on hotspots (Ziniti 2020). In turn, the distress faced by Italy on account of new arrivals and the banning of relocations to other member states due to Covid may have urged nearby member states (France and Austria) to reinforce physical controls at borders for fear of 'secondary movements'. Ultimately, this fed the perception of Italy's solitude in facing the challenge, as explained by this narrative.

Italy expanding EU's borders

A second argument raised vehemently after the refugee crisis, maintained that the EU must operate in Africa as a significant setting for its future. As Minniti stated, 'the governance of migratory flows is to be achieved outside national borders and does not only involve and interest Italy. It has to do with Africa and Europe' (Ziniti 2017). Furthermore, 'the governance of migration cannot be limited to the territory of the Union and in particular to the arrival of migrants on Italian shores. It has to be dealt with first in Africa, where it has its roots and where economic, environmental, and humanitarian causes drive the phenomenon' (De Maizière and Minniti 2017). Additionally, 'the decisive game for Europe is no longer being played to the East, rather to the South. Our future is strongly linked to the future of Africa' (Foschini 2017), specifically referring to the challenges posed by terrorism, demography, and the need for strategic resources. Talks about a 'Marshall Plan for Africa' suggested the scope and resoluteness showed by Italy in its engagement. In the summer of 2020, at the height of the Covid pandemic, flows to Italy resumed copiously from Tunisia. As a result, Minister Lamorgese warned the EU to intervene effectively to reduce the effects of the economic hurdles faced by Tunisia. In fact, the pressure could only be reduced in Africa (Sarzanini 2020). Indeed, this type of argument has visibly connected immigration policy with foreign policy in general and, to a certain degree, has contributed, though unintentionally, to paving the way for the securitization of migration by linking insecurity conditions in Africa with possible massive and chaotic flows. In addition, migration governance was associated with domains that mostly used security tools to cope, while resources were diverted from development initiatives (Ministero degli Esteri 2020).

Among others, a narrative matching the border of the EU with the Southern border of Libya was advanced. This contribution to the EU's re-bordering is peculiarly Italian. In fact, at the end of 2016, Minniti established a renewed phase of relations with Libya and, by so doing, it obtained support (primarily financial) from the Union. Every initiative was coordinated with and brought to the EU level, such as the meeting held in Rome in July 2017 with Libya's Majors, in which the Commissioner for Internal Affairs, Dimitris Avramopoulos, participated. The idea to advance was that the Southern border of Libya was EU's border, as the Italian Minister explained (Cazzullo 2017). In the words of Minniti, Italy's assertive role and the assiduous involvement of the EU produced the added benefit of balancing the EU's international projection with a pivot to the South (Cuscito and Caracciolo 2018). Essentially, the pillars of the strategy involved building up Libya's capacity to fight smuggling, maritime and terrestrial border controls, information exchange, the development of economic projects in Libya, and the improvement of reception center conditions.

This attempt has visibly coincided with the broader international effort to restore security and statehood in Libya, which was in complete disarray after the toppling of the Quaddafi regime in 2011. In this context, Italy has related the insecurity situation of the country and the lack of sovereignty prerogatives to the growing threat of human smuggling and the endangering of human lives, as testified by the abysmal number of deaths in the Mediterranean, particularly in 2016. As Minniti pointed out, human smuggling is a real threat to Europe as a whole: assisting in the deadly game of smugglers against desperate immigrants could not be a choice (De Maizière and Minniti 2017). Closing the Saharan smuggling industry and its support bases in Libya represented, for Minniti, a 'democratic duty' (Ziniti 2017). In fact, only by establishing the rule of law could any talks about reception be made. Moreover, he posited that a democracy cannot passively react to processes governed by criminals (Foschini 2017). But the rush to Libya was supported by another securitizing narrative: recalling the arrival in June 2017 of more than 25 vessels carrying 12,500 immigrants in less than two days, Minniti pointed out the high risk of extreme tensions in Italy (Ciriaco 2017). Hence, there was no choice but to act.

To a certain degree, several securitizing moves legitimized the necessity of extending the EU's intervention southwards. Minister Minniti clarified that 'if Africa is well, we are also well' (Valentino 2017), alluding to the fact that insecurity in Africa translates to insecurity in the EU. Smugglers exploited the hopes of irregular immigrants and, in so doing, endangered their lives; hence, action was inevitable. Throughout 2017 relations with Libya toward 'political stabilization' were intense, involving various policy fields that intertwined in the effort to curb illegal migration (Camilli 2020; Ceccorulli and Varvelli 2022).

Border-wise, the strategy carried many implications. First, the definition of Libya as a 'transit country' came with implications regarding the practices implemented. Within this 'bounding exercise, that is, the purposeful construction of categories (Crawley and Skleparis 2017), ten vessels were donated to Libya to control departures, and personnel was trained. Peace deals were brokered between tribes South of the Sahara, allowing for more effective control of major smuggling corridors there. This point is vital because Libya has mainly been a destination country for many immigrants coming from neighboring countries and Asia (Frowd 2020). In addition to Libya, Niger, Chad and Mauritania have been defined as 'transit countries' (Weymouth 2018). This process evokes an image of their borders as fluid, both in entrance and exit. Secondly, Libya was implicitly defined as 'safe', a label justified by the presence of Italy and the EU. Emphasis was placed on the funds provided by the Union for reception centres under the responsibility of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). As stated by Minister Minniti, the training of the Libyan Coast Guard by the EU and Italy had already ensured the rescue of 10,000 lives from deadly waters, bringing immigrants back to Libya (De Maizière and Minniti 2017). Indeed, this narrative has always been hugely contradictory, as evidenced in Minniti's insistence that immigrants could not be trapped in lager-like camps that enriched smugglers (De Maizière and Minniti 2017). Ultimately, this concern motivated the first humanitarian corridors to Italy directly from Libya. Seemingly, Minister Lamorgese inferred that centers in Libya had to be closed and more humanitarian permits had to be granted (Ministero dell'Interno 2019b). According to Minister Salvini, the recognition of Libya as a 'safe port' was more a matter of 'labels' than the practical verification of safe and decent conditions (Ministero dell'Interno 2018a).

Thirdly, and faithful to its logic, a whole set of new relations were established with third countries to the South of and bordering Libya, most noticeably Niger, Chad, and Mali. Cooperation has been attempted with them and more or less achieved in a new vast EU effort, spanning from the governmental to the local level (De Maizière and Minniti 2017). Libya's reception camps mentioned before were said to ensure a smoother procedure for voluntary repatriation back to countries of origin (Ziniti 2017). Finally, and in some related ways, the strategy was aimed at redefining hard borders between Libya and its neighbouring countries and, ultimately, closed borders towards the Union. In this sense, it was paramount to prevent immigrants from reaching Libya in the first place and to make the sea border almost impenetrable by increasing the control capacities of north African

states. Most desirable would be, according to Minister Salvini, the positioning of identification centers in North African countries (Cremonesi 2018), a likelihood often alluded to but never achieved, that would effectively shift the hard border of the EU away from the territory of the EU. In the words of the League Minister, the objective was to prevent migrants from departing Africa and entering Europe (Weymouth 2018).

Here again, the narratives of opposing political forces have somewhat differed in their point of view regarding the ‘fluidity’ of borders. Thus, if all administrations have strongly emphasized the strengthening of European repatriation agreements with third states, some of them have pointed out the simultaneous exigence to respect human rights and non-refoulement principles and to potentiate humanitarian corridors. This is not to say that the same administrations were not accused of denying human rights (Panebianco 2019). Nor does this mean that Minister Salvini has acted in complete disregard of the vulnerable groups; in fact, humanitarian corridors continued under his mandate, were renewed (with Ethiopia), and even opened anew with Jordan and Niger (Ministero dell’Interno 2019a). However, the rhetoric has been quite different, producing visible results in shaping the national community’s cognitive borders.

The demarcations of the political community

The refugee crisis has also impacted Italy’s conceptions of herself and her defining values. As seen before, the refugee crisis has somehow hardened the reception and integration challenges of frontier states by posing a new emphasis on the European duties of these states. This further interaction process between Italy and the EU has been mirrored mostly by narratives and actions aimed at drawing the framework of rights and inclusion possibilities granted to immigrants and asylum seekers. Here the differences between political forces are more visible, but their approaches are hardly consistent. While Minister Minniti passed a law in March 2017 to allow non-accompanied minors to remain in Italy because ‘our country should never lose track of the primary objective to protect those who flee from war and famine’ (Valentino 2017), he simultaneously furthered the elimination of a second-degree appeal for asylum seekers, explaining his decision as the aim to reduce the amount of time required for a decision on their statuses.

Overall, the populist government has been predictably restrictive and has challenged the core values of Italy and the EU. This has been particularly clear in two instances. First, the promulgation of the Security Decrees overhauled the narrative about the value of integration in Italy (Ponzo 2018), raising administrative borders against immigrants while fencing cognitive ones, a move which gave 30% of public support to the populist party in the summer of 2018 (Walt 2018). Bringing into play economic security, a sensitive chord for many Italians, Salvini paralleled the reception and integration of immigrants with draining of financial resources (Cremonesi 2018). Among key provisions was denying social inclusion for asylum seekers (previously granted), leaving projects in this direction only for refugees (Ministero dell’Interno 2018b). Faithful to this logic, Salvini openly and matter-of-factly reported that he had diverted 42 million euros from the reception to the repatriation dossier to ‘balance the books’ (Romano 2018). Humanitarian protection, a layer of protection offered by Italy and the EU, was also discursively banalized and practically depowered because considered to be ‘abused’: ‘Everybody pretends to be ill or homosexual, which clearly cannot be the case’ (Romano 2018). Immigrants’ appeals were blamed to causing a waste of resources adeptly exploited to enrich some people, as most of the demands were clearly unfounded, mimicking car accident claims (Romano 2018). Emphasizing the difference between waste (reception) and values (security), beggars and deserving individuals, Salvini explained that money saved from reduction in expenditure on reception centers was to be used to pay the arrears of police, ‘men and women, servants of the State who had worked and had to be paid’ (Siamo, Capitale, and Salvini 2018). Similarly, with the branding ‘Decreto sicurezza or Decreto Salvini (in an attempt at strong personalization)’, securitization kept feeding itself, implying that more restrictive measures provided more security. Besides, the cost and the waiting time to apply for citizenship were increased, among others.

Indeed, Salvini's arguments employed a different rhetoric from that of other administrations, which instead chose to securitize the lack of integration: 'The equation between migration and terrorism is wrong and misleading'. Nevertheless, according to Minister Minniti, ever since Charlie Hebdo's events in 2015, 'it is clear that there exists a relation between terrorism and the lack of integration' (Valentino 2017). According to him, a vital game for the country's future was being played around the issue of integration, suggesting the profoundly ontological value of the challenge (Valentino 2017). Furthermore, Minister Lamorgese explained that proper integration is a precondition for keeping social cohesion in the country (Sarzanini 2019). Efforts were later taken to partly reverse some of the measures of the Security Decrees, also as a reaction to the observations advanced by the President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella. Attention centered around reducing sanctions against the non-compliance of NGOs (under the radar of the populist government); allowing prefects to increase funds for the provisions of services for immigrants (ruling out the risk of tenders being deserted); reintroducing the basics of humanitarian protection (now 'special protection'); and eliminating the provision that prohibits asylum seekers from registering at municipalities, among others. These efforts were, however, short-lived when a new far-right government took over in September 2022.

During the COVID pandemic, immigrants endured differentiated treatment: the proposal for legalization of a significant number of illegal immigrants working in the health and agricultural sector granted immigrants clear recognition of their vital role in the Italian economy as well as a way to check their health status. On the other hand, though, anti-migration formations used the pandemic to reiterate the priority of national citizens: because of the economic emergency, specific 'requests' were dubbed inappropriate and even out of place. As seen, the pandemic gave rise to a new form of border in the shape of quarantine vessels. Minister Lamorgese, who was the head of the Interior Office, explained that they were compatible with the practices of a civil country, which can never counterpose humanity and security, not even in a pandemic season (Cerasa 2020b). Quarantine vessels were hence conceived as another available instrument to manage the phenomenon, though their bordering effect was unclear.

Another important aspect of this last-mentioned argument pertains to the unexpected decision by Italy not to approve the Global Compact for Migration in December 2018, departing from its traditional alignment with Western European countries in UN frameworks (Monteleone 2021) and moving closer to a sovereigntist demeanor. Launched in 2016 with the UN New York Declaration, the Global Compact for Migration represented the very first attempt at genuine international cooperation in migration for the ordered, safe, and legal regulation of flows. After working for months on consultations and negotiations, Italian diplomats were mandated to abstain only a few days before the final approval of the Document (Ceccorulli, Coticchia, and Gianfreda 2022). An analyst close to the ruling yellow-green government judged the pact ineffective concerning Italy's main worry: curbing migration and the burden of reception (Sacino 2018). For the then Minister Salvini, the Compact did not do enough to differentiate between 'economic' migrants and refugees (Bongiorni 2018). This move, which created more than an embarrassment within the same government, had two critical repercussions in terms of the EU's bordering: by denying the values enshrined in the document, it undermined the values upon which the Union was founded and, in so doing, it undermined the ontology of the Union. Furthermore, an already deep fracture among member states was exacerbated, supporting not only restrictive migration policies but also an aggressive approach concerning the governance of the phenomenon and an overall weakening of the EU as a political actor.

If these moves are undoubtedly remodeling administrative and cognitive borders in a restrictive way, a subsequent move has had the same effect; that is, the release on October 2019 of a list of 'safe countries of origin' through an initiative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ministero degli Esteri 2019), something that Italy had always refused to do irrespective of the positions of other member states. Indeed, this does not only largely blur borders between issue areas along a now relatively consolidated trend in the EU, 'extending' EU's

boundaries according to the logic described above. Most importantly, it declassifies international protection by further reducing its applicability, questioning the duties implied, and downscaling the sanctity of the EU's international protection regime, paralleling protection in the EU with conditions and rights obtainable elsewhere.

Conclusion

This article aimed at linking reflections on borders with those on ontological security and securitization dynamics that is, the insertion of migration into a security frame. While the last two concepts are different and raise different questions, they could be profitably kept together via the decisive role of borders as critical signifiers. In this sense, the analysis of Italy's bordering efforts since the refugee crisis of 2015 has offered quite an interesting contribution to the literature. As shown, Italy's and the EU's recursive interaction has filtered the interpretation of the different crises that occurred, leading to securitization processes aimed at ontological security's (re)definition. In the process, border exercises have acted as signifiers and lifelines.

In particular, three main bordering efforts have constantly surfaced. First, Italy overlapping with the Union's borders. The key element here has been Italy's quest for solidarity as a member state of the EU, possibly erasing the cognitive border that still characterises the governance of migration in the Union. Second, Italy's effort to stretch Europe's border southward. Indeed, bordering effects might be different according to whether the effort is aimed at enforcing borders or at defusing them. Overall, this narrative has been decisive in the repositioning of the EU towards the Southern Mediterranean and the African continent at large. Finally, Italy (re)shaping of its cognitive borders to draw the lines of the national community on the occasions of EU's compounded crises. Here, certain contradictory traits at play have surfaced, especially when practices seemed to run contrary to narratives. In this bordering effort, differences have emerged according to the political formations in power: even though integration was praised more for societal cohesion and peace than human rights per se, clearcut securitarian (and hence exclusionary) traits have loomed large with populist formations. Ultimately, this openly challenged a somewhat ingrained understanding of Italy's and the EU's values.

Indeed, the study does not consider the adoption of the new Pact on Migration and Asylum by the EU; further research will look at how the reconfiguration of the EU's approach to migration for the years to come will impact Italy's sense of the self and ensuing border practices emerging. As the EU moves towards a more restrictive trajectory, Italy's bordering efforts might change as well, or some might gain leverage over others.

Notes

1. For a detailed and original analysis of EU's configuration of the relationship between mobility and borders, see Grappi and Lucarelli (2022).
2. For a consideration of the evolution of migration policy in 45 states after the second World War to 2015 see De Haas et al. (2018).
3. Authors' online interview with Matteo Villa, ISPI Research Fellow, 25 May 2021.

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