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This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

Published Version:

Ceccorulli M., Coticchia F., Gianfreda S. (2022). The government of change? Migration and defence policy under Giuseppe Conte's first cabinet. CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN POLITICS, online first 3 August 2022, 1-18 [10.1080/23248823.2022.2107136].

Availability:

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/900905> since: 2022-11-09

Published:

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2022.2107136>

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(Article begins on next page)

This is the final peer-reviewed accepted manuscript of:

Michela Ceccorulli, Fabrizio Coticchia, Stella Gianfreda (2022): The government of change? Migration and defence policy under Giuseppe Conte's first cabinet, Contemporary Italian Politics, online 3 August 2022: 1-18

The final published version is available online at:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2022.2107136>

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The government of change? Migration and defence policy under Giuseppe Conte's first cabinet

Abstract

In 2018, a fully populist government, without any mainstream parties, was formed in Italy. Some authors expected to see a considerable degree of policy change, while others predicted a limited – and mainly symbolic – transformation. However, few studies have investigated the impact of the new government on migration and on defence policy. To what extent did the ‘Yellow-Green’ government foster policy change with respect to traditional paths in these policy domains? The manuscript aims to gauge the extent of policy change on migration and defence under the Conte’s (first) Cabinet (June 2018-August 2019). Relying upon secondary and primary sources (semi-structured interviews with ministers, MPs, diplomats, experts, etc.), we contribute to the literature on the impact of populist parties on migration and defence policies once in office, advancing the hypothesis of a ‘salience-constraints’ balance.

Keywords: Populism, foreign policy change, Italy, Lega, M5S, migration, defence

1. Introduction

In 2018, for the first time in Western Europe, a fully populist government was formed in Italy. The executive - which was headed by Professor Giuseppe Conte, a political outsider - was supported by a parliamentary majority composed of the Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle*, M5S) and the League (*Lega*, L), the two parties that prevailed at the general elections (Chiaramonte et al., 2018).

The growing literature on the so-called ‘Yellow-Green’ cabinet has mainly focused on domestic politics (Baldini and Giglioli, 2021), while few studies have devoted attention to understanding the impact of the new government on the international dimension.ⁱ Yet, given the eclectic ideological traits of the all-populist government – from Euroscepticism to pacifism, from pro-Russian stances to xenophobia – several scholars (Fabbrini and Zgaga, 2019) expected to see a considerable degree of transformation. This manuscript aims to assess such foreign policy change, bridging the existing scholarly debates on foreign policy and populism by focusing on the external dimension of migration and on defence policy.

Thus, to what extent did the “Yellow-Green” government foster policy change in migration and defence? The (limited) existing debate disagrees on the evaluation of change, with some highlighting undeniable shifts and others earmarking only ‘façade’ modifications and mostly ‘vocal’ u-turns. The manuscript aims to gauge the *extent* of policy change on migration and defence under the Conte’s (first) Cabinet (June 2018-August 2019) with respect to previous directions. Relying on the literature (Hermann, 1990; Gustavsson, 1999; Joly and Haesebrouck, 2021; Chryssogelos and Martill, 2021) on foreign policy change (FPC), this article looks at policy commitment, instruments, and goals, considering multilateral and bilateral relations. In this sense, the Italian example offers a great opportunity to assess how and to what extent a populist executive might impact on the international relations of a country often seen as a middle power (Andreatta 2001) punching above its weight in terms of foreign policy (Giacomello and Verbeek, 2011).

While the literature has examined the impact of populist parties on migration policy at domestic level, far less is known about their consequences on other foreign policy areas (Hackenesch et al, 2022), especially defense policy. Focusing on the external dimension of migration and on defence policy allows us to assess to what extent (political and public) saliency affects the

capacity of populist parties to give course to their promises of change from the past once in government, bypassing existing external and domestic constraints. Indeed, migration and defence were salient for both parties, as illustrated by the portfolio allocation, with the Ministry of Defence attributed to an exponent of M5S (Elisabetta Trenta) and the Ministry of Interior to the leader of the League (Matteo Salvini). The League has held anti-migration attitudes (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018) while the M5S has showed rather pacifist inclinations (X and Y, 2020; Diodato 2022). However, while migration was also highly politicised during the 2018 electoral campaign, defence issues were mostly excluded from public debate. Pettrachin and Paxton highlighted how the two parties (at local level) have adapted their choices ‘to the perceived public salience of each policy’ for the population (2022, 26). Taking into account the traditional strategic behavior of populist parties for domestic audience, coalition dynamics and the balance between salience (for parties *and* for the public) and constraints, we expect to find the higher degree of change in the external dimension of migration rather than in defense policy.

After a literature review on populism and FPC, the paper introduces the Italian political context. The empirical analysis, which is based on secondary and primary sources (as interviews with Ministers and MPs), highlights the main results. Although the paper does not aim to advance theoretical generalizations, it provides a detailed empirical assessment that allows generating specific hypotheses on which factors may influence the impact of a populist cabinet on policy transformation with respect to consolidated paths. The hypotheses can be further tested in other cases, in Europe and beyond.

2. Populism, Migration and Defence Policy Change

Defining Populism(s)

The political science literature on populism is broad. Its focus is mainly on the characteristics of populism (Moffit, 2016; Mudde, 2004), on the impact of populist parties on political competition (Rooduijn and Akkerman, 2017; Zulianello, 2020) and on domestic policies once in office (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015; Askim et al., 2021). Comparatively, only recently has there been a growing interest in the impact of populism on international politics or in the international consequences of populism (Verbeek and Zaslove, 2015, 2017; Destradi and Plageman, 2019; Destradi et al 2022). However, the preliminary findings of these recent studies need to be generalized while many cases and geographical areas have not been considered at all. This paper aims to contribute to this emerging debate by looking at the case of Italy.

How, and to what extent, do populist parties affect the course of foreign policy? Three main aspects originating from this growing body of literature provide hints to answer this question. First, populism shows a ‘thin ideology’ (Mudde, 2007), which ‘considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and the ‘corrupt elite’ and argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people’ (Mudde, 2004: 543). Hence, the stances of populist parties on transnational issues are likely to depend on their ‘host’ ideology. As an example, Koch (2020) classifies between communitarian and cosmopolitan types of populism, Copelovitch and Pevehouse (2019) make a distinction between nativist and redistributionist populism, while Albertazzi and Vampa (2021: 21) differentiate between exclusionary, inclusionary and neo-liberal types of populism. Only the former types of populism present authoritarian and anti-immigration stances, which nearly always imply an anti-internationalist stance, mapping closely into nationalistic concerns about sovereignty. ⁱⁱ

Second, following the above-mentioned definition by Mudde, other authors (Verbeek and Zaslove, 2017) expect that populist parties will project their viewpoint on ‘pure people’, versus the ‘corrupted elite’, at the international level, contrasting ‘transnational elites’ and ‘multilateral organization’, and aiming at ‘taking back control’ of national sovereignty (Chryssogelos, 2017). For Destradi et al (2022), the distinctive features of populism (for instance, the relative weight of anti-elitism and people-centrism) have an impact on how foreign policy is politicised.

Third, with a more comprehensive and structured effort, Destradi and Plagemann (2019: 268) highlight some recurrent patterns of a ‘populist foreign policy’ beyond the kind of host ideology, such as centralisation and personalisation, as well as attempts to limit ‘concessions on global governance issues’.

In summary, populist parties are generally sceptical of transnational ties that bind their hands and are inclined to centralise and personalise the political process. However, only certain types of populism assume specific anti-immigration traits or more generally exclusionary tendencies. Italy is a useful case study to compare different types of populism. On the one hand, Matteo Salvini transformed the Northern League, founded in the 1990s as a regionalist party advocating for the independence of a mythological region in Northern Italy (*‘la Padania’*), into a national-wide nativist-exclusionary type of populist party, with Euroscepticism and anti-immigration at the center of its political agenda (Albertazzi et al., 2018). Matteo Salvini’s systematic attacks on immigrants, his closer ties to the Visegrad countries and his alliance with the most Eurosceptic parties in the European Parliament (EP), all undermine international

cooperation and regulation (Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021). On the other, the M5S resembles a redistributionist-inclusionary type of populist party. It shows many populist features, i.e., anti-elitism, emphasis on direct democracy, Manichean visions, charismatic leadership, etc. (Mosca and Tronconi, 2019). M5S has mainly focused on redistributive policies, namely, the citizenship income, its flagship. Moreover, the literature (X and Y 2020, Diodato 2022) has illustrated the relevance of pacifist political language (e.g., the ‘rejection of war’) in the party’s rhetoric. Finally, the M5S projects its viewpoint on ‘pure people’, versus the ‘corrupted elite’, at the international level, strongly criticising the technocratic nature of the European institutions, which lack democratic accountability.

Operationalising Foreign Policy Change

All the above being said, we still need a way to measure foreign policy changeⁱⁱⁱ. Here we draw on the literature on Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA). Joly and Haesebrouck (2021) have recently reviewed several attempts to conceptualize FPC, stressing the general attention devoted to dramatic changes, which are however rare (Rosati et al. 1994). Recent analyses (Chryssogelos and Martill, 2021) have illustrated the scholarly debate on drivers of change (Brummer and Opperman, 2021), which are located at individual, domestic, and international levels.

This paper relies on the seminal analysis by Hermann (1990: 5), who distinguishes among ‘four graduated levels of change’ in foreign policy: (a) small ‘adjustments’ in the *intensity* of the commitment to a certain foreign policy or in the class of targets; b) ‘programme changes’ in the means by which the goal is addressed; c) ‘problem/goal changes’ replacing foreign policy purposes, and d) ‘re-orientation’ of states’ role in world affairs. In the first case, no change in tool or policy goals is to be recorded. In the second, change is appreciated in terms of tools but not policy objectives. Point c, instead, denotes a change in the goals or purposes of the foreign policy, while the last point contemplates a far wider change entailing the aim at re-positioning in the regional or international landscape. Overall, Hermann’s original distinction between four gradations of change allows for better identification of the different alterations of foreign policy, beyond just incrementalism and rupture and seems fit for our purpose. As a matter of fact, and as seen above, change might take different features, not all overlapping with a defined rupture with previous and consolidated paths in foreign policy. In the domains of our concern, for example, change might take the form of a significant cut in military expenses or the closing of previously open borders, but might take as well the nuanced shape of a confrontational approach.

Hence, as stated by Pugliese et al, the case of the ‘Yellow-Green’ cabinet represents ‘a fertile testing ground for scholarly assumptions’ (2022, 1033) on the impact of populist parties on foreign policy change. In order to develop specific expectations on the degree of change we now dig deeper into the peculiarities of these populist formations.

3. Populist in power and foreign policy change: Lega and Cinque Stelle

The 2018 national election represented a turning point for Italian politics (Chiaramonte et al., 2018). M5S and League were the real winners of the elections, with 32.68% and 17.35% vote share respectively. After several weeks of negotiation, the two parties signed an agreement (*‘Contratto di governo’*) that defined the main aims of the first fully-fledged populist government (i.e., without any mainstream party family) in Western Europe.

On foreign and defence policies, the two coalition partners hold very different stances. For the League, these issues never constituted a top priority, as Euroscepticism and nativism make up the identity of the party (Passarelli and Tuorto 2018). Conversely, M5S has usually adopted a pacifist and humanitarian narrative (X and Y 2020, 523; Diodato 2022), contrasting combat operations (such as the mission in Afghanistan), criticizing NATO and strongly supporting the campaigns undertaken by NGOs against military procurement (such as the F-35) and for disarmament.

Although very succinct on defence issues (16 lines in total), the contract of government was biased in favour of the conservative approach of the League (Cladi and Locatelli 2021). M5S only managed to snatch a vague promise to “re-evaluate our presence in international missions” and “to rationalise the waste of resources in military spending” (*Contratto per il governo del cambiamento*, p. 18). Instead, the government agreement devotes three pages on immigration. The securitarian approach of the League prevails in the pledge to reduce immigration flows, to devolve reception funds to repatriation, and to fight against religious radicalization. M5S’s echo can be found in the attention posed to the fight against corruption and organized crime connected to the business of reception.

This work aims to specifically consider some aspect on the government agreement: the so called ‘external dimension of migration’, that is, those aspects of migration governance that are nested to foreign policy activities, envisaging cooperation, coordination or negotiations with third states or actors and defence. It does so by empirically examining the levels of transformation with respect to previous formations, from adjustment to orientation change as proposed by Hermann as above (1990).

Destradi and Plagemann (2019) have illustrated how populist leaders, apart from style and personalization, mainly reinforce existing trends in foreign policy rather than altering them. Yet, in the case of Italy, numerous scholars (Jones, 2018; Fabbrini and Zgaga, 2019) expected a considerable rupture in the Italian foreign policy. Others (Baldini et al 2021; Pugliese et al 2022) have emphasized substantial continuity or merely symbolic policies. Relying on the existing scholarly debate, as well as on the features of the two parties, we believe that the argument of the foreign policy change of populist parties could be sharpened. In fact, we claim that only by balancing the level of saliency of the issues (both for the party and for the public) and the existing constraints to change, we can better assess the expected degree of transformation, between symbolic policies and actual change. Two elements should be emphasized. First, the international constraints (alliances, resources, EU membership) that affect a ‘middle power’ such as Italy inevitably limit the possibility of significant evolution in international affairs (X, 2021). Indeed, the room of manoeuvre in international politics for “middle powers” is restricted (Andreatta 2001). Lequesne (2021) highlights also the role played by domestic factors (e.g., statutory protection of diplomats or ministers of foreign affairs who are outside populist parties) as downscaling the innovation brought by populists. Therefore, we can expect that the more the (domestic and international) constraints on a policy, the more the obstacles to promote change.

Second, as underscored by the literature (Pettrachin and Paxton 2022), the (party and population) perceived salience of the issue shapes the degree of transformation of policies crafted by populist parties, which adopt strategic behaviours towards domestic audience (Pugliese et al 2022). Consequently, we assume that the more the saliency of an issue, both for the public and the parties, the more the incentives to foster change in line with parties and public opinion’s views. At the same time, as widely highlighted by the literature (Destradi and Plagemann 2019; X 2021), symbolic policies allow parties to better deal with their constituencies, without fostering actual transformation.

Against this backdrop, we can expect a higher level of change promoted by the two populist parties in the external dimension of migration rather than in defense policy. The former was punctuated by a widely shared salience, which was attributed to the issue both by parties *and* public opinion. The latter, despite salient for the M5S, has been (paradoxically) ignored by the public debate,^{iv} while it was severely constrained at domestic and international level (e.g. alliances).

The extent of foreign change is assessed by empirical analyses. A specific attention is given to the above-mentioned inter-party dynamics, highlighting the interaction among parties within

the coalition government, tense at times. Relatedly, it is worth noticing that while the League – notwithstanding being the junior party – had manifold experiences at government and it was ruled by the Salvini’s personalized guidance, the M5S - which had several ‘leaders’ - displays a weaker internal structure and was featured by diverse ideological inspirations (Baldini et al 2021). Such elements reinforce our expectations on the different level of change in the two policy domains.

As said above, the selection of defense and the external dimension of migration, allows examining foreign policy areas generally underestimated by the scholarly debate. Particularly defense policy requires detailed analysis, also because of the very significant role Italy and its armed forces have played in the post-bipolar era. A cabinet formed by two parties that express scepticism towards Italian military dynamism (especially after the failures of the ‘war on terror’) represents a very promising case for the study of foreign policy change brought by populist actors. Indeed, the increasing attention to the ‘external’ dimension of migration in the overall governance of the phenomenon (well beyond Italy) and the rich critical literature on securitization, militarization and weaponization of migration suggest increasingly relevant connections with defense, often regardless of political colours and states concerned. While this is now widely assessed, here attention is devoted to whether a rupture has been clearly evidenced that singles out Italy’s position with respect to the traditional path on the matter.

The paper, which relies on secondary and primary sources (17 interviews with ministers, MPs, diplomats and experts, official documents, votes), investigates the decision-making process as well as the outcomes related to defence and migration policy of the Yellow-Green government, identifying the above-mentioned ‘graduated levels’ (Hermann, 1990: 5) of FPC, such as signs of intensity of commitment or transformation of tools and goals. The empirical analysis assesses the claimed preliminary expectations on the different levels of change in policy domains, allowing developing hypotheses on variance in foreign policy change.

4. Defence and Migration Policy under the Conte 1 cabinet

4.1 Defence Policy Change

The defence policy of the Conte 1 government illustrated a stunning continuity, with few changes occurring, mainly at a symbolic level. The ‘re-affirmation of national sovereignty’ shaped the approach adopted by the executive and its members in defence and military affairs.

The strategic and instrumental use of defence policy is quite clear by looking at several elements, beyond the very low salience attributed to the topic by the cabinet^v.

First, the ‘timing’ of controversies initiated by Salvini against Minister Trenta (on the external dimensions of migration, Libya, military procurement, and conscription)^{vi} can be viewed as an aspect of the broader ‘propaganda before the EU elections’.^{vii} Indeed, after months of quiet (and ‘once obtained what it wanted on crucial issues as migration’),^{viii} in 2019 the League started to constantly attack Minister Trenta, even though her policies and approach were similar also months before. Thus, inter-party dynamics were affected by growing tensions largely for electoral purposes.^{ix}

Second, the M5S needed to balance the (new) institutional role with its traditional ‘pacifist DNA’^x, which was still shared by its constituency. Thus, the party developed a strategy based on delays *and* symbolic policies related to a vague ‘para-pacifist narrative’.^{xi} For example, in terms of symbols, Conte affirmed the need for the Defence Ministry to ‘to renounce the purchase of five guns to support funds for peace and education’,^{xii} while the issue of ‘inclusion’ was the main theme chosen by Trenta for the military parade on June 2nd (Republic Day).^{xiii} For some scholars, even the doctrine elaborated by Trenta, who deeply stressed concepts such as ‘dual-use, resilience, multi-purpose by design’, was ‘a strategic way - a stratagem - to combine the institutional role with the pacifist constituency’.^{xiv}

Overall, the analysis of Conte’s defence policy seems to confirm the largely symbolic dimension of populist foreign and defense policy. In this section we assess such claims about the Italian defence policy of the Yellow-Green cabinet by looking at two main (international and domestic) aspects: missions abroad and international cooperation, and military procurement.

Military missions abroad and international cooperation

The military operations abroad have represented one the most relevant foreign policy tools for Italian Post-Cold War foreign policy. Before 2018, the *Lega* and the M5S had expressed their criticism (especially after the problematic outcome of missions such as Libya) regarding the Italian operations and the national contribution to multilateral institutions (Z and X 2020). However, once governing, the two parties supported *all* the missions.

In conformity with ‘the contract’, Trenta illustrated how the cabinet had assessed the operations abroad in line with national interest, fostering a relocation of troops towards the ‘Enlarged Mediterranean’^{xv}, finally activating the mission in Niger, which was conceived as being ‘strategic to contrast organized crime involved in smuggling of migrants and terrorism’.^{xvi} The

relocation was limited and slow (e.g., from the Afghanistan), but it was accomplished. Moreover, as said, by examining official documents and votes in the parliament, it emerges that all the Italian military missions were renewed and supported^{xvii} without any drastic reduction or unplanned withdrawal.

The level of change in the field of defence has been characterised by a ‘substantial continuity’,^{xviii} also by assessing the general involvement within multilateral frameworks, such as NATO and the EU. Indeed, despite the vocal scepticism towards the EU, it is worth noting the continuity in Italian commitment for the evolving European defence (e.g., PESCO, the EU defence funds), which has been interpreted by the majority coalition as ‘a way to support the national interest’.^{xix} In terms of votes and concrete defense policies towards multilateral contexts, any rupture with the past occurred. Traditional frames in the M5S’s pacifist rhetoric persisted – from the repudiation of war to disarmament – but more ambitious goals – such as the ‘reform of NATO’ or ‘new alliance strategies for Italy’ (Diodato 2022) - were not even discussed or pursued. Votes and interviews confirm how bureaucratic resistance and international constraints, frustrated a ‘populist rupture’ (Baldini et al 2021,1033) in defense policy.

The unique element of ‘novelty’ is related to the European Intervention Initiative (EI2). According to the former Minister Trenta, the EI2 has been considered ‘the biggest discontinuity in defence policy issues during the Yellow-Green government’.^{xx} As Trenta said, she was sceptical about the EI2, and even the connection between the French leadership and the word ‘intervention’ (that she asked to change) symbolically evoked the (negative) legacy of the 2011 war in Libya. As she stated, it was not a matter of anti-French attitudes^{xxi} but rather she had a doubt about the whole process and the lack of a request (which was the specific condition Rome specified) for ‘an Italian leadership in the Mediterranean, for the defense of its vital interests’.^{xxii} However, even the previous Paolo Gentiloni’s government had doubts on the EI2, due to the possible negative effects towards PESCO. Yet, the idea of being part of the framework, in order to influence the process, was at that time considered a better option than staying out.^{xxiii} On the whole, the level of change specifically related to the EI2, also due to the scepticism expressed by previous cabinets, is closer to simple ‘adjustment’ than to ‘programme change’ (Hermann 1990).

Procurement

The Italian military budget did not decrease,^{xxiv} despite the initial concern among the military. Despite the traditional pacifist agenda of the party, the level of change regarding defence

spending was limited, if non-existent. Regarding military procurement, the connection between the promotion of '*national (economic) interest*' and investment in the military has been widely stressed by the League.^{xxv} According to an MP of the League, Salvini's vocal activism in opposition to possible cuts to military procurement was 'related to the *defense of national interest*'.^{xxvi} In terms of coalition dynamics, Salvini's activism – along with his focus on military programmes - caused some clashes with the M5S (again, especially before the EU elections), which was marked by internal tensions (particularly between the Minister of defense and her Deputy Minister).^{xxvii} The Movement also called for 'an official assessment of the actual needs of Italian defense, to guarantee acquisition coherent with our strategy and *interests*'.^{xxviii} Adjustments occurred mainly at symbolic level. Indeed, Di Maio aimed to shape some policies related to procurement, announcing the cut of the military programme CAMM-ER (*Common Anti-air Modular Missile Extended Range*) in summer 2018, while discussing the revision of national budget.^{xxix} However, it did not actually happen.

Along with the symbols, the strategy adopted by the government on defence policy was that of the 'delay'. As said, rather than adopting decisions on issues such as military programmes (which had been strongly attacked by the M5S in the past, and they were still opposed by the constituency of the party), the Ministry waited for 'technical assessments' on relevant – and controversial acquisition – such as the F35, whose procurement was 're-moduled'.^{xxx} Other decisions were adopted after many months,^{xxxi} or just postponed, even if they had almost been made^{xxxii} (such as the 'Tempest' warplane). Trenta highlighted that, despite some delays that occurred for 'bureaucratic reasons', her efforts aimed at 'explaining the role of military expenses to the M5S and its constituency'.^{xxxiii} Thus, 'paradigms such as dual use and resilience were adopted to transform the concept of defence'^{xxxiv} to better address new threats in the future. While public opinion did not attributed specific salience to defense issue, the M5S aimed to strategically engage its constituency, mainly with symbolic policies. As expected, international and domestic constraints were crucial in affecting defense policy. President Mattarella, within the entire Supreme Council of Defence, put clear pressure on the 'required modernization of the military programme', as well as the need to provide 'continuity to military operations in a multilateral context'.^{xxxv} Mattarella (and Moavero) frequently stressed that NATO and the EU were 'crucial pillars for Italian defense'.^{xxxvi} Moreover, both members of the Ministry of Defense, as well as leaders of pacifist organizations, highlighted the fierce internal resistance by the armed forces, and by other ministries, to the plans of reforms (e.g., the national strategy, the new doctrine, etc.) that were supported by the Minister of Defense.^{xxxvii}

Finally, the pressure from above (NATO, EU, allies) – to maintain or enhance commitment - has been constant (Nelli Feroci, 2019).

In sum, all the military operations abroad have been supported, while the military budget was not cut. Thus, notwithstanding the rhetoric and the strategy based on symbolic policies and delays,^{xxxviii} the Italian defence policy under the Yellow-Green government has been marked by relevant ‘continuity’.

4.2 Policy Change on Migration

In this section, we analyse Italy’s position on three aspects of migration: the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (from now on GC), the approach towards operation EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia against human smuggling in the Mediterranean and relations with Libya, considered to be a key country in order to reduce the number of immigrants arriving on Italian shores. All three cases are related to what we have called ‘the external dimension’ of migration, that is, the facet of migration governance that is not only a matter of internal affairs, but that entails coordination/negotiation dynamics with other actors (third states, International Organizations, global for a, the European Union, to name a few). Predictably, in all three cases the rhetoric is quite harsh; this comes not as a surprise, given the presence of an openly anti-migration formation in the ruling coalition. However, here a further element is underlined: two of the three situations (the discontinuation of Operation Sophia and the abstention from the Global Compact) also testify a confrontational approach in coordination dynamics that has produced a rather ambiguous outcome when evaluated with respect to purported objectives.

Global Compact

The GC process was officially launched in 2016 with the adoption of the UNHCR New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants in which the 193 UN Member States recognized the need for a comprehensive approach to human mobility and enhanced cooperation at the global level.^{xxxix} The GC is a non-legally binding agreement between UN nations that aims to regulate immigration flows. Many populist right-wing parties worldwide have accused it of favouring ‘invasion’ and ‘uncontrolled migration’ (Camilli and Spinelli, 2018). The process of negotiations was concluded at the intergovernmental conference in Marrakesh on 10 and 11 December 2018. The GC finally was adopted with 152 votes in favour and 5 against, with 12 abstentions. Among the twelve abstaining countries was Italy.

The Italian position during the negotiation of the GC is emblematic of the stance endorsed by a populist executive in multilateral negotiations. Initially, the Conte 1 cabinet was in favour of the GC. The Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Enzo Moavero Milanesi, stressed many times in international fora and in the Parliament how the document contained ‘the important element of burden sharing in the management of migratory phenomena and of enhancing cooperation with the countries of origin and transit’^{xi}. Similarly, on 26 September 2018, in the UN Assembly, Conte endorsed the GC.^{xii}

However, on 28 November 2018, before the Chamber of Deputies, Matteo Salvini announced that Italy would not participate in the Marrakesh conference because the entire dossier should have first been discussed and approved by the Parliament^{xiii}. A few hours later, the Prime Minister echoed him: ‘I have not changed my mind at all, the GC is compatible with our strategy. But despite being a non-binding programmatic document, it has a political significance in an inter-ministerial summit, so we agreed that it is right that there is a parliamentary debate.’^{xliii}

According to our informant ‘the decision to move the discussion of the GC to the parliamentary arena was driven by the League, together with representatives from Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d’Italia*-FDI), to politicise and finally block the entire negotiation process. In the end, the government did not make any decision on the matter, de-facto assuming a *no-position*.’^{xliii}

M5S seemed divided on the issue: while the Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs, Manlio Di Stefano, explained that he shared the choice announced by Salvini, the president of the Commission of Constitutional Affairs, Giuseppe Brescia, expressed all his disappointment by insisting on the need for the GC to be signed by Italy as well^{xlv}. Sabrina Del Carlo (M5S) explained that, although ‘the multilateral nature of the document is a turning point’ and the M5S ‘has always fought for human rights’, nevertheless the GC ‘will hardly be able to determine any concrete solution’, and thus, ‘we believe that no agreement should be signed until there are concrete steps forward in the European and global sharing of the migratory phenomenon.’^{xlvi}

M5S’s position was based on two main considerations. On one hand, the GC was considered risky because, although not binding in itself, it would have forced Italy to sign subsequent provisions made within the UN Trust Fund. On the other hand, it was considered to not be effective in addressing the root causes for migration. As Di Stefano clearly explained: ‘The real point that is missing, to date, is to have taken a concrete step forward in every agreement that has been signed and to continue to sign them without any tangible result’^{xlvii}. Similarly, the

MP of the League, Paolo Formentini, emphasized the rosy picture on migration provided by the Compact, expressing his concern about its eventual evolution into ‘a sort of soft law.’^{xlviii}

On 19 December 2018, a motion presented by the League, the M5S and FdI – binding the government ‘to postpone the decision on Italy’s accession to the GC, following an extensive assessment with reference to its effective scope’ – was passed^{xlix}. On 27 January 2019, the Parliament approved a motion presented by the FdI that committed the government not to sign the GC and not to participate nor to contribute in any way to the related UN Trust Fund.

The Italian decision to abstain from the GC has been interpreted as a political failure. On one hand, Italy renounced taking a role in multilateral negotiations, ‘stepping back from a UN negotiation has been like denying the negotiations undertaken in previous months, thus affecting Italian credibility on similar topics.’¹ At a bilateral level, Italy lost its credibility with those foreign countries with which it agreed and with those who it hoped would consider cooperation projects involving migration matters. The negotiation of the GC shows that populist parties in the government decided to politicise salient issues to gain electoral success in the short term, disregarding the possibility of remaining isolated at an international level^{li}.

EUNAVFOR MED SOPHIA

With a Council Decision agreed upon in May 2015, the EU initiated its biggest naval military operation, EUNAVFOR MED, renamed “Sophia” in memory of a rescued Somali baby in the Mediterranean Sea^{lii}. The operation was aligned with and received the backing of the UN to address the spiralling security situation in Libya, serving the immediate objective to identify, capture and destroy smugglers’ vessels before their use, so as to prevent any loss of lives.

Italy’s centrality was clearly put upfront by the operation: it represented the first effort by the EU to parallel the range of *Mare Nostrum*, the naval operationb unilaterally deployed by Italy in 2013, and to alleviate the costs related to patrolling operations in the Mediterranean. Also, Italy was in command of the operation and Sophia contributed to the objectives of other Italian missions, such as *Mare Sicuro*, that were deployed in the Central Mediterranean, granting Italy an important intelligence contribution. On 29 March 2019, the EU Political and Security Committee required the temporary suspension of the operation’s naval component. At the end of March 2020, the operation was dismissed.

Italy’s intention may not have been the closure of the operation, rather its modification, but the open resistance to any compromise demonstrated between 2018 and 2019, (a ‘take-no-prisoners approach’ according to some)^{liii}, eventually led to this result, one that, according to many, backfired on Italy. The key role here is attributed to the Minister for the Interior Salvini,

who was able to drag along the entire government coalition, even at the price of overstepping other Ministers' responsibilities on the matter. And yet, the background argument of a 'lack of solidarity' from the EU and Member States to help cope with irregular immigration was not new. Preceded by the decision to close Italian ports to NGOs in June 2018, Salvini acted not to change the policy paradigm, in keeping with Hermann's jargon, but used the tools to force it. Salvini 'started spectacularizing the arrivals of migrants, orchestrating crises at sea and challenging the idea that it was a duty to find a place of safety for disembarking migrants.'^{liv} Building on the 28 June Council Conclusions, which asked for 'shared and complementary actions'^{lv} and openly accusing precedent centre-left governments for having agreed to loading Italy with the disembarkations of all the rescued, with no evident benefit in return, the Minister of the Interior's intention was to 'raise the voice' at the European table, by threatening to block the arrival of international vessels' missions. Indeed, the finger was pointed at Sophia, whose chief mandate was not that of rescuing migrants but whose international obligations inevitably included that duty. 'With our government the music has changed and will change', echoed the words of the Minister of the Interior^{lvi}. Discomfort, however, was soon shown by the Minister of Defence Trenta. She emphasized that those international missions were positioned under the responsibilities of Defense and Foreign Affairs, consequently Italy's command of the operation was clearly a reason of pride for the country, suggesting a more conciliatory approach with European institutions, sensing that Italy's boycott of the mission would most likely mean the loss of Sophia's command.

With a letter on 14 July 2018 to the then President of the Commission Jean Claude Juncker, Giuseppe Conte asked for an unequivocal signal of the necessity to share responsibilities for rescued migrants and anticipated Italy's intention to make a request to the Political and Security Committee for an immediate modification of Sophia's rule for the identification of the port of disembarkation.^{lviii} This request was reiterated by the Minister for Foreign Affairs to the High Representative of the Union. Three days later, Conte addressed a new letter to the President of the Commission to urge the creation of a 'crisis cell' to coordinate Member States' actions regarding the identification of the disembarkation port and the countries that are available to receive rescued migrants.^{lviii}

Over the summer of 2018 the relations between Italy and the EU remained tense. Salvini openly tied Italy's involvement in the operation to a rotation of ports for disembarkation, by stating, 'we should evaluate the opportunity to keep spending money on a mission that is international only on paper, but that is in substance only for Italy and for 60 million Italians to bear'^{lix}. Meanwhile, the established conclusion of the operation set for December 2018 (lacking a

prorogation) was approaching. According to the EU High Representative, instead, the aim of Sophia was precisely to support Italy in the Mediterranean, where the country had been operating alone before 2015: if it wanted it with the benefits relating to command, intelligence and headquarters, then it had to abide by its rules^{lx}. After the deadlock situation in December 2018, a technical prorogation up to March 2019 was decided on to try to figure out a possible solution and to avert Italy's unilateral change of disembarkation rules, which would de facto call the mission off.

By March 2019, the situation seemed to slip out of Italy's hands, and so the Defence and Foreign Affairs Ministers, with the backing of the President Mattarella, hastened to find a last-minute solution to avoid dismissing Sophia. The impossibility of finding a compromise caused the High Representative to propose the cessation of the operation in March 2019.^{lxi}

Sophia was then given an extension of 6 months, but its naval component, including the tackling of smuggling activities and rescuing migrants, was suspended. Salvini 'imposed his line on migration'^{lxii} despite Trenta's opposition^{lxiii}. Although it was most likely unintentional, he played a major role in ending Operation Sophia's naval component.

Italy's cooperation with Libya

Between 2016 and 2017, the EU's attention to the Central Mediterranean route has rapidly increased. If 2016 registered the biggest increase in irregular arrivals in years the same time period became similarly infamous for the number of deaths recorded at sea. The major culprit for such a scenario was said to be the smuggling industry, exploiting migrants' desire to head for Europe. Therefore, building up the capacities and strengthening the sovereign prerogatives of Libya's Government of National Accord would also help to tackle the challenge of smuggling, which proliferated due to weak institutions and blurred statehood.

With the backing of the EU, Italy drove the process of strengthening relations with the North African country^{lxiv}. On 2 February 2017, recalling the 2008 Treaty of Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation signed by the former Interior Minister Roberto Maroni with Gaddafi, Italy released a Memorandum of Understanding. The main objectives were to help Libya control both the maritime frontier to the north and the land frontier to the south; to work with local organizations to provide alternatives to smuggling activities; and to improve the situation of migrants in Libya. From July to August 2017 the flow of migrants to Italy dropped remarkably, never to resume the highest peaks^{lxv} from the past; while many migrants were returned to Libya by the newly established Libyan Coast Guard.

In comparison to the previous governments, Conte's cabinet was 'less active' (Palm and Barana, 2019), without a clear strategy, de facto 'abandoning the Libyan dossier', (Bertolotti, 2019). Libya was mainly regarded as a military crisis, which was managed in substantial continuity within the military policy^{lxvi} and mostly handled by the secret services^{lxvii}. The immigration issues connected with the Libyan crisis remained in the background since they had already been set by previous governments with clearly good results in terms of quantity reduction. Given that relations with Libya were already in line with Salvini's goal to fight against irregular immigration, he did in fact have no occasion to play a protagonist role in this dossier.

Thus, despite the rhetoric of closed harbours, several experts illustrate the substantial continuity in relations with Libya, starting from 2017, by the former Minister of the Interior Minniti, which aimed to block departures from Libya thanks to agreements with local actors/militias (Cusumano and Villa, 2019; Palm and Barana, 2019).

5. Discussion and conclusions

In this paper we have analysed the evolution of defence and examples of the external dimension of migration policy under the Conte 1 cabinet to understand to what extent populist parties in government change existing policies.

Our empirical analysis shows that the Yellow-Green government - despite prioritizing the 'defence of national sovereignty' rather than making 'concessions' to allies, and favouring a 'personalistic and a centralized' decision-making process - did not promote rupture in Italian foreign policy. Concerning policy outputs - in line with our preliminary expectations, which were related to different levels of constraints and salience of the issues (both for parties *and* for the public) - changes in defence policies range from symbolic to small 'adjustments', while policy transformation on migration range from small adjustments to problem/goal changes (Hermann, 1990).

In defence policy, we noticed just 'small adjustments', which were mainly represented by the shared rhetoric on sovereigntism. Concerning military operations, the degree of continuity has been stunning while the same can be said for procurement. Apart from the attempts to delay some acquisitions or merely symbolic moves, we do not have relevant transformation but only some 'adjustments'. The unique change was related to the decision of not taking part in the EI2. But also in this case, due to the doubts expressed by the previous government regarding the initiative, the degree of alteration has been extremely limited.

Regarding migration, we found a higher degree of discontinuity in multilateral relations (see also Monteleone 2021 on this point), and a substantial continuity in bilateral relations. At the end of 2018, two actions were taken by Italy in open confrontation with the European Union^{lxviii} and against international commitments that had already been made, such as the closure of Italian ports to vessels on European missions and abstention from the GC. Instead, the Conte 1 government confirmed the approach already defined towards Libya because in line with the programmatic goals of the coalition parties. According to Hermann's (1990) classification, Italy's withdrawal from the GC can be considered a 'problem/goals change'. Although the GC was a non-binding agreement, nevertheless, the Italian decision 'not to decide' on the issue increased isolation and Italy's credibility in international fora and *vis à vis* cooperation partners. Instead, the closure of Italian ports to NGOs represented a 'programme change', since the goal of decreasing immigration flows and increasing Italian leverage over European decisions remained unchanged, while the instruments to pursue it changed in favour of a more robust rhetoric (Cusumano and Gombeer, 2020).

Considering the results of our preliminary empirical analysis, we can now better formulate and advance one main hypothesis on the factors that could explain foreign policy change promoted by populist parties. As stressed by the literature - along with peculiar traits as style, centralisation and personalisation - the populist politicisation of foreign policy is largely marked by framing foreign policy issues in anti-elitist and people-centric terms (Destradi et al 2022). We claim that to gauge the expected level of change promoted by populist actors at government, we should take into consideration a 'salience-constraints balance': comparing and contrasting the weight of both salience of the policy issue and internal and external (political and institutional) constraints. External (e.g., pre-existing treaties/deals/commitments, adherence to supranational and international institutions, etc.) and internal constraints to the action of populist parties (e.g., other institutions, foreign policy bureaucracies, technocrats in the cabinet, etc.) could significantly limit populist parties' *room for manoeuvre*. However, the higher the salience of the issue for those parties, which have constantly domestic audience in mind, the higher the incentives to bypass the obstacles to change (Dennison and Geddes, 2021). We can assume that only when a foreign policy issue is extremely salient *both* for populist parties *and* for public opinion, the incentives for real change – beyond merely symbolic moves – could be higher than the existing constraints.

Additional empirical evidence is needed to better understand the specific conditions that affect such balance and the mechanisms of both fully-fledged populist government and coalition governments with populist parties. As revealed by the Italian case, inter-party dynamics are

crucial to investigate in order to determine types and outcomes of bargaining within coalition governments. For instance, party's internal structure, leadership, and the cohesiveness of the thick ideology of populist actors are all vital elements to take into consideration. Besides, a broader comparative (qualitative and also quantitative) analysis of populist cabinets, from the Mediterranean to Eastern European countries, could test the hypothesis developed by our research.

ⁱ On the foreign policy of the 'Yellow-Green' government, see: Cladi and Locatelli (2021); Giurlando (2020), X (2021); Pugliese et al (2022). On the Conte cabinet and the EU in the context of 'de-Europeanisation, see: Monteleone 2021. On the 'structural conflict' between the Italian government and career diplomats see Lequesne (2021).

ⁱⁱ For a conceptual clarification between nationalism and populism see Chryssogelos (2022). For the author, the 'key similarity is their shared emphasis on sovereignty, the idea that a group of humans is entitled to rule itself (2022,7). In nationalism, this group is the 'nation', while for populism it is the 'people'.

ⁱⁱⁱ Foreign Policy change is defined by Goldmann (1988: 10) as 'tangible departure or reversal of previous patterns of policy that goes beyond incremental or procedural shifts'.

^{iv} See the data provided by the Eurobarometer. See: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/browse/all/series/4961>

^v Anonymous former staff member at the Ministry of Defense (2019). Interviewed [in person] on 7 November.

^{vi} See, as an example: C. Fusani, "Il retroscena: Guerra alla Difesa: Trenta (M5s) "caccia" dal tavolo sulla Libia il sottosegretario Volpi (Lega)", *Tiscali news* 31 July 2019. See also below. For additional details of this clash see X (2021).

^{vii} Pioppi, S. (2019). Interviewed [telephone], on 23 October.

^{viii} Vignarca, F. (2019). Interviewed [telephone] on 5 November.

^{ix} Anonymous staff member at the Minister of Defense and former Security Officer in Afghanistan. Interviewed [telephone], on 23 October 2019.

^x Marrone, A. and Pioppi, D. (2019). Interviewed [telephone] on 21 and 23 October.

^{xi} Vignarca, F. (2019). Interviewed [telephone], on 5 November.

^{xii} Analisi Difesa (2019) 'Il generale Cornacchione scrive una (dura) lettera al premier Conte'. 18 May,

^{xiii} Caprara M (2019) 'Parata, ora la protesta dei generali rischia di allargarsi ad altri ufficiali', *Il Corriere della Sera*,

^{xiv} Pioppi, S. (2019). Interviewed [telephone], on 23 October.

^{xv} Parliamentary Minutes, Minister of Defense before Joint Defense Commissions, 26 July 2018.

^{xvi} Trenta, E. (2019). Interviewed [in person], 31 October.

^{xvii} Italy deployed 7.967 units in 2018 and 7.434 in 2019. See: Senate of the Republic, Dossier 18 December 2018, *Autorizzazione e proroga missioni internazionali*; Senate of the Republic, Dossier 13 May 2019, *Autorizzazione e proroga missioni internazionali 2019*.

^{xviii} Author's telephone interviews with N.Pirozzi, IAI, 24 October 2019, and with Stefano Pioppi, 23 October 2019.

^{xix} Rizzo, G. (2019), Interviewed [written], 15 December.

^{xx} Trenta, E. (2019). Interviewed [in person], 31 October.

^{xxi} According to other scholars, the shared anti-French attitudes in the cabinet played a relevant role in explaining the Italian decision. Marrone, A. (2019). Interviewed [telephone], 21 October.

^{xxii} Trenta, E. (2019). Interviewed [in person], 31 October.

- ^{lvi} Ziniti A (2018) ‘Porti chiusi anche alle navi militari europee’, ma Salvini irrita la Difesa: ‘Non ha nessuna competenza’, *La Repubblica*, https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2018/07/08/news/nave_militare_irlandese_sbarca_a_messina_con_106_migranti-201198516/
- ^{lvii} *Messaggero* (2018) Migranti, nave Gdf davanti Pozzallo. Conte: a Francia e Malta 50 a testa, finalmente l'Italia viene ascoltata, 14 July, https://www.ilmessaggero.it/primopiano/cronaca/migranti_barcone_lampedusa_diretta_trasferiti_nave_gdf-3855524.html.
- ^{lviii} Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (2018), https://www.ansa.it/documents/1531996845348_CONTE.pdf
- ^{lix} *Avvenire* (2018) Operazione Sophia. Europa fredda su condivisione porti. Governo minaccia di uscire, 30 August, <https://www.avvenire.it/attualita/pagine/viennafall>.
- ^{lx} Peduzzi P (2019) L'Ue si è scoccia della guerra di Salvini sui migranti. Il caso Sophia, *Il Foglio*, 23 January.
- ^{lxi} D'Argenio A. (2019) Migranti, la missione Sophia verso il pensionamento: lunedì il verdetto Ue, *Repubblica*, 22 March, https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2019/03/22/news/migranti_la_missione_sophia_verso_il_pensionamento_lunedì_il_verdetto_ue-222270295/
- ^{lxii} Bertolotti, C. (2019). Interviewed on 23 October
- ^{lxiii} Trenta, E. (2019). Interviewed on 31 October.
- ^{lxiv} Varvelli, A. (2021), Interviewed [skype], 31 May.
- ^{lxv} According to the *Viminale*, in 2017 migrant arrivals amounted to 119,310 compared to 181,436 in 2016, which then became 23,370 in 2018. In December 2019, there was a further decrease in landings equal to 11.4716. For a more in-depth analysis, please refer to http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto_statistico_giornaliero_31-12-2018_0.pdf.
- ^{lxvi} Marrone, A. (2019). Interviewed [telephone], 21 October.
- ^{lxvii} Author's anonymous online interview with a high-level official of the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Rome, 31 October.

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