

An Exploration of the Reasons Why Right-Wing Populist Parties in Europe are Anti-Immigration: The Case of Italy

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Abstract. Populism has become a prevailing political phenomenon in Europe, as evidenced by the repeated electoral victories of right-wing populist parties, which have transitioned from the political periphery to the centre stage. These parties frequently espouse anti-immigration rhetoric, which poses significant obstacles to European integration and globalization while simultaneously fueling racism and xenophobia. Such sentiments may foster political polarization within Europe and destabilize the global political economy. Despite Italy's former status as a leading destination for migrants in Europe, it has recently implemented increasingly restrictive immigration policies and experienced notable electoral gains for right-wing populist parties. The xenophobic tenets of right-wing populism account for these developments, making it crucial to investigate the reasons for their anti-immigrant stance. Accordingly, this study will examine the interplay between the tightening of Italy's immigration policy and the rise of right-wing populist parties, specifically investigating the underlying reasons for the anti-immigration stance of such parties by analyzing the cultural dilemma and economic crisis. By scrutinizing the origins of right-wing populist anti-immigration claims, this study seeks to uncover the driving factors behind the heightened stringency of immigration policies in countries like Italy in the wake of the rightward shift in European politics.

Keywords: Italy; immigration policy; right-wing populism; anti-immigration.

1. Introduction

In recent times, many Western nations have experienced economic downturns, political unrest, and cultural conflicts that have resulted in a significant increase in populist forces. The crisis of globalization and the resurgence of nationalism has fueled identity politics, creating a tangled web of "tribalism" that has led to cultural divisions and political polarization [1]. This has been exemplified by the tightening of immigration policies and the rise of anti-immigration sentiment, both of which have been fueled by right-wing populism. Since 2015, Western intervention in the Middle East and North Africa has led to a massive influx of refugees, most of whom have landed in Europe, straining the European economy and resulting in high unemployment rates. Additionally, the infiltration of terrorists disguised as refugees has led to numerous terrorist attacks, leading to social instability and security concerns in European countries. Dissatisfaction with the country's lax immigration policies has also contributed to security concerns. Mainstream political parties have been slow to address societal instability and corruption, allowing "anti-immigration" populist parties to gain traction by exploiting the public's fears that the influx of foreign immigrants will harm their political and economic interests. These parties question the legitimacy of mainstream parties, represented by the "elite", and have utilized social media to gain momentum and attract support from a broad range of voters.

As one of the European countries with the most serious economic problems and social contradictions, Italy's immigration issue has been a highly contentious topic in the ongoing dispute between populist parties and mainstream parties. In fact, right-wing populist parties in Italy have made significant political strides, moving from the fringes to the centre, and even attaining political power. Hence, it is imperative to conduct an in-depth examination of the relationship between the governance of immigration in Italy and the claims of its right-wing populist forces. The academic discourse on this subject has been quite productive, with several scholars delving into the relationship between immigration policy and populism. For instance, some scholars have explored how populism has influenced Italian immigration policy by examining the interaction of populism with nationalism

and nativism [2]. Others have analyzed the politicization of migration in Italy by studying the migration framework's formation by both the left and right sides of the political spectrum [3]. Additionally, some researchers have focused on the effect of immigration on the electoral performance of right-wing populist parties, such as examining the impact of immigrant sentiment rather than the number of immigrants on the number of votes received by right-wing populism. Alternatively, some scholars have looked at whether the economic and cultural characteristics of immigrant-sending countries, relative to immigrant-receiving countries, can influence the electoral success of right-wing populist parties in developed, democratic receiving countries [4].

This paper posits that examining the reasons for the anti-immigration stance of right-wing populist parties is crucial, given the current reality of tightening immigration policies and right-wing populist interventions in Italy. As such, this study will scrutinize the relationship between immigration and populism, with a particular focus on the history of immigration in Italy, the manifestations of right-wing populist anti-immigration in Italy, and ultimately, the core reasons behind far-right populist anti-immigration sentiments.

2. Italy's Immigration Policy and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism

2.1. Immigration History and Policy Tightening

Italy has a complex and lengthy history of immigration, with a second wave of migration occurring in the 1970s and 1980s due to political instability in neighbouring countries, such as Albania and Yugoslavia. Many of these migrants were refugees fleeing conflict or persecution in their home countries, with a significant number coming from Africa and Asia. The Italian government, for many years, actively managed immigration through policies that legalised undocumented migrants already in the country. By the 1990s and early 2000s, Italy experienced yet another wave of immigration driven by economic growth and demographic shifts in neighbouring countries, such as Romania and North Africa. Most of these immigrants were young, male, and low-skilled workers from developing countries, who sought better economic opportunities or refuge from political instability. They predominantly worked in small and medium-sized enterprises in the low-paid service sector, as well as in industry and agriculture, with many Italians reluctant to take on these low-paying jobs.

In response, some Italians perceive immigration as a threat to their national identity and cultural values, while others view it as an economic burden that deprives native-born citizens of jobs. Since the early 2000s, Italy's immigration policy has become increasingly strict, with the introduction of the Bossi-Fini law in 2002. This law made it more challenging for immigrants to obtain legal status in Italy and increased penalties for employers who hired workers without legal documentation. The law also established quotas for different categories of migrants and facilitated the deportation of undocumented migrants.

2.2. The Tightening of Immigration Policy and the Manifestation of Right-Wing Populism

Populism is a dynamic and evolving phenomenon that continues to incorporate new elements. Due to its rapid evolution, the academic community has varying views on the definition of populism, whether it is an ideology, a political movement, or a style of discourse and political strategy. At its core, however, populism centres on the idea of the "people" as a heartland [5]. As one scholar has posited, "Populism is a global phenomenon about the complex intertwining of popular and elite politics, with specific ideologies, values, and political strategies and styles" [6].

Notably, the tightening of Italy's immigration policy is closely linked to the rise of the country's populist right wing. Italy has experienced a surge in right-wing populism in recent years, with the populist right campaigning on an anti-immigration platform and advocating for stricter immigration controls. According to statistics, the number of immigrants entering Italy increased rapidly from 2007 until nearly a decade ago in 2016, reaching more than five times the level of the late 1990s (Istat, 2017). Initially, Italians did not oppose immigration, but as more temporary migrants became settled migrants, some questioned the rationality of immigration laws.

Lega Nord, which later changed its name to Lega, has been a prominent proponent of anti-immigration sentiments in Italy. The party has consistently campaigned on an anti-immigrant platform, calling for stricter immigration controls, increased deportations, and tighter border security. Lega has been vocal in its opposition to immigration and has advocated for more stringent immigration policies. Since Italy's accession to the European Union in the late 1990s, the party has targeted European integration and foreign immigration, contending that foreign migrants are responsible for various social and political problems, including increased crime, unemployment, and drug abuse. Furthermore, Lega, as a right-wing populist party, has not only opposed Italy's comprehensive immigration laws from their inception but also had a role in drafting the immigration laws that were later introduced in the country [2].

Since taking office in the spring of 2018, the Italian coalition government comprising the right-wing xenophobic Lega party and the anti-establishment populist Five Star Movement has implemented a series of policies aimed at controlling and reducing immigration. The most significant of these policies is the 'decreto sicurezza' (security decree), which was ratified and implemented as law in December 2018. The adoption of this decree marked a relaxation of regulations pertaining to the deportation of migrants who pose a threat to public order. Specifically, the decree reduces protective measures for migrants seeking humanitarian protection and increases fines for NGOs operating rescue boats in the Mediterranean. Furthermore, it prohibits boats carrying rescued migrants from entering ports and establishes "citizen patrols" to report undocumented migrants to authorities. The government has claimed that these measures are necessary to prevent human trafficking and safeguard national security. Fratelli d'Italia, another far-right populist party, has also advocated stricter immigration policies. Its leader, Giorgia Meloni, has called for the closure of Italy's borders to illegal immigrants and criticised the government's policy of allowing humanitarian ships to dock in Italian ports. Meloni has further asserted that it should be more difficult to obtain Italian citizenship and that migrants who commit crimes should be deported promptly. Forza Italia, which was founded by former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, has likewise taken a hard line on immigration. In the past, Berlusconi referred to illegal migrants as a "social time bomb" and called for the deportation of those who commit crimes. The Italian government announced plans to close reception centres for asylum seekers and decrease funding for related projects in 2018. In 2019, the Italian interior minister signed a decree authorising the seizure of NGO rescue boats that bring migrants to Italy without authorisation. The decree also increases fines for NGOs that violate Italian immigration laws. Furthermore, members of both the Five Star Movement and Lega have also taken to social media to express their strong dissatisfaction with the EU's migration policy, contending that the inability to curb illegal immigration is a major cause of anxiety and unrest among the Italian populace. They have even advocated for the construction of a border wall and have looked to nationalist figures like Trump and Le Pen as models [7].

In addition to the aforementioned policies, reports of violence against migrants in Italy have surfaced. This underscores how the dissemination of negative perceptions of immigration can lead to further social problems and fears. The implementation of these 'security' measures could also lead to greater reliance and demand from the public, potentially enabling certain politicians to leverage anti-immigration rhetoric to mobilize their supporters and consolidate political power.

It is necessary to mention that, in academic discourse, it has been posited that right-wing parties in Italy prioritize the issue of immigration for four main reasons. Firstly, immigration is perceived as a threat to the national and cultural identity of the native population, given Italy's long history and a strong sense of national identity that may not be easily assimilated by other ethnic groups. Secondly, a significant proportion of indigenous Italians view immigration as a major cause of crime and social insecurity, particularly given the possibility of terrorist attacks by immigrants from Africa or the Middle East. Thirdly, Italy is grappling with high levels of unemployment and slow economic growth, and the influx of immigrants is seen as exacerbating the situation by taking over jobs in the basic labour market, leading to unemployment among the native working class. Fourthly, there are concerns that welfare state policies are being exploited by immigrants [8]. Some scholars suggest that popular

anti-immigrant sentiments are rooted in racism and xenophobia. However, it is widely acknowledged that political and media discourses play a crucial role in shaping negative social perceptions and representations of immigration.

3. Reasons for Far-Right Populism's Anti-Immigration

In the context of the Italian case, it is apparent that far-right populism and anti-immigration rhetoric are often interlinked. Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine in greater detail the relationship between far-right populism and anti-immigration. According to Mudde, the central concept of far-right populism is undoubtedly the "nation" [9]. By opposing the "pure people" to the "corrupt elite," far-right populists restrict the people they represent by excluding outsiders (people of other nationalities) from the "we" represented by their own people. They separate outsiders (people of other nationalities) from the "us" they represent, defining them as "them" and establishing a fundamental difference and irreconcilable contradiction between the two. Far-right populists believe in protecting the rights of indigenous people, and Italian far-right populism frequently proclaims "Italian supremacy." In their view, a nation-state should be inhabited and governed solely by its indigenous members, and people of different ethnicities and cultures not only fail to integrate into the local culture but also fundamentally jeopardize the purity and homogeneity of the nation, which undermines national unity and the security and stability of the people's lives. Therefore, they must be resisted as much as possible. Such xenophobic ideas have moved beyond ordinary nationalism and have been elevated to "ultra-nationalism" or "nativism" with a distinctly populist political style. It has been argued that the core of right-wing parties is nationalist xenophobia and anti-establishment populism [10]. This concept of xenophobia has a deep background: the rapid economic development of post-war Europe necessitated the importation of a large labour force, leading to the arrival of many "outsiders" from the Middle East and North Africa who initially came to work for a short period. However, many of these individuals have since settled or even become naturalised Europeans, most of whom are Muslims. Despite their citizenship status and even after having offspring, some native Europeans still harbour aversions and even hatred towards these outsiders and refuse to accept them due to xenophobic attitudes.

3.1. Cultural Crisis

Fundamentally, the antipathy towards immigrant refugees by far-right populism is rooted in a cultural conflict. The differences in cultural heritage between the indigenous population and the newcomers make it challenging for them to trust and identify with each other. Meanwhile, immigrants find it difficult to integrate into mainstream European culture due to their unique Muslim cultural heritage, which results in their subjective rejection of it. The preservation of their distinctive beliefs, behaviours, and advocacies has led far-right populists to view the Muslim community as heterogeneous, thus representing a potential source of social unrest with negative repercussions. Moreover, the rapid growth of the Muslim population relative to Europeans has further fueled the perception that Europeans are losing their primacy in society. Opponents of immigration argue that this growing number of immigrants is eroding the traditional mono-ethnic fabric of Europe. Far-right populism is a major proponent of this viewpoint and attracts support from a significant xenophobic population.

3.2. The Economic Crisis

Far-right populism's hostility towards immigrant refugees is not only driven by cultural factors but also by economic and social factors. Immigrants and refugees are often blamed for taking away job opportunities and welfare benefits from native Europeans, leading to their demonization as a burden on the economy. Far-right populists overlook the economic benefits that immigrants and refugees bring to European societies and instead advocate for "welfare chauvinism," where social welfare benefits are reserved exclusively for nationals rather than Muslim immigrants. Moreover, isolated

incidents of terrorism committed by individuals from immigrant and refugee backgrounds have led to a stigma and reinforced prejudices against these groups in European society.

Far-right populists believe that the decision to welcome immigrants and refugees into Europe is driven solely by the political and economic interests of the elite, with little regard for the concerns and well-being of the majority of people. They view multiculturalism and ethnic diversity as threats to national and cultural identity and argue that limiting the influx of immigrants, particularly Muslim immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East, is necessary to preserve the cultural and national identity of native populations. The right-wing populist party Lega performed well in the election, primarily due to the hardline stance on illegal immigration of its leader Salvini. According to a study, Salvini's mentions of anti-immigration issues on social media were the most frequent of all topics, and also received the most popular support and discussion [11]. As highlighted in academic literature, framing immigration in relation to crime and social unrest has proven to be an effective strategy for far-right populists to gain popular support [12].

4. Conclusion

With the election of far-right populist Giorgia Meloni as Prime Minister of Italy in 2022, the prospect of an even more hostile stance toward immigrants is likely to polarize Italian society and potentially exacerbate conflict with the EU. This study reveals that the extreme xenophobia and closed-mindedness of far-right populists and their supporters reflect a cultural and ethnic "ultra-conservatism" compounded by an economic development dilemma. Furthermore, it highlights their critique of and dissatisfaction with "European values" and "political correctness" - the notions of freedom, openness, and pluralism - that European elites have promoted and popularized for decades. The rise of far-right populism and anti-immigrant sentiment, therefore, signifies a reaction to these values and a threat to the existing European political system, with the potential to shift it towards more authoritarian governance.

It is foreseeable that the increasing prevalence of right-wing populism will heavily influence future policies of European countries in response to refugees and terrorism. Immigration and refugee policies may shift from open and liberal admission policies to more conservative and austere ones, while counter-terrorism policies may move from crisis-response-driven models to crisis prevention-capacity-building models. Countries may also place greater emphasis on surveillance and preparedness.

In light of this, it is crucial for Europe to address the structural issues that have developed over time within the EU and revitalize its economic and political dynamics to curb the influence of the populist far right. Additionally, technology can be used to create growth points to address social issues, enabling people to become beneficiaries of regional integration, rebuild their belief in European integration, and embrace globalisation.

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