The Migration Factor and the Italian Election – Why Catching up with Populist Stances on Migration Does not Pay Off

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The results of the Italian national election earlier this month are yet another confirmation that being tough on migration does not pay off for traditional, moderate parties.

The collapse in the share of the vote of Renzi's Partito Democratico (from 40.8% in the 2014 European election to 19% this year) is the result of several factors, most of them unrelated to migration. Yet, it is also clear that the party's stances and policies on migration have not yielded the wanted results in terms of matching the public opinion's demands. In an attempt to respond to the increasing support for populist and far-right parties, the Partito Democratico, as other European mainstream parties, adopted a containment approach to migration when it was in government. From Renzi's 'aiutiamoli a casa loro' (let's help them [migrants] in their home country), to the outgoing government's strategy of support to the Libyan coast-guard and reported deals with various militias controlling the smuggling trade, the priority has been to limit arrivals to Italian shores as much as possible and at almost any cost.

Is Italy's – and Europe's – public opinion really as hostile to migration as political leaders and the media depict it or fear it to be?

Well, yes and no. Europe's public opinion is on average more negative than positive about migration from outside the EU, and Italy is no exception. But that is not a recent trend. On the contrary, attitudes towards migration have been quite stable. If anything, they have become slightly more positive on average in the course of the last fifteen years[1]. The trend varies from country to country, but for example in Italy the percentage of people holding negative feelings about migration has been in sharp decline between 2014 and last year (from 75% in November 2014 to 59% in May 2017, according to Eurobarometer's data).

However, the importance citizens assign to migration as an issue facing their country has increased dramatically over the last three years in several EU countries, including Italy[2]. In other words, the so-called refugee crisis has not radically changed people's opinion on migration. Rather it has caught the anxiety of a larger portion of voters, beyond those who traditionally oppose migration and the idea of a multiethnic society.

Attitudes towards migration are the result of a complex web of different factors – ranging from migration and integration policies to people's values, from emotions to concerns about the economic situation of one's country[3]. These do not fundamentally shift overnight. If the extremes are often more vocal and social media have proved to be a powerful amplifier of radical positions, majorities tend to hold much more nuanced and fluctuating opinions on migration than what one poll can tell us. That is often among the reasons behind contradictory survey results. In Italy for example the percentage of people believing that migrants are a threat to public order and safety

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[1] James Dennison and Andrew Geddes, "Are Europeans turning against asylum seekers and refugees?"
[2] The percentage of Italians identifying migration as one of the two most important issues facing their country has dramatically increased since 2012, touching 42% in 2016 (the highest peak since 2005) and 36% in 2017 – Eurobarometer data.
[3] For a summary of the research on this, see Helen Dempster and Karen Hargrave, "Understanding public attitudes towards refugees and migrants".

has been constantly increasing since 2014[4]. However, as we observed earlier, attitudes toward migration have become more positive over the same period.

The number of Italians who are hostile to migrants has not increased, but the number of those who are anxious about the impact of migration on the Italian society has. Nuances, one might say. Yet nuances are the key to better understand what people think, and why they think it. The 'why' is a particularly important dimension for policy-makers who intend to design far-sighted policies and communicate them in a convincing way without falling into the trap of giving simplistic solutions to complex issues because they feel the pressure to respond to 'what' public opinion thinks.

Why have Italians become more anxious about migration? Is it because of 'the numbers', as if there was a tolerance level of migrants per person? The highest difference in arrivals of migrants and asylum-seekers by sea to Italy from one year to the other was registered between 2013 and 2014 – from 42,925 to 170,760 (Frontex data). Assuming that all of them stayed in Italy (which is not the case, as several migrants continue their journey to Northern Europe), the arrival of 170,760 people is hardly noticeable in a population of 60 million. In fact, only 15% of Italians consider migration one of the most important issues at the personal level. And although this percentage has been rising from the 2-3% level of five years ago, it is far from the levels of concern about migration's impact at the country level (36% of Italians identify migration as a major issue facing Italy). A significant group understands migration as a challenge not through their direct experience or individual concerns, but through their perception of the country's experience.

Of course the increased number of people migrating to Italy does have a direct impact in specific places where migrants arrive or have been transferred to. The outcomes of these situations, and even more, the way they are brought into the national debate by media reports and politicians – the way in which they are framed – has forged the perceived experience of how Italy deals with migration. As in every good story, there are tensions and conflicts, challenges to overcome – and even more so in this case given how traumatic the experience of migration to Europe can be and the social tensions created by Italy's emergency-driven, mismanaged system for the reception of asylum seekers. There is one glaring omission to this narrative - a 'happy ending'. It does not need to be the sugarcoated picture of a conflict-free multiethnic society (which by the way will hardly convince any of those who are more or less directly in contact with the arrival of newcomers).

If an issue is brought to the public attention as a problem, a solution is needed

Right-wing and xenophobic populist parties have intercepted (and in some cases contributed to create) this demand, and propose simplistic solutions such as sealing national borders and repatriating all those without regular permits to stay. Probably not the solution that the majority of Italians were hoping for, but it sounds better than no solution at all to many voters.

Instead of proposing an alternative scenario, instead of fixing at least the asylum reception system, the centre-left positions have *de facto* reinforced the same vision: migration policies are successful when they stop people from arriving irregularly. The outgoing government's containment strategy was not accompanied by the enhancement of opportunities for non-EU migrants to work and stay regularly in Italy – in a context where almost all legal channels for labour migration that used to exist and sustain many Italian economic sectors have been closed and

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[4] Demos & Pi, Immigrazione e sicurezza

periodic regularisations of undocumented migrants suspended. In a nutshell, the heralded solution is: 'less migrants'.

Although the Democratic Party's strategy was more articulated than that, the decrease in the number of people reaching Italian coasts from Libya is the only success regarding migration that the party was able (or willing) to repeatedly claim in the election campaign. A success story that was confirmed also at the EU level on several occasions – from President Juncker's State of the Union speech praising Italy's action to bring down the number of crossings from Libya, to Commissioner Avramopoulos' tweet of last February celebrating the 'significant drop in asylum applications in 2017' and his recent speech where the first positive result on the European Agenda on Migration he mentions is the 'clear and consistent decrease in irregular arrivals'[5].

The shortcomings of the policy of containment

Analysts and NGOs have highlighted the shortcomings of this policy of containment[6]. First, it bears its fruits only from a short-term and geographically limited perspective. The closure of one migratory route often means that people fleeing wars and persecution or seeking a better future will redirect to other – possibly more dangerous – routes. Moreover, the closure of a migratory route is inherently flawed when it depends on the cooperation with unstable countries, as it is the case with Libya, and it can itself have destabilizing effects on the country in question and its neighbourhood. Finally, and most importantly, it comes with a deeply appalling human cost, as shown by media and NGO reports of abuses endured by refugees and migrants detained in Libya[7].

Playing catch up with xenophobic populist positions on migration is an impossible fight to win. If mainstream political parties join them in portraying success as less migrants and asylum seekers, then all promises and policies will be measured against that criterion. Reducing arrivals already demanded great compromises to European values and human rights. And it has been quickly topped by right-wing parties' promises of deporting all those who do not have a valid legal permit to live and work in Italy. Conversely, any policies aimed at improving safe and legal channels for labour migration and asylum, or any promising models of reception of asylum-seekers, become politically unpalatable and not exploited to their full potential – which in turn reduces the chances for a smoother journey of integration of newcomers.

Success – by which I mean any kind of resolution of tensions – is an important element of narratives that reassure and convince us. Is the one about less migration the only possible success story in Italy? Couldn't success be measured in terms of the number of people finding asylum and the opportunity of a new life in Italy? Or the number of new enrollments to Italian language courses? Or the number of Italian families ready to host asylum-seekers? The number of volunteers, activists, skeptics who changed their mind on migration, communities who open themselves…

In a recent research project[8], the think tank Counterpoint went on a field trip across several European countries to listen to stories and observe local realities of migration, including in Italy. One of their key findings is that conflict is an inevitable part of integration. It is not just an initial stage. Integration is a non-linear process, with ups and downs, tensions and connections. Nobody

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[5] European Commission, Remarks by Commissioner Avramopoulos on the reform of the EU visa policy, progress made on migration and the Facility for Refugees in Turkey

[6] See Giulia Laganà, Europe's hypocritical response to reports of slavery in Libya

[7] See Amnesty International, Libya's Dark Web Of Collusion: Abuses Against Europe-Bound Refugees And Migrants

[8] Counterpoint, Bonne année – Local realities of migration: emotions, institutions, conflict and cooperation

enjoys the moments of conflict and tension, but they are an important part of the picture because their resolution can reward the people involved. But for that to happen, to make the tensions worth enduring, newcomers and the local communities receiving them need not only support but also recognition for these resolutions.

National and European narratives on migration need to incorporate local experiences of receiving and integrating newcomers; affected individuals and communities need to recognise themselves in the story that is told by the media and politicians, and feel that their experiences – the positive and the negative ones – are part of a bigger, successful picture.