

## ***EU Management of Migration Crisis: Policy responses from Italy***

*Fulvio Attinà*  
University of Catania

*The EU management of the migration crisis raises well-founded doubts about the effectiveness and legitimacy of key responses. In 2013, Italy gave a turn to the EU management of the migration crisis and, since it, has been bearing the frontline-state burden to an extent, more than the Italian leaders and people estimated. The present paper reviews and assesses the EU management and mismanagement of the migration crisis and focuses on how the Italian governments went through it. The four sections of the present paper explore the following themes (1) the pre-crisis relationship between Europe and immigrants, (2) the building of the EU crisis management since the 2011 growth of the migrant inflow, (3) the response to the crisis by the Italian governments, and (4) the opinion of the Italians about migration management and migrants. In the concluding remarks, the flaws of the EU and Italian management of the migration crisis are recapped and policy advice is given.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the second half of the past century, Italy's governments were of the group of European governments that sided in favour of letting in regular and irregular migrants as cheap labour force. This permissive policy went by with the economic crisis in the late years of the past decade. Next to it, the European governments cut down the number of regular immigrants by restricting visa rules and went down the anti-immigration road of extremist and populist parties for the sake of containing their electoral fortune. Later on, they blamed Italy for firing the migration crisis and jeopardising Schengen by flooding Europe with illegal immigrants that the Italian Navy saved from sinking boats. As of today, Italy is the frontline state that most bears the costs of hosting migrants that nobody wants in Europe. The Rome government does its utmost to soften the domestic protest of

anti-immigration people and parties and to please the EU institutions and governments that cry out about the nefarious effects of accommodating Europe. The Member State (MS) governments refuse to recognize the economic benefits of immigration and keep on returning irregular immigrants to last departure and origin countries after ignoring the humanitarian duty of rescuing and helping refugees and forced migrants.

The present paper recapitulates knowledge about the migration crisis and focuses on the actions and role played by the Italian government in the EU crisis management plan. Viewed from Europe, the mass movement of people towards the continent is a trans-boundary crisis, i.e. a crisis affecting the normal conditions of all the EU countries besides being the effect of the unauthorised

border crossing by third country nationals.<sup>1</sup> The European governments called on the EU institutions to engage in the management of the crisis. Yet, the EU management has been difficult to shape and carry out because all the MS governments continued to play their own management strategy in harmony with the country approach towards receiving refugees and authorising non-nationals to enter the country.

The present paper is organised as follows. The pre-crisis relationship between Europe and immigrants is presented in the first section. The following section outlines the building process of the EU crisis management since the 2011 growth of irregular migrants inflow. The third section analyses the response to the crisis by the Italian government. The last section is about the opinion of the Italians about migration management and the migrants. The concluding remarks assess the EU and Italian management and propose some policy recommendations.

### **EUROPE AND IRREGULAR MIGRANTS IN PRE-CRISIS TIME**

In the second half of 2017, the number of arrivals has decreased remarkably but nobody bets on the near end of the phenomenon. The motto is 'migration is there to last'. Blame is on the mix of Africa's demographic explosion and lacking job opportunities. Indeed, the structural causes of migration are such to discredit all attempts of the policy-makers to cut down the flows. Yet, Europeans keep being unkind to receiving migrants and the EU leaders call on the African governments to hold people home and wait the time cooperation funds create employment there.

Europeans have been ever kind to receiving migrants. They welcome non-national workers, especially those bearing skills, on condition they already signed a job deal and do not oppose to leave back as soon the job term expires. In addition to temporary and circular economic migrants, Europeans welcome asylum seekers coming from countries of undisputed conditions of political persecution and war. Any other migrant is unwanted because is perceived as a

threat to the normal economic and cultural conditions of the receiving country.

In the second half of the past century, European former colonial powers accepted people coming from the former colonies. Also prosperous countries like Sweden, and countries with a growing economy like Germany managed to receive workers from European and non-European countries. Each country set up own reception and integration policies. Some tried multiculturalism but failed.



**Figure 1.** Factors pulling people towards Europe

Generally, the European governments ruled immigration by 'client politics', i.e. in collaboration with business and trade unions and humanitarian and religious groups. Normally, the governments did not meet great opposition to passing amnesty regulations legalising the status of irregular migrants and meeting the hopes of business circles and civil society groups. Client politics went unopposed because, in the past forty years, the European labour markets tapped into foreign workers to fill in jobs in sectors of low-profit margins the Europeans refuse to take and that cannot be delocalized to countries with low labour costs. These jobs are in the agriculture, fishing, constructions, mining, caregiving and nursing, cleaning, and hospitality sectors. Also population aging has raised demand for foreign workers.

<sup>1</sup> The "trans-boundary crisis" concept and the analysis of trans-boundary crisis management are presented in the TransCrisis: an EU H2020-funded research programme, <https://www.transcrisis.eu>.

Opposition to permissive immigration policy existed in the past but anti-migrant and xenophobic parties got remarkable electoral success only after the 2008 economic and financial crisis. Henceforth, in total disdain of the foreign labour need of the European economies and households, governments and mainstream parties ceased to be permissive towards irregular immigrants and turned to halting immigration by passing restrictive rules. Permissive policy and “client politics” gone, immigration turned into public, i.e. confrontational, politics. This occurred at the time the Arab Spring added a lot of refugees to the multiyear-long inflow of irregular immigrants. Briefly, Europe entered into the migration crisis because the citizens, struck by economic decline and public expenditure cuts, shared the anti-immigration messages of populist parties that the policy-makers were unprepared to respond to (Attinà and Rossi, 2017).

### **THE EU MANAGEMENT OF THE CRISIS**

From the 2011 increase to the present time decrease of the inflow of irregular migrants, the management of the migration crisis by the EU institutions and governments has passed through five contingency scenarios:

**1. Conventional response (2011 – 2013):** The outbreak of Arab Spring and consequent uncertain conditions of North African countries inflated the existing flows of people escaping hard conditions of living in Africa and Central-Western Asia. The EU leaders did not recognize the forced migration hatching and responded by conventional border control means like halting, identifying and, to a small extent, returning the migrants lacking regular visa.

**2. Mare Nostrum (October 2013 - October 2014):** A different scenario started from the Italian government decision to prioritize, in harmony with humanitarian law and the international law of the sea, the humanitarian dimension and to respond to the tragedy of migrant sinking boats by activating the Mare Nostrum Search and Rescue (SAR) operation. The EU and partner governments condemned

the operation and blamed the Italian government for impairing Schengen by missing to control the EU external border properly.

**3. EU Turn to a comprehensive approach (November 2014 – September 2015):** A year later Italy had started Mare Nostrum, the EU governments and the Commission recognized the humanitarian aspects of the unsafe crossing of the Mediterranean Sea and turned towards, they said, a comprehensive approach. This involved the EU SAR operation Triton, the plan to relocate the migrants hosted in Greece and Italy to all the EU countries, the EUNavFor-Med anti-smuggling operation, and the EU concern with the root causes of migration. The British and Visegrad governments overtly opposed the EU turn. The consent of the other EU governments proved to be mostly elusive. Since that time, they have tailored the implementation of the EU management decisions on domestic interests and on the people mood about migration.

**4. Fencing the EU (October 2015 – January 2017):** The summer 2015 massive arrival of migrants from Turkey and the Balkans, the Eastern Mediterranean route, convinced the EU governments to U-turn again towards conventional means of border control and push on the Commission-led external migration policy. To get Europe rid of refugees and migrants, the EU called on the governments of the transit and origin countries to block people at their borders in exchange for financial and technical assistance. On March 2016, the EU governments signed the accord with the Turkish government. On next October and December, they signed migration compacts and partnership agreements with the Lebanon and Jordan governments, and, later, similar engagements with Afghanistan and African governments. The EU-Turkey deal saved Germany and the Central-Eastern MSs from the influx of Syrian and Afghan refugees. To the EU leaders, the shutting down of the Eastern Mediterranean route proved the appropriateness of the fencing-Europe strategy and of the cooperation with third countries, especially those of last departure. On such belief, on October 2016, the EU governments acceded to the Commission proposal to turn

FRONTEX, the EU support agency for managing border control problems, into the European Border and Coast Guard service.

### 5. Stop and back (February 2017-ongoing):

Besides almost ending immigration through the East Mediterranean route, the main return of the EU-Turkey deal was the growth in number of migrants arriving to Italy from Libya. Hence, the EU leaders urged Italy to stop the migrants from landing on its costs and to return irregular migrants to the origin country. In turn, the EU was ready to supplement support actions. The Italian government decided to tighten border control, expand the execution of return decrees, and, most important, cut down smuggling by giving financial and technical assistance to the Libyan coast guard and by imposing a code of conduct on NGOs operated SAR missions. The EU reciprocated the Italian efforts by expanding financial assistance to Libya to all-out stop migrant departures.

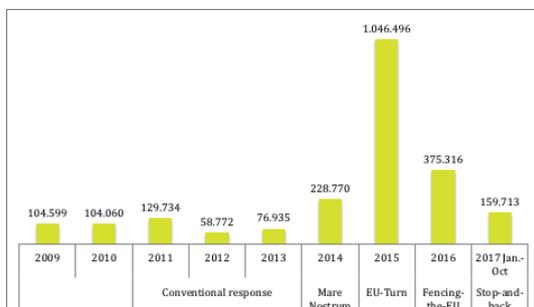


Figure 2. Illegal border crossing: Mediterranean routes  
Source: FRONTEX, 2017

In conclusion, the contrasted and tortuous shaping of the EU migration crisis management shows the difficulty of building the common response. Many decisions have been made at the highest institutional level, the European Council, but the member governments' compliance with the common management goals and actions has not been reached. From the 2015 fair consensus on common management goals and actions to the present agreement on strict border control, effective hotspots, mandatory return, and external partnerships, the governments of the European countries have tailored implementation on the voter preferences and the political goals of the ruling parties. Italy is one of the cases of such national style approach towards

the common management of the migration crisis (Attinà, 2017). The next section will draw attention to this approach.

### EU MANAGEMENT: THE ITALIAN WAY

The 2011 Commission Communication to the Council and the Parliament, titled Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (GAMM) is the keystone of the EU policy towards migration control and co-operation with third countries for building well-managed migration. In harmony with this goal, the Commission and the member governments did not consider the growing size of forced migrants as good reason for re-examining the existing visa, asylum, and reception policies. Italy was in tune with this position but did not adjust border control to the gravity of the phenomenon and ignored the Partners call to stop dropping irregular immigrants into their country also in order to avoid suspending Schengen and free circulation. Indeed, Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, and Sweden and Norway as non-EU associated member to Schengen, reintroduced border control in 2015. Additionally, on October 2013, the Italian government started Mare Nostrum as overdue SAR operation according to humanitarian obligations and the law of the sea. To infuriated EU partners the Italian government asked to organise a European SAR operation to replace the Italian one and take charge of the whole humanitarian assistance to the migrants at sea and on land. Since EU acceded to the Italian expectations and turned towards the comprehensive approach, the separated management of the crisis ended. However, the line up of Italy with the EU official position has been slow and rough.

In the past thirty years, immigration has turned Italy into a multi-ethnic country but Italians have a bias towards such a change while governments are unprepared to drive the country to meet the global change. The anti-immigration parties are on the right-hand side of the political spectrum. Some of them are populist parties like the Northern League and the Five Stars Movement. Generally, the media feed anti-immigration campaign. Policymakers avoid challenging the overall negative sentiment towards the aliens.

In tune with the EU policy, the Berlusconi's rightist coalition government, which lasted till November 2011, opposed permissive migration policy. In 2009, to please the EU demand, Berlusconi signed with Qaddafi the treaty that exchanged Italian money for blocking African migrants into the Libyan territory. The effect of the treaty ended in March 2011 at the time of the fall of Qaddafi and the start of civil war.

The Monti government, which followed to Berlusconi in November 2011 and lasted till April 2013, opened again the Lampedusa reception and identification centre the previous government had closed following the reduction of migrants caused by the 2009 treaty. Monti was the recipient of the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights that found Italy guilty of intercepting at sea and returning to Libya 24 Eritreans and Somalis without granting them access to asylum procedures. In general, Monti came across the crisis by keeping migration on a profile lower than the problems of the economic recovery.

Enrico Letta, prime minister from April 2013 to February 2014, called again on the EU to respond to the humanitarian emergency by rescuing migrants at sea and bearing the burden of the reception. The Commission and the Council, instead, restated the EU position of not granting humanitarian rescue and aid to migrants attempting to illegally crossing the EU border. They reminded to all the MSs the duty of controlling the external borders in the frame of the Schengen system, and of returning irregular migrants to the origin country. But on 18 October, the government sent the Mare Nostrum vessels to rescue migrants in distress at sea and take them ashore. Many migrants continued their journey towards the North European countries.

Renzi government, on charge from late February 2014 to December 2016, finally gained the EU recognition of humanitarian emergency. On November 2014, EU took charge of the SAR operation, granted financial and technical aid to Italy and Greece as frontline states and launched two relocation plans that turned into a flop. The countries that complied with the plans did it to a very small extent. Support to

organising and operating hotspots for blocking and returning unauthorized migrants has been always a matter of controversy between EU and the Italian and Greek governments. On the whole, Italy responded to the partners' humanitarian turn with disenchantment since almost all the rescued migrants disembarked in Italian ports and relocation was drastically downscaled. Nonetheless, the Italian government accepted the EU-Turkey deal to relieve Germany and the Balkan and Central European countries of the refugee pressure. In a short time, the side effect of the deal with Turkey, the growth of the number of migrants arriving to Italy, added to the failure of the EU operation Sophia that was supposed to crack on the smugglers of migrants. The Prime Minister Renzi proposed also to side the EU-Turkey deal with long-term actions. The Commission, after the initial sceptical response to the proposal, forwarded the "migration compact" idea to upgrade the existing EU programmes of long-term financial and technical aid to origin countries and improve their capabilities to fight illegal migrants.

The Gentiloni government, in charge from December 2016, concluded Italy's adaptation to the EU management. The government reformed the migrant detention centres, accelerated the expulsion of irregular immigrants, and most remarkably, on February 2017, signed the memorandum of understanding with the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA). It gave Italian assistance to the Libyan Navy and Coast Guard to rescue migrants in the Libyan waters and take them to detention camps in Libya. Finally, to meet the complaints of the Italian government for the migrants taken to Italy by the Triton and NGOs ships and for the missing relocation of migrants, EU approved the Action Plan to Support Italy and Stem Migration Flows. Prepared by the Commission and published on early July, the Plan has to enhance Libyan capacities with a €46 million fund and sustain the Italian government with an additional €35 million to keep on with the EU policy of stopping migrants outside Europe and get rid of them.

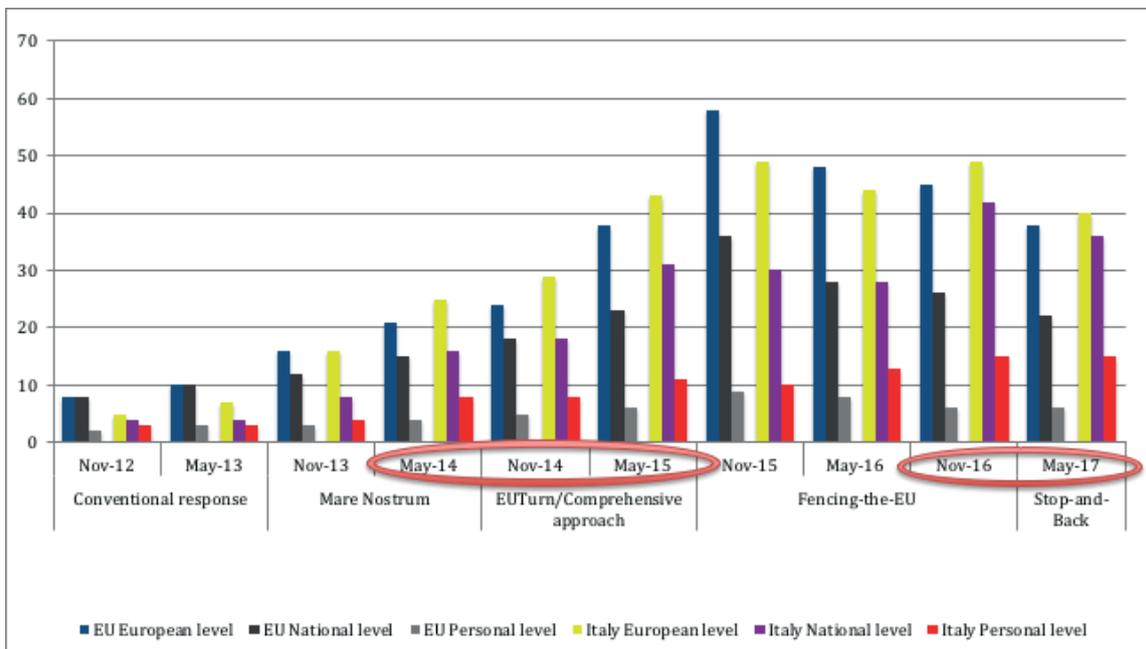
### SALIENCE OF MIGRATION TO THE ITALIANS

Generally speaking, the preferences of the citizens have an influence on the policy-makers' choice of crisis management. But the opposite is true also. The political leaders' management has an influence on the citizen perception of the issue and preference on how to manage it. In other terms, influence goes in both directions. Therefore, policy-makers have a space for developing crisis management and take into account the expectation of the citizens.

In the present section, the double-direction relationship between Italy's citizens and policy-makers in the migration crisis is explored by a proxy, namely the citizen perception of the salience of migration during the time of the crisis management. The assumption is that the citizen perception is influenced both by knowledge about the migrant inflows and by the crisis management adopted by the state and EU policy-makers.

The Euro-Barometer (EB) offers survey data useful to know the salience of migration to the Italians and EU citizens during the time of the crisis. EB data give also information about the citizen attitude/feeling towards migrants in general. Also this information is clue to understand the citizen feedback to the leaders' management of the migration crisis because an important element influencing perception of salience in a particular time is the individual attitude towards receiving migrants and aliens (Attinà and Rossi, 2017).

In May and November, EB interviewers ask to a sample of EU citizens to choose from a list the two issues they consider to be the most salient ones. The interviewee is asked to pick up the issues s/he perceives as salient to, separately, Europe, his/her own country, and him/herself individually.<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 3.** Immigration as one of the two most salient issues at the national/European/personal level  
Source: Eurobarometer survey no. 73.4, 74.2, 75.3, 76.3, 77.3, 78.1, 79.3, 80.1, 81.4, 82.3, 83.3, 84.3, 85.2, 86.2 and 87.3.

<sup>2</sup> The 16 issues of the list are Crime; Economic situation; Rising prices/inflation; Taxation; Unemployment; Terrorism; Defence/Foreign affairs; Housing; Immigration; Healthcare system; The educational system; Pensions; The environment; Energy; Other (spontaneous); None (spontaneous); and Don't know.

The histograms of Figure 3 show the per cent value of the number of citizens that consider migration as one of the two most salient issues.

Since the Italian government started the Mare Nostrum operation, the number of people concerned with migration has been growing in Europe. It blew up at the time of the EU-Turn scenario. Many citizens were frightened by the increasing arrival of migrants, and anxious about the humanitarian turn of the management of the crisis decided by the leaders in contrast to past months condemnation of Italy's humanitarian operation. Perception of salience continued to spread in the population until the EU negotiation with the Turkish government came to successful end, March 2016. Since May 2016, the number of people considering migration as most salient issue has been decreasing in EU as a whole but Italy.

The remarkable difference of the three perceptions of salience to Europe, own country, and personal confirms the sociotropic explanation offered by public opinion analysts to this kind of distinguished perceptions. A small number perceive the negative effects of migration straight on themselves but many share the fear of being the same at risk as they are members of the community. The reader should be informed also that many Europeans rated the salience of the migration issue above the salience of the economic issues all the time

through to late 2016.

At the time of the Conventional Response scenario and also in November 2015 and May 2016, the number of Italians concerned with migration has been lower than the number of the Europeans as a group. In the remaining time, the number of Italians preoccupied with the migrant inflows is larger than that of the preoccupied Europeans as a whole. This is not a surprising data as Italy is the true European frontline state since mid 2016.

The perception of salience is also a symptom of the citizen anger about the management of the crisis by the political leaders. The Italians feel angry with the migrants because they pay the burden of the migration crisis to a larger extent than the remaining Europeans. Indeed, in the last four-year time, their feelings towards immigrants from outside the EU are almost as much negative as the feelings of the citizens of the European countries like Poland, Austria, Hungary, and Slovakia to name some that blatantly refuse, differently from Italy, to host immigrants (see Figure 4). Italians are of the group of the less favourable towards immigrants both from other EU countries and from outside the EU. In the latter case, they are just a few more favourable than two Baltic countries, Latvia and Estonia, three Visegrad countries, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, and nearby Malta.

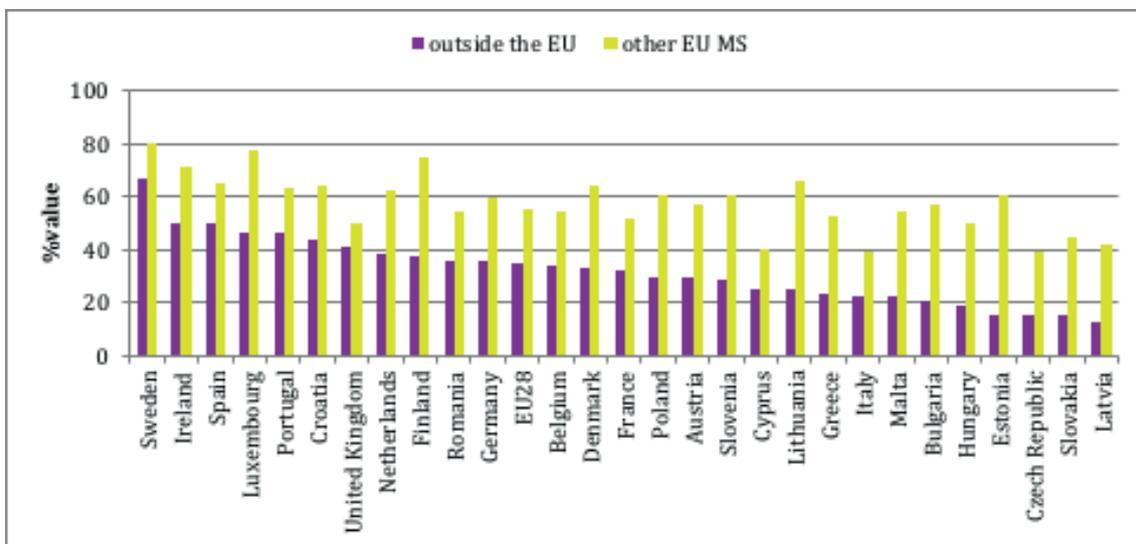


Figure 4. Figure 4. Positive feeling of MS citizens toward immigrants from EU states and from outside the EU (Mean of the per cent value from November 2014 – May 2017)

Source: Eurobarometer survey no. 82.3, 83.3, 84.3, 85.2, 86.2 and 87.3.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS**

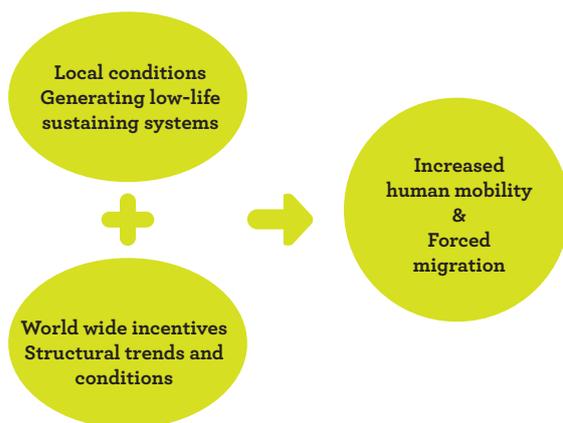
In the last three decades, experts and policy-makers have been conscious of the growing size of the migration phenomenon. The community of migration scientists documented the growth and explained the causes and possible consequences of the phenomenon (Castles, 2004; Castles and Miller 1993; Hammerstad, 2013; Massey et als, 1998). A number of documents and reports of the EU Commission called the MS governments to cope with this challenge by building common responses. FRONTEX and EASO offered support to coordinate the national responses to the contingency. Nevertheless, the great upturn of irregular migration at the beginning of the present decade took the EU leaders by uncertainty about how to respond to it. This occurred mostly because the humanitarian aspect gained the upper hand on legal and technical aspects and provoked the reaction of the populist and extremist anti-immigration parties. Fatal accidents raised the concern of the people and pushed policy-makers to organise SAR missions to help the migrants in distress at the sea. Also NGOs decided to respond to the emergency by their own missions (Irrera, 2016). However, humanitarian aid to migrants only at the time they are at risk of life is just like slapping a bandaid. It does not help them to exit from the state of need nor crack on the roots of the problem. The European citizens and policy-makers hold that the crisis starts from the unauthorized people that cross uncontrolled borders and put under threat the normal life of the country they enter into. Correspondingly, Europeans hold that the crisis will end by erecting effective border control and by pushing back those who go across without permit.

In reality, the problem starts where the migrants come from and will hardly turn down without dealing with the root causes that are local like the economy, culture and politics of the origin country, and global like the rules of world trade and business that segments the world market and stratify the national economies. Additionally, drivers and correlates like the demography gap, the human rights system, and the means of easy communication and fast

transport pump up the phenomenon in today world (Attinà, 2016).

Italy is one of the EU countries that most defended the necessity to respond to both the short-term needs and the long-term trends of the migration crisis, namely to the humanitarian dimension and the root causes of migration. Incidentally, the humanitarian and structural split and the local and global split of the causes are all but unstated in EU official documents and reports.

The humanitarian dimension, in the view shared by the Italian government, is the condition of distress and no-protection of the persons that illegally go through third-country borders because they are forced to leave their own country and are exploited by smugglers. The root causes, in the view of Italy's policy-makers, are mainly the conditions that impede the economic take-off and development of the origin states. Also political and cultural conditions are root causes of migration but, in the present crisis, they have been the object of minor consideration. Political violence and persecution have been debated as reason for applying the refugee Convention and protocols. Yet, controversy arose about implementation aspects.



When humanitarian emergency and forced migration came into consideration at the EU level, the institutions firstly denied the humanitarian nature of the crisis, then accepted it but ended by dismissing to abide by humanitarian action norms. As the long-term

goal of fighting the root causes of migration comes into consideration, instead, the EU governments and institutions did not deny the duty of action but only acceded to reshuffling and slightly expanding existing programmes of development cooperation (den Hertog, 2016), and promised to adapt their procedures and objectives to future cooperation schemes. Yet, reducing migration is a long-term goal to achieve by engaging states and international organisations in reviewing the ineffective development cooperation of the past and, more important, in reforming the international trade rules that obstruct the take-off strategies of unindustrialised countries.

In reality, at present the EU management of the migration crisis is focused (A) on the control of the external borders and the instrumental, negotiated support to frontline states, and (B) on the cooperation with origin, transit and, mostly, last departure countries founded on various kinds of deals that have names like international partnership and migration compact.

Coordination of the border agencies of the MSs is essential to achieve the goal of border control in a trans boundary crisis like the migration crisis. FRONTEX, EASO, and the EU agencies that have been involved in pursuing this goal did not deliver as much as they were expected to. This situation took the EU to expand the resources and competence of the agencies and to turn FRONTEX into the European Border and Coast Guard agency (EBCG).

As far as the support to the MSs directly affected by the crisis comes into consideration, since the logistics of migration charges costs most on the frontline states, no doubt on the duty of compensating the burden they bear. Additionally, the Dublin Convention downloads all reception costs on the countries of first-entry. These problems have been dealt with on the spot and have been approximately solved by giving to the frontline states some compensation funds and technical assistance in managing the hotspots, and by the shading relocation plans. Also pull countries, i.e. countries with growing economy, dynamic labour market, functioning welfare, and rooted immigrant communities, like

Germany and Sweden, bear the burden of the crisis, but they draw economic benefits from integrating new labour force into their growing economy.

Cooperation with the countries of origin of economic migrants is the policy invoked by the Commission to well-manage the supply of non-nationals to the EU labour market. Forwarding this policy at the time of mass and forced migration is urgent but hardly simple and effective. The governments of those countries have economic and political reasons for not impeding citizens to leave the country since there are very few or no opportunities at all for earning life and the EU financial and technical aid will give positive returns in the very long term.

The present crisis brought to light the case for developing cooperation also with countries of transit and countries of last departure to the EU territory. In the latter, which are of utmost importance, political factors may delay the negotiation but, as the Libya case demonstrates, do not impede the conclusion of financial and technical assistance cooperation. EU has been able to overcome this kind of problems with the governments of the Balkan countries, Turkey, and also with the contended government of Libya. But in the latter, the results of the cooperation deal are not given for granted. The statistics of the flows are not very much positive.

To conclude with Italy, the all-round turn of the government policy is clear. The Berlusconi and Monti governments were broadly in tune with the EU conventional approach towards the migration flows. The Letta government left the EU approach and turned towards the humanitarian approach. Renzi's government started a process of getting closer again to the EU mainstream. Last, the Gentiloni government has totally adjusted the Italian approach to the EU policy of tight border control and of partnership with the countries of last departure. By tailoring the EU approach on the country priorities and constraints, Italy's governments pragmatically tuned into the controversial and still uncertain management that has been developed by the EU institutions.

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**FULVIO ATTINA**, professor of Political Science and International Relations, and Jean Monnet Chair Ad Personam at the University of Catania, has been Chair of the Italian Association of Political Science, and served in the governing bodies of ECPR, ISA, and Italian ECSA. Former Director of the Department of Political Studies and Chair of the Master Course of Global Politics and Euro-Mediterranean Relations, University of Catania. Visiting professor at universities in America, Asia and Europe, he is the author of The Global Political System, Palgrave, 2011; the editor of The politics and policies of relief, aid and reconstruction. Contrasting approaches to disasters and emergencies, Palgrave, 2012; and the co-editor of Multilateral Security and ESDP Operations, Ashgate, 2010. Currently, he does research on the European Union role in multilateral security, humanitarian and emergency actions, and the management of the EU's migration crisis. <https://fulvioattina.net>