

# Italy's anti-immigration rhetoric is paying off for the populists



It wasn't long ago when Italy used to be referred to colloquially as "the sick man of Europe," a country whose economic situation was stuck in the doldrums, whose political system was always a crisis away from collapse, and whose political class was divided into those who were ineffectual and those who were corrupt. The Italians still have their systemic problems, no doubt. Italy has accumulated a pile of national debt (£2bn) that is larger than its GDP (£1.48 trillion). Its unemployment rate is over 10 per cent, higher than the EU's collective average, and about three in ten young Italians can't find work. And yet the "sick man of Europe" monicker is so last decade; with Matteo Salvini, Luigi Di Maio, and Giuseppe Conte now running the government in Rome, Italy is now "the troublemaker of Europe."

Nowhere is this more the case than Europe's perpetual migration headache. In Berlin, Paris, and Brussels, the talk about illegal immigration is about finding a unified European solution that is as durable as it is humane. In Rome, the discussion is far more polarising. The question is less about finding solutions favourable to the European Union as it is about finding a way to send a lightning bolt through the EU's stony exterior in order to get its attention.

For most politicians in the West, forcing dozens of poor, tired, and desperate migrants to stay on a rescue ship off the coast of Sicily until the EU agrees to adopt them would be a career suicide. Decency, virtue, charity, and morality are supposed to be what Europe is all about. When people running from war, torture, or political persecution risk their lives to cross the Mediterranean, the Europeans are expected to come to the beaches with outstretched hands. To not assist the tens of thousands of hungry people fleeing Africa, the Middle East, and Asia - or worse, to block these vulnerable men, women, and children from landing on European shores - is to violate the theory that Europe is a universal beacon for life, liberty, democracy, and opportunity.

Italy, however, is a different story. As illustrated in the March parliamentary elections, when nearly half of Italian voters cast their ballots for parties that ran

on demonstration of the EU as an oppressor of Italian ambition, it's not a particularly appealing prospect for a politician to be a pan—European, pro-refugee establishmentarian. The country's politics in 2018 are not only anti-establishment, but anti-migrant and anti-asylum. The Italian people are fed up with their country being asked to manage Europe's migration crisis on the one hand while being criticized for insufficient loyalty to the EU on the other. That much was clear long ago, even before the League and the Five Star Movement upended the Italian political mainstream last winter and formed a government without help from Silvio Berlusconi and Matteo Renzi.

But Italy's populist currents have taken on new relevance this week, when the Conte government not only refused entry to migrants on board the Diciotti for over a week, but was rewarded politically for keeping anti-immigration at the top of its agenda (on August 25, after a week at sea and with prosecutors having commenced an investigation of Salvini's conduct, the Interior Ministry finally allowed the ship's occupants to walk off the boat). Giuseppe Conte's antics during EU meetings, Matteo Salvini's ideological anti-immigration policies, and Di Maio's financial threats towards Brussels are being compensated by the Italian public with even higher approval ratings. According to an Ipsos poll conducted in late July, 61 per cent of Italians have a positive outlook on the Conte's government's performance. The prime minister himself has a 68 per cent approval rating, while Salvini and Di Maio are at 60 per cent and 58 per cent respectively.

The political gods are watching Matteo Salvini like no other politician in Europe. By piggybacking on migration, Salvini has miraculously transitioned his League party from a fringe, northern secessionist movement into a national political force whose poll numbers only grow with every rescue ship blocked from Italy's ports. The issue continues to be a winner for the populists, and as long as that development holds, Rome has even less of a reason to become more compassionate. Even possible legal jeopardy for Matteo Salvini over the Diciotti can't compete.

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