Italy and EU's co-constitutive bordering effort

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Introduction

Italy plays a performative role in the construction of the (Southern) border of the European Union. Her actions are simultaneously affected and affect the European border and its meaning. In fact, a frontier state is inevitably called to implement a series of rules and procedures agreed at the European level for the sake of the entire Union: the implementation since 2015 of the hotspot approach as a new bordering tool is a case in point and has been widely covered by the literature (see for example Campesi, 2018). In turn, Italy shapes the border of the Union whenever its narration and practices transform borders in cognitive, ideational and material terms (see theoretical paper). The iteration of this mutually constitutive relation provides extraordinarily variegated images of European borders as contemporarily fluid and incredibly impenetrable, as stretchable yet rigid, as inclusive yet widely discriminatory.

As explained in the paper this work relies on, (re)bordering practices seems to be inescapable for states and more so in times of crisis when uncertainty crumbles core belief system and test institutional capacity and preparedness (resilience even, to use a recurrent jargon). They are key to actors' aim to discover, uncover or even reproduce ontological security. Italy is no exception, having been shaken hard by multiple and concurrent crises over the last years. The economic crisis first, the 'refugee crisis' then and lastly the COVID pandemic have repeatedly questioned the country's ontological security, its priorities, its alignments, and resoluteness along with main values. This work specifically looks at the fallout of the 'refugee crisis' on Italy's bordering process, though the effects of all three crises and their main features are hardly understandable as standalone.

As seen, if insecurity looms large, the provision of security is what is expected and required: bordering exercises in this sense largely depend on securitizing moves enacted and their legitimizing arguments. Italy is hence analysed in this paper looking at main securitizing narrations and matching bordering practices. Considering three political constellations running the country from 2016 to 2020 this work has a twofold objective: first, to consider bordering practices according to their legitimizing arguments. Second, to evaluate their implications on migrants' treatment, on EU's practices and overall ontology.

Setting the context: Italy's unnormal normalcy

When the EU-Turkey Statement of March 2016 sealed the eastern Mediterranean corridor and rather optimistically and arbitrarily signalled the end of the 'refugee crisis,' Italy's was everything but relieved at this apparent solution the Union had pulled out of a hat (Ceccorulli, 2019). Ever since, Italy has started fearing a diversion of flows towards its territory through the Adriatic route of the many stranded in the Balkans adding to those soaring along the Mediterranean one. Anxiety over becoming 'the parking place of Europe' was transmitted by the media as EU's member states fortified internal borders out of concerns over secondary movements. Italy's apprehension at that point was motivated by two elements: first, the requirement (now inescapable) that Italy fully performed its role as first country of entrance as requested by the Dublin Regulation. Second, the awareness of acting relying on a still largely imperfect asylum structure. When inflows towards the country reached a new hike in 2016 apprehension turned into insecurity and imbued, even though with diverse emphasis, the political debate. What followed in terms of both security moves and implementing practices was an attempt by multiple political majorities to govern the phenomenon through the definition of different sets of borders: some defining the perimeter of the national political community, some defining Italy's imagined position (opportunistic at times) in the European Union and still others as far as reframing the borders of the Union.

Indeed, this complex process has mirrored nuances proper to the political majority in power as it is seen below, but some traits have persisted, unchanged and irrespective of the political color, along these days to provide a more solid and decisive contribution to the Union's bordering effort. In particular, Italy has tried to define a perfect matching between its borders and those of the Union: this exercise has been mostly devoted at enticing Union's and Member States' solidarity in governing migration, with the aim to erase those cognitive borders that still characterise the issue area and that indeed display quite concrete distributional effects. Besides, and somehow relatedly, Italy's has constantly tried to stretch the external border southwards, reconfiguring the Union's geographic border and with that relations with a new neighbourhood. More undetermined and schizophrenic has been instead the bordering of the national community: combining wholehearted actions with blunt disrespect of migrants' right; accommodating and inclusive stances with the contraction of basic liberal rights, Italy's has hardly made up its mind about basic values supporting her being. Ultimately, this has contributed more than not to blur EU's already fuzzy border on the matter. Ambiguity and often reliance on restrictive definition of borders cripple rather than embolden Italy and Union's ontological security, perverting their supposed, imagined and loudly heralded distinctiveness.

The five-years period of consideration together with the alternation of different political majorities offer a perfect occasion to appreciate continuities and discontinuities in the Italian political discourse and practice. Between December 2016 and June 2018 Italy was run by a centre-left/centre-right coalition. Throughout 2016 Italy had been facing the largest inflow of asylum seekers ever experienced (Ansa, 2016), while significant lows were registered along other Mediterranean corridors. Minister for the Interior Marco Minniti, a long-experienced politician of the left, assertively shaped a Mediterranean policy aimed at governing flows and magistrally brought the Union's attention (and pockets) in this geographical region, with a 'model' or 'vision' to be implemented in Libya. After that government, Italy displayed the first full-populist western European government ever, run through a contract between the Five-star movement and the League, party with traditional anti-migration stances. As occurred in other historical moments when the League (previously Northern League) made it into the leading coalition, the seat of the Interior was occupied by a prominent figure in the party, Matteo Salvini this time. The dubbed 'yellow-green government' experience sunk in August 2019, Italy was then run by a coalition between the Five-star movement, and some parties from the centre and the left until February 2021, with Luciana Lamorgese, with a long experience as officer in the Ministry of the Interior, covering now the highest seat within. The last phase is the one that saw Italy endure, first among European countries, the impact of SARS-COV-19 (Covid), something which, alongside health, brought immense repercussions in social, economic and political terms. Indeed, the frequent political turnabout have not favored comprehensive and more importantly consistent approaches; the issue is not new for Italy though. In fact, the patchy, reactive and ever emergency traits of its approach to migration has been frequently attributed to this peculiar feature.

The period of observation is all the more interesting in that it displays different inflows' intensity. Ultimately, this allows us to gauge both the salience of the issue and its manipulation by political leaders; the relevance attributed to the issue as a defining element for Italy's ontology; and, ultimately, the weight of relations with the Union in bordering attempts and practices.

Next sections elaborate on the bordering attempts mentioned above, trying to combine them with their imbued securitization logic.

Italy as the Union's border

One of the leitmotivs of Italy's political discourse has been the one reminding that 'Italy's border is in fact the Union's border'. As Minister Salvini half explained and half admonished, "the plan is that

finally the EU takes care of the defense of its borders, that are also ours" (Cremonesi, 2018a). At first sight, this type of argument seems to stress a geographical and even territorial, definition of border, whereby Italy clearly draws the contours of the Union's 'hard' limes. Clearly there is some truth to this interpretation, as Salvini's words made clear through the use of a military parlance. In this sense, hard borders would collimate with cognitive ones: Italy is the doorstep of a regionally integrated organization where common values, norms, rules apply that differ from other geographical spaces. That space has hence to be cocooned, 'defended', protecting the Mediterranean and Italy as well (Cremonesi, 2018a). According to Minister Salvini, defending the external border was key to remove controls at internal borders introduced since 2015 out of the refugee crisis and kept eversince (Walt, 2018). However, rather than referring to an external audience this argument is mostly addressed to the Union. Reminding that Italy locates and perceives itself and demands to be recognised as part of the Union is intended to stimulate 'solidarity' from other Member States, recalling such value as constitutive of the Union and hence integral part of its ontology. As explained by Minister Lamorgese, "solidarity principles stand at the basis of the European construction and integration" (Sarzanini, 2019); without solidarity it is not possible to set in motion a reception policy reflecting EU's values and to overcome the sterile binary logic of primary and secondar movements (Spagnolo, 2020). Having that in mind provides an image of borders in less rigid terms than what anticipated.

This logic has been a constant in Italy's discourse irrespective of political colours and to the limit of hypocrisy when the same was taken forward by formations with quite sovranist stances. The argument has been raised time and again. For example, during the refugee crisis of 2015, the request has been that to speed up the relocation decisions redistributing asylum seekers from specific countries among Member States; afterwards emphasis was put on updating the Union's ethnic profiles for relocation to reach more nationalities, reflecting the new composition of flows (Ziniti, 2017). But perhaps more vigorously it has resonated in the debate about search and rescue activities in the Mediterranean, particularly relevant in the aftermath of the refugee crisis. All political formations have vigorously asked for a regionalization of search and rescue activities in the Mediterranean: almost the entirety of disembarkations of rescued persons have occurred in Italy, causing at times of intense inflows particular hardship for the Italian reception system. As reported by Minniti, it is hard to imagine an international rescue mission and at the same time reception by a sole country (Democratica, 2017).

The quest for a European search and rescue system would indeed push outwards the border of the Union to the sea, partly reconfiguring this space as the Union's, in terms of effective intervention and of responsibility. This reconfiguration would however not fix new borders, for the sea seldom recognises some, at least in practical terms; it would be closer to what has been called in the literature a 'borderland' (Del Sarto 2021).

Despite efforts, Italy's call for solidarity has been unmet till these days, with huge consequences. This held true for example when the reiterated call by Minniti to FRONTEX and other Member States for a change of Operation Triton rules of engagement during the summer of 2017 were sunk. Looking at timing, one might for example infer that Member States' blind eye on the matter might have pressured Italy's into signing a code of conduct for NGOs operating in the Mediterranean, by underlining the operative necessity to govern a 'jungle' (Martini, 2017) and might have been decisive to deepen and accelerate cooperation with Libya, giving shape to the bordering logic explained below. During the populist government, Italy's unheard voice has accelerated the dismissal of operation EUNAVFOR MED Sophia, unique and never replaced European presence of this type in the Mediterranean, vanishing the likelihood of a European reconfiguration at sea. Hardening the stance against NGOs, in June 2018 Minister Salvini mandated the closing of Italian ports to these organizations, with the explanation that most of these wore the flag of another Member States which were however not sharing Italy's efforts on reception. As with Minniti, the end objective was the change of the rules of engagement of missions in the Mediterranean, allowing for rotating disembarkations. To force hand, Salvini was particularly hostile towards the EU, menacing to close ports even to EU's missions (Themis, Triton and Sophia) and, according to experts, truly orchestrated 'crises' at sea, in an effort to spectacularize his moves by 'hostaging' vessels and questioning the urgency and the necessity of disembarkations 'in a safe place' (Cerasa, 2020a).[1] These missions were international only 'on paper', and instead only Italian to economically support (Romana, 2018): as pointed out, "The European Themis mission is composed of 32 vessels, 30 of which Italians': how can you affirm it is a European mission?" (Romano, 2018). Italy's behaviour was stirring at times hypocritic reactions from other Member States, accusing Italy of 'cynicism and irresponsibility' (Cremonesi, 2018b). If most likely Salvini's move went beyond real objectives, as testified by the skirmish within the Italian Minister of Defence which instead praised Operation Sophia (of which Italy had the Command) and the significance it held for Italy, the operation was finally discontinued. In fact, no European solutions emerged and after a final phase which saw the paradoxical presence of a naval operation without a naval component (with no anti-smuggling and rescuing activities) the EU seemed to abandon previously alluded security interests: anti-smuggling efforts and migrants' lives.

The last of the three governments, was the one having gotten closer to such a more shared system with the Malta Summit of September 2019. Minister Lamorgese explained that, "in coordination with Germany, the idea has been taken forward that who lands in Italy lands in Europe" (Ministero dell'Interno, 2019a). Minister Lamorgese explained that a new solidarity environment had settled

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[1] Authors' online interview with Matteo Villa, ISPI Research Fellow, 25May 2021.

among Member States, necessary for an effective sharing of the problem (Sarzanini, 2019). A mechanism for the redistribution of migrants called by the Commission (and not by Italy) based on automatic relocation procedures was envisaged and served two objectives: first a more equitable distribution of burdens among Member States; second, reduced uncertainty over responsibility on reception (Sarzanini, 2019). In the words of Lamorgese, the measure equated to the overcoming of the Dublin Regulation (which in itself it's a powerful cognitive barrier within the EU both for migrants and among Member States as the argument about primary and secondary movements highlights), for, after a first security and sanitary control undertaken by Italy, those arrived would be registered in EURODAC by the receiving country (Cerasa, 2020b). And yet, the system run on a voluntary basis and enclosed a limited amount of European states.

Moreover, the outbreak of the pandemic has struck a lethal blow to the feeble voluntary mechanism at play, leaving Italy with increasing inflows from Tunisia to deal with and poor instruments to cope. During summer 2020, in fact, rising and mostly unchecked disembarkations were reported by Minister Lamorgese. The compounded problem of intercepting these inflows (hence also undertaking proper sanitary check) and the fast spreading of the Coronavirus has indeed affected perceptions related to inflows, perceptions largely engrossed by populist formations underlining the health threat posed by irregular migrants. Indeed, Minister Lamorgese explained, in an attempt to defuse concern, that the problem of sanitary checks was seemingly valid for all persons entering Italy, for work, study or tourism reasons (Sarzanini, 2020). However, this has made it all the more difficult to organize proper reception, for the local levels engaged in reception showed strong resistance. Even in the case of properly tracked inflows (undergoing as they normally do security and sanitary checks) reception in the available structures was rendered difficult because of the exigencies of social distancing.

Against this backdrop, the decision to 'quarantine vessels' off Italy's ports represented indeed a new bordering system (Denaro, 2021). Together with the sanitary threat 'imported to Italy' by migrants alluded by anti-migration formations, confining migrants afloat may have deepened the perception among Italian public opinion of asylum seekers as 'incubators' even if the measure was exactly taken to ward off this eventuality by disposing proper sanitary checks (Cerasa, 2020a) and alleviate pressure on hotspots (Ziniti, 2020). In turn, the distress faced by Italy because of new arrivals and blocked relocations to other Member States may have urged close Member States (France and Austria) to strengthened physical controls at borders, for fear of 'secondary movements'. In turn, this fed the perception of Italy's solitude to face the challenge, as explained by this narration.

Italy stretching out EU's borders

A second argument taking the lead after the refugee crisis is that the EU has to operate in Africa as main decisive context for its own future. As Minniti made clear, "the governance of migratory flows is to be played outside national borders and does not only involve and interest Italy. It has to do with Africa and Europe" (Ziniti, 2017). Also, "the governance of migration cannot be limited to the territory of the Union and in particular to migrants' arrival on Italian shores. It has first to be faced in Africa, where it has its roots and where economic, environmental and humanitarian causes guide the phenomenon" (De Maizière and Minniti, 2017). And again "the decisive game for Europe is no longer being played to the East, rather to the South. Our future is strongly linked to Africa's" (Foschini, 2017), with a specific reference to the challenges posed by terrorism, demography and strategic resources. Talks about a 'Marshall Plan for Africa' were evocative about the scope and the resoluteness of the engagement shown by Italy. When during summer 2020, in the hike of the covid pandemic, flows towards Italy started to resume copiously from Tunisia, Minister Lamorgese admonished the EU to intervene effectively to reduce the effects of the economic hurdles facing the North African country, because a slowdown of the pressure could only be attained in Africa (Sarzanini, 2020). Indeed, this type of argument has visibly connected migration policy with foreign policy more at large. This has partly contributed, though unintentionally, to the securitization of migration by linking insecurity conditions in Africa with possible massive and chaotic flows, and by nearing the governance of migration with domains mostly using security tools to cope, while probably diverting resources on useful development chapters (Ministero degli Esteri, 2020).

Amon others, a narration matching the border of the EU with the Southern border of Libya was advanced. This contribution to EU's re-bordering is peculiarly Italian, for it was Italy at the end of 2016 with Minniti to inaugurate a new phase of relations with the north-African country and to gain (primarily financial) support by the Union in the attempt. Every initiative was coordinated with and brought to the EU level, such as the meeting held in Rome on July 2017 with Libyans' Majors, which saw the participation of the Commissioner for Internal Affairs Dimitris Avramopulos. The idea to be sedimented was that the Southern border of Libya was in fact EU's border, explained the Italian Minister (Cazzullo, 2017). In the words of Minniti, Italy's assertive role and the assiduous involvement of the EU had the added benefit of balancing EU's international projection with a pivot to the South (Cuscito and Caracciolo, 2018). Essentially, the pillars of the strategy were the building up of Libya's capacity on anti-smuggling, maritime and terrestrial border controls; information exchange; the development of economic projects in Libya; and the improvement of reception centres conditions.

This attempt has visibly and easily crossed the broader international attempt to restore security and statehood in Libya, in complete disarray after the toppling of the Quaddaffi regime in 2011. In this

sense, Italy's strategy has wisely related the insecurity situation of the country and the lack of sovereignty prerogatives with the growing threat of human smuggling, endangering human lives as testified by the abysmal number of deaths in the Mediterranean particularly in 2016. As Minniti pointed out, human smuggling is a real threat to Europe as a whole: assisting at smugglers' deadly game against desperate migrants could not be a choice (De Maizière and Minniti, 2017). Closing the Saharan smuggling industry and the supporting bases in Libya represented, for Minniti, a 'democratic duty' (Ziniti, 2017), for only by showing to master illegality any talk about reception could be made - reiterating, hence, the legitimacy of the vision. Moreover, it was explained, a democracy cannot follow and passively react to processes governed by criminals (Foschini, 2017). But the rush to Libya was supported by another securitizing narration: recalling the arrival, in June 2017, of more than 25 vessels in less than two days carrying 12.500 migrants, Minniti pointed out that the risk was very high of intense tensions in the country (Ciriaco, 2017). Taking actions was hence no choice.

Different security moves have been at play somehow legitimizing the necessity to extend southwards EU's intervention. Minister Minniti made clear that "if Africa is well, we are well as well" alluding to the fact that insecurity in Africa translates into insecurity for the EU (Valentino, 2017); smugglers exploitation of irregular immigrants' hopes could not but endangering their lives, was inferred: hence, the inevitability of action. All along 2017 relations with Libya towards 'political stabilization' have been intense, covering different policy fields tied by the attempt at curbing irregular immigration (Camilli, 2020; Ceccorulli and Varvelli, 2022).

Border-wise, the strategy carried many implications: first, the definition of Libya as a transit country with related implications in terms of practices implemented: ten vessels have been donated to Libya to control departures and personnel has been trained and peace was promoted between tribes South of Sahara, allowing for a better control of relevant smuggling corridors there (Ziniti, 2017). This point is not trivial, for Libya has been mostly than not a destination country for many migrants coming from both neighbouring states and Asia (Frowd, 2020). Alongside Libya, Niger Chad and Mauritania have been defined as 'transit countries' (Weymouth, 2018), easing an image of their borders as particularly fluid both in entrance and in exit. Second, the implicit definition of the country as 'safe', a label legitimised by Italy and EU's presence: emphasis was put on the funds provided by the Union to reception centres under the responsibility of the UNHCR and the IOM. In the word of Minister Minniti, Europe and Italy's training of the Libyan Coast Guard had already ensured the saving of 10.000 lives from deadly waters, bringing migrants back to Libya (De Maizière and Minniti, 2017). Indeed, this narration has always been hugely contradictory, as evidenced for example in Minniti's insistence that migrants could not be trapped in lager-like camps fattening smugglers' traffics (De Maizière and Minniti, 2017). Ultimately, this concern motivated the first humanitarian corridors to

Italy directly from Libya. Seemingly, Minister Lamorgese inferred that centres in Libya had to be closed and more humanitarian permits had to be granted (Ministero dell'Interno, 2019a). For Minister Salvini, the recognition of Libya as 'safe port' was more a matter of 'labels' that the EU had to be quick to affix, rather than the effective verification of safe and decent conditions (Ministero dell'Interno, 2018a).

Third, and faithful to its logic, a whole set of new relations with third countries south and bordering Libya, most noticeably with Niger, Chad and Mali. With them cooperation has been attempted and more or less achieved in a new extensive EU's effort, spanning from the governmental to the local level (De Maizière and Minniti, 2017). Libya's reception camps mentioned before were said to ensure smoother procedure for voluntary repatriation (Ziniti, 2017). Besides, and somehow relatedly, the redrawing of hard borders between Libya and neighbouring countries and the Union itself: an objective of the strategy was that to avoid that migrants could even reach Libya in the first place, while a close second was to make the sea border almost impenetrable to pass by building the control capacities of north-African states (Sarzanini, 2019). Most desirable would be, according to Minister Salvini, the positioning of identification centres in North African countries (Cremonesi, 2018a), a likelihood often alluded to but never achieved that would effectively shift EU's hard border away from EU's territory. In the words of the League Minister, the objective is to avoid migrants' departure from Africa and entry in Europe: hence, efforts are been undertaken in Africa (Weymouth, 2018).

Here again, political colours have somehow differed, at least from a narrative point of view, on the 'fluidity' of borders. Thus, if the strengthening of European repatriation agreements with third states has been strongly emphasised by all formations, non-populist governments have remarked the simultaneous exigence to respect human rights and the non-refoulement principles and to potentiate humanitarian corridors. This is not to say that the same governments were not accused of denying human rights. Nor does this mean that Salvini has acted in full disregard of the vulnerables, for humanitarian corridors have continued under his term, renewed (with Ethiopia) and even opened anew with Jordan and Niger (Ministero dell'Interno, 2019b). However, the rhetoric has been quite different, producing different results not in hard but certainly in the shaping of the national community's cognitive borders.

Administrative and cognitive borders

The refugee crisis has also impacted Italy's conceptions of herself and of her defining traits. This has been mostly mirrored by narrations and actions aimed at drawing the contours of rights and inclusion

possibilities granted to migrants and asylum seekers. Here, the differences between political colours have been more visible, but the overall approaches have been hardly consistent. For example, while Minister Minniti passed a law in March 2017 to allow non-accompanied minors migrants to remain in Italy because "our country should never lose track of the primary objective to protect who flees from war and famines" (Valentino, 2017), he simultaneously furthered the elimination of a second-degree appeal for asylum seekers, motivating the choice with the objective to reduce the amount of time for a decision on the status.

Overall, the populist government has not only been predictably restrictive but has also challenged main values at the basis of Italy's and EU's ontology. This has been particularly clear in two instances. First, the promulgation of the Security decrees overhauling the narration about the value of integration in Italy (Ponzo, 2018), raising administrative borders against migrants while fencing cognitive ones, a move upgrading support for the party to 30% in summer 2018 (Walt, 2018). Touching economic security, a sensitive cord for many Italians, Salvini was paralleling reception and integration to costs: they had to be possibly cut off (Cremonesi, 2018a). Among key provisions was the denial of the previously granted social inclusion for asylum seekers, leaving projects in this direction only for already ascertained refugees (Ministero dell'Interno, 2018b). Faithful to this logic, Salvini openly and matter-of-factly reported to have diverted 42 million euros from the reception to the repatriation dossier, to "balance the books" (Romano, 2018). Humanitarian protection, an added degree of protection that has distinguished Italy among other Member States, was also discursively banalized and practically de-powered, because inferred to be 'abused': "everybody pretends to be ill or homosexual which cannot clearly be the case"(Romano, 2018). Migrants' appeals were also portrayed as causing a waste of resources ably exploited to enrich some, as most of them were clearly unfounded, like car accidents (Romano, 2018). Emphasising the difference between wastes (reception) and values (security), beggars and deserving, Salvini explained that money saved from reduction in expenditure on reception centres were to be used to pay the police's arrears, "men and women, server of the State that have worked and have to be paid" (Siamo and Capitale, 2018). Also, with the branding 'Decreti sicurezza or Decreto Salvini (in an attempt at strong personalization)' securitization kept feeding itself implying that more restrictive measures were to provide more security. Besides, among others, the cost and the waiting time to apply for citizenship were increased.

Indeed, Salvini's arguments remarked a significantly different rhetoric from those of other governments, which have instead securitised the lack of integration: "the equation between migration and terrorism is wrong and misleading. However, ever since Charlie Hebdo, it is clear that there exists a relation between terrorism and the lack of integration" echoed the words of Minister Minniti (Valentino, 2017). According to him, a vital game for the future of the country was being played

around the issue of integration, suggesting the profoundly ontological value of the challenge (Valentino, 2017). Also, explained Minister Lamorgese, true integration is a precondition for keeping social cohesion in the country (Sarzanini, 2019). Efforts have been taken to partly reverse some of the measures of the Security Decrees, thanks also to the observations advanced by the President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella. Attention has been for example centred around dampening sanctions for NGOs' non-compliance (under the radar of the populist government); allowing Prefects to increase funds for the provisions of services for migrants (ruling out the risk of tenders to go desert); reintroducing the basics of humanitarian protection (now 'special protection'); eliminating the provision prohibiting asylum seekers' registration at municipalities, among others.

During the COVID pandemic migrants endured differentiated treatment: the proposal for a regularization of a significant number of irregular immigrants working in the sanitary and agricultural sector (Bianconi, 2020) granted foreigners clear recognition of their vital role for the Italian economy and was considered a measure to strengthen health safety through proper tracking of otherwise undetectable profiles (Bianconi, 2020). On the other hand, though, anti-immigration formations used the pandemic to reiterate the priority of national citizens: because of the economic emergency, certain 'requests' were dumbed inappropriate and even out of place. As seen, the pandemic gave rise to a new form of border in the shape of quarantine vessels: if these have been invariably demonised, Minister Lamorgese running the Interior office, explained that the tools were compatible with the practices of a civil country, which can never counterpose humanity and security, not even in a pandemic season (Cerasa, 2020a). Quarantine vessels were hence conceived as another instrument at disposal in the effort at governing the phenomenon, whose bordering effect was unclear, though.

Another important aspect of this last logic attains to the unexpected decision by Italy to not approve the Global Compact for Migration in December 2018, departing from traditional alignment with Western European countries and moving closer to sovranist demeanours. Launched in 2016 with the UN New York Declaration, the Global Compact for migration has represented the very first attempt at true international cooperation in the field of migration for the ordered, safe and legal regulation of flaws. Working for months on consultations and negotiations, Italian diplomats were mandated to abstain only few days before the final approval of the Document. An analyst close to the ruling yellow-green government judged the pact as ineffective with respect to Italy's main concern: curbing immigration and the burden of reception (Sacino, 2018). For the then Minister Salvini, the Compact did not do enough to differentiate between 'economic' immigrants and refugees (Bongiorni, 2018). This move, which created more than an embarrassment within the same government, had two important repercussions in terms of EU's bordering: by denying the values enshrined in the document, it undermined the values the Union has founded itself upon and, in so doing, its ontology. Also, it has

intensified an already deep fracture among Member States, supporting not only restrictive migration policies, but also a confrontational approach with respect to the governance of the phenomenon.

If these moves are undoubtedly remoulding administrative and cognitive borders in a restrictive way, another subsequent move has had the same effect; that is, the release on October 2019 of a list of 'safe countries of origin' with an initiative of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, something that Italy had always refused to do irrespective of other Member States' positions (Ministero degli Esteri, 2019). Indeed, this does not only largely blur borders between issue areas along a now rather consolidated trend in the EU, 'extending' EU's borders according to the logic described above. Most importantly, it declassifies international protection by further reducing its applicability, questioning the duties attached therewith, and downscaling the sanctity of EU's international protection regime, paralleling protection in the EU with conditions and rights obtainable elsewhere.

Conclusion

The analysis of Italian bordering efforts has offered a quite variegated picture. As shown, Italy's and EU's constant iteration has affected discourses and practices, favouring different and sometimes opposite images of borders and their meaning and functions.

In particular, three main arguments have been raised. First, that Italy's border overlaps with the Union's border. If many are the interpretations that can be derived out of this narration, the key element has been Italy's quest for solidarity as part of the EU. Second, that Europe's border should stretch out to the South: indeed, bordering effects might be different according to whether the effort is aimed at enforcing borders or at defusing them. Overall, this narrative has been decisive in the repositioning of the EU towards the Southern Mediterranean and the African continent more at large, thus contributing to the (re)drawing of its ontology. Finally, that administrative and cognitive borders do play a big role in the definition of the main beliefs typifying the national community. Here, some contradictory traits at play have been witnessed especially when practices seemed to run contrary to narrations. In this bordering effort, difference has been noticed according to political formations in charge: even though integration was praised more for the sake of society cohesion and peace than human rights per se, marked securitarian (and hence exclusionary) traits have loomed large with populist formations. Ultimately, this openly challenged a rather ingrained understanding of EU values (and hence of its ontology).

The way in which COVID has reshaped Italy's and EU's borders in cognitive and material terms and how this has impacted their ontology has been only tentatively attempted, and needs further

investigation. Evidence so far suggests that the challenge posed by the pandemic has been met by a further thickening of physical, administrative and cognitive borders.

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