

Italy's migration crisis is a clear threat to European unity

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*While the migration crisis has eased in other EU countries such as Greece, Italy's coastline remains an entrance point for irregular migration. **Roland Benedikter** and **Ireneusz Pawel Karolewski** track Italy's attempts to deal with the problem. They argue that the absence of solidarity from the rest of the EU is fostering Euroscepticism and that it would be in the EU's long-term interest to provide the country with greater support.*



Migrants arriving on the Island of Lampedusa, Italy. Credits: [Sara Prestianni](#) / Noborder Network (CC BY 2.0)

One of the biggest challenges for Italy's new prime minister, Paolo Gentiloni, in charge since 12 December, is, according to his own statements, the ongoing Mediterranean refugee and migration crisis. While most routes to Europe were closed in the meantime, among them the Balkan route and the Greek border with Turkey, the coastlines of Italy, which stretch more than 7,600 km (4,720 miles) and are difficult to control for the European border agency FRONTEX, remain an entrance for human trafficking. In addition, they are the focus of the European Union's rescue programmes which include the recovery of migrants in front of the Libyan coast and their escort to Italian islands, mainly Lampedusa and Sicily.

Accordingly, Gentiloni, former minister of foreign affairs and well acquainted with the problem, has announced his intention to prioritise the issue. This is in order to safeguard not only Italy's political and social landscape, which his own governing majority centred around the Democratic Party (PD) believe is being affected by uncontrolled immigration in unpredictable ways, but also Europe's unity, which could be affected by the rise of anti-immigration parties. Such parties usually – and in their majority – are nationalist and thus hold anti-European stances.

Italy and the refugee crisis: An unsolved problem since 2010

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Long before the Italian reform and constitutional referendum of 4 December 2016, then Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi had vowed to make the refugee crisis the key issue on Europe's agenda. He made repeated attempts to this end from the start of 2015, the year when the migration crisis first peaked. The majority of his initiatives during talks at European Union summits, such as the introduction of joint refugee bonds in the EU, failed mainly because of Germany's opposition. Berlin tends to react allergically to every term resembling “eurobonds”, suggesting the extension of German liability for public deficits of other EU countries. The pivotal role of Italy in the migration crisis did not translate into leverage of its national deficit within the EU.

At the same time, the relevance of Italy for the EU has steadily grown since the “Arab spring” starting in December 2010 and in particular since 2012, as various waves of refugees from the MENA region reached the coasts of Italy after multiple outbursts of civil wars, rebellions and humanitarian catastrophes. The EU has failed to recognise the problem at hand, since the EU discourse has primarily focused on German chancellor's Angela Merkel's “open doors policy” and largely ignored problematic developments in Italy's citizenry. Numerous reports of increasing refugee riots in southern Italy after the closing of the Balkan migration route in the beginning of 2016 and the miserable failure to relocate refugees, with only 560 people instead of the originally declared 39,600 transferred to other EU nations by autumn 2016, should have motivated the EU to act, but they did not.

This dire situation pressured Renzi to search for sustainable structural solutions for Italy with MENA countries resembling the EU agreement with Turkey, with or, if necessary, without the EU. Although he explicitly called for calm and rejected the “invasion of refugees” discourse, emphasising that most of the refugees would be eventually redistributed across the EU, many Italians remained sceptical about the EU's solidarity.

In 2016, reports of new record refugee waves were not encouraging, suggesting to many voters that the EU was unable to solve the emergency, and did not understand the Italian perception of it. FRONTEX announced that at least 1 million people would wait in northern Africa to cross over to Italy in 2017 and 2018. Among them were at least 100,000-200,000 people from sub-Saharan Africa, waiting in Libya for their entry into Italy – most of them economic migrants. In September 2016, the Austrian chancellor Christian Kern announced that in Egypt alone, more than 5 million people were getting ready to emigrate to Europe – most of them through Italy.

Already in May, June and August 2016, thousands of migrants had once again reached the coasts of Italy, despite the EU's announcement aimed at stopping uncontrolled migration. Waves of several thousand people per week continued across almost the entire year of 2016. Due to lack of space in other reception areas, many of the refugees were brought to Sicily, Rome and Milan in early summer 2016. The general overcrowding of refugees in Italy ensured that even well-prepared regions like the autonomous province of Bolzano at the Austrian border reached their limits. In addition, the refusal of other European countries, in particular Germany, to set refugee limits, as well as dogmatic clinging to the EU's Dublin agreements, which stipulate that the country where refugees arrive is responsible for them, exacerbated the problem in Italy even more.

Renzi undertook several concrete diplomatic and juridical initiatives to tackle the refugee crisis at the EU level. In March 2016, he suggested that apart from new investments into FRONTEX and border controls, an EU “Africa Fund” should be established in order to promote infrastructure and investment projects across the continent, thus

improving socioeconomic development to incentivise people to stay. The “Africa Fund” and its projects were to be supported by the European Investment Bank (EIB) and funded by the so-called European joint refugee bonds. In addition, according to Renzi, the EU should sign refugee pacts with other countries in the MENA region, modelled on the EU-Turkey agreement.

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Renzi’s proposal, in particular its financial aspects, were rejected by the German government in April 2016. As the spokesman of the German government, Steffen Seibert stated that “the German Federal Government sees no basis for collective refugee debts financed by the member countries”. Likewise, the German federal government, partly contradicting positive responses such as from Horst Seehofer, the premier of the German federal state of Bavaria, rejected Renzi’s further initiative to allow more African states to more easily access international finance markets through “EU-Africa-bonds”.

The German government suspected that the real goal of Renzi’s initiatives was to find a loophole in the EU’s rulebook to increase Italy’s government spending, something Renzi had consistently tried to do in order to overcome EU austerity policies which he had rejected from the start of his tenure. Overall, Berlin did not take the situation seriously enough and framed the refugee crisis in Italy as a ploy by Renzi to increase Italian spending.

Consequences for Italy’s position in the EU

Aside from its effect on domestic politics within Italy, the refugee and migration crisis has also changed the political balance across the EU and Italy’s place within it. In October 2016, the minister for economy and finance Pier Carlo Padoan estimated that Italy will have to spend at least 3.8bn euros on refugees and migrants in 2017 alone, which according to Padoan was the most conservative estimate under “stable circumstances”. Any increase in the number of refugees and ongoing EU passivity would cost Italy at least around 4.2bn euros. He warned that this could lead to the breach of EU fiscal rules, as Italy’s 2017 deficit would rise to 3.2 per cent.

As Renzi brought the budget deficit back into the mix, arguing that the refugee and migration crisis, as an asymmetrical external shock, should also lead to asymmetrical treatment of the countries with the highest financial burden, Berlin sounded the alarm. Again, Renzi’s announcements were interpreted by Angela Merkel’s government as an attempt to manipulate the refugee crisis in order to get away with a higher deficit.

But other EU countries were also less than sympathetic with Italy’s plight. In October 2016, a clash between Hungary’s prime minister, Viktor Orbán, and Renzi occurred. The Hungarian PM blamed Italy for not fulfilling its duty to secure the borders of the Schengen area. In response, Gentiloni, who was then Italian foreign minister, reacted sharply, arguing that “with its building walls at the border and an invalid [referendum on refugee quotas](#), Hungary violated the EU rules and should not teach Italy lessons.”

In turn, the Hungarian foreign minister, Peter Szijjarto, countered that “Italy is ignoring its obligations. If only Italy took the EU rules more seriously, the refugee and migration pressure would be much less.” This was the catalyst for Renzi announcing that Italy might block upcoming EU budgets, should the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries still reject refugee relocation quotas and Germany and the EU ignore Italy’s extraordinary costs from migration.

Long-term outlook

“Italy feels as though it has been left to deal with Europe’s refugee and migration problem on its own. This crisis is undermining Europe’s unity by facilitating the rise of populist rhetoric in the third-largest Eurozone economy.”

The challenge for Italy lies in tackling the diverging European visions as to how to approach the crisis. Italy expects

more solidarity through the pan-European relocation of refugees, which is interpreted in Central and Eastern Europe as an acceptance of unlimited refugee numbers and endless quotas for others. For Hungary, the conclusion is simple: Italy has made no serious effort to seal the border and yet expects to become a transit country for millions of refugees and migrants. Under such circumstances, Central and Eastern Europe are not going to accept quotas for refugees that might never end. Budapest, Warsaw and Bratislava want solidarity at the Italian border first, and they are willing to send troops and cash to help secure the entry points of the EU.

Still, the problem is not just diverging proposals. The controversy between the EU and post-Renzi Italy has a concrete financial basis. The renowned leftist newspaper “La Repubblica” has argued that with new debts that are higher than expected, Italy risks sharing the fate of Greece. At the same time, refugees and migrants are still reaching the coast of Italy in the thousands, since the EU-Turkey agreement tackles mainly the problem of the Greek Islands.

For instance, in April 2016, around 6,000 refugees arrived in Italy within 4 days. Various refugee organisations expect that at least a further 100,000 will arrive in the first half of 2017. Moreover, according to the UNHCR, despite all of the attempts made at containment, 2016 came close to becoming the “most fatal year in the Mediterranean”. Whilst in the previous record year of 2015, 3,771 refugees and migrants died during their attempt to reach the coast of Europe, they had counted 3,210 deaths by September.

All of this has induced parts of the Italian public to cast scepticism on quick solutions, and to distrust the credibility and reliability of Europe – not only concerning the refugee question, but in general. In such ways, Europe’s refugee and migration crisis is undermining Europe’s unity by facilitating the rise of nationalist sentiment and populist rhetoric in the third-largest Eurozone economy. The [Italian referendum on 4 December](#) was a vote in favour of anti-European parties and their populist leaders, who promised to end the migration crisis once and for all without the European Union.

As a consequence, after Renzi’s resignation, some observers fear political chaos, given most of Renzi’s reforms envisaged in 2014-2016, including electoral, parliamentary and economic changes, are badly needed, and may even be reversed by his ultimate successors. Many also saw the anti-Renzi outcome of the referendum as a clear vote against current EU refugee and migration policies, a sentiment which is destined to create division and turmoil, undermining the bloc’s unity in the years to come.

In sum, Italy feels as though it has been left to deal with Europe’s refugee and migration problem on its own. The EU has not lived up to its standards of solidarity, as both Germany and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe rejected Renzi’s initiatives, thus contributing to his fall and weakening the European project in the third-largest post-Brexit EU member state. With Renzi stepping down, a new period of chaos in European politics could begin.

This could have far worse consequences for the EU than for Italy in the mid to long-term. Renzi’s fall suggests that with its own passivity concerning the refugee and migration crisis, the EU is likely to undermine its own existence. For the bloc, such self-destructive policy-making is a clear break from its self-conception as a peace project and as an enlightened and normative global power.

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Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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