FAR FROM EYE, FAR FROM HEART: HOW EXTERNALIZATION THROUGH THE 2023 ITALY-ALBANIA DEAL AMPLIFIES EXCLUSIONARY NARRATIVES ON MIGRANTS

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ABSTRACT

The thesis examines how the 2023 Italy-Albania migration deal is legitimized or opposed in Italian political discourse, and how it constructs externalized migrants compared to those already within Italy. Through a deductive thematic analysis of government and opposition speeches, and drawing on critical scholarship on migration, the study explores how externalization reshapes migrant narratives. Findings show that externalized migrants are framed through intensified racialized, gendered, and securitarian logics, often portrayed as preemptively criminal and undeserving that also serve to legitimize the deal. In contrast, migrants in Italy are governed through conditional inclusion and humanitarian rhetoric. The thesis argues that externalization operates not only as a legal mechanism but as a discursive strategy deriving from colonial legacies. It contributes to migration scholarship by revealing how externalization can produce different migrant narratives.

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Introduction

Since the 1990s, the European Union (EU) has been developing a complex migration management system, beginning with the creation of the Common European Asylum System and the Schengen Area, followed by the establishment of instruments like the Dublin Regulation (Boswell 2003; Lavenex 2006). The aim has been to regulate entrance into the territories of Member States through various policy mechanisms. At the same time, the topic of migration kept rising on the EU's political agenda, leading to the securitization of migration (Huysmans 2000). Especially during the so-called "migration crisis", during which Europe experienced a surge in migrant arrivals due to humanitarian disasters in various parts of the world[2], migration became associated with issues of crime, threats to European identity values, and economic burden (Colombo 2018).

The sense of crisis was also fueled by the EU's inability to manage refugee arrivals effectively, particularly regarding the implementation of the Dublin Regulation III, which failed to uphold the principles of burden and responsibility sharing (Davis 2020). One of the responses from the EU was to externalize its borders beyond its territorial boundaries, which according to the UNHCR means to take measures outside of a country's territory to block asylum seekers from reaching or claiming protection there (De Leo 2024). The EU did so initially through the 2016 EU-Turkey deal and then with the 2024 EU partnerships with Egypt and Mauritania, all of which have been further normalized by the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, entering into force in June 2026 (Griffini and Rosina 2024).

The case of the 2023 Italy-Albania Protocol on Migration Cooperation[3] represents a notable instance of externalization within the EU context. Because of its geographical location, which makes it one of the main migrants reception country, Italy has long grappled with migration challenges. Especially during the "refugee crisis", the country was particularly impacted, so much so, that

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[2]Arab Spring, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya (Colombo 2018).
[3] Protocollo Italia-Albania in materia migratoria. All translations from Italian to English are the author's own unless otherwise noted.

Triandafyllidou (as quoted in Colombo 2018) claims that the "crisis", dramatically impacted Italy's maritime borders. Due to the intensity of migration flows, the topic became highly controversial within public opinion, leading to the adoption of equally controversial and restrictive migration policies.

However, even before the "refugee crisis" Italy had signed numerous externalization agreements with third countries, including with Libya, Tunisia and Algeria (Fontana and Rosina 2024). Such deals have been heavily criticized on legal and human rights grounds, as they create legal grey zones where the enforcement of refugee rights is not guaranteed. In particular, the Italy-Albania migration deal presents a unique model (De Leo 2024). Under the agreement, Italy processes asylum claims in two reception centers in Albania, Shëngjin and Gjadër, using the accelerated border procedure (De Leo 2024). Although located in Albania, the facilities are treated as "border areas" under Italian jurisdiction, making EU and Italian asylum law applicable. This legal framing draws on the Asylum Procedures Directive, which permits Member States to process applications made at sea or in territorial transit zones.

Alongside the legal issues raised by the deal, externalizing migrants to Albania also has significant implications for the way migrants are discussed in Italian public and political discourse. Since the announcement of the deal by Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and her Albanian counterpart, Edi Rama, in 2023, the issue has sparked wide debate. On one hand, the left has attempted to oppose it, on the other, Giorgia Meloni has been at the forefront of defending and promoting it. While migrants in Italian discourse were already framed through a securitarian and alarmist lens, the introduction of the Albanian deal seems to have brought migration narratives at the heart of Italian public debate, raising the question of what happens to migrant narratives when deals that spatially remove or prevent migrants from entering a country are implemented.

While the literature on externalization is extensive, relatively little research has focused on how geographical removal affects the worsening of public and political discourse around migration. Hence, the research question arises: "*How is the externalization of migration under the 2023 Italy-*

Albania agreement legitimized or contested in Italian political discourse, and how does this discourse construct the figure of the externalized migrant compared to migrants already within Italy?" To answer this question, this thesis conducts a deductive thematic analysis of Italian political discourse. Speeches from prominent government and opposition figures are analyzed using critical migration scholarship to assess how the protocol with Albania is legitimized or opposed, how externalized migrants are constructed, and whether offshoring practices like externalization worsen migrant narratives.

The research is informed by four key conceptual frameworks: first, racial governmentality (Moffette and Vadasaria 2016), which conceptualizes how state practices regulate and racialize migrant bodies; second, gendered and racialized deservingness (Gray and Franck 2019; Welfens and Bonjour 2021), exploring how narratives around vulnerability selectively legitimize migrant inclusion; third, monsterization (Tyerman and van Isacker 2024), which frames migrants as racialized threats whose monstrosity justifies exceptional governance; and fourth, care and control (Pallister-Wilkins 2020), which analyzes how humanitarian discourses of protection simultaneously mask and enable practices of exclusion and detention.

The structure of the thesis is as follows. Chapter 1 reviews the existing literature on externalization and critical migration theory. Chapter 2 contextualizes Italy's approach to migration and externalization, culminating in the 2023 Italy-Albania agreement. Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical framework, drawing on postcoloniality, racial governmentality, gendered deservingness, and monstrosity theories. Chapter 4 details the research method and thematic analysis approach. Chapter 5 presents the thematic analysis findings across key discursive figures. Finally, the conclusion reiterates the main arguments of the thesis and answers the Research Question.

By investigating how externalization transforms the symbolic and political constructions of migrants, this thesis contributes to critical migration scholarship, highlighting how bordering practices are not only territorial but profoundly discursive, racialized, and historically embedded.

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Understanding these dynamics is crucial not only for scholarly debates but for envisioning more just

and humane approaches to migration governance.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

This section aims at reviewing scholarly literature on externalization to establish the necessary background for the research. Externalization is not only a policy mechanism, but also a discursive process that constructs migrants in ways that justify exclusion. While externalization has been widely studied from legal, political, and governance perspectives, less attention has been given to whether externalization plays a role in creating harsher or simply different narratives on migrants. In fact, grasping the discursive dimension related to externalization, is necessary to analyze how migrants subjected to the 2023 Italy-Albania migration deal are represented by the Italian government and its opposition, and whether externalization leads to a more intensified or differently constructed process of othering and/or welcoming.

Hence, the literature firstly provides an overview of existing scholarship on externalization, from early studies on the practice, focused on externalization as a policy tool for migration control and boundary making, to more recent work aimed at historicizing offshoring through a postcolonial lens. Secondly, the chapter briefly reviews different policy mechanisms of externalization, highlighting how they contribute to shifting migration governance beyond territorial borders through tools such as visa schemes, detention centers, and bilateral and multilateral agreements between countries. Third, the review introduces a working definition of externalization built on the literature. Fourth, it reviews key literature that studies discursive practices on migrants subject to externalization, and finally it grounds the research on conceptual work on discursive constructions of migration which is used later in the thesis to analyze government and opposition speeches. In this way, the literature review sets the stage for the empirical analysis of the study, which examines how Italian government and opposition discourse construct externalized migrants in contrast to migrants already within Italy.

Externalization's Historical Development

Externalization is a widely researched topic among critical migration scholars, and it is now possible to informally speak of an "externalization studies" field (Cobarubbias et al. 2023; Cobarrubias and Novak 2025). Literature on externalization emerged in the 1990s, as a first wave, when regional and state actors such as Australia, the United States, and the EU began shifting migration control beyond their borders to manage what they framed as "uncontrolled migration" (Lavenex 2006).

In the EU context, externalization evolved alongside European integration. Before a common asylum and migration framework existed, member states relied on bilateral agreements with third countries to control migration (Longo and Fontana 2022). However, with the Schengen Agreement and the Dublin Convention of 1997, EU states sought to strengthen their external borders while abolishing internal ones, reinforcing externalization through stricter visa policies, readmission agreements, and cooperation with transit states (Longo and Fontana 2022). The 1997 Amsterdam Treaty further consolidated migration governance at the EU level, leading to the European Neighborhood Policy in 2004 and externalization agreements such as the EU-Turkey Deal in 2016. These measures institutionalized the outsourcing of border control, allowing member states to prevent arrivals while minimizing legal accountability.

Boswell (2003) was one of the first scholars to examine the EU's "external dimension" of migration governance, arguing that cooperation with third countries became part of a broader security strategy (Lavenex 2006). Key elements of this strategy included border control, migration management in transit states, and readmission agreements. Similarly, Zolberg (2003) described the U.S. practice of "remote control", referring to visa regimes and pre-screening procedures that regulate migration before individuals reach U.S. territory. Bigo and Guild (2005) expanded on this with the "policing at a distance" concept, highlighting how Schengen visa policies outsourced enforcement to private actors and foreign officials, making migration restrictions less visible but more pervasive.

Scholars of the first wave have also noted how securitization plays a key role in justifying externalization policies through discourses of security and crisis (Huysmans 2000; Boswell 2003). In such discourses, political actors construct an issue as an existential security threat, justifying

extraordinary measures to address it (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998). Boswell (2003) claims that since the early 1990s, migration has been linked to rising crime rates, terrorism, and Islamic fundamentalism, allowing governments to put in place strict migration policies, including outsourcing measures. Zaiotti (2016) expands on this by introducing the functional dimension of externalization, explaining how securitization creates anxiety, which can be strategically manipulated by political elites to distract from their limited ability to control the economic forces of globalization (Turton 2002; Bauman 1998). This anxiety, in turn, rationalizes restrictive policies, such as externalization, as an inevitable and necessary response, even when these measures involve outsourcing migration control to non-EU countries with weaker human rights protections.

Beyond policy mechanisms, scholars have examined how externalization reshapes migration governance spatially. Van Houtum and van Naerssen (2002) describe borders as social practices, continuously (re)produced through differentiation rather than fixed territorial lines. Faist (2009) similarly defines externalization as a social mechanism that redraws boundaries, reinforcing exclusionary practices by keeping migrants outside the EU's legal space. This research aims at studying whether the physical and legal distancing created through offshore processing and migration outsourcing contributes to the creation of discourses that construct externalized migrants as different from other migrants.

Contemporary and Critical Perspectives on Externalization

Postcolonial and Racialized critiques

A second wave of literature on externalization focuses on the importance of avoiding ahistorical accounts of migration outsourcing. Indeed, recent scholarship has framed externalization as a continuation of colonial power structures, where migration control serves to reinforce racial and geopolitical hierarchies (Lemberg-Pedersen 2019; Cobarubbias et al. 2023). Postcolonial critiques of externalization highlight how racialized and colonial narratives shape migration governance. This

study examines whether these narratives manifest in political discourse by constructing externalized migrants as more racialized, dangerous, or distant than those already within Italy.

Lemberg-Pedersen (2019), underscores how painting refugees from the Global South coming into Europe's borders in "unprecedented" and "unmanageable" scales, motivated by poverty, requires to actively forget a series of displacements induced by European and Western powers in colonial territories. Hence, it is important to approach externalization through the lens of coloniality (Quijano 2007) to understand how colonial practices reoccur in present Western institutions and infrastructures so that the West retains its power over colonized societies. This is particularly evident in the 2008 externalization deal between Libya-Italy. The deal claims that the two countries were overcoming their past of brutal colonial relations. However, in reality the deal was only strengthening the European influence over Libya migration control, allowing for migrants to be contained in the country, reflecting what Casa-Cortes et al., (2015) called European "spatial and institutional stretching".

On a similar note, Stock et al. (2019) frame externalization as part of a broader transformation in international politics, where certain forms of mobility are systematically constructed as a security threat to the nation-state (Bruns et al. 2016; De Genova and Peutz 2010), depicting migrants from the Global South as threats, thereby legitimizing their exclusion.

These critiques emphasize that externalization is not just a migration control tool but a discursive and political strategy that shapes public perceptions of migrants. By physically placing migrants outside the legal and geographical reach of receiving states, externalization fosters narratives of undesirability, illegitimacy, and exclusion, reinforcing racialized migration hierarchies.

Legal and Human Rights Issues

Legal scholars argue that externalization enables destination states to evade legal responsibilities under international refugee and human rights law (Frelick et al. 2018; Podkul and Kysel 2015). A primary concern is the violation of non-refoulement, as asylum seekers are sent to third countries

with inadequate protections, exposing them to indirect or chain refoulement. The Hirsi Jamaa and Others v. Italy (2012) ruling by the ECtHR confirmed that states remain legally responsible even when migration control occurs beyond their borders, yet externalization continues to operate in legal gray zones.

Beyond non-refoulement violations, scholars have criticized how externalization criminalizes migration, framing asylum seekers as security risks rather than individuals with legal rights to protection (Podkul and Kysel 2015). This framing justifies detention, surveillance, and restricted access to asylum procedures, effectively blocking legal pathways for refugees while reinforcing the narrative of migration as a crisis requiring extraordinary measures.

Policy Mechanisms of Externalization

Scholars have identified several policy tools of externalization employed by state and regional actors. These tools have evolved over time, forming a complex system of boundary making, border outsourcing, bilateral agreements and deterrence measures:

- Bilateral and multilateral agreements: EU-Turkey Deal and Italy-Libya cooperation frameworks that establish where non-EU states agree to block or detain migrants in exchange for financial and diplomatic incentives (Lavenex 2006).

- Visa regimes and pre-screening mechanisms.

- Privatized border control.

- Offshore detention and processing centers: detention centers in transit countries function as exclusionary spaces, where asylum seekers remain legally and physically outside of the receiving country's jurisdiction.

These policy mechanisms construct a system whereby migration control is deterritorialized, making border enforcement less visible but more expansive, extending state power beyond national boundaries, while reducing legal accountability (Zaiotti 2016.

Discursive Practices of Externalization

In the field of public policy, it is argued that narratives are central in the policy making process (Terlizzi 2021). In particular, the role of narratives in policy design is relevant in fields such as migration, where related policy instruments are often not driven by evidence on cause-effect relationships but on narratives. In fact, the Terlizzi (2021) investigates how migration and migrants are discursively framed by decision makers in key government positions to justify restrictive migration policies such as externalization practices. The author found that governments make policy decisions based on different constructions of a target population, influencing policy instruments selection and policy design, strategically using narratives to shape and control policy agendas (Terlizzi 2021). Such constructions, Terlizzi (2021) claims, operate on the narrative of those "deserving" and "undeserving" of entrance, attaching a specific value to the target group.

Terlizzi (2021) also found that externalized migrants are discussed through the humanitarian logic of saving human lives by stopping them before they reach Italy's borders as they will likely lose their lives through perilous crossings of the Mediterranean. However, he argues that the narrative is not wholly humanitarian, as the refugees are then left in third countries such as Libya where their human rights are not guaranteed. Building off Terlizzi's (2021) argument, if constructions differ based on the target populations, narratives on externalized migrants might differ from migrants already in Italy.

On a similar note, Ibrahim and Howarth (2017), underline how borders are a symptom of the modern nation-state which allows states to manage forms of criminality through risk categories and risk discourses. The two authors show how risk is manufactured in public discourses relating to migration, by framing the migrant as "risky", playing on a culture of fear of the "Other". Specifically, Ibrahim and Howarth (2017) analyze the rhetoric surrounding migrants stuck in Calais, Britain's external border and show how these externalized migrants are constructed. Their study found that there is a "*transference of risk and responsibility*" to the migrant body, meaning that the migrant decision to irregularly cross a border is framed as a desperate act enforced by migrant smugglers, but

at the same time, it is also constructed to depict migrants as complicit in deciding to commit an illegal border crossing (Ibrahim and Howarth 2017).

Mountz (2015) also deals with narratives around externalized migrants. The author argues that territorial borders are not just a geographic boundary anymore but come to represent spaces of exclusion and confinement. Such spaces of exclusion and confinement coincide with practices of externalization, where states manage migration beyond their territorial borders, often in remote zones in third countries. The author argues that it is in this new geographical configuration that migrants are discursively constructed both as "hypervisible" when portrayed in the media through the lens of a security crisis, and "invisible", as they are held and hid in detention centers away from the core and into the periphery. Mountz (2015) adds on Terlizzi, Ibrahim and Horwath (2017), as she seems to imply that the more the migrants are "offshored", the more they are "othered", creating racialized others built on the politics of fear and neocolonial relations.

All of these authors have analyzed and studied narratives surrounding externalized migrants, offering valuable insights into how migrant bodies are constructed as a threat, criminalized and othered through discursive practices that justify exclusionary practices. However, what seems to be missing from these accounts is attention to how externalized migrants might be differently constructed as compared to their "internalized" counterparts. In other words, scholarship on discursive constructions of externalization seems to not be focused on whether there is a systematic difference in how externalized migrants are portrayed. Hence, the research question arises, "*how is the externalization of migration under the 2023 Italy-Albania agreement legitimized or contested in Italian political discourse, and how does this discourse construct the figure of the externalized migrant compared to migrants already within Italy?*"

Externalization - A Working Definition for the Research

Based on the previously reviewed literature, the thesis presents a working definition of externalization as the extension of migration and border controls beyond the territorial boundaries of migrant-

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receiving states, primarily in the Global North, into neighboring third countries, or sending countries in the Global South. It can include various policy tools, from the outsourcing of border enforcement through visa regimes, readmission agreements, and offshore detention, to the management of migration in third countries through detention, aimed at immobilizing migrants in transit countries.

Beyond the regulation of mobility, externalization practices are embedded in wide social, economic and political boundary making processes. Indeed, externalization can reinforce and reconfigure power asymmetries, by determining who is allowed to move and under what conditions, often reproducing inequalities between people, states, and institutions. Moreover, migrants that are subject to offshoring can be discursively constructed as threats, legitimizing exclusionary migration regimes.

Conceptual and Theoretical Literature on Migration

This section reviews key conceptual and theoretical debates in migration studies, particularly those concerning discursive representations of migrants and their impact on externalization policies. By examining how migration discourse constructs different categories of migrants, this section sets the foundation that makes up the theoretical framework that will be used for analyzing whether government and opposition actors in Italy systematically represent externalized migrants differently from those already in the country.

Scholarship on migration governance highlights key tensions in the construction of migrants in public and political discourse. Gray and Franck (2019) show how UK newspapers carefully construct refugees arriving to their shores *as risk* vs as *a risk*, depending on certain gendered and racialized logics of coloniality. Gray and Franck (2019) further claim these dynamics allow the UK and its inhabitants to read and treat the male, non-white, migrant as a threat, or as a risk, and prevent him from entering "Fortress Europe" through exceptional circumstances such as externalizing policies. While the migrant men are constructed as risky, the migrant non-white woman is narrated primarily through Orientalist fantasies of the "other", presupposing she is uniquely vulnerable, in

need of saving from her oppressive culture, and hence allowed to enter the West. These racialized and gendered migrant representations have led British media discourse to employ binary narratives of the "racialized masculine threat" (Grey and Franck 2019) as opposed to the "racialized feminine vulnerability", perpetuating oppressive structures leading to the notion of migrant deservingness and logics of *care and control*. These gendered and racialized representations of migrants are embedded in what Moffette and Vadasaria (2016) refer to as "colonial modernity" as they allow former colonizers to retain epistemic, ontological and physical power over previously colonized states.

Welfens and Bonjour (2021) argue that when state and non-state actors have to make decisions on who gets to enter borders such as EU borders, they mainly do a vulnerability assessment, the more vulnerable, and the more assimilable to European society, the more deserving of entrance. Referring to resettlement schemes in particular, Welfens and Bonjour (2021) observe how in actuating such deservingness assessments, states engage in the practice of *care and control* (Pallister-Wilkins 2018) where they show care towards the uniquely vulnerable women alone by letting them into their territorial borders, and at the same time, exercise control, by excluding the risky non-white men that will not be able to assimilate into the culture, and monsterizing him.

Tyerman and van Isacker (2024), also focus on how migrants are discursively constructed, and argue in particular that the risky, non-white migrant is monsterized through a process that is heavily reliant on gendered and racialized colonial-era narratives of monstrosity. In particular, the authors outline four mechanisms through which monsterization narrates migrants as dangerous, dehumanized and unassimilable. Migrants are animalized, by being depicted as beasts, swarms or predatory creatures, congruent with colonial discourses that portrayed non-Europeans as "savages" and justifying harsh border policing. By depicting them as mindless and invading hordes, migrants are framed as an indistinct group stripped of individuality and agency, "zombifying" them and framing them as overwhelming and faceless, a threat to national stability.

Refugees are further criminalized, portrayed as rapists, terrorists or traffickers and barbarized, as invading forces that threaten Western civilization. Not only is the migrant monsterized, but

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Tyerman and Van Isacker (2024) also claim that the border itself is monstrous, and border enforcement comes to be seen as a horrific, bit necessary act, tying back to the care and control logic, where the border is a tentacled, headless Leviathan, that manages to reach into everyday life and maintains racialized global hierarchies. The authors in particular also stress the role of externalization practices in intensifying migrant otherness.

This theoretical perspective is highly relevant to this study's analysis of Italian political discourse on externalization. It provides tools to examine whether:

1) Meloni's government and the opposition, invoke these gendered and racialized narratives, whether they do so more strongly when discussing externalized migrants (those detained in Albania) compared to migrants already in Italy.

2) The opposition frames externalized migrants differently, potentially emphasizing humanitarian logics rather than securitization.

This study builds on existing scholarship on migration discourse by applying these theories to a new empirical case: Italy's externalization of migration to Albania. In the theoretical framework chapter, the thesis will bring together the work of these scholars to create a coherent theoretical lens through which government and opposition discourse will be analyzed. While research has extensively examined how migrants are othered through securitization and humanitarian discourses, there is a gap in understanding whether externalized migrants are framed differently from those already within a state's borders. By analyzing Italian political discourse on externalization, this research provides an empirical contribution by testing whether externalization leads to a more intensified or differently structured form of othering/welcoming compared to internal migration discourse.

Further, While existing literature has successfully theorized the colonial, racialized, and gendered dynamics of externalization, fewer studies have examined how these dynamics are *narratively constructed and mobilized* in political discourse. This thesis contributes to this gap by using a constructionist, thematic-analytic approach to explore how migrants are made legible and governable through the Italy-Albania agreement.

Chapter 2: Contextualizing the Italian Case: Externalization Deals

This chapter outlines Italy's history with externalization policies and how they came about. It zooms in on the Italy-Libya deal as a precursor to the Italy-Albania protocol and examines the broader EU framework that shapes it. Further, it provides a brief overview of the public discourse around migration in Italy that will serve as empirical evidence for the comparison with the discourse on externalized migrants.

Italy and Externalization: A Brief Overview

Italy's geographical position has made it a primary arrival country in the EU. In fact, Italian political discourse has long expressed frustration over the uneven distribution of asylum seekers under EU regulations like the Dublin system. In 2016, out of the 40,000 migrants that the EU promised to relocate through the Dublin Regulation, only 2,350 were transferred (Terlizzi 2019). Accordingly, Italy's public opinion reflected this frustration and by 2017, 66% of Italians prioritized migration control and border security over any other policy issue (Di Filippo and Palm 2018, quoted in Fontana and Rosina 2024).

In response to this challenge, Italy has implemented various externalization measures. However, some of them even predate the harmonization of a common EU migration law and were pursued during the 1990s. In 1998, the Turco-Napolitano law initiated agreements with third countries to facilitate returns, and subsequent deals were signed with Albania, Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria, Tunisia between 1998 and 2010 (Fontana and Rosina 2024). Among these agreements, Italy's collaboration with Libya has been particularly significant, shaping contemporary migration governance and serving as a model for subsequent externalization efforts, including the 2023 Italy-Albania migration deal.

The Italy-Libya Memorandum of Understanding

Between 2000 and 2016, Italy signed thirteen migration-related agreements with Libya (Griffini and Rosina 2024). The first of these, in 2000, entailed the establishment of detention centers in Libya with Italian support and Italy's assistance in pushback operations. Although the European Court of Human Rights deemed pushbacks unlawful, Italy adapted its strategy and continued to cooperate with Libya to externalize migration.

Further, in 2017, against the backdrop of the migration crisis, the Gentiloni government signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Libya (MoU), pledging USD 240 million for the development of a satellite detection system for Libya's southern borders, the training of Libyan authorities responsible for migrant reception centers, and for technical support to the Libyan Coast Guard (Fontana and Rosina 2024), effectively shifting migration management responsibilities to Libya. Although framed as combating human trafficking, this cooperation raised serious human rights concerns on migrants detained in Libya often faced torture, slavery, and extortion (Amnesty International 2024).

EU Policies and the Expansion of Externalization

Italy's approach to migration governance cannot be understood in isolation from broader EU migration strategies. As externalization has become a central pillar of EU migration policy, Member States like Italy have played an active role in operationalizing and expanding its reach. In this context, Italian governments across the political spectrum have integrated development and foreign policy tools into migration control strategies.

As a, EU Member State, Italy participates in the institution's development initiatives. In 2017, under the EU Trust Fund for Africa, the Gentiloni government established the "Africa Fund" to facilitate voluntary returns, conduct information campaigns in countries of origin, and contribute to regional development, with the broader aim of preventing irregular migration (Fontana and Rosina 2024). While framed as an effort to enhance cooperation with African countries, the overarching goal was to curb specific migration routes.

This approach was continued and expanded under former Interior Minister Matteo Salvini in 2019 and later integrated into Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's "Piano Mattei for Africa", a strategy promoting development and cooperation to reinforce ties with African nations (Fontana and Rosina 2024). Such initiatives align with former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi's assertion in a letter to the Presidents of the EU Commission and Council: "The external dimension of migration policies is fundamental for the survival of Schengen and the principle of free movement" (Renzi 2016, as quoted in Terlizzi 2019). While these initiatives claim to focus on development and cooperation, they function as tools for externalizing migration control beyond EU borders, consolidating Italy's approach.

Legal and Human Rights Concerns

The above-outlined migration policies are not merely technical instruments but exclusionary tools of migration management with serious consequences for refugee and asylum seekers. In fact, intercepting migrants at sea or outsourcing asylum procedures to third countries risks violating the non-refoulement principle (Refugee Convention 1951, art. 33; Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, art. 19).

The Italy-Libya MoU has been criticized on this ground and also for transferring migrants to centers where inhumane treatment is documented. Furthermore, legal challenges arose because the MoU was signed without proper parliamentary ratification, leading to Italian court rulings questioning its validity (Amnesty as quoted in Reviglio 2020). These legal and humanitarian concerns provide a critical lens through which to assess the Italy-Albania migration deal, raising questions about the ethical and legal implications of Italy's continued reliance on externalization as a migration management strategy.

The 2023 Italy-Albania Migration Deal

Building on Italy's long history of externalization policies, the 2023 Italy-Albania migration deal represents the latest attempt to manage migration flows through agreements with third countries. Under the deal, Italy can transfer migrants rescued in international waters by Italian navy ships to two reception centers in Albania, in Shëngjin and Gäder, constructed reflecting the "hotspots" model, able to host up to 3000 people and operated by Italian personnel under Italian jurisdiction (Camera dei Deputati 2024a). Notably, vulnerable groups such as minors and pregnant women are excluded. Only migrants that come from "safe" countries can processed in Albania, and Italy committed €670 million over five years to finance the initiative (Camera dei Deputati 2024b).

Initial implementations faced setbacks: in October 2024, Egyptian and Bangladeshi migrants transferred to Albania were returned to Italy after courts ruled that neither country met EU standards for safe third countries (Camilli 2024). Subsequent groups also faced judicial interventions that prevented them from being processed in Albania, delaying the deal's full application. Meanwhile, the Meloni government issued decrees expanding the list of "safe" countries to overcome these legal obstacles. These cases were referred to the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU), and the government is currently awaiting its ruling to decide on the fate of the agreement.

While the Albania deal differs from the Libya MoU in placing operational control in Italian hands, it still constructs Albanian territory as a zone of exception. Italian law applies extraterritorially, creating a "fictio juris" that mimics broader EU strategies of "non-entry", allowing migrants to be processed outside of EU legal frameworks (Giordani 2024). Criticisms of this legal structure have been widespread. Dunja Mijatović, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, has highlighted potential for human rights violations (Celoria and De Leo 2024). The Commissioner has raised concerns about delays in disembarkation and search and rescue operations, fairness in asylum procedures, identification of vulnerable individuals, the risk of automatic detention without proper judicial oversight, and inadequate detention conditions. Furthermore, access to legal aid and effective remedies remains uncertain under the agreement's current framework.

This case exemplifies a growing trend in European migration governance of border flexibilization. States extend migration control measures beyond their geographical borders through new legal and administrative spaces created to regulate mobility. This evolution challenges traditional notions of state sovereignty and territorial jurisdiction, further embedding externalization as a defining characteristic of contemporary migration management (Giordani 2024). As subsequent chapters will show, this legal and spatial displacement also reshapes how migrants themselves are constructed and represented in political discourse.

Narratives around Migrants in Italy

The representation of migrants in Italy has evolved significantly over the past four decades, reflecting broader political shifts and public anxieties. In the 1980s, migration was largely framed through humanitarian paternalism where migrants were depicted as vulnerable populations deserving of conditional compassion (Colombo 2018). However, the 1990s marked a critical turning point, with mass arrivals from Albania and the rise of right-wing parties like the Northern League instrumentalizing migration as a security threat tied to criminality and cultural instability (Richardson and Colombo 2013).

By the 2010s, especially during "refugee crisis" migration discourse became heavily securitized, shaped by what Wodak (2015) terms the "politics of fear". Public narratives increasingly depicted migrants through metaphors of "invasion", "waves", and "emergencies", framing them as existential threats to public order, social stability, and cultural identity (Richardson and Colombo 2013; Wodak 2015). Even center-left actors began adopting securitarian language, emphasizing order, legality, and security alongside humanitarian concerns (Colombo 2018; Senate 2017/791).

Two dominant and often overlapping logics emerge from this evolving discourse. On one hand, migrants are framed through a humanitarian lens, especially in left-wing and centrist discourse, as vulnerable individuals fleeing conflict and deserving protection. On the other hand, they are simultaneously securitized and portrayed as potential threats, particularly within right-wing and far-

right narratives (Colombo 2018). Even centrist actors adopt this dual logic, producing what Pallister-Wilkins (2018) identifies as the politics of "care and control": migrants must be saved, but also managed, surveilled, and contained. This framework often justified calls for greater EU burden-sharing and stricter border enforcement, blending humanitarian rhetoric with security imperatives.

Issues related to sovereignty, cultural identity, and economic security are also embedded in these narratives. Particularly among the far right, migrants are constructed as cultural and economic threats, depicted as endangering national identity or overwhelming welfare systems (Colombo and Richardson 2013). This rhetoric sharpens the binary between the "deserving" and "undeserving" migrant: the "real" refugee fleeing persecution is contrasted against the "bogus economic migrant" seeking personal gain. Such discursive divisions rationalize exclusion and reinforce racialized hierarchies of mobility and belonging.

Criminalization narratives further deepen this divide. Far-right politicians often spectacularize isolated criminal offenses to depict migration itself as a security crisis. However, centrist and center-left figures have also invoked security discourses, emphasizing the need for "security, order, and legality", or warning that migration involves individuals that are "mafiosi" and "criminals" (Senate 2017/791). Even then-Interior Minister Luciana Lamorgese, from the left Democratic Party described the 2017 migration flows as "worrisome" and part of a "complex migration crisis" (Parliament 2019/253), reflecting the broad diffusion of securitarian logics across the political spectrum (Griffini and Rosina 2024).

Thus, Italian public and political discourse on migrants is split between humanitarian rhetoric, particularly for highly visible vulnerable figures who are awarded conditional compassion, but that can also be subjected to securitarian suspicion. Generally, it appears that migrants within Italy remain politically visible and are subjected to surveillance, administrative management, and occasional criminalization, but their presence within Italian territory preserves a minimal claim to rights and recognition.

This backdrop of conditional inclusion and racialized governmentality provides the foundation for the subsequent analysis. As the thesis will demonstrate, the externalization of migration management, particularly through the 2023 Italy-Albania agreement, radicalizes existing logics of migration narratives. Migrants subjected to externalization are no longer merely surveilled or disciplined; they are spatially removed, legally marginalized, and preemptively criminalized. Externalization thus represents an intensification of the bordering practices that have long structured Italian migration discourse.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework used to analyze how externalization shapes the representation of migrants in Italian political discourse, and how the Italy-Albania deal is legitimized or opposed. Drawing on postcolonial and critical migration scholarship discussed in the Literature Review (Grey and Franck 2019; Tyerman and van Isacker 2024; Pallister-Wilkins 2020; Moffette and Vadasaria 2016; Welfens and Bonjour 2021), the framework is based upon the intersecting logics of racial governmentality, gendered deservingness, monstrosity, and the care-control nexus. These concepts guide a deductive thematic analysis of political speeches that construct externalized and migrants in distinct, hierarchically ordered ways. The aim is to understand whether and how externalization contributes to constructing harsher migrant figures than those already present within Italian borders.

This framework underpins the thematic analysis adopted in the thesis, further explained in the Research Method chapter. Following a deductive approach, theoretical concepts and the research question guide the identification and interpretation of discursive patterns across speeches by government and opposition figures (Braun and Clarke 2006). Rather than serving as fixed categories, the concepts help illuminate how meaning is produced through language and how political discourse constructs different migrant subjectivities.

Coloniality, Racial Governmentality, and Externalization

Migrant constructions are shaped by enduring colonial logics. Coloniality, as theorized by Quijano (2007), refers to the lasting hierarchies of power and knowledge rooted in colonialism that continue in modern governance. In migration policy, this manifests through externalization strategies that replicate colonial spatial and racial control. By delegating border enforcement to third countries, these policies serve to maintain Western dominance and uphold the racial hierarchies existing within migration. In fact, racial governmentality, as defined by Moffette and Vadasaria (2016), positions race as a key organizing principle in this process.

This framework analyzes how colonial logics persist in political language that justifies or contests externalization and how in turn they inform migrant constructions. Following Moffette and Vadasaria's view of violence as a regular practice operated by modern, neoliberal states, and guided by colonial modernity, it highlights how racialized assumptions construct offshoring practices and shape notions of who is governable or threatening. Rather than identifying specific discursive figures, this perspective provides an overarching grid through which it is possible to read the Italy-Albania deal in light of racialized control narratives that protect European sovereignty by spatially displacing migrants.

Deservingness and Its Intersection with Racial Governmentality

Building on colonial logic, this framework addresses the construction of migrant deservingness. Grey and Franck (2019) highlight the dual framing of migrants as either "refugees at risk" or "migrants as a risk". This binary is deeply racialized and often gendered. Vulnerable individuals, such as women or unaccompanied minors, are deemed deserving of entry, while others, often racialized male migrants, are excluded as dangerous or culturally incompatible. Deservingness and racial governmentality intersect in political discourse. The "risky" male is governed through exclusion, while the "vulnerable" female is conditionally included. This logic shapes how figures of inclusion and exclusion emerge, as examined in the Governing Through Deservingness section of the analysis chapter.

Monstrosity, Care and Control, and the Spatial Expansion of the Border

Tyerman and van Isacker (2025) claim that migration management involves the process of monsterization, i.e., framing migrants as threats whose very presence legitimizes violent control. This framing aligns with Pallister-Wilkins' (2018) concept of care and control, where humanitarianism coexists with exclusion. The humanitarian logic is deployed to frame externalization as protection, where in reality it hides practices of surveillance, exclusion, and control. As Ticktin (2011) and Fassin

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(2012) argue, humanitarianism often enables control under the guise of compassion. The analysis explores how this discursive framing neutralizes critique and portrays exclusion as rescue.

This framework also emphasizes the spatial expansion of borders. The Italy-Albania deal, reflecting broader EU trends, demonstrates how sovereign power is projected transnationally through external detention infrastructures. The use of former military bases in Albania illustrates racial governmentality: migrant bodies are managed through extraterritorial containment, reinforcing their construction as dangerous and unmanageable within EU borders.

In thematic analysis's Migrant as Criminal Monstrous Other section, migrant constructions of this theme emerge through the language of "necessity", "order", or "emergency", which serve to normalize extraterritorial practices and justify containment by framing migrants as ungovernable and threatening to civilization.

This theoretical framework supports a critical, discourse-oriented analysis of political speech. It allows for a close reading of how externalization not only functions as a policy tool, but also reshapes symbolic borders through racialized, gendered, and spatialized constructions of migrants. By anchoring the analysis in this framework, the thesis investigates how political discourse actively produces differentiated migrant subjectivities, figures who are either legitimized and made governable, or marked as monstrous and externalizable.

Chapter 4: Research Method

Thematic Analysis (TA) is a qualitative research method used to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It is considered a flexible method because it allows to work inductively, deriving themes from the data without a predetermined theoretical framework, or deductively, where coding and analysis are guided by pre-existing theories or research questions. In this thesis, I conduct a deductive, latent thematic analysis informed by a constructionist epistemology.

Epistemological position

Importantly, TA holds that themes do not simply "emerge" from the analyzed data set neutrally or passively because the researcher has an active role in identifying and shaping such themes (Braun and Clarke 2006). In fact, the analysis process is heavily informed by the researcher's theoretical assumptions, which influence what appears as meaningful or relevant in the data. Thus, it is essential to make the theoretical and epistemological positions of the research explicit. In this study, I adopted a constructionist approach to TA. From this perspective, meaning is socially produced and shaped by discourse, rather than residing inherently within individuals (Burr 1995 as quoted in Braun and Clarke 2006). My is to analyze how broader sociocultural and political contexts shape discourse. Conducting TA at the latent level, I sought to uncover the underlying assumptions, ideologies, and conceptual structures that inform how migrants are represented in political speech.

Moreover, my analysis is deeply informed and structurally guided by the theoretical framework, discussed in the previous chapter of the thesis. Concepts from critical migration studies are used in the research as a set of sensitizing concepts, that guided my coding process. These concepts did not rigidly determine the findings but helped direct attention to how political discourse constructs migrant subjectivities, aiming to answer the research question: "how is the externalization of migration under the 2023 Italy-Albania agreement legitimized or contested in Italian political

discourse, and how does this discourse construct the figure of the externalized migrant compared to migrants already within Italy?", which also guided the analysis.

Data selection

The dataset analyzed consists of political speeches from key Italian government and opposition figures. This sample was constructed to provide empirical evidence on how the Italy-Albania migration agreement is legitimized or opposed, and how externalized migrants are constructed discursively, with special attention as to whether such constructions differ from that of migrants already within Italy. The analysis includes five government speeches: two by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, who was instrumental in creating and promoting the protocol; one by Minister of the Interior Matteo Piantedosi who has long been associated with restrictive migration policies and whose ministry implements the protocol; one by Minister of Transport Matteo Salvini, who remains a central political figure in anti-migrant discourse; and one by Costanzo Dalla Porta from Brothers of Italy[4].

On the opposition side, I selected speeches by Elly Schlein, leader of the Democratic Party[5] and the most prominent opposition voice, member of the parliament Riccardo Magi, from a +Europa left party firmly opposed to the deal, as well as senators Graziano Delrio and Giuseppe De Cristofaro respectively from the Democratic Party and the Left Alliance party. Delrio and De Cristofaro's speeches were delivered during the Senate debate over the ratification of the protocol, making them particularly pertinent to the dataset. All speakers were chosen for their institutional authority and their centrality in the public political discourse on migration in Italy.

Analytical procedure

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) distinction, I conducted the analysis at the latent level, focusing not only on what was said, but on the ideological and discursive structures underlying the text. Coding

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[4] Fratelli d'Italia. All translations from Italian to English are the author's own unless otherwise noted.
[5] Partito Democratico

was guided by my research question and theoretical framework, but I remained open to identifying additional patterns of meaning. One such theme, Externalization as spectacle, emerged during the analysis. Although not directly informed by my initial theoretical concepts, it contributed an important new layer to understanding how externalization is constructed and legitimized in Italian discourse.

My analytical process involved multiple stages, broadly following Braun and Clarke's six-phase model of thematic analysis (2006), beginning with familiarization and initial coding and moving through theme development, review, and refinement. After selecting and transcribing the speeches, I conducted initial coding based on the theoretical concepts In the coding and theme development process I moved between the data and the conceptual framework to refine the themes and ensure they were forging the abstraction of the theory, providing concrete empirical examples.

Throughout the analysis, I followed Braun and Clarke's principle that thematic analysis is not a passive act of discovery, but an active process of interpretation. My choice of a deductive, latent thematic analysis was guided by what I wanted to know: how migrants are constructed in political discourse surrounding externalization, and how those constructions differ across political positions and spatial designations. This choice is aligned with my broader constructionist stance, which recognizes that discourse is a mechanism through which power, identity, and belonging are negotiated. Hence, the methodological approach adopted allowed me to identify nuanced patterns in how migrants are represented, and how those representations serve to justify or contest the Italy-Albania agreement.

Chapter 5: Analysis

This chapter presents the findings of TA of political speeches by Italian government and opposition figures, focusing on how externalization through the 2023 Italy-Albania migration agreement is represented, legitimized or contested, and what type of discursive figures of externalized migrants emerge from such political discourse. Attention is also devoted to how they come to be constructed: what concepts, themes, ideas, and assumptions are assigned to migrants brought to Albania, and is there a systematic difference from migrants that reside in Italy? The analysis highlights how different migrant figures, such as the vulnerable, the threatening, the criminal, or the offshored, are constructed in relation to broader logics of sovereignty, legality, care, and racial governmentality. The chapter is organized thematically, with one central theme from which various other sub-figures emerge.[6]

1. **Governing through Deservingness**

This section analyzes how political discourse surrounding the Italy-Albania migration deal fragments migrants into differentiated figures of deservingness (Gray and Franck 2019; Welfens and Bonjour 2020; and Pallister-Wilkins 2018). Rather than a simple binary of deserving versus undeserving, the analysis shows how migrants are constructed through overlapping moral, legal, and securitarian hierarchies shaped by racialized, colonial, and gendered discourses. Through TA, distinct typologies emerge that position migrants as vulnerable subjects, opportunists, or displaced victims within Italy's broader migration governance.

1.1 The Vulnerable but Manageable Migrant

After having visited the reception centers in Albania, Giorgia Meloni held a joint press conference with her Albanian counterpart, Edi Rama, where she articulated the figure of The Vulnerable but Manageable Migrant. First, she reiterated that vulnerable people will not be brought to Albania (Vista

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[6]A detailed thematic analysis table, including themes, sub-themes, and interpretive summaries, is provided in the Appendix.

Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale 2024, hereafter Vista 2024). These migrants are recognizable through commonly accepted indicators of frailty relating to minors, women, elderly or frail people. Such markers construct them as deserving of state protection as they are explicitly excluded from the deal and brought to Italy (Camera dei Deputati 2024b).

In the same speech, Meloni connected their reception in Italy to sovereignty, by framing it as a benevolent act, a humanitarian gesture, aimed at combating irregular migration and that will allow access into the nation-state to those who "really need protection"[7] [8](Vista 2024). Here, vulnerability becomes legible and governable, a justification for inclusion only under Italy's terms. The vulnerable but Manageable Migrant is in the government's discourse a figure who is at risk and deserves to be saved, and that can function as a stark comparison against the migrant that poses a risk. In this way, the risky migrant can be easily externalized to Albania.

1.2 The Bogus Economic Migrant

This figure is defined by what they lack: suffering, and legal entitlement. Della Porta, a member of the Prime Minister's party Brothers of Italy, during a Senate discussion, argued that the protocol would serve to deter and discourage economic migration. He suggested that individuals truly fleeing from war and hunger would not be concerned about their specific destination, as their priority would be simply to escape danger (Senato della Repubblica 2024). By contrast, those who show a preference for where they arrive are portrayed as less deserving of protection and, according to Della Porta, should now expect to be transferred to Albania rather than Italy (Senato della Repubblica 2024).

Hence, the migrant fleeing poverty is not seen as vulnerable but as opportunistic. Despite enduring equally perilous journeys, they are placed at the bottom of a moral hierarchy. Even without direct economic references, their designation as "bogus" and this stressing of the difference between "real" from "economic" migrants, links implicitly to ideas of immorality and irrationality (Kmak

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[7] (...) accogliere in Europa solo chi ha davvero diritto alla protezione internazionale. (Vista 2024).
[8] Speeches retrieved from YouTube were transcribed using Otter.ai, an AI transcription software. All transcriptions were manually reviewed and corrected by the author for accuracy.

2015) and relate to discourses of national burden and scarcity, where migrants are implicitly connected to Italy's limited humanitarian and economic capacities.

If the migrant trying to reach Italy is not a "real" refugee, his externalization becomes justified. Indeed, the narrative of the Bogus Economic Migrant serves the government to normalize the Italy-Albania protocol and its subsequent physical and discursive removal. However, externalization worsens the usual figure of the bogus refugee because it implies that his claim to enter Italy is so unfounded that he needs to be processed in a third country rather than residing in hotspots or refugee camps like the other migrants.

1.3 Opposition Figures and Counter-Constructions: Victim of Arbitrary Displacement

Opposition parties challenge the conditionality of government-framed deservingness. Elly Schlein, leader of the Democratic Party, during a parliamentary discussion on the drafting of the deal, referred to the externalized migrants as "poor Christs"[9](Camera dei Deputati 2025), invoking compassion. Similarly, during a TV interview for a famous political talk show, Riccardo Magi stressed that migrants brought to Albania are "shipwreck survivors"[10] that have committed no crime (La7 2024). Magi reframes migrants not as opportunists or threats but as lives rescued at sea that deserve entrance into Italy.

In a Senate debate over the ratification as law of the deal, Graziano Delrio, from the Democratic Party, critiqued the selection criteria for externalization, arguing that migrants in identical legal conditions are split into those who stay and those deported. He claims that the distinction between who is offshored to Albania and who gets to enter Italy creates a hierarchy of rightsholders, as those that are sent to Albania face legal uncertainty and may be entitled to less legal protections and safeguards. For Delrio, deservingness is not based on legal or personal characteristics, but it is

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[9] Poveri cristi (Camera dei deputati 2025)
[10] Naufraghi (La7 2025)

inherent in all humans. These framings produces the figure of the Arbitrary Victim of Displacement: a migrant who is caught in unjust systems and whose suffering is morally undeniable.

Even if they are trying to stop the Italy-Albania deal, the opposition figures are still relying on a rhetoric of innocence and victimhood that tends to paint the figure of a passive subject. By referring to them as "poor Christs" or "shipwreck survivors", the opposition is inadvertently relying on the same humanitarian discourse of the right, where *care* can only be granted to migrants because they are suffering. Indeed, humanitarianism can depoliticize refugees by making them bodies in need of saving rather than individuals with legal rights (Ticktin 2011; Fassin 2012). Thus, even if well-intentioned, the opposition is reinforcing the politics of compassion that make only certain bodies as visible, reproducing narratives of exclusion.

1.4 Externalization as Spatial and Colonial Logic

Across both governmental and opposition discourse, it becomes evident that externalization is not a neutral logistical mechanism, but a geopolitical practice embedded in colonial spatial hierarchies. Across her speeches on the deal, Meloni insists Shëngjin and Gäder are simply reception centers, yet they are located in former military bases (Il Post 2024), symbolizing containment and defense, where migrants are not housed, they are securitized. As theorized by Quijano (2007), coloniality allows us to understand how colonial mechanisms persist through such extraterritorial mechanisms, where Europe outsources its "undesirable" bodies to peripheral states. The symbolic use of military spaces transforms the reception centers into zones of exception: places where normal legal protections are suspended or become harder to enforce, and where migrants are held not just out of administrative necessity, but under a regime of suspicion, preemptive criminalization, and emergency management.

The ambiguity of Albania's position, both partner and subordinate, reinforces a neocolonial relationship. The deal's assertion that "the jurisdiction will be Italian, the personnel will be Italian, and the internal public order will be secured by Italian police" (Camera dei Deputati 2024b) underscores Italy's sovereign reach into non-EU territory. Externalization, therefore, constructs

Albania as a buffer zone, a space of legal exception where the EU's racialized border regime can operate with reduced scrutiny.

This analysis shows that externalization does not simply shift the location of border enforcement but transforms the representational logic through which migrants are sorted, governed, and made knowable. By analyzing how figures of deservingness operate in both government and opposition discourse, this thesis reveals that even contestation can reproduce humanitarian exclusion. In doing so, it contributes a critical lens on how externalization consolidates racialized, spatialized, and moral hierarchies under the guise of both compassion and control. Ultimately, migrants are not just classified by legal criteria but also categorized into moral orders.

2. **Border as Care and Control**

This section examines how political discourse constructs migrants through intertwined logics of care and control (Pallister-Wilkins 2018). Rather than treating migrants simply as vulnerable or threatening, discourse around the Italy-Albania externalization deal produces shifting figures shaped by ideas of sovereignty, legality, race, and spatial governance. Care and control are not opposing, but mutually reinforcing strategies used to manage and justify externalization.

2.1 The Morally Legible Body

Thematic analysis here exposes a contradiction in the government's discourse: humanitarian care for migrants is expressed in their very detention and is deployed selectively based on how migrants are constructed as Morally Legible. During a press conference on combating irregular immigration with Prime Minister Piantedosi, Meloni justified offshoring asylum procedures to Albania by claiming that it will disincentivize illegal migration, the "number one enemy of legal migration"[11]. In this way she framed externalization as a humanitarian necessity and care practice. To externalize the opportunistic, bogus migrant, means to save the lives of those who really need protection. However, this discourse

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[11]l'immigrazione illegale di massa è la prima nemica della migrazione legale. (Il Fatto Quotidiano 2025)

functions less as an ethical claim than as a tactic to remove migrants from visibility, and control who enters Italian territory.

Further, through this construction Meloni is implying that while Italy is externalizing refugees to deter illegal migration, spatially removing them from its territory, it is simultaneously protecting the rights of other, more legitimate migrants. Externalization thus becomes a "humanitarian battlefield" (Musarò 2019, p. 150) where war-like discourse of combatting a threat (traffickers), is paired with language of humanity and of rescuing. Hence, while Italy is spatially removing refugee seekers from its territory into detention centers, it is also trying to pass the idea that it is actually caring for certain admissible bodies.

This echoes Welfens and Bonjour's (2021) observation that care is conditional on perceived characteristics that relate to admissibility into the Western European liberal state. Migrants are judged on whether they possess such characteristics for integration into "Europeanness" or "Italianess". Through this lens, admissibility and deservingness become proxies for belonging, where perceived compatibility with Italian civic, racial, and cultural norms functions as a mechanism to decide who can enter Italy. Thus, while the rhetoric of integration into the national order is often deployed across discourse on migration, externalization appears to make it worse. By "compassionately repressing" through externalization, the line between "us" (the Italian citizen) and "them" (the externalized migrant) reinforces the othering of migrant bodies that cannot be cared for but only controlled. The Morally Legible Body allows the state to frame inclusion as a reward for moral and cultural legibility, maintaining a selective humanitarianism that aligns with national identity and demographic control.

Hence, in analyzing discourse through the logic of care and control, externalization appears to be shifting the way migrants are normally talked about. Distancing refugees from Italy reinforces the dynamic the othering of migrants as it institutionalizes the creation of geographical distance between Italy and asylum seekers. In fact, the Italy-Albania deal allows for a legal gray zone which justifies the detention of migrants in a third country to be normalized. If the migrant cannot assimilate and is dangerous, it is only right that he is spatially removed. In this way, governance of migration

does not function through a strict binary of care versus control, but through stratified, shifting constructions of migrant subjectivity that justify inclusion, exclusion, or spatial displacement based on shifting moral and legal logics.

2.2 The Logistically Removed and Spatially Contained Migrant

This figure represents the migrant as an object of logistical management, not a political subject. When during the press conference in Albania, the Italian Prime Minister explained the technicalities of the Protocol, the detention centers were depicted neutrally, as performing the typical functions of first reception centers, or welcoming centers. However, this neutrality or logistical tone erases their detentive nature, which only comes out when Meloni and other government's politicians selectively decide to criminalize the migrants. This echoes Pallister-Wilkins' (2018) argument that humanitarianism often facilitates governance through logistical care, preserving the appearance of benevolence while securing sovereign control. In this way, violent border enforcement is presented as a bureaucratic, if not humanitarian, exercise, despite being based on legally ambiguous measures. By presenting externalization as a logistical solution to protect legal migration, the government is also able to mask exclusion as care while reaffirming Italy's sovereign control over mobility.

Furthermore, the reception centers in Albania embody what Mountz (2015) terms "spaces of exclusion and confinement". Although these centers are under Italian jurisdiction, they are extraterritorial in function and have an underlying symbolic meaning. Migrants are physically removed from Italian soil, making them legally peripheral and socially invisible. Processing migrants in Albania hides a spatial containment strategy, that enacts the brutality, or monstrosity, of the border, a tentacled Leviathan (Tyerman and Van Isacker 2024) that stretches beyond Italy's boundaries to impose control over people. The migrant is not just distanced out of a management necessity but is actually framed as inadmissible within the moral geography of the nation.

Through the Logistically Removed and Spatially Contained Migrant, the border is reasserted not as a fixed line, but as a flexible mechanism of sovereign projection, reinforcing Italy's territorial

control and its ability to manage proximity and distance as expressions of geopolitical power. By constructing migrants as spatially removable, this figure legitimizes their extraterritorial detention and reinforces the idea that Italy can extend its sovereign governance beyond its physical borders. Another contradiction appears here: the government is claiming to be controlling its borders, defending Italian sovereignty, but on Albanian soil. By asserting sovereign control on foreign soil, the government normalizes an ambiguous zone in which migrants are subject to Italian authority but denied Italian rights. This construction allows Italy to reaffirm its self-image as a morally superior sovereign actor, even as it engages in practices that displace migrants into less visible zones of the law.

2.3 Opposition: The Offshored Rights-Holder

Opposition figures, while often remaining within the humanitarian frame, construct a different figure: the migrant as an Off-Shored Rights-Holder. In this framing, externalization is criticized as a legal and ethical violation. Politicians such as Riccardo Magi and Graziano Delrio argue that the centers in Albania are not neutral zones of protection, but extraterritorial sites of abandonment, compared to "colonies of detention" or quasi-deportation facilities[12]. These critiques draw attention to the legal fiction of non-entry that underpins the project (Giordani 2024). This legal grey zone strips migrants of EU protections by holding them in a non-EU country under ambiguous jurisdiction.

Through this figure, the migrant is constructed as someone who should be within the protection of EU rights regimes but has been deliberately displaced into a legal void. This narrative uses ideas of citizenship, legality, and justice, and implies that Italy is undermining its liberal and constitutional commitments by denying visibility and access to those who would otherwise be protected. In this way, the opposition highlights how externalization both erodes legal protections and repositions Italy as a liberal player, acting from a position of moral and legal contradiction.

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[12] Delrio "vere e proprie colonie detentive per stranieri" (Senato 2024); Magi "Colonia detentiva per stranieri" (La7 2025)

3. The Criminal Monstrous Other

This section analyzes how Italian government discourse constructs externalized migrants as criminalized and racialized threats, drawing on Tyerman and van Isacker's (2025) concept of monstrosity. Monstrosity is evoked not through specific acts, but through association, proximity, and potential danger. Focusing on government speeches, the analysis shows how externalization reinforces suspicion as a sufficient basis for criminalization, worsening racialized narratives that justify exclusion.

3.1 The Illegal Migrant as an Enabler of Organized Crime

From the thematic analysis it appears that the migrant brought to Albania is constructed not merely as someone seeking asylum, but as a contributor to organized crime. His monstrosity is not only about who he is, but in his very movement. He has made the decision to cross borders "illegally", so his body is treated as a moral and legal offense. This is particularly the case because his movement is facilitated by the so-called "evil people smugglers" (Tyerman and van Isacker 2025). Such a migrant figure is constructed in Giorgia Meloni's press conference after the visit in Albania, when she referred to the "illegal migrant" placed alongside the fight against "illegal networks of people smugglers"[13] (Vista 2024). Here, the migrant appears not only as someone assisted by criminal networks, but as part of that network because of his "illegality". This fusion generates the figure of the Illegal Migrant as Enabler of Organized Crime, but also as the criminal himself. This overlap is politically productive. It allows Meloni to present irregular migration as inseparable from criminal economies, transforming border crossing into complicity.

Further, in the same instance, the Prime Minister mentioned having collaborated with the National Anti-Mafia Prosecutor's Office[14] in the field of migration management (Vista 2024). This

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[13] Questo progetto rappresenta uno straordinario strumento di deterrenza per i migranti illegali e un mezzo efficace di contrasto alle reti di trafficanti. (Vista 2024)
[14] Procura Nazionale Antimafia.

discursive move allows her to bring together migration with the mafia, framing externalization as a defensive measure to protect the nation-state. By constructing the figure of the Enabler through the trope of combating mafia, the Premier is not only rendering migration as a mafia business, but she is also connecting it to a powerful national image: the moral imperative to fight the mafia. This association positions the migrant as not only complicit in criminal networks, but also transformed into a well-known domestic threat, making externalization emotionally familiar and politically persuasive to an Italian public that generally supports anti-mafia efforts.

Further, Meloni narratively created the Enabler by defining him as "illegal". This move, as argued by Walia (2013) is a product of state power. The author argues that no human being can be illegal, as illegality is not an intrinsic characteristic, but it is a legal label that arises because of violent border regimes. By naturalizing the term, Meloni legitimizes the denial of rights and the preemptive criminalization of people based solely on how they arrived in Italy. In this framework, the migrant is no longer a subject in need of protection, but an offender to be neutralized, spatially removed, or managed from a distance.

From the thematic analysis, it appears that the construction of the Enabler allows the government to legitimize efforts to offshore migrants in Albania. The refugee seeker is not simply trying to reach the borders of the European Union, he is partaking in an illegal crossing through the Mediterranean that strengthens criminal networks of the mafia, one of Italy's biggest cruxes. Hence, externalization is presented as the only rational solution to reduce human trafficking and criminality. In such a context, externalization seems to be adding an extra layer to mainstream migrant discourse. While usually the migrant that crosses borders illegally is depicted at the intersection of criminality and victim (Ibrahim and Howarth 2018), having to resort to criminality to survive, the externalized migrant loses the victim part. He is simply the *Enabler* of the criminal network or part of it himself, enhancing the monstrosity narrative.

On the contrary, the opposition opposes the monstrosity and criminality logic. In the TV interview, Riccardo Magi for example, rejected the preemptive criminal framing, emphasizing that the transferred migrants had committed no crimes and should not be treated as offenders (La7 2025).

This section argues that externalization intensifies the figure of the criminal migrant by removing the possibility of moral ambiguity. In contrast to domestic migration discourse, where the figure of the smuggled migrant is often ambiguously framed between victimhood and illegality, the externalized migrant is constructed as already complicit, if not monstrous in his criminal potential. In doing so, government discourse justifies the expansion of carceral infrastructure outside Italy's borders.

3.2 The Migrant as an Inherently Violent Criminal

The monstrous figure of the migrant also appears as inherently violent and unpredictable, a subject whose criminal potential justifies spatial exclusion. In official government discourse, migrants sent to Albania are framed as individuals who could commit offenses at any moment. Piantedosi, Minister of the Interior, during the media briefing for the MED5, a conference on migration management for Mediterranean European Union states, explained and defended the practice of tying the hands of migrants that were being transferred to Albania, as a normal operational decision, necessary to prevent possible violent acts. He framed it as cost-effective and protective, implying that had these constraints not been used, more police and an additional ship would have been required (Ministero dell'Interno 2025). This administrative logic quickly shifts into a narrative of danger that presupposes having to take exceptional measures only to be able to deal with these migrants safely.

In the same discourse, Piantedosi cited that, among the 40 transferred migrants, some had prior convictions among which featured sexual assault and attempted murder (Ministero dell'Interno 2025). Here the figure of the migrant is constructed through preemptive fear and through assigning criminality to the whole group of migrants. There is suspicion about a few, that in turn is used to criminalize the whole group. The externalized migrant is thus inherently criminal and violent, but

also barbarised through racialized and gendered sensationalistic notions of the migrant as a threat to European order (Tyerman and van Isacker 2025). In contrast, Delrio, stressed the collective nature of the transfer to Albania to people that had committed no crimes (Senato 2025).

Matteo Salvini's discourse offers an even starker example. During his intervention in a political rally of a politician from his party, Salvini referenced seven Egyptian and Bangladeshi men transferred back to Italy from Albania after a court ruling, Salvini stated: "what if one of them next week sells drugs, mugs, rapes, or kills, who will be held responsible?"[15] (Agenzia Italia News 2024). This question renders criminality a condition of potential, not of fact. They are in Italy, they are migrants and hence they will commit crimes. As Tyerman and van Isacker argue, the criminal monster is racialized and imagined through apocalyptic risk scenarios. This is where externalization becomes essential. Salvini's does not care about the legality of the migrant and his transfer to Albania, but about proximity. The monstrous migrant must remain in Albania, not to be processed, but to be kept from citizens. Externalization becomes a spatial fix to a racialized problem: managing threats by rendering them invisible, offshored, and containable. It does not respond to monstrosity; it produces it. This is the function of externalization as a modern colonial border technique: to manage racialized threats through spatial containment, justified by the presumed criminality of the mobile, racialized body. So, if in regular political discourse on migration, the criminal refugee seeker is exposed for a crime committed on Italian soil, through externalization government discourse does not need concrete examples anymore. Just because he is a migrant it is possible that he will commit a crime. Distance allows for a more speculative, racialized, and collectively applied logic of punishment.

Externalization as a Spectacle

This section aims at analyzing how political discourse either legitimizes or opposes the Italy-Albania externalization deal. In trying to advocate for the deal, the government frames it as a necessary step

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[15] "Ma se uno di questi sette settimana prossima compie un reato, se uno di questi sette spaccia, scippa, stupra o ammazza, chi ne dovrebbe rispondere?" (Agenzia Italia News 2024).

towards stopping the overwhelming force of illegal migration. In this context, externalization becomes more than a migration policy, but a political performance. Externalization is legitimated, staged and implemented as a muscle flex through which the government is showing that it is keeping up with electoral promises of stopping migration by implementing harsher border policies, transforming externalization into a spectacle. In particular, a spectacle of control of Italian sovereignty.

Giorgia Meloni and her ministers can proudly say that with the Albanian protocol they are protecting their territory from what they have constructed as a migration crisis. While the sentences taken into consideration here do not directly relate to migrant constructions, from the way that externalization is framed in them, a certain migrant figure emerges indirectly. The idea that the migrant is an uncontrollable influx that needs to be spatially removed from Italian borders. On the other hand, for the opposition it becomes the battleground onto which they can fight the government.

3.3 Producing crisis: migrants as invading force

Government discourse consistently casts migration as a phenomenon of uncontrollable proportions, one that threatens to undermine national sovereignty and overwhelm state capacity. This appears clear from the Albanian media briefing, where Meloni referred to mass irregular immigration as something that neither the EU nor the single Member States can face alone (Vista 2024). In this framing, mobility is described as a "priority" that is "by now urgent"[16], adopting a crisis language that, according to securitization theory, legitimizes the deployment of exceptional spatial and legal measures, such as the transfer of migrants in Albania where they are arbitrarily detained. The migrant here is not even granted the ambivalent humanity of the vulnerable-but-manageable figure; instead, they are a faceless component of a threatening flow, echoing Tyerman and van Isacker's (2025) notion of zombification, an endless wave of racialized, de-individualized bodies encroaching upon the European order.

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[16] "Io penso che ci siano ora alcune priorità", "ormai urgente" (Vista 2024).

3.4 Sovereignty protection: muscle flexing through deportation

Externalization becomes the solution to this invented crisis and the key to protect Italian sovereignty through force. In the press conference with Piantedosi, Prime Minister Meloni declared the end of the "era of laxity"[17] and showcasing the agreement with Albania as the start of more stringent rules and controls (Il Fatto Quotidiano 2025), Meloni signaled that the government is publicly and spectacularly restoring order and reclaiming control. Indeed, the Prime Minister went on to explain how in implementing the Protocol with Albania the government is stopping illegality, presented as a win for decent Italian people and the nation as a whole (Il Fatto Quotidiano 2025). The deal is here positioned as both practical and symbolic. On one hand it becomes an instrument for the protection of Italian sovereignty, and on the other hand, it implicitly constructs the need for protection by producing a binary between "the decent Italian people" and the rest, i.e., the criminal migrant. In this context, the migrant is not only criminalized but instrumentalized: their physical removal is used to perform the reassertion of the nation-state's authority.

The opposition, meanwhile, also contributes to the spectacle albeit through resistance. Magi and Delrio link the Albania centers to Guantánamo or colonial detention zones (La7; Senato 2025), accusing the government of creating "gray zones of the law" (La 7). Schlein mocks the supposed deterrent effect of the deal (Camera dei Deputati 2025), while Senator De Cristofaro from the Five Stars Movement[18] denounces it as a mechanism of deportation. Although these voices resist the policy, they nonetheless help situate externalization as the stage upon which sovereignty and legality are contested, confirming its symbolic centrality in the national imaginary.

Crucially, this performative logic reflects the ideal that the neoliberal state that does not just govern but must be seen to govern. In this context, externalization becomes a way to perform not only control over borders, but moral clarity, firm leadership, and protection of "the Italian people".

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[17] "possiamo dire che è finito il tempo del lassismo" (Vista 2024).
[18] Movimento cinque stelle

The migrant, in turn, becomes the necessary antagonist through which national identity is illuminated (Moffete and Vadasaria 2016).

Conclusion and Discussion

The thesis aimed at answering the research question: "*How is the externalization of migration under the 2023 Italy-Albania agreement legitimized or contested in Italian political discourse, and how does this discourse construct the figure of the externalized migrant compared to migrants already within Italy?*". The thematic analysis reveals that the migration agreement with Albania is legitimized by the government by constructing the externalized migrant as inherently criminal and threatening, so that Italy-Albania agreement emerges as a necessary, even ordinary, instrument of migration management. This is line with Terlizzi's (2021) argument that narratives are not neutral, but strategically constructed to legitimize specific policy choices. In contrast, the opposition contests the deal through humanitarian appeals to victimhood that inadvertently produce depoliticized and passive subjectivities.

When comparing discourse on externalized versus internalized migrants, the thesis identified a significant intensification of negative stereotyping towards the former. Whereas migrants within Italy are constructed through a binary of humanitarianism and securitization, externalized migrants are preemptively criminalized, fully stripped of claims to belonging or protection. They are not surveilled, integrated, or even criminalized based on behavior, as migrants within Italy might be, but are excluded in advance based purely on their mobility.

What also emerged from the thesis is that asylum seekers in Albania are not merely geographically displaced but are subjected to a symbolic erasure that profoundly reshapes the narratives constructed around them. While internalized migrants are governed through conditional logics of deservingness, subjected to surveillance, administrative management, and occasional criminalization, political discourse surrounding refugees within the Italy-Albania deal frames them through more extreme racialized, gendered, and securitarian logics, reinforcing a public imaginary of the migrant as a preemptive criminal threat whose potential danger can only be neutralized through spatial removal. Externalization thus marks a radicalization of bordering practices: a shift from conditional inclusion to absolute displacement

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Moreover, being spatially geographically removed or prevented from entering Italian territory also has legal and human rights consequences, from stripping refugees of the minimal political and legal recognition afforded to those within national borders to the removal of procedural rights, including meaningful access to asylum, legal aid, and protection against arbitrary detention. This shift occurs not because of legal distinctions between groups, but because of political and racialized constructions of risk and undeservingness.

Through a postcolonial lens, externalization practices must be understood as continuations of colonial structures of racialized control. As Lemberg-Pedersen (2019) argues, European externalization policies reproduce the colonial matrix of power by outsourcing migration governance to non-European states, treating them as peripheral spaces for the containment of racialized bodies without full political rights. Humanitarian justifications, such as "saving lives" or "combating smuggling", hide the violent realities of displacement, detention, and exclusion, of Italian and EU migration management, that resemble colonial modes of control and exclusion of racialized bodies. Externalization does not merely manage existing migration flows, but it actively creates displacement, creating zones of legal and social invisibility beyond Europe's borders. Like colonial strategies, it extends European sovereignty extraterritorially, establishing zones of exception where migrants are rendered expendable.

The Italy-Albania deal exemplifies how contemporary externalization both mirrors and extends colonial practices of racialized exclusion. It reveals how European migration governance relies not only on legal and territorial controls but on the production of differential migrant subjectivities: subjects who may still contest their belonging within national borders, and subjects who must be permanently expelled beyond them.

The research presents limitations. Firstly, the sample of speeches analyzed is limited and cannot account for the entirety of Italian public opinion. By integrating more political figures, media outlets, civil society or NGOs, a more a more comprehensive understanding of the country's climate could emerge. Moreover, while the thesis focuses on discourse, migrant perspectives are not

included. Further research could benefit from an ethnographic or interview-based study on how the migrants themselves experience externalization, that could be compared to the experience of migrants within Italian reception centers.

Ultimately, the thesis aimed at showing the deliberate effort of the current Italian government to prevent migrants from reaching the country and how such efforts contribute to create a public imaginary that demonizes people on the move simply because of their decision to migrate. Refugees are brought "far from sight" so that they can be "far from the heart", criminalized and rendered invisible at the same time. Understanding these dynamics is crucial not only for academic debate but also for shaping more humane and just approaches to global mobility.

Appendix – Codebook

	Theme and sub-themes	Codes	Example Quote	Interpretation
1	**Governing through Deservingness** The Vulnerable but Manageable Migrant The Bogus Economic Migrant Opposition Figures and Counter-Constructions: Victim of Arbitrary Displacement Externalization as Spatial and Colonial Logic	Gendered deservingness/und eservingness Vulnerable victim Inclusion Pre-emptive exclusion	"Those fleeing war and hunger don't worry about where they end up; they worry about where they are and want to escape from there. Those who are concerned about where they want to arrive must now know that from today, they can also arrive in Albania, not necessarily in Italy" (Della Porta)	Portrayed as opportunistic and morally suspect; used to justify removal and denial of protection vs those who really flee crisis, deserving of entrance.
2	**Border as Care and Control** The Morally Legible Body The Logistically Removed and Spatially Contained Migrant Opposition: The Offshored Rights-Holder	Care-control Spatial erasure Screening Detention Victimization Humanitarianism	"This agreement has three main objectives: to combat human trafficking, to prevent irregular migration flows, and to welcome into Europe only those who truly have the right to international protection". (Meloni)	Discursively legible as deserving; care is conditional and used to justify spatial exclusion under the guise of protection, but also deal as logistical tool to stop human trafficking.
3	**The Criminal and Monstrous Other** The Illegal Migrant as an Enabler of Organized Crime The Migrant as an Inherently Violent Criminal	Racialized threat Sovereignty Criminal profiles Monsterization Criminalization of mobility Othering	"Just to give you some profiles: among the 40 people transferred, there are five convictions for sexual assault, one for attempted murder, and prior offenses involving weapons, crimes against property, theft, resisting a public official, and assault... in short, a broad sample of criminal records. These are individuals who, based on this information, were deemed dangerous". (Piantedosi)	Equated with smuggling and organized crime; their movement legitimizes externalization as a crime-fighting tool.
4	**Externalization as a Spectacle** Producing crisis: migrants as invading force Sovereignty protection: muscle flexing through deportation	Externalization as sovereignty protection European model Deterrence Migration as incontrollable phenomenon	"We submitted a report to the National Anti-Mafia Prosecutor's Office, we introduced stricter rules and controls, and the result is that the work permit requests are now in line with the planned quotas. This means we've kicked out the organized crime that had infiltrated the rules for legal migration" (Meloni)	Migration framed as existential threat; creates urgency and normalizes exceptional responses and used to showcase state control to protect national sovereignty.

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