

**CHARLES UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**

Institute of Political Studies

Department of International Relations

Master's Thesis

2024

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**Blame Games at the European Union Level:
How the blame for the migration crisis in Italy
gets shifted to the European Union**

Master's Thesis

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Study Programme: MAIN

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Year of Defense: 2024

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In Prague 30.07.2024**Giulia Bellabarba**

Bibliographic note:

Bellabarba, G. (2024) *Blame Games at the European Union Level: How the blame for the migration crisis in Italy gets shifted to the European Union*. MA Thesis: Charles University: Prague, Czech Republic.

Length of the thesis: 79 pages and 119173 characters

Abstract:

This thesis analyzes how Italian politicians employ blame game theories to divert responsibility for the immigration crisis to the European Union. The politicians chosen are Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni as they best represent the use of these tactics. Through the use of a comprehensive content analysis of speeches, public statements, and social media posts the project examines the use of scapegoat, diffusion, and renegade blame games.

The thesis aims to understand the political tactics and motivations behind the use of blame games to shift the fault to the EU. Moreover, the project tries to understand how the strategies used affect Italian citizens. Employing theoretical frameworks from blame-shifting and international relations literature, the analysis explores the significance of the three blame games in political discourse and their impact on other international actors and public opinion. The projects aim to provide insight into the dynamics of blame attribution in a multilevel governance system like the EU as a way to add to wider dialogues on political strategy, accountability, and the politicization of the immigration crisis. Moreover, this thesis looks at the critical gap in the literature by linking blame game theories to specific political behaviors.

Abstraktní:

Tato práce analyzuje, jak itaľští politici využívají teorie hry na obviňování, aby odvedli odpovědnost za imigrační krizi na Evropskou unii. Zvolenými politiky jsou Matteo Salvini a Giorgia Meloni, protože nejlépe reprezentují použití této taktiky. Prostřednictvím komplexní obsahové analýzy projevů, veřejných prohlášení a příspěvků na sociálních sítích projekt zkoumá použití obětního beránka, šíření a hry s obviňováním odpadlíků.

Práce si klade za cíl porozumět politickým taktikám a motivacím, které stojí za používáním her s obviňováním k přesunu viny na EU. Projekt se navíc snaží pochopit, jak použité strategie ovlivňují italské občany. S využitím teoretických rámců z literatury o přesouvání viny a o mezinárodních vztazích analýza zkoumá význam tří her s obviňováním v politickém diskurzu a jejich dopad na ostatní mezinárodní aktéry a veřejné mínění. Cílem projektů je poskytnout vhled do dynamiky přepisování viny v systému víceúrovňové správy, jako je EU, jako způsob, jak rozšířit širší dialogy o politické strategii, odpovědnosti a politizaci imigrační krize. Kromě toho se tato práce zaměřuje na kritickou mezeru v literatuře tím, že spojuje teorie hry o obviňování s konkrétním politickým chováním.

Key Words:

Blame games theories, immigration crisis, European Union, Italian politicians, content analysis.

Klíčová slova:

Teorie vinných her, imigrační krize, Evropská unie, italští politici, obsahová analýza.

Title:

Blame Games at the European Union Level: How the blame for the migration crisis in Italy gets shifted to the European Union

Titul:

Blame Games na úrovni Evropské unie: Jak se vina za migrační krizi v Itálii přesouvá na Evropskou unii

Research questions:

- To what extent have Italian politicians used the EU as the only culpable of the migration crisis, and what political tactics have they employed?
- What are the motivations of Italian politicians to use the EU as the culprit for the migration crisis?

Výzkumné otázky:

- Do jaké míry italští politici využili EU jako jediného viníka migrační krize a jakou politickou taktiku použili?
- Jaké jsou motivace italských politiků využít EU jako viníka migrační krize?

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Introduction:

My goal with this thesis is to look at the migration crisis in Italy between 2014 and 2023 and the responses from specific Italian politicians. To conceptualize the research, I will proceed from the existing theoretical reflections dealing with blame games. Simultaneously, I will take into consideration the ideologies, policies, and strategies associated with blame games. Consequently, I will use the reactions from the Italian actors in question to identify and investigate to what extent they try to shift the blame for managing the crisis to the EU. Moreover, I'll try to understand how and in what capacities the strategies are employed, and what specific blame games are used in the case study selected. After that, I will examine the motivations and reasoning behind Italian politicians' use of blame games and the impact their use has on the European migration crisis.

In the last decade, the migration flows to Italy have drastically changed, recording ups and downs, with severe peaks in correspondence with humanitarian crises primarily due to geopolitical events, wars, and economic conditions in the countries of origin of the migrants. The war in Syria was the cause of an escalation in the flows. Consequently, Italy faced a humanitarian emergency due to the uncontrollable arrivals. Concurrently with other African countries' political and economic instability, an efflux in

migration characterized the period between 2011 and 2015. To find a solution to the crisis, the Italian government launched in 2013 the Mare Nostrum Operation, which was supposed to rescue and provide assistance to migrants and also combat smuggling operations and human trafficking (Tazzioli, 2016: 2). The arrivals were concentrated on the coasts of Lampedusa, an island part of the Italian Republic but closer to the coast of Tunisia. Near Lampedusa is also where, in 2013, a tragic shipwreck that killed more than 800 people happened (Esperti, 2023). The catastrophe drew international attention and entailed the opening of a discussion on the requirement of a coordinated response to the crisis (Tazzioli, 2015: 4).

Between 2016 and 2017, the difficulties of the Italian government in managing the flows were shown even more, especially after the EU-Turkey Agreement that changed migration movements and increased the number of arrivals in Italy (Rygiel, Baban and Ilcan, 2016: 1). The agreement also started a debate on burden-sharing within the EU. The discussions brought to light the voices of Italian politicians who were not only against mass immigration but also against the EU (Bulli and Soare, 2018: 138). They believed the regional organization and its members were leaving Italy alone to deal with the phenomenon (Bulli and Soare, 2018: 138).

The change in government in 2018 and the rise of anti-immigration sentiments and populist movements demanded

stricter measures against migration, such as closing ports and pursuing bilateral accords with Lybia (Albertazzi and Seddone, 2018: 650). The 2020 pandemic restricted the movements but didn't stop or diminish the flows. After a couple of years characterized by a decrease in arrivals, from 2020, Italy witnessed a general increase. In 2020, around 34000 refugees arrived, and 2021 only doubled, since 2022, it has returned to figures of about 100,000 (InfoMigrants, 2021). The situation has changed again since the establishment of the right-wing Meloni government, characterized by the agreement between Tunisia and the EU and between Italy and Albania. Both try to protect the EU coasts and deal with the migration flows before they reach the member states.

Regarding the theories I will use to conceptualize my research, I will look at approaches concerned with blame games and the politicization of the EU. The increasing politicization of the EU has raised the stakes for all the political actors involved. This phenomenon is evident because the EU's influence on member states' domestic affairs has led to a growing political interest in the institution's behavior. This has entailed a shift in the political debate and a surge of mobilization of public opinion. Moreover, the bargaining power of states has increased. With that, it has made it possible for states to use numerous different types of blame games to deflect criticism and maintain political support, both domestic and international.

Blame games are tactics used to manipulate reality and shift the culpability to avoid losing support and being portrayed as the cause of a problem (Heinkelmann-Wild et al., 2021: 2). The three most influential blame games are scapegoat, renegade, and diffusion. The scapegoat game aims to shift the blame and it does that by blaming a single actor for the issue while simultaneously deflecting the attention from the possible responsibility that other actors have (Heikelmann-Wild, et al., 2020: 3). On the other hand, the diffusion game condemns multiple actors to minimize the impact on a single one and make attributing the blame as unclear as possible (Heikelmann-Wild, et al., 2020: 5). In conclusion, the renegade game portrays the game user as the defender of order and structure and the other party as the traitor and culpable (Heikelmann-Wild, et al., 2020: 4).

Moreover, blame games are used as a political strategy to maintain and gain support while portraying themselves as the protectors of national interests against those trying to cause disorder. With these tactics, it is possible to deflect accountability. A calculated use of blame games quickly hides shortcomings and failures (Heinkelmann-Wild et al., 2021: 5). Furthermore, after identifying the problem, whoever uses these tactics can create a narrative that fits the goal of shifting the blame using a language that can manipulate the perception of reality. The multiple effects of blame games make the study of them fascinating. Especially regarding the case of Italian politicians shifting the blame to the EU,

different approaches are utilized depending on the politicians and the situation; for that reason, I will focus on that in this project.

Studying blame games and how they change and influence the political discourse is relevant because it helps understand political tactics and makes it easier to hold politicians accountable (Heinkelmann-Wild et al., 2021: 5). It also helps analyze the changes in public opinion. Understanding how blame games are used makes sure we can prevent the unjust victimization of actors who are not involved (Heinkelmann-Wild and Zangl, 2019: 953). More specifically to the case study of this thesis, analyzing how Italian politicians use blame games to shift the fault to the EU helps provide insights into the changes in migration policies, both at a national and regional level. Moreover, it helps assess how the Italian political concert perceives the relationship between the nation and the EU. It sheds light on the dynamics of cooperation, disagreements, and negotiations within the European framework. It can help understand the motivation behind the need and want to shift the blame. It provides a nuanced understanding of political dynamics, policy processes, and the evolving relationship between Italy and the EU. Furthermore, It contributes to a broader discussion on European integration, governance, and the challenges of addressing transnational issues collaboratively (Heinkelmann-Wild and Zangl, 2019: 954).

Moreover, looking specifically at the case of the migration crisis is relevant because it represents a sector in which the

decision-making process is divided between the EU and the member states. Therefore, it allows us to look at the behavior of international actors in situations where they need to cooperate or come to joint decisions (Hansson, 2018: 546). The case of Italy is even more peculiar and unique because, even though the EU has tried to enhance cooperation among member states as a way to address the common problems and challenges regarding the topic, the Italian state has often expressed its dissatisfaction with how the EU has managed the crisis over the years (Kriegmair et al., 2021: 1153). This is because Italy, as a state that faces the Mediterranean, has frequently been subject to first-hand migratory flows, and it had to find a way to manage them, often independently. The need to react efficiently to the arrival of migrants has made many politicians resort to using blame games to spread, diffuse, or scatter the fault to other member states or institutions (Kriegmair et al., 2021: 1154).

The problem with studying the migration crisis in the EU is that researchers have mainly focused their analysis on policy outcomes, the legal framework, and the overall social and economic factors. However, the studies should look more at the roles of blame games and how they shape public opinion, the decision-making process, and the relations between states and international organizations (Heinkelmann-Wild and Zangl, 2019: 955). The aim of this project is to fill the gaps in the research and contribute to a better and deeper understanding of the intricacy of blame-shifting. By doing so, I want to provide insights into the motives and behaviors of Italian

politicians when using blame games. Furthermore, I will take a different approach to studying the relations between the EU and Italy, using blame game theories as a lens. I'll use blame game theories to provide a more nuanced understanding of the topic.

As for the methodological approach, adopting a qualitative data analysis would be appropriate. Moreover, it will be vital to recover primary and secondary data, such as speeches, interviews, and social media posts made by politicians who have expressed themselves on the subject, as well as official statements and documents from the Italian government over the years. I choose to analyze the period between 2014 and 2023. In addition, I'll look at the decisions made by the Italian state and the EU regarding the migration crisis. I believe it is essential to analyze qualitative and quantitative studies focusing on the EU's migration crisis as they will allow me to better comprehend the behavior of institutions and single states. Once the data is collected, I will analyze it, looking at academic research on blame game theories in the context of international relations to understand how these games are carried out and especially the effects on the population of Italy.

I will use content analysis methods to examine the data. This method will entitle me to study the language and detect the use of blame games (Benoit, 2010: 268). Moreover, I will be able to identify repeated patterns in the techniques of shifting blame used by Italian politicians. Therefore, after collecting the data, I will set up a system to analyze it. The system will be consistent, valid, and reliable

(Benoit, 2010: 271). I'll conduct this research to identify the differences between specific Italian political parties and study the most effective blame games used to modify public opinion. Moreover, I will be able to value the particular blame games depending on the outcomes that they were able to produce. The specific system I decided to use will try to spot if the politicians, during a speech, directly blamed the EU, criticized the EU policies, called for the assistance of the EU, emphasized the Italian right to sovereignty, appealed to the nation's interest or calls for a change.

At the end of this research project, I think I'll be able to spot many times when Italian politicians have used blame games. I assume the main reasons why blame games are used in the Italian context are to shift the blame to the EU, discredit the opponent, and shape public opinion. Moreover, after analyzing the data, I expect to individuate numerous times when specific Italian politicians have used the EU as a scapegoat, accusing the organization of not respecting the Italian interest and getting involved too excessively in the country's policy-making. More specifically, I believe they will try to insinuate that the EU is responsible for the mismanagement of the migration crisis and that the reason why Italy cannot solve the issue in question is because the EU is trying to dictate how the state should behave and is trying to enforce specific policies (Kriegmair et al., 2021: 1159). In addition, I think I'll be able to identify opposing cases, therefore occasions when Italian politicians have used the fact that the EU does not assist Italy enough with crisis

management, as an excuse to justify the shortcomings of the Italian government, both in the economic and political field (Basile and Borri, 2022). Moreover, I also foresee criticism towards the Member States, as one of the most used rhetorics by Italian politicians is to highlight how Italy is the only state dealing with migrants (Basile and Borri, 2022).

1. The Migration Crisis in Italy (2013-2023)

This chapter will focus on the critical events of the migration crisis between 2013 and 2023. Analyzing this will be relevant to understanding Italian politicians' behaviors and positions. It is also necessary to conceptualize the data I'll be looking at in Chapter 4.

The year 2013 was marked by an escalation of the civil war in Syria, which led to an influx in the number of Syrians leaving their nation and seeking refuge in other countries (Heisbourg, 2015: 8). Therefore, the European continent experienced a rise in Syrian refugees and other migrants coming from regions impacted by conflicts and misery, specifically in the Middle East and North Africa. During this first wave of refugee-seeking, the principal event that led to international resonance was the Lampedusa shipwreck. It was one of the deadliest incidents that occurred in the Mediterranean. The shipwreck caused 368 confirmed deaths and about 20 missing persons (Esperti, 2023). The boat was carrying migrants coming mainly from Somalia and Eritrea; after catching on fire, it forced the people to evacuate to the sea, resulting in the death of women, men, and children because of drowning or severe burns and injuries (Ritaine, 2016: 102). As already mentioned, the incident attracted international attention not only for the numerous casualties but also

for the rescue efforts of the Italian government. Many believed that the Italian Coast Guard didn't do enough to assist the migrants and help took too long to arrive (Cuttitta, 2015: 38). The tragedy sparked a debate on human trafficking and the migration policies of Italy and the EU (Ritaine, 2016: 105). Moreover, the regional organization reiterated the need for a coordinated response from all the member countries. It clarified that an increase in rescue operations and better protection of the migrants making the Mediterranean route was necessary (Ritaine, 2016: 103). Not only that, but it highlighted the need to address the root causes of irregular migration and improve asylum processes (Ritaine, 2016: 103).

On the other hand, Italian politicians used the tragedy to highlight the lack of help from the EU and the state members. Specifically, right after the fact, the Italian politician Salvini took it upon himself to complain about EU migration and border control policies and argue that they contributed to incidents like the Lampedusa shipwreck, as he believed they facilitated irregular migration (BergamoNews, 2013). Moreover, he used the Lampedusa shipwreck to shift blame away from his government's policies to the EU. The shipwreck was considered the outcome of a high increase in immigration to Italy, which made the government implement a search and rescue mission called Operation Mare Nostrum. It officially started in October of 2013 and was based on the idea that the Mediterranean Sea migration is a shared responsibility (Tazzioli, 2016: 2). The goal was to avoid the death and distress of the

migrants who were forced to take a trip on makeshift boats, often not suitable for long distances. It was also supposed to put an end to smuggling operations and human trafficking by intercepting the boats involved with these criminal activities (Cuttitta, 2015: 71). Moreover, Operation Mare Nostrum was praised for its broad scope despite many controversies and problems (Tazzioli, 2016: 6). Many of the criticisms came from other EU states. The main one was that some countries believed the operation encouraged more people to venture and attempt the journey across the sea on improvised boats. They believed the extensive search and rescue efforts were inciting the migrants as they were confident the rescue teams would be ready to help them (Armilli, 2017: 147). The member states also raised concerns regarding the financial cost of maintaining such an extensive operation (Bembenek, and Gooden, 2015: 2). Furthermore, the distress coming from the states reflected the much larger disputes over the migration crisis and the policies states or the EU should implement.

However, the complaints regarding Mare Nostrum were not only from other EU states but also from Italian politicians. Many felt that the operation infringed on Italian sovereignty by allowing multinational rescue efforts to run on Italian territory. Moreover, they also argue the obstacle of letting other states decide how Italy should behave concerning the arrival of migrants (Tazzioli, 2016). In contrast with the problem of allowing different states to dictate what happens on the Italian borders, the main concern that still

characterizes the current discourses around the migration crisis has to do with EU solidarity and burden-sharing (Bauböck, 2019: 10). The operation highlighted how Italy had to bear a disproportionate burden due to the geographic location that makes it a frontline state for migrants coming from Africa (Bauböck, 2019: 10). Therefore, the need for more help and adequate support from other EU member states was called out by Italian politicians, who asked to help Italy alleviate the pressure of the ever-growing flows (Cuttitta, 2015: 129). Moreover, operation Mare Nostrum was used as a scapegoat by political parties to leverage their agenda, shift the blame, and gain support for stricter immigration policies and better protection of the Italian borders (Il Fatto Quotidiano, 2013). More specifically, the right-wing politician Giorgia Meloni asserted that the operation was pulling more migrants into Italy and called for better protection of Italy's border, interests, and sovereignty (Il Fatto Quotidiano, 2013).

The operation officially ended in November 2014 and was replaced by Operation Triton, instituted by the EU, which focused more on border control and less on rescue efforts (Tazzioli, 2016: 2). Moreover, the procedure was responsible for identifying and preventing irregular migration and, therefore, contributing to the maritime security of the Mediterranean from the flows coming from North Africa, the Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa (Tazzioli, 2016: 11). It involved the participation of multiple EU member states and non-EU states, as well as NATO and other organizations. Because it didn't address the humanitarian needs of the migrants at

sea and didn't focus on search and rescue activities, the operation was greatly criticized (Tazzioli, 2016: 12). The operation evolved over the years and was integrated into the EU border management and maritime security frameworks.

Another vital fact that affected the migration flows to Italy was the EU-Turkey deal of March 2016, best known as the EU-Turkey Statement. It was an official agreement to acknowledge the migration crisis and alleviate the burden of irregular migrations from Turkey to the EU and Mediterranean states, focusing primarily on Greece (Lehner, 2018: 177). The goal was to remit to Turkey migrants who arrived illegally in the EU after March 2016 or who were rejected from getting asylum (Lehner, 2018: 179). To help the Turkish country, the EU agreed to support it financially by allowing the government to provide essential services like healthcare to the refugees. The deal was challenging to implement as it handled sensitive topics, such as the protection and repatriation of minors. It impacted Italy as it reduced the number of migrants and refugees reaching Greece, shifting the flows to another route, including the one to Italy. Moreover, the deal tried to demonstrate the willingness of the EU to acknowledge the exceedingly high burden the Mediterranean states have to share regarding the migration crisis and attempted to establish a form of cooperation with a state outside of the Union to symbolize the commitment to address the problem and support the states (De Marcilly, and Garde 2015: 2). However, the EU's engagement in external partnerships made Italy aware of

that possibility and advocated for establishing similar agreements with countries in North Africa (Niemann and Zaun, 2018).

Another event that characterized 2016 was the closing of the Balkan Route, which refers to the closing of the routes used by migrants to move from Greece to the Western Balkans to reach central and northern European states, which were considered more appealing because of their asylum policies. The increase in arrivals raised the pressure on central and eastern European states and made them react unilaterally by closing the borders or tightening the controls (Abikova and Piotrowicz, 2021). Hungary was one of the first countries to treat, but many followed only a short time later. The humanitarian implications were not insignificant, as irregular camps in precarious conditions were forming at the border areas (Abikova and Piotrowicz, 2021). The unilateral decision sparked political contestation and tension among European countries. It opened up, for the umpteenth time, the discussion on the need to protect the borders of some countries and the need for others to help them deal with the crisis (Abikova and Piotrowicz, 2021). It signified a change in response to the situation as states started adopting more restrictive measures. Moreover, the closing of the Balkan Route led to a change in the migration patterns. Due to the Balkan's state decision, the Italian country was impacted by a surge in arrivals, which added pressure to the asylum system and search and rescue operations (Camilli, 2016). It aggravated the humanitarian challenges, and the refugee centers became even more

overcrowded, making providing adequate aid to the migrants arduous. It showed how a single country couldn't bear the arrivals independently, especially considering the smuggling networks exploiting the migrants (Giorgia Bulli and Sorina Cristina Soare, 2018: 136).

Furthermore, the change evoked in the Italian state the need to reassess the migration strategies, which entailed a reinforcement of the cooperation with North African countries. The most important agreement was the one with Libya to stem the arrivals from the Mediterranean Sea; they enabled the coast guard in Libya to intercept and stop the boats trying to reach Italy. The goal was to address and block the illegal migration to Italy. The agreement was mainly concerned with enhancing collaboration and protecting the borders for security reasons (Vari 2020: 111). Joint patrols, information sharing, and capacity-building were established (Vari 2020: 112). Italy also provided resources to train personnel and law enforcement agencies (Vari 2020: 112). However, the agreements raised questions on the potential violation of international refugee law, as the Libyan Coast Guard brought back the migrants to detention centers, where their human rights were not respected (Vari 2020: 7). Many of the documents made by humanitarian organizations and non-profits show the horrific conditions of the centers (Vari 2020: 118). From abuse to torture, the records show a lack of respect for fundamental rights. In addition, all migrants were denied access to the asylum process, as they were not allowed to

enter an EU country (Vari 2020: 118). This also negated the non-refoulement principle, which states individuals' right not to stay in a country where they face possible harm or persecution (Vari 2020: 140). It is relevant to notice that the EU supported the agreements as part of its policies to shift the responsibility and blame for managing the migrations to the countries of origin. In conclusion, the agreements had mixed results, as the migrants adapted and found other routes to Italy.

The rescue of the Aquarius ship in 2018 marked an influential moment in the history of the EU, as it highlighted divisions in regional organizations. Italy and Malta didn't let the ship dock and rescued the migrants on their coasts (Reuters, 2018). The ship was stranded at sea for several days until Spain allowed entry. The refusal of port access for the boat showed how the opinion of the member states regarding responsibility for the crisis was separated. It fostered concerns about human rights and the obligation to assist (Reuters, 2018). In addition, because the operation to save the migrants at sea was directed by the humanitarian organization Doctor Without Borders, some countries, specifically Italy, were questioning the role of the rescue ship and how their action could have been responsible for encouraging more migrants to try to make the dangerous trip (Carli, Barone and Conte, 2018). It is also relevant to note that at the time of the event, Matteo Salvini was the Interior Minister, and his reasoning for being against the rescue reflected the overall direction of his government. He focused his

complaints on the lack of support from the other EU countries and the refusal to burden the entire weight of the arrivals (Carli, Barone, and Conte, 2018). As already mentioned, he also accused the non-profit of helping human trafficking and facilitating illegal migration. His decision to restrict the ship's activities raised tension among the states. However, his concerns and comments on the issue were targeted to draw the attention of the public opinion and advantage his political agenda. It was the perfect occasion to highlight how his nationalistic and populist rhetoric was fundamental to protecting Italy's interests.

A UN agreement regarding migration was signed in 2018. The state members approved the UN Global Compact for Migration to embrace the need for international cooperation on the subject (Micinski, 2021: 10). It acknowledges the increased complexity of the migration crisis and recognizes the global scale of the phenomenon; therefore, there is a need to collaborate to improve the situation. The goal was to find a way to protect the human rights of the migrants, to regulate and facilitate migration through better policies, to address the problems that lead so many people to move, such as environmental factors and poverty, and to strengthen cooperation (Micinski, 2021: 11). The agreement implementation followed a non-binding principle and, therefore, was supposed to be used as a guide and encourage states to address the common problem collaboratively (Micinski, 2021: 12). However, states have raised concerns that the agreement infringed on their sovereignty (Micinski,

2021: 12). Populist or nationalist Italian politicians viewed the deal as threatening the nation's interest and identity. They portrayed it as a global attempt to prioritize the rights of refugees instead of the ones of citizens (Carrera et al., 2018).

When Salvini was the Minister of the Interior (June 1, 2018, to September 5, 2019), he implemented and executed strict policies to limit migration to Italy. He focused on closing the ports to non-profits trying to rescue the vessels and shutting down reception centers all over Italy (Carrera et al., 2018). Salvini believed the NGO-operated rescue ships were responsible for facilitating illegal migrants arriving in Italy and saw the reception centers just as a waste of public finances, which the country could not afford (la Repubblica, 2019). His government also implemented a security decree to change the rules to increase the expulsions of migrants responsible for crimes and tighten the policies limiting the rights of asylum seekers (Camilli, 2018). Not only that, but Salvini also carried out policies that made it more difficult for asylum seekers to access social services (Camilli, 2018). He did this because he managed to take advantage of the public concerns regarding security and economic growth to boost the support for his harsh anti-immigration rhetoric and portray himself as the protector of Italy's national security and sovereignty (Camilli, 2018). In conclusion, his raspy line led to a lessen in the number of arrivals, which was not due to fewer migrants deciding to undertake the journey but more due to the strict protection of the Italian

borders, which often resulted in disinterest in trying to rescue migrants at sea.

2020 was the year the EU proposed a new pact regarding the migration crisis and asylum. The so-called EU Migration Pact addressed member states' complaints and diverging opinions and interests regarding managing the migration crisis (EMNireland, 2024). The European Commission introduced it to confront the long-lived challenges of burden sharing and the asylum process. The pact was very ambitious and addressed several problems (EMNireland, 2024). First, it focuses on establishing a more efficient asylum system based on common standards. The aim was to protect the fundamental rights of asylum seekers while fastening the process and providing legal assistance and interpretation services (Carrera, 2020: 4). Moreover, it focuses on sharing the responsibility for dealing with the arrivals between all member states. The agreement was based on a flexible burden-sharing principle to allow states to contribute as much as possible (Carrera, 2020: 4). The primary way this aim was tried to be reached was by relocating the refugees among states and easing the returns process for unapproved migrants. To avoid the arrival of too many unauthorized individuals, the agreement acknowledged the importance of strong EU borders, which could be kept this way by the role of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Carrera, 2020: 5). In addition, the agreement included the need to have measurements to combat discrimination and improve the integration policies for

individuals trying to settle in an EU country. However, the extensive scope of the agreement affected its efficacy, as the flexible burden-sharing principle increased the differences and opinions between member states (Carrera, 2020: 5).

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the migration patterns and policies in Italy. The travel restrictions imposed by the Italian government disrupted the regular migration flows as they limited the movement, leading to a decrease. It also increased the attack on migrants made by politicians, as they used the concern of public health and the spread of the pandemic to accuse the incoming people of worsening the situation and, therefore, highlighting the need for stricter policies on migration (Sanfelici 2021: 1330). For example, Meloni has expressed worries about the migrants increasing the number of infections but has also criticized the government for wasting resources on handling the arrivals when they should have prioritized the health of the Italian citizens and the difficult economic situation (francescotumminello@gmail.com, 2021). She also called for stricter border controls. Giuseppe Conte, on the other hand, retrogrades the Italian need to balance humanitarian and health concerns. He emphasized Italy's international obligations and how the pandemic cannot stop the commitment to help and rescue the migrants (www.rivistailmulino.it, 2021).

In October 2022, Meloni became the Italian council's president, and for now, its mandate has been characterized by two significant agreements, the one between the EU and Tunisia and the one

between Italy and Albania. The first is meant to improve the cooperation between the regional organization and the state. It was signed during the joint visit to Tunis of Giorgia Meloni, the Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, and the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen (www.governo.it, 2024). The increase in irregular arrivals from Tunisia to Italy pushed the Union in the direction of a necessary agreement to control flows. If in recent years the main movements were from Libya, last year, 50% of arrivals in Italy started from Tunisia (Agenzia ANSA, 2023). The leading political investment in the memorandum concerns the deepening of cooperation in migration. However, the agreement does not cover only the subject of immigration; it also deals with the economic development and macro-stabilization of Tunisia (Camilli, 2023). As a result, the agreement is based on the idea already tried and tested with Turkey of providing a third country with additional financial resources in return for a more significant commitment to controlling and managing migratory movements to Europe to reduce the number of arrivals (Camilli, 2023). In addition, it strengthens coordination in search and rescue operations and the fight against criminal networks. The President of the Meloni Council has repeatedly expressed herself on the necessity and success of the agreement, presenting it as a necessary step for the EU in its foreign policy and the management of the migration crisis (www.governo.it, 2024).

The second agreement was signed on the 6th of November, 2023, between Italy and Albania based on an old cooperation treaty between the two countries (deputati, 2024). It provides for the construction of two centers to repatriate migrants managed and controlled by Italy in Albanian territory. The aim is to speed up the processing of asylum seekers' applications (deputati, 2024). Albania guarantees to Italy the use of the port of Shengjin and the area of Gjader for managing migrants. Construction work on two structures, one landing and one temporary reception, will begin in spring 2024 at the expense of Italy. Meloni has highlighted how the agreement should become a blueprint for the EU, as she considers it the best way to combat trafficking in human beings, preventing irregular migratory flows and welcoming into Europe only those who have a right to international protection (www.governo.it, 2024). However, it seems risky to already define the agreement as an example to follow when it still has to be put in place, and the structures have yet to be built. One cannot be sure that this choice is the best or that it can limit arrivals on the Italian coast.

2. Analytical Framework

2.1 Blame Games in International Relations and European integration: the Existing Theories

In this section, I will delve into the existing theoretical studies on blame games in international relations to unpack the motivations, mechanisms, and consequences of blame-shifting behavior. I will look at my case study's theoretical insights and empirical evidence to comprehensively understand the implications. Blame games are still an understudied field of international relations, especially regarding the effects of the use of the games. However, when analyzing the relations between member states and international organizations, the attempts to shift the blame to the organizations are multiple and worth noticing. States like Italy are responsible for using the EU to limit negative comments against the work of the government and shift the culpability to the regional institution, particularly in the case of contested policies, such as the one regarding the migration crisis. There are several ways in which this can be achieved.

2.2 Conceptual Framework

In order to conceptualize the study, it is important to start by analyzing the existing theoretical works on blame games. To begin with, it is relevant to highlight the paper of Tim Heinkelmann-Wild, Berthold Rittberger, Bernhard Zangl, and Lisa Kriegmair on blame games theory. Their article perfectly highlights the differences between the three main blame games used by international actors.

First, the scapegoat games refer to the case strategy when an actor, to avoid responsibility, tries to divert attention to another international actor (Heikelmann-Wild, et al., 2020: 3). Confronted with patent crises and criticisms, they attempt to minimize the negative perceptions of their action and diminish their responsibility by shifting the culpability (Heikelmann-Wild, et al., 2020: 3). It can be done in several ways, including exaggerating the impact of the scapegoat in the situation of the actor using the blame game or overstating the actor's role in the decision-making process (Schmidt, 2019: 5). The scapegoat game is, therefore, a strategic tactic that uses the negative portrayal of another international actor to discharge themselves from their shortcoming and manage a crisis. The main goals of using the scapegoat game are to diverge attention, justify decisions as policies, and consequently organize public opinion and mobilize support (Schmidt, 2019: 5). The need to diverge the attention stems from the will to overshadow their actions and enlarge the failure of the chosen scapegoat. This action can

minimize, diverge, and shift the scrutiny from the public opinion of the actor who implements the blame game (Heikermann-Wild, et al., 2020: 3). However, this tactic can backfire as, in the long run, it could exacerbate tensions that lower public opinion's trust and perpetuate mistrust (Urso, 2018: 366).

Secondly, the renegade game happens when someone is accused of violating or interfering in the policy-making process of an actor who would prefer to work alone. It is the blame game most often used to shift the responsibilities to an international institution (Heikermann-Wild, et al., 2020: 4). Moreover, actors of the international system may accuse an institution of allowing or enabling misconduct, not being solid and credible, and lacking the power to address a specific situation (Heikermann-Wild, et al., 2020: 4). In addition, using the renegade game, the actor summons the accused of not being trustworthy and not a reliable partner in the international system. This is done by calling attention to moments when the renegade actor violated the system's principles and rules of conduct (Schmidt, 2019: 6). The goal is to mobilize opposition, delegitimize the action of the accused actor, and isolate it as a means to deprive it of its authority, supremacy, and legitimacy (Heikermann-Wild, et al., 2020: 4). The renegade game often involves appeals to collective action and solidarity among like-minded states or allies to counter the perceived threat posed by the renegade actor (Heikermann-Wild, et al., 2020: 4). It allows them

to portray the regional organization as incompetent and irresponsible.

At last, with the diffusion game, the goal is to dilute accountability for the outcome. This type of blame game is based on highlighting the broader context in which the crisis is happening to point out the multiconnected nature of the issue (Schmidt, 2019: 7). It emphasizes the intertwined characteristics of the phenomenon considered and how the global challenges it poses need to be cracked through shared responsibilities (Heikermann-Wild, et al., 2020: 5). Therefore, while using the diffusion game, the international actor might stress the significance of cooperation, negotiation, and diplomacy to find a standard solution to a common problem. This is done to diffuse the responsibilities as there are multiple holders. They spread the accountabilities, obscuring the individual guilt of one specific actor (Heikermann-Wild, et al., 2020: 5). The international actor might also try to avoid responsibility by accusing multiple actors of not having done their part in resolving the issue or crisis in question. This specific game is often used in situations where it is relatively easy to distort reality and shift public opinion. Moreover, when it comes to international organizations, the knowledge of these organs still needs to be improved, and therefore states or politicians can use that to their advantage, diluting the responsibility to several organizations or organs because they know the public opinion would not know who to blame.

Another relevant article on the study of blame games is “Multilevel blame games: Blame-shifting in the European Union” by Heinkelmann-Wild and Zangl. The two authors focused their research on blame-shifting preferences. By studying policymakers' behaviors, they conclude that the shift of responsibility can only work if the illusion of objectivity is maintained. To complete that, the authors empirically assess an integrated theoretical model of blame shifting in a system characterized by multilevel governance (Heinkelmann-Wild and Zangl, 2019). In their analysis, they look at the reasons behind the decision to shift the blame. To begin with, they highlight how often it is a strategic decision to redirect public scrutiny to avoid taking responsibility for failed policies, which is a crucial necessity, especially during crisis times. However, not only they can avoid responsibilities, but they can also present themselves as the victim of a system that is working against their interests (Heinkelmann-Wild and Zangl, 2019). In addition, international actors, when trying to shift the blame, also actively try to create a common enemy to foster a sense of community, solidarity, and resentment against a common entity (Heinkelmann-Wild and Zangl, 2019). This allows them to safeguard their image and not lose public support.

Heinkelmann-Wild, Zangl, Rittberger, and Kriegmair focus their study on the blame avoidance effects of delegating to the European Union. Even though it's known that states will try to avoid the blame for contested policies, the literature is lacking when it comes to

understanding the effects of this phenomenon. Therefore, this paper wants to study public blame attribution in the media coverage of policies regarding the financial and migration crises (Heinkelmann-Wild et al., 2021). This study concludes that the effectiveness of blame avoidance depends on the delegation design. Therefore, the public blame attribution targeting the government is higher when the agents are dependent on government control and vice-versa (Heinkelmann-Wild et al., 2021).

Kriegmair, Rittberger, Zangl, and Heinkelmann-Wild studied the policy-making of EU decisions. Their article concentrates on blame avoidance and how states shift responsibility for unpopular policies. Moreover, the authors want to point out how the state's blame games achieve their objectives because the public does not know or is not interested in policymaking at the EU level. Not only are they unable to identify whether decisions are being taken by the European Union or by states, but they are also unable to identify who is managing decisions within the regional institutions. The authors identify the blame avoidance strategy as the most popular among states and study whether it is effective. To conceptualize their research, they used the case of the Italian government in 2018 when it refused to comply with the SGP in budget planning. The authors use a content analysis of news media in Italy in 2018 and conclude that domestic compliance constituents can impede the government's blame-shifting attempts, supporting the blame-attraction hypothesis.

Lastly, "Allocating Responsibility in Multilevel Government Systems: Voter and Expert Attributions in the European Union" by Wilson and Hobolt, examines how the accountabilities are given and shared in the EU. The article reveals that there is a pattern when it comes to the attribution of liabilities, and public opinion decides depending on the national context, but also based on the performance and visibility of the regional organization. Studying how the responsibilities are shared is relevant because it affects the functioning of the EU. In fact, the regional organization is denoted by a multilevel governance system. Therefore, the decision-making process and judgment are shared by the institution and the national governments of the state members, and for this reason, it is more difficult to hold the international actors accountable for their actions. Moreover, the blurred lines of responsibilities allowed for a manipulation of reality to avoid the blame.

To visualize this study, I will look at blame game theories, focusing on the case of the European Union and Italy. By analyzing the various blame games, I will conceptualize this research and effectively understand the behaviors of the actors in the international system in question. As mentioned before, countries use the need for more clarity about the functioning of the EU to scatter the responsibilities and, consequently, avoid responsibilities. More specifically, when it comes to the use of blame games by Italian politicians, many are the cases worth highlighting.

Moreover, starting with the scapegoat game, Italian politicians portray the directives and migration regulations implemented by the EU as highly unsuccessful and harmful to the country's interest and sovereignty, especially regarding the asylum and distribution mechanisms (Kriegmair et al., 2021: 1154). Italian politicians have accused the EU of interfering with Italy's attempt to set flow rules. The blame is directed towards Brussels as the seat of EU institutions, which is done to paint the organization as highly bureaucracy, distant, and not listening to the country's necessities (Urso, 2018: 367). The politicians have also accused Brussels of caring more about the interests of the other member states, leaving Italy to deal with the crisis alone (Kriegmair et al., 2021: 1159).

In the case of the renegade game, Italian politicians accused the EU of not holding member states accountable for their lack of solidarity and failing to manage the responsibilities inside the organization efficiently (Urso, 2018: 368). Moreover, the regional organization is blamed for failing to help Italy and follow the procedures that were decided to deal with the migration crisis (Schmidt, 2019: 6). This is done by framing it as a renegade actor that disregards its legal obligations. Therefore, because not even the EU is willing to follow its own rules, the Italian politicians threaten to challenge the institution's authority, which lacks legitimacy. Considering the scarcity of credibility of the Union, Italian politicians call for autonomy in the policy-making process regarding the migration crisis as a way to appeal to national interest and national

sovereignty (Kriegmair et al., 2021: 1159). They argue that Italians should be allowed to make policies regarding who can and can not enter the country. Moreover, they emphasize the country's sovereignty and stress how Italy can not keep wasting money on the EU if the regional organization is unwilling to help the state. That is why they argue for Italy's ability to make its policies without being dictated by the EU bureaucracy (Kriegmair et al., 2021: 1157).

Lastly, the diffusion game is based on the idea that most citizens of the member countries are not aware of the functioning of the various bodies of the EU. Therefore, it is easier for Italian politicians to spread the blame across the organization, blaming not a specific organ but rather the Union as a whole (Heikermann-Wild, et al., 2020: 5). The migration crisis is framed as a compound phenomenon, and therefore, the responsibility lies with multiple actors. Moreover, as a way to diffuse the responsibilities, the policies of the EU are often blamed because they are ill-equipped to address the complexities of the migration crisis (Heikermann-Wild, et al., 2020: 5). More specifically, the policies regarding the asylum process have been a central point of the politician's critiques. The idea that refugees must be given asylum in the first EU states they arrive in is considered disadvantaged for Italy (Schmidt, 2019: 5). They also emphasize how the other states have economic and political advantages because they can decide who to let in the country, unlike Italy (Urso, 2018: 366). Therefore they call for greater solidarity among states to share the burden of the crisis. They also contest the

weak governance of the EU in foreign policy. By deflecting the focus on national governance and shifting the attention to the EU leadership, they call for a better direction regarding the crisis (Urso, 2018: 368). This is effective because the migration problem is an international issue and calls for broader international relations.

2.3 Qualitative Content Analysis

To analyze empirically which of the three above-presented types of blame games the Italian politicians used, I will study speeches and social media posts. To do this, I will use qualitative content analysis as a methodology. Schreier's book describes qualitative content analysis as a method of analyzing material that requires some systematic interpretation. It is used to systematically examine the content of various forms of communication. It is considered the best option when to understand the data, a prior individual background on the topic has been done (Aaftink, 2013: 19). Therefore, qualitative content analysis starts with a coding framework setup. The background will allow the researcher to individualize a coding system that aligns with the research questions and the project's overall goal (Aaftink, 2013: 8). This method involves quantifying specific features within the content to identify repeating patterns or gain information about one particular subject. As with every other method to survey data, content analysis follows a pattern (Aaftink, 2013: 7). The first step is to define the research

aim. After sampling the data, the researcher has to decide the units of content and the coding scheme to categorize the content methodically (Aaftink, 2013: 7). Once the coding system is set up, it is possible to evaluate if the terms are consistent and valid. The data need to be interpreted to analyze the findings (Aaftink, 2013: 8). Another critical element of the coding system is that it must be consistent and reliable.

Stemler depicts content analysis as a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules. The last step involves interpreting the data and drawing conclusions based on the data and the prior knowledge (Stemler, 2000: 2). Content analysis is a stable method for analyzing political communication (Stemler, 2000: 3). It allows us to measure the content of the message. Holsti identifies content analysis as a technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages. Moreover, it's a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (Stemler, 2000: 2). Content analysis is used to comprehend mass communication used by politicians, draw connections, identify differences in their messages, and draw inferences about the reception of those messages by their audience. The messages must be codified via specific, exhaustive, mutually exclusive, relevant categories (Stemler, 2000: 2). It is essential to develop a codebook that will specify the categories we are looking for. It needs to be reliable and valid.

Now looking specifically at the case study of this thesis, for my data, I will be inspecting speeches and social media posts made by two politicians from two different political parties, Giorgia Meloni for Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy in English) and Matteo Salvini for La Lega di Salvini (The League of Salvini in English). The reason why I've chosen these two politicians is because I believe they represent the two parties that most often make use of blame games in an attempt to accuse the EU of the migration crisis. Moreover, I will collect speeches they made and focus only on the specific parts where the politicians mention the shortcomings of the EU, its member states, or delegates. On the other hand, for the social media post, I will look at the personal accounts of Meloni and Salvini. The data was chosen according to a time criterion, so after choosing the period between 2014 and 2023 as the one to be analyzed, I made sure to collect and have data for all the years taken into account. In specific, I collected thirty speeches and ten social media posts for both politicians.

Afterward, I will translate them from Italian to English to maintain consistency with the rest of the thesis. I will examine the speeches and social media posts and apply the system, which is consistent and reliable. Moreover, to individuate when and which blame games were used, I will search for the criteria selected in each speech and then draw some conclusions depending on the data. I will conduct a qualitative content analysis using the information gathered from the data. The heart of this research is

individuating the attempts to shift the blame to the EU for the migration crisis, finding out which specific blame game was used, and inspecting if it is a successful political tactic.

In specific, to understand the use of blame games I will not develop concrete codes but I will define the general level of the three blame games, as I believe it is more suited for the understanding of more subtle strategies and tactics such as the one here taken into consideration. Therefore, for every one of the three blame games, I have individuated criteria and keywords I will look for in the data. For the scapegoat game, the one that involves the deflecting of responsibility by placing the blame on a single international actor such as the EU, I will be interested in the use of tactics that directly shift the blame to the EU for a crisis, accuse Bruxelles of incompetence and mismanagement of the migration crisis, and portraying of the Italian state as the main victim of the crisis and the EU misconduct and absolve the country from every responsibility. Therefore the language used by the politicians will include the use of keywords such as "EU's fault", "failed policies", Incompetence and mismanagement", "imposed on us against our will", "EU's agenda", and "unfair treatment". On the other hand, when trying to individuate the use of the renegade game, which involves the blaming of the central authority for the failure of the policies, I will analyze the data to find out statements about Italy having to take independent actions, rejecting the regulations imposed by the EU, and prioritizing their national interests. In addition, the renegade games also involve the

targeting of specific EU leaders or institutions, so I'll look for mentions of personal failures of specific individuals in the EU and calls for resignation and accountability. Therefore, the keywords I will pay attention to include "independent decision", "Italy will act and work alone", "against EU policies and rules", "national priority", and "putting Italy first". To conclude, the diffusion game, as it is the game that involves the spreading of responsibilities among multiple actors, I will look out for mentions of shared responsibility, distribution of roles, and the involvement of multiple international actors, both state members and the regional organization. In addition, I will try to understand if the causes of the issue taken into consideration are described as multifaceted and various. To make the analysis more efficient, I will look out for keywords such as "joint effort", "multiple parties", "not just in Italy", "interconnected causes", "complex issue", and "collective responsibility".

I will manually look at and analyze the data, therefore I will break down the speeches and social media posts into meaningful units. By working on units, I'll be able to focus on the more meaningful parts of the data and highlight better the use of blame games. Moreover, the decision to divide the speeches and social media posts into units stems from the need to segment the texts into more easily manageable parts. Therefore, I will start by dividing the speeches and social media posts based on thematic changes and shifts, as a way to make sure that each unit represents one topic. This passage is essential to understanding the use of blame games

as it will allow me to analyze all the different and more subtle uses of the tactics. Moreover, especially in long speeches, the politicians are bound to use different strategies and it is essential to analyze them separately. To make the analysis and separation of the data into units easier, I will not only look for significant changes in context but also for indications of transitions such as “on the other hand” or “on the contrary”. I will also disregard the parts of the speeches or social media posts that are not relevant to my study. To conclude, I will make sure to apply the same rules and criteria for each speech and social media post. After that, I will apply the codes to identify which blame games were used in which part.

By delving into the rhetoric of Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni, I will better understand how political narratives shape public perceptions and policy agendas. I will be able to comprehend how blame games are used, and which ones are chosen to shift the accountability for the migration crisis to the EU. I will also try to understand the motivations behind the use of blame games. In addition, by looking at a 10-year-long period, I will be able to identify potential changes in the attitude and political position of the politicians and determine if the events of the time had an impact on their opinion.

3. Meloni and Salvini as Two Analytical Sub-cases

In this chapter, I will look at two Italian politicians who represent, at best, the tactics used to shift the blame to the EU for the migration crisis. I will provide a background on them, and highlight their roles in Italian politics. I will also examine the political party they represent and if their affiliations affect their statements and opinions. After presenting the two Italian politicians, I will look at the data and review it through the use of content analysis to identify patterns and blame attribution strategies. The data, as already mentioned, is composed of speeches and social media posts made by them.

The analysis will start by looking at Matteo Salvini, the leader of the far-right Italian political party “La Lega for Salvini Premier”, or the League in English. The party was created in 1979 under the name La Lega Nord (Severino and Licciardi, 2011: 270). In the beginning, the main idea of the party was to highlight the need for the North of Italy to separate from the South, as the political party believed that this decision would have meant more accelerated economic growth for the north of Italy, more specifically for the Padania area (Severino and Licciardi, 2011: 271). Furthermore, the South was painted as a problem that kept the North in a miserable situation, and to get rid of

it would have been necessary to maintain Italian primacy (Severino and Licciardi, 2011: 271). Salvini was elected as Federal Secretary of the Northern League in December 2013 and reappointed in May 2017. His secretariat was characterized by a general shift of the party towards the right and the extreme right (Berti and Loner, 2021: 2940).

In 2017, the political party La Lega went through a massive change and gradually abandoned the theme of the secession of the Padania to embrace a new Italian nationalist line, distinguished by xenophobia eurosceptism, and populism (Severino and Licciardi, 2011: 309). On 14 December 2017, La Lega Nord officially changed his name to La Lega per Salvini Premier. Consequently, since 2017, the focus has shifted from southern Italy to migrants and refugees, therefore significantly enlarging the electoral base (Severino and Licciardi, 2011: 310). Salvini understood that this move would have helped him get more votes because it would have allowed his party to gain the trust of the south of Italy, which is part of the country that deals with the migration crisis firsthand (Berti and Loner, 2021: 2943). This change had immediate effects, and the party became the third most voted in the 2018 general election and the first in the center-right coalition (www.senato.it, n.d.). This switch of direction allowed La Lega to establish itself as the first party in the 2019 European elections (Dennison and Geddes, 2021: 444). Moreover, since 2017, Salvini has strongly advocated for a hardline stance on the immigration crisis and has supported stricter border controls and

the prioritization of Italian national interests (Berti and Loner, 2021: 2943). He believes Italy is losing the ability to protect its national interests and sovereignty, and it should be authorized to determine the immigration policies that best shield the country. He's also been portraying the immigrants as a threat to Italy's identity and security, therefore making them the scapegoat for every issue (Severino and Licciardi, 2011: 283).

He was celebrated for his harsh tones and direct accusations to the EU. Matteo Salvini has criticized their policies, especially the lack of accountability for the migration crisis (Öner, 2020: 6). He asserted that the state members' lack of shared responsibility hurt Italy, and the EU policies aggravated the migration crisis. Moreover, he's against any measures which could infringe the sovereignty of Italy. In his speeches, he portrays the EU as an unauthorized entity trying to dictate how Italy should behave and spend its money. Specifically, Salvini has been very critical of the policies of the EU regarding asylum applications, best known as the Dublin Regulation (Öner, 2020: 10). He has criticized the asylum process, arguing that it doesn't distribute the responsibilities among the EU member states (Öner, 2020: 10). Italy, in his mind, has to bear the difficulties of illegal migration and significant flows because of its location. Therefore, because under the Dublin Regulations, the country where an asylum seeker first enters the EU is responsible for processing their asylum claim, Italy has to deal with a more significant share of the burden (Öner, 2020: 10). He believes reform is necessary;

otherwise, Italy will take matters into its own hands and close its borders or refuse to process asylum claims (Dennison and Geddes, 2021).

Now moving to Giorgia Meloni, she's an Italian politician and the current President of the Council of Italy. She has gained international attention, not only for her right-wing stance and conservative values but also for being the first female head of the government in Italy (De Giorgi, Cavalieri and Feo, 2023: 109). She started her path in politics by joining the youth wing of a right-wing political party, the National Alliance Party (De Giorgi, Cavalieri, and Feo, 2023: 110). Her strong stance got her the position of Minister of Youth under the 2008-2011 Berlusconi government. She is now the leader of the party Fratelli d'Italia or Brothers of Italy in English. The party is best known for its nationalist, conservative, and eurosceptic ideas, which align with Meloni's beliefs (Marino, 2011: 137).

During the years, she has expressed opposition to mass immigration to Italy, stating that she's trying to protect Italian cultural values and national interests (De Giorgi, Cavalieri, and Feo, 2023: 114). Meloni is also known for her critiques of the EU and its policies regarding the migration crisis. Fratelli d'Italia under Meloni's leadership has developed into one of the key players in the right-wing political landscape in Italy (De Giorgi, Cavalieri and Feo, 2023: 111). The party won the appreciation of public opinion by putting national security and sovereignty at the heart of their political proposals. This applies to the perceived threat of migrants and the

interference of the EU. Moreover, Fratelli d'Italia has commented on the migration crisis, calling it a risk for Italian culture and identity but also an economic weight that the state cannot afford and that should be managed more at the European level (Perissich, 2024). The political party is particularly famous for the hypocrisy of calling out too much interference from the EU in Italian affairs, but at the same time, complaining that aid from the regional institution is not doing enough (Mario, 2024). Furthermore, the political party is supporting stricter policies on border controls and measures against illegal immigration. They have been opposing mass arrivals because they are perceived as a threat to the national sovereignty of Italy.

However, it is essential to point out the change in how Giorgia Meloni talks about the EU since becoming the head of government (Perissich, 2024). Before, her opinions reflected more the nationalistic identity of the political party. For example, at the congress of Fiuggi in 2014, she commented that Italy is more essential to the EU than the reverse, insinuating that how the institution benefits the country is not worth it (Mario, 2024). In 2015, she insinuated that European solidarity does not exist and that Italy, referring to the EU, is in the hands of a band of usurers. More recently, in 2021, she recalled that without Italy, the EU would not exist. However, since she has been president of the council, her speeches about the EU have shifted. In recent months, she has been careful not to take any false steps towards Brussels or NATO, confirming her support for the Western Front (Tocci, 2023). She has

also said she had never declared the will of the brothers of Italy to push for the exit of Italy from the EU, although many were his posts on social media on the subject (Tocci, 2023).

4. Analysis of the Data

In this chapter, I will report what I have detected following the data analysis. After translating and dividing the data into units, I will start searching for keywords and the potential use of blame games in the speeches and social media posts of the two politicians. This will allow me to compare data and identify differences over the years. Moreover, I will contextualize the data and be attentive to the specific time when the various statements of politicians have been made to comprehend whether the international context has and in case how it affected the opinions of politicians. Moreover, I looked at whether the EU's decisions and policies have led Meloni and Salvini to a change of position. In addition, I have also looked at the arrivals of migrants over the years to see if that has negative effects on the opinion of politicians. Specifically, I will divide my analysis into two parts to highlight the differences and similarities between the two politicians.

4.1 Salvini

To begin with, when looking at the data I collect trying to best portray Salvini's opinions and tactics in the period between 2014-2023, it is possible to notice some significant changes. To start

with, I'll be analyzing the period between 2013 and 2015. A quick look at the data gathered shows a very relevant pattern in Salvini's accusation to the EU. Moreover, it is easy to notice how very often, direct but vague the accusations of the EU are (Matteo Salvini, 2014). Specifically, rarely or only in particular cases such as after Juncker's speech on 9 September 2015, Salvini accuses an institution of the EU or a specific politician/worker (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2015). Therefore, when talking about the failures of the regional institution, Salvini uses tactics borrowed from the diffusion and the scapegoat games.

Moreover, he talks about the EU as a unipolar institution and how it does not care about Italy's interests and needs (Matteo Salvini, 2014b). In his speeches, he often mentions the failed policies and how it is unjust for the EU to not be proactive and help Italy (Matteo Salvini, 2014b). It is fair to say that the critiques of the EU's actions regarding the migration crisis are part of a broader attempt to dismiss the work of the institution (Rai, 2015). The attacks are made to foster Euroscepticism and anti-establishment sentiment in Italy. The goal is to build up sentiments of resentment and distrust towards European integration in Italian citizens (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2016). Therefore, the attacks are not only against the policies regarding immigration, but Salvini has managed through the years to review and critique every single action made by the EU.

In contrast to the criticism of the organization's extended interference in the work of the Italian state, Salvini has also repeatedly called out the EU for not having done enough. In May 2014, he said that the EU was not interested in the needs of the Italian state and its people (Matteo Salvini, 2014). He commented on the poor management of flows and the non-availability of other member states to redistribute migrants in their states (Matteo Salvini, 2014). On top of that, the charges also involved the perceived lack of financial help from the regional organization (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2014). The cost of managing migrants is often mentioned by Salvini, especially to highlight the enormous amount of money Italy wastes every year trying to manage migrants and how they could be using the funds to help Italian citizens. He has frequently emphasized the cost per day of a migrant, which in his thought is the money misspend on men who do not contribute to Italian society (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2014). During the television program *Porta a Porta* in 2015, he dwells on how Italy is the only European country that wrongly does not defend its borders, and that the situation must change because the Union does not help and therefore cannot command and dictate rules (Rai, 2015).

Moreover, the actions taken by the regional institution are presented, via the use of tactics borrowed from the renegade and scapegoat games, as hindrances to the work of the state, as they seek to meet the general needs of the EU or the more powerful Member States, not considering Italy and indeed limiting the state in

its decisions and sovereignty on its territory (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2014). To convey his message, Salvini has also often used lying or exaggerating the situation as a way to blame the scapegoat for being the only one at fault. However, even if he is corrected later, it's often too tardy and the message has already reached many people. In 2014 he said that, only in the first months of the year, more than 30 thousand illegal immigrants arrived in Italy, which wasn't true (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2014).

To continue, the data between 2016 and 2017 highlights how Salvini is harsher in his accusations of the EU when the arrivals of migrants in Italy are high. More specifically, the data analyzed has shown how in years such as 2016, when the arrivals were increasing on daily, so were his attacks on the people and the mismanagement of the EU (Matteo Salvini, 2016). During the peaks, his speeches focus on the need for Italy to protect its borders and national security (Rai, 2015). Therefore, in these particular moments, he often uses the scapegoat game to accuse the regional institution of failing to protect the borders and leave the country to deal with the crisis alone, and the renegade game to highlight the need to find a solution independently from the regional organization (La7 Attualità, 2016). Moreover, the policies of the Union are taken into account as a scapegoat for the crisis of the Italian state. More specifically, Salvini has repeatedly blamed the EU for being the cause of the increase in crime or unemployment in Italy (Corriere della Sera, 2020). For example, in a conference in Milan in 2016, Salvini emphasized the

idea that uncontrolled immigration not managed by the EU is creating twenty million unemployed in the continent, and the organization should start addressing the issue. The idea is to present problems that are close to the heart of Italian citizens and find a culprit outside the Italian state (La7 Attualità, 2016).

This is done also to appeal to nationalist interests or populist ideas (La7 Attualità, 2016). The politician Salvini capitalizes on the situation in Italy and presents himself to the public as the only person truly interested in the welfare of citizens, as he does not represent traditional political institutions and brings new opinions, including challenging the work of the EU (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2016). Moreover, with the use of the renegade game, Salvini puts an emphasis on Italian interests and how they need to be protected from the interference of Bruxelles. During the television program *Porta a Porta* in 2015, he dwells on how Italy is the only European country that wrongly does not defend its borders, and that the situation must change because the Union does not help and therefore cannot command and dictate rules (Rai, 2015).

Moreover, between 2018-2019, Salvini had a significant influence over immigration policies as he had governmental power. He used his position of strength to implement strict anti-immigration policies, such as the closing of the ports to migrant rescue ships and NGOs (Rai, 2019). Therefore, with the use of the renegade game, the politician has emphasized the fact that Italy needs to solve its problems alone and avoid the infiltration of other international actors

such as NGOs and the EU in the decisions that impact the state (Michele Santoro presenta, 2018). His speeches and Instagram posts in 2018 are filled with mentions of having to put Italy and the Italian citizens first (La Repubblica, 2018). Regarding the attacks on the EU, the critiques focused on the lack of support and the impractical policies (Il Fatto Quotidiano, 2018). Specifically, Salvini has argued that the Dublin regulations are disproportionately impacting Italy, putting unfair burdens on the country (La Repubblica, 2018).

In addition, the period between 2018 and 2019, as mentioned before also marked the elections and his governance as Minister of the Councils. For this reason, much of his electoral campaigns revolve around the situation of migrants and on promises of improvement of the circumstances through the closure of ports and reception centers (La Repubblica, 2018b). Both in 2018 and 2019, his electoral strategy was based heavily on criticism of migrants and challenged the EU's stance on migration (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2019). In fact, Salvini was well aware of the fact that accusing an international organization would put an emphasis on the magnitude of the problem and highlight how many people or entities could work to solve it but choose not to do it (TG2000, 2018). In fact, in January 2019, during the meeting with the EU Commissioner for Immigration Dimitri Avramopoulos, Salvini referred to the need for the Union to put words to deeds, to underline the slowness of the bureaucratic machine of the regional organization.

Furthermore, by blaming the inability of the EU, he is attacking traditional politics, and portraying it as incapable of presenting real changes for the future (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2019). He proposes himself and his political party as the complete opposite and what Italy actually needs to thrive (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2019). In Arezzo in 2018, on the subject of political elections, he reminded the public that if they choose his party La Lega, they choose the party that will make a real change, that will not follow the rules imposed by other states or other institutions and that will fill boats and planes of migrants to bring back to the African continent (ToscanaTV, 2018). Through a strong emphasis on the national interests of Italy, he denounces the policies of the EU.

Furthermore, he always critiques the situation, accusing everyone except for him and his political party of not contributing enough, but seems to be unable to lay down a concrete program to find a way to manage the arrivals (TG2000, 2018). Moreover, it has also repeatedly drawn attention to how the aid provided by the Union, specifically the €6,000 for each migrant decided in 2018, are not nearly enough (TG2000, 2018). Therefore, employing numbers to concretize the accusation is another tactic widely used by Salvini not only conceptualize the large number of migrants coming to Italy every day or how much the rescue operations cost help him get his point across, but it is also effective because, during especially speeches, nobody can fact-check him and he can spread lies freely (TG2000, 2018).

Another thing Salvini underscores is that real refugees are women and children and that men, especially young ones, should not be considered as such. For example in 2019 during an interview at Non è L'Arena, he said that the Italian cities are full of strong thirty-year-old men with tennis shoes and mobile phones who go around doing nothing or making a mess (Matteo Salvini, 2019). This is also an attempt to dehumanize the refugees. However, when it comes to talking about solutions, he rarely manages to provide a definite program for the bettering of the situation. For example, he often says, as in his speech in June 2018, that Italy will be the protagonist of the choices of the EU to spur change, but does not specify how (alanews, 2018). He often mentions the need for change, but the new lines to be adopted are always unclear and involve the help of another entity such as the EU, or the complete blockade of landings (alanews, 2018).

Moreover, it is also interesting to highlight Salvini's positions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic gave him the opportunity to add new reasons to criticize both migrants and the European Union. In fact, before the accusations were focused on the economic weight of the management of migrants and on the attacks on Italian culture and tradition, with the pandemic began the concerns for the health and safety of Italian citizens (La7 Attualità, 2020). The arrival of migrants on the Italian coast has certainly not stopped with COVID-19, and this has led Salvini to link the migration crisis with public health concerns in the Italian state (alanews, 2020).

Moreover, considering that Italy was among the first European countries to have a high number of COVID-19 cases and to have to subject citizens to a national quarantine, Salvini used the situation to accuse the EU, through the use of a scapegoat game, of being unable to protect the Italian people (La7 Attualità, 2020). Furthermore, the accusations highlighted how the mismanagement of the crisis by the regional institution has led Italy to have to manage both the pandemic and high numbers of arrivals, which only worsened the situation for the health of the people because migrants increased the cases of viruses and participated in the rapid spread of the disease (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2021). Consequently, according to the politician, not only was Italy in a worse position than the other states because it had to spend a large number of funds for managing the migration crisis, but its citizens were at risk of getting sick because the virus was able to circulate in the state more quickly and easily (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2021).

In addition, during his speech in Rome in 2020, Salvini defined the EU as distant, absent, distracted, deaf, and ignorant (alanews, 2020). However, as mentioned before, the strikes against the regional organization are often broad and unspecific because he is aware of the fact that most Italians do not know or do not care about how the EU works. The ignorance on the subjects allows Salvini to utter many allegations as the chances of someone fact-checking him are low (La7 Attualità, 2020). Therefore, he is free to inculpate an

institution outside Italy. His ways are in line with the diffusion game as he often highlights the complexity of the issues and the interconnective nature of the migration crisis (La7 Attualità, 2020).

When looking at his speeches and social media posts in 2021, we can see that the attacks on the EU from the politicians do not stop during the low arrival periods. Moreover, during those times, Salvini was more concerned with crediting the good situation to the good work of the Italian government in a way to showcase how with good management, the situation can be put under control (Corriere della Sera, 2021). More specifically, he tries to shift the attention from any other actors involved in the managing of migration and affirms that the reason for the few arrivals is stringent policies. However, even in those periods, his accusations against the EU are still present. He still calls for the reform of the policies that negatively affect Italy.

For this reason, the attacks are also directed against specific Member States, such as Germany, which at Italy's expense accepts only a limited number of migrants and, as reported by him in September 2023, does not want the reception centers on their territory, and allows only the arrivals of highly educated and professional migrants (alanews, 2023).

Moreover, when looking at Salvini's strategy, it is easy to notice how he has mostly criticized the EU and its policies for two reasons: because he views them as a limit to the sovereignty of Italy, and

because they negatively impact the Italian state and its citizens, arguing that the country should have the right and the freedom to control its borders and make decisions regarding migration policy without the EU working as a mediator (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2021). The policies are, in his opinion, ineffective, and their shortcomings are highlighted to conceptualize the critiques against the organization (TG2000, 2018). Therefore, speaking about the reasons behind the decision to accuse the EU, we can see that he uses the tactics of the renegade game, as he highlights how it would be better to put Italy first and that the policies of the institutions are so ineffective, Italy would be better off working on its own (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2021). Specifically, in February 2018, outside the old headquarters of the Bank Etruria, stating that he did not care about what Brussels says or does, he launched an attack on the decisions and policies of the EU regarding the migration crisis (ToscanaTV, 2018).

Therefore, to conclude, we can affirm that many are cases and instances when Salvini has used blame games to shift the responsibility for the migration crisis on the EU. This happens because the politician is aware that blame games are perfect strategies to influence public opinion and bring more people on his side, especially during election campaigns. In fact, amplifying the frustration and discontent of the Italian people about the EU's handling of the migration problem is a great way to gain support and potential votes. In this way, Salvini is able to capitalize on anti-EU

and nationalistic sentiments. The politician knows perfectly well that the migration crisis is an emotional problem for the Italian people who polarized the political context in Italy. In addition, his continuous speeches and social media posts loaded with heavy and severe accusations against the EU are made to attract media attention and provide Salvini with an even bigger platform to spread his views.

4.2 Meloni

Now looking at Giorgia Meloni's case it is also interesting to notice the changes in her opinions throughout the years. She has strategically used blame games to increase her political support. During the period between 2014 and 2015, Giorgia Meloni strongly criticized the EU for the inadequate policies and the mismanagement of the crisis. Especially after the tragedy of 2015, in her speeches, Meloni mentions many times the fact that Italy was left alone to manage the dramatic increase in migrant crossings (Rai, 2015). In addition, the respective shipwrecks of 2013 and 2015, and the strong visibility that they had, allowed her to reach an even larger audience with her comments on the EU. Through the use of the scapegoat game, Meloni said that the regional organization has washed their hands of the Italian state, and for this reason, it is important to protect national sovereignty and security, strong points of the politics of her party (Rai, 2015). For example, during an interview for Ballarò, she tells how the EU accuses Italy of not being

able to manage funds to coordinate the arrivals of migrants and defines Europe as a committee of usurers (Rai, 2015). Moreover, she states that the EU does not really exist because there is no solidarity between states, but only selfishness of the stronger states that are enriching themselves off the skin of the weaker states (Giorgia Meloni News, 2015).

During the data analysis, I noticed a change in her speeches during the period from 2017 to 2018. With the rise of populism and anti-immigration sentiment, Meloni aligned her rhetoric to gain votes (La7 Attualità, 2018). Her speeches during that time were more loaded with attacks on the EU for crisis management, with an emphasis on the fact that the Italian state has been made solely responsible for the administration of a very high percentage of arrivals in Europe (La7 Attualità, 2018). Consequently, in order to increase the electoral base of her party, Meloni used the renegade game, launching direct attacks on officials and leaders of the EU, accusing them of being solely responsible for the migration crisis and proposing unilateral management of the problem by Italy as the only solution (La7 Attualità, 2018). Moreover, she discredited the policies and directives of the regional organization, calling them inadequate, and decided specifically to go against the interests of the state and the Italian people (La7 Attualità, 2018b). During a press conference at the port of Civitavecchia, Meloni speaks as her political party requires a naval blockade to avoid the numerous landings on the Italian coast because the policies of the EU are not

able to handle the situation and it is time for Italy to take control of the situation (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2017).

2019 is an interesting year for my analysis because it is also the year of the elections for the European Parliament. In fact, the elections for the EU institution always lead to a significant increase in the discussion around the migration crisis, especially about the role that the regional organization should have in the management. Since Giorgia Meloni is a politician who has repeatedly leveraged the situation, we can, of course, note a strong increase in the attacks against the EU during the election campaign. In fact, from her speeches and social media posts, we can see how she used the situation to argue that the institution was not able to protect the borders of the Italian state from mass arrivals and for this requires tighter controls and help with stopping the flows (La7 Attualità, 2019). As a result, with the use of the scapegoat game, Meloni has tried to earn the votes of euro skeptics who like her believe in the need to protect national interests and security (Rai, 2019). During a speech held in Turin in conjunction with the start of the election campaign for the European Parliament, Meloni speaks of her party and La Lega as the only two hopes for Italians not to be subdued by the great puppeteers of the EU (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2019). In addition, with regard to immigration, she highlights how impossible it is to solve the problem of mass arrivals by closing ports, because this tactic only slows it down, and the only way to actually put an end to the phenomenon is to prevent boats from

leaving (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2019). For this reason, with the use of the renegade and scapegoat game, she recalls how important it is to have in Italy a government that respects the interests of its citizens because it is important that it goes unpunished in order to change the rules of the EU (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2019). In fact, she says that the first proposal they will make in Europe is the blockade of Libya (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2019).

Similar to other Italian politicians, Giorgia Meloni also used the pandemic to criticize the EU, resulting in the double crisis, migration, and health, as an example of what happens when too much decision-making power is left to the regional institution. With the use of the diffusion game, Meloni has distributed the blame for the two crises to all the organs in the EU defining the problem as a systematic failure (Fratelli d'Italia, 2020). For this reason, during an intervention in the Italian Parliament in December 2020, she emphasized how millions of Italians are suffering from the consequences of the pandemic, but the EU spends millions on migrants and, pointed out that the institution with all its organs is behaving as if the Italian borders did not exist (Fratelli d'Italia, 2020).

Therefore, in the years between 2014 and 2022, Meloni's accusations against the EU are strong. She has accused the EU of implementing policies against the interests of the Italian state. Several times, as during the interview for La7 in May 2014, she commented on the European norm that says that an asylum seeker,

so every immigrant who arrives on the coast of Italy, according to European rules must remain in the first European nation in which it arrives and as a consequence has the right to stay in Italy; this limits the sovereignty of Italy as a state on the Mediterranean and subject to frequent landings (La7 Attualità, 2014). Furthermore, the rules on asylum are an example of how, for Meloni, there is no EU and nobody that considers European people's interests or the need for solidarity between nations (La7 Attualità, 2014). In fact, in July 2015, she uttered not only that the Union is incapable of supporting solidarity between states, but also that there are egoisms among the stronger states that impose their rules on the weaker ones (Giorgia Meloni News, 2015). This should not be the case because, without Italy that welcomes migrants, the Union would not work (Giorgia Meloni News, 2015). Recently in 2020, she also commented on how without Italy there is no Europe, there is no euro and there aren't privileges that these nations have built on "the skin of Italians" (Fratelli d'Italia, 2020). Moreover, the EU not only profits at the expense of Italy but also takes state money without helping it (Fratelli d'Italia, 2020). As said by the politician in July 2020, Italians and Italy produce wealth that is attacked and stolen by the EU (Fratelli d'Italia, 2020b).

Furthermore, Meloni emphasizes the cost of migrants, as she said in 2014 at La7, every illegal immigrant who arrives in Italy costs the country 30 euros per day, which is 900 euros per month, and those 900 euros that Italy is forced to spend on every illegal

immigrant who arrives in Italy and cannot move for the rules imposed by the EU, could be used for Italian pensioners (La7 Attualità, 2014). Moreover, not only is money wasted, but the EU does not help economically enough, because even if it sends something, it is never enough (La7 Attualità, 2014).

The problem of the terrible policies of the EU is attributed by Meloni to the absence of a European foreign policy. In fact, in 2015 in Rome, she said that the dramatic increase in arrivals in Europe is a sign of a great problem that the EU has and does not know how to deal with because of the lack of foreign policy cohesion (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2015). This is a serious problem because it emphasizes a lack of help from the organization and also from other states (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2015). However, she accuses the EU of rarely being effective and as she stated in May 2019 in La7 with Gruber, the EU manages to give Turkey 6 billion euros to stop the flow of migrants, but they do not help Italy (La7 Attualità, 2019). For this reason, Meloni emphasizes the need for a change (La7 Attualità, 2019). In 2019 she said that a conversion is required to avoid Italy becoming the refugee camp of Europe (Rai, 2019). Meloni emphasizes how a change is necessary but the Union can't be asked to do anything and that her Political party is the only one capable of proposing serious change, especially to protect the Italian state (Rai, 2019).

She is been critical of the overall doing of the EU, attacking even the Euro and the economic unity (Fratelli d'Italia, 2020). Her

skepticism is portrayed as an attempt to protect national interests from EU bureaucracy (Fratelli d'Italia, 2020). Italy, in Meloni's speeches, is always presented as the victim of immigration out of control, and as such, cannot alone find a solution (La7 Attualità, 2019). Therefore, considering how distant and disconnected the EU is, the Italian population must support her in the fight against Brussels's interference (La7 Attualità, 2019).

However, a substantial change in her viewpoints can be noticed after becoming President of the Italian Council. In October of 2022, with the beginning of her government, her position of the EU took a radical change. The politician went from accusing the Union of not representing the state and never helping it enough, to celebrating the work they are doing together to limit illegal immigration (alanews, 2023). The position regarding the need to protect the Italian state remains that she has promised the country she will protect it from illegal migration (alanews, 2023). However, regarding Meloni's new statements, she says that the protection of Italy can be achieved only with the support of the whole multilateral system and with the will of the EU member nations (La Repubblica, 2023). For example, talking about the migratory pressure in Italy in 2023, Meloni asks the president of the European Commission to go to Lampedusa to personally realize the gravity of the situation and that Italy will need to be helped in order to fight illegal immigration (La Repubblica, 2023).

Moreover, to highlight the importance of the work she is doing with the EU, Meloni praises her effort and says that without it, a bettering of the situation wouldn't have been possible (Il Sole 24 ORE, 2023). In fact, during an interview in Brussels in March 2023, Meloni says that since she's been in charge of the government, immigration has become one of the main objectives of the EU (Corriere della Sera, 2023). She wants to emphasize the miracle work she has done, to turn the EU from a bureaucratic machine incapable of delivering trustworthy policies and lacking a concrete foreign policy, to an institution working successfully to deliver solutions to the migration crisis (Corriere della Sera, 2023). To support her positions and the work she has done, giving a remark on the work of the Council of the EU, she always calls herself trustworthy and the reason why Italy will finally not be alone in dealing with the migration crisis (La7 Attualità, 2023). She praises how the priorities of the European Council moved from internal distribution to defending the external borders, as the problem must be solved upstream, in North Africa (Il Sole 24 ORE, 2023b).

Positive comments on the work of the Union are made often after the approvals of agreements such as that between the regional organization and Tunisia (Il Sole 24 ORE, 2023b). That is because they allow Meloni to highlight how the agreements follow the immigration policy line that for years she has supported. In the introductory speech of the July 2023 International Conference on Migration and Development at the Farnesina, she praises the

dialogue between equals based on mutual respect because the EU and the enlarged Mediterranean mustn't be in a competitive or conflictual relationship, that is, it cannot be and must not be a relationship made up of opposing interests. (Il Sole 24 ORE, 2023b).

In conclusion, the case of politician Giorgia Meloni individualizes the use of all three blame games but it is particularly interesting because it shows vividly how the opinions of politicians can change not only according to the national and international political situation but also according to their role and position within the national government and the European institutions.

4.3 What Blame Games Are Being Used?

After looking at the data and analyzing it following the selected criteria, we can conclude that the most commonly used blame game by Salvini and Meloni in her first years is the scapegoat blame game. Moreover, the tactics used by the two politicians focused on portraying the EU as the principal cause of the migration crisis (Heikermann-Wild, et al., 2020: 3). They shifted the blame to an entity outside the Italian state to absolve themselves and the state from all culpabilities and shortcomings (Heikermann-Wild, et al., 2020: 3). By focusing on the failures and defeats of the EU, Meloni, and Salvini divert the blame and distract the public from their drawbacks, moving the attention away (La7 Attualità, 2014). The scapegoat,

therefore, becomes a convenient justification for their behavior (La7 Attualità, 2014). For example, the impossibility of lowering the high unemployment rates is explained by the fact that the EU is actively working against the Italian state, by not helping with the arrivals and leaving the state alone in the managing of the crisis (Matteo Salvini, 2015). Moreover, portraying the EU as a common external enemy helps also to mobilize domestic support (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2016). It allows the politicians to shape the narrative surrounding the migration crisis (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2016).

However, the scapegoat is not the only blame game used. In the specific case when Meloni and Salvini blame the stronger EU member states, the game used its diffusion (Heikelmann-Wild, et al., 2020: 4). When accusing a general major group such as the member states, the goal is to dilute accountability and distribute the responsibilities to several actors (Matteo Salvini, 2014b). This is done to conceal individual accountability and redirect attention (Matteo Salvini, 2014b). Therefore, the Italian politicians blame the states because they are not helping Italy with the migration crisis (La7 Attualità, 2014). To mobilize public opinion even more, they emphasize how economic disparities and geopolitical tensions can shape the perception of the crisis and influence the Italian ability to solve the problem all alone (La7 Attualità, 2019). The highlight of how global the problem with the migration crisis is and that Meloni

and Salvini are trying to advocate for burden and responsibility sharing (La7 Attualità, 2019b).

The renegade game is often used by politicians to talk about the policies of the EU. The institution is portrayed as untrustworthy and lacking the legitimacy to impose rules on the member states (Heikelmann-Wild, et al., 2020: 5). Meloni and Salvini frame the Union as a renegade actor that violates Italian sovereignty and freedom of choosing its policies for managing the migration flows, justifying not following or opposing the institution's initiatives or policies (La7 Attualità, 2019b). In addition, to gain public support, the EU is presented as an institution actively working against the Italian population's interests and not a reliable partner in the international system (Fratelli d'Italia, 2020).

Moreover, the blame games are used by both politicians to reach the same goals. In specific, the EU is portrayed as the only international actor to be held accountable for the migration crisis as a way to deflect responsibility and mobilize support (Fratelli d'Italia, 2020). The strategy used by Meloni and Salvini is to present their work as the only attempt to find a solution and prevent Italy from becoming the refugee camp of Europe, and to present the work of the EU, instead, as an attempt to block any effort at improvement for the Italian state (Reuters, 2023). This will mobilize support for their political agents, not only in the field of immigration but in general support for the exclusion of any external entity in the work of the Italian state.

4.4 Why are Blame Games Being Used?

Many are the reasons why states decide to use blame games in an attempt to shift the blame to the EU. Understanding the motivations is very relevant as it allows for better comprehension of the actions of the politicians. It helps to decode their strategies. Moreover, it promotes also accountability as it makes sure that politicians are held accountable for their actions and words. When it comes to public opinion, ensuring that the citizens are aware of the reasonings behind the use of blame games helps them know if the politicians are trying to manipulate the situation and if they are trying to avoid being liable for their actions. On the other hand, the state and the EU have to be aware of the tactics used and the motivations to address the issue and create more effective policies.

Regarding the Italian situation, after looking at the data collected from the two politicians, we can individuate many motivations as to why they have chosen to use blame games to attribute to the EU the culp for the migration crisis. To begin with, one of the main reasons for both Meloni and Salvini is to gain votes or in general support for their political party and to shift public opinion (Hansson, 2018. 548). Both present themselves as the protectors of national security and the interests of Italian citizens and through the use of blame games, identify the EU as the reason why Italy is not able to make autonomous decisions but must submit to the power of the institution (Kriegmair et al., 2021: 1168). Moreover,

they showcase to their voters the EU as a body that is illegally mocking Italian citizens by imposing policies that worsen their situation in many respects, such as economic and national security (www.lagazzettadelmezzogiorno.it, 2017.). As already mentioned, this shift of blame is done because it allows them to identify, outside the national government, a culprit that can always be taken into causes and that, out of ignorance of Italian citizens about the functioning of the EU, is recognized by many as a legitimate responsible (Heikermann-Wild, et al., 2020: 4). Attacks on the EU greatly simplify the situation of the migration crisis and provide a clear target for public frustration (Heikermann-Wild, et al., 2020: 4).

Therefore, in their speeches, they focus on arguments that resonate with nationalist and Eurosceptic voters (Il Sole 24 ORE, 2023). Consequently, to draw more votes, both politicians accentuate the inability of the EU to propose effective policies, and how the only solution is an active resistance and restructuring of the rules for the management of migrants by Italy (La7 Attualità, 2020). For this reason, blame games are used to allow them to propose new guidelines that the Italian state should follow so allowing them a place in government (La7 Attualità Meloni, 2018). This means that they can then have decision-making skills to support their ideas about migrants, emphasizing the need to protect Italian culture and national identity (La7 Attualità Meloni, 2018).

Moreover, the use of the EU as the culprit of the migration crisis also starts from the desire to avoid accountability for political failures

(AGTW, 2022). Specifically, by manipulating the situation with the use of blame games, politicians are able to correct the anger and accusations of Italian citizens regarding the situation of migrants in Italy to the EU (Heikermann-Wild, et al., 2020: 4). Both have repeatedly accused the international institution of not having helped the Italian state enough, economically and politically, leaving Italian politicians alone to deal with a humanitarian crisis (Il Sole 24 ORE, 2023). Moreover, the EU not only failed to provide adequate support but was also unable to distribute the burden of the crisis over other member states and then mistakenly accused Italy of committing crimes against humanity because they did not take care of all migrants (TG2000, 2018). It reinforces the idea that Italy should have more control over its own borders and policies (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2021).

In addition, leveraging on Euroscepticism and using blame games to make the EU look bad and reckless, is part of their effort to promote a sovereignist agenda (AGTW, 2022). In order to do it both politicians have several times criticized the EU's centralized decision-making process, defining it as a limit to the national sovereignty of member states. In fact, Salvini and Meloni before becoming the President of the Council, also attacked the economic unity and the single currency the euro, arguing that those policies had negative effects on Italy's economy (Fratelli d'Italia, 2015). To promote their sovereignist agenda, they have also appealed to the importance of protecting Italian culture and identity (Vista Agenzia

Televisiva Nazionale, 2017). Multiculturalism is presented as an EU imposition to limit the national identity of member states (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2021). Moreover, irregular immigration is one of the main causes that led Italy to lose its national identity (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2021). For this reason, the state must stop being a slave to international and non-profit organizations, and begin to decide for itself to protect its own culture, identity, values, and traditions (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2021).

Consequently, it is relevant to understand the motivations and reasons why the two politicians picked the specific blame games to shift the responsibility for the migration crisis. The scapegoat is the best blame game when the politicians want to overly simplify the issue or crisis. The reality is that the migration crisis is a complicated problem that involves many international actors. However, politicians who try to shift the blame onto another entity, through a simplification of the situation, are able to provide the public with a straightforward narrative and consequently a clear culprit for the situation (Heikelmann-Wild, et al., 2020: 4). Moreover, this is the best strategy when the goal is to put emphasis on Italian sovereignty and attract the attention of populists and nationalists because it allows politicians to portray the EU as a body incapable of managing the crisis and negligent (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2021). This is done to reaffirm the idea that the Italian state should be solely responsible for managing arrivals and migrants in the state and that

it should be able to take control of its own affairs (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2021). All this is done to deflect criticism for his actions or actions of his government in periods as in 2019 and increase his electoral base by attracting the attention of Italian citizens frustrated with the Situation and the management of the EU (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, 2019).

As regards the diffusion game, one of the main reasons why this strategy is being adopted is to emphasize the failures of the EU, in particular, the failure of European solidarity (Heikermann-Wild, et al., 2020: 4). This is a tactic very productive as it allows to connect a series of topics outside the migration crisis and accuse not only the regional institution but also the member states of being blind to the needs of the Italian state (Heikermann-Wild, et al., 2020: 4). Specifically, the politicians in question have repeatedly recalled the situation of migrants in Italy to highlight how the state finds itself in a disadvantaged situation because of its location and that richer and more powerful states refuse to help because they are not affected directly by the crisis (La7 Attualità, 2019). Not only this, showing the differences between states close to the borders of the EU and states not, allows politicians to promote a united front against the current EU policies (La7 Attualità, 2019). Therefore, another important reason why the diffusion game was chosen is to promote the need to share responsibility for the migration crisis. Salvini and Meloni stated in their speeches and social media posts that Italy should not and can not bear the burden of the migration crisis alone (La7 Attualità,

2017). In this way, they are able to emphasize how the crisis is a collective problem and as such should be managed differently and should provide for a more equitable distribution both monetary and in migrants per se (Heikermann-Wild, et al., 2020: 4).

Lastly, with the renegade game, the strong accusations against the EU policies are aimed at an attempt to disrupt the decisions of the regional organization and present them as ineffective to a wider audience as possible (Heikermann-Wild, et al., 2020: 4). This is done so as to gain leverage in negotiations so as to put the Italian state in a more favorable position (Heikermann-Wild, et al., 2020: 4). Moreover, taking such strong and negative positions towards the regional institution under consideration sends a message to its supporters and to the Italian citizens who listen to them that politicians who use the renegade game are willing to stand up to the EU and defend Italy (La7 Attualità, 2018,2).

4.5 Consequences of the Use of Blame Games

Meloni and Salvini using blame games to shift the fault to the EU has had significant impacts on how the migration crisis is perceived and managed in Italy. To begin with, Their use of blame games has influenced how the migration crisis is perceived and managed in Italy. Their description of the EU has fostered Euroscepticism. This has reinforced the idea that the EU is

unresponsive to Italy's demands and works only to protect the needs of the stronger member states. In addition, the EU has been accused of promoting and encouraging uncontrolled immigration, straining public services, and changing the social fabric of member states. The Euroskeptics have accused the EU of enforcing a democratic deficit arguing that the Union is insufficiently accountable to voters and that decision-making processes are overly bureaucratic and don't correctly portray the needs of the citizens.

In addition, another big concern that the use of blame games has raised is the increasing xenophobic sentiments among Italian citizens. By framing migrants as a threat, Salvini and Meloni have contributed to the anti-immigrant sentiments, making it more difficult for migrants to integrate into Italian society. The politicians have in fact introduced the migrants in a very negative light, that now several Italians accuse them of many of the problems that the Italian state knows facing. To start with, the rhetoric that migrants come to Italy to steal jobs from Italians has been pushed up several times. This sentiment is greatly exaggerated especially in Italy during periods of economic crisis. Moreover, especially Salvini is always the first to talk or write on his social posts to tell when migrants commit crimes. This is done to accentuate how the multiculturalism promoted by the EU is simply a facade that cannot be implemented. As a result, according to the more skeptical citizens, integration is very difficult and should not be a priority of the Italian state, or at least other states should help Italy in managing migrants. This has also

increased the polarization of the Italian public opinion on the migration crisis, which has consequently formed a more hostile environment for the migrants.

Conclusion

The European migration crisis is and will forever be a complicated and multifaceted phenomenon with significant implications on different levels, such as economic, political, and societal. Italy, as a state facing the Mediterranean, has been strongly affected by the migration crisis, and over the years has shown that it cannot manage arrivals efficiently. Consequently, the crisis has brought up questions on European solidarity, responsibility sharing, and the role of the EU as an institution regarding managing the flows and placement of migrants. The fundamental principles of the international organization have been questioned. Many states of the international system have contested whether collaboration is effective and worth it to sacrifice part of their sovereignty in certain sectors. If the EU cannot manage the arrivals so that all member states share the same burden, then why should the states try to manage the situation collectively? Therefore, it was vital for me to analyze how the regional organization is perceived, especially in a state like Italy, which has been at the forefront of the crisis. Analyzing the opinions and statements of two of the most relevant politicians on the right has allowed me to understand the sentiments and tactics used to shift or spread responsibility for the crisis.

Matteo Salvini, the current leader of the Italian right-wing political party La Lega, has been known in Italy but also abroad for

his opposing positions on the EU and immigration. He has repeatedly accused the EU of interfering in the work and decisions of the Italian state, to the point of limiting the sovereignty. This is because an important part of his political strategy is based on shifting the blame on other national actors or the international system. He does that to divert attention from his shortcomings and his inability to organize a program for the solution of the various problems that afflict the Italian state, but also to, especially in the case of the EU, present it as untrustworthy and lacking legitimacy. Salvini tries to shift public scrutiny away from its own governance and decision-making but also polarizes the debate. In addition, his goal is to mobilize political support and consolidate his power. This highlights how Italy is always the victim because many agents are against its national interests. Specifically for the migration crisis, the shift of blame helps to justify how in 10 years the Italian government has not been able to find an agreement or national rules that would allow the country not to be brought to its knees by the arrivals of migrants.

Regarding Giorgia Meloni, I was very interested in analyzing her positions on the migration crisis and the EU because those have drastically changed from the moment she became the first female president of the Italian Council. The switch presented itself as a transition from a strong opposition against the policies and decisions of the EU, portrayed as a highly bureaucratic institution not interested in the needs of the Italian state, to a possible partner and

collaborator for crisis management. In fact, since October 2022, Meloni has declared the need to cooperate with the regional organization to find a resolution that reflects the interests of Italy, the Union, and other member states. She has been more inclined to work together especially to establish international agreements, such as the one between Tunisia and the EU. What has not changed in her speeches and her posts on social media is the need to start a change because the current arrival management situation is not appropriate and is not able to meet the needs of the Italian state. Therefore, a switch must be made through close collaboration with the EU and that must be made before the situation becomes unmanageable. Moreover, we can see that from the moment she became head of government, Meloni tried not to criticize the work of the institution, but rather highlight how thanks to her initiative and will to put in an effort, the EU has finally been able to come up with a plan to keep the migration crisis under control. In fact, since the beginning of her government, multiple times she has mentioned how what the Union is doing right now, would have been impossible without her collaboration.

Therefore, Salvini and Meloni frame the EU as the chief culprit for Italy's migration challenges. They do so by tapping into widespread public discontent and redirecting frustrations toward a common external enemy. To achieve these goals, the two politicians use blame games, and the scapegoat game is the most common. It is the most used because it allows the shift of failures and

shortcomings to the regional organization and to justify, for example, the disastrous situation of the reception centers. The diffusion game is used to distribute the blame on several actors, in this case, the member states, and to emphasize the privileged situation in which many find themselves because they do not have coasts on the Mediterranean Sea. On the other hand, the renegade game is the most appropriate to emphasize the lack of legitimacy to impose rules on the EU member states.

The reasons Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini have resorted to blame games in the context of the migratory crisis are complex and include political calculations, ideological stances, and practical considerations. Their effective mobilization of support, strengthening of political positions, and influence over public discourse resulted from their exploitation of anxieties and concerns surrounding migration. Their methodology emphasizes how rhetoric and story, especially when it comes to divisive topics like immigration, have a significant influence on public opinion and political environments. Moreover, their persistent use of blame games has seriously polarized Italian public opinion and it has intensified apprehensions and suspicions about the EU. This has made the Italian citizens grow feelings of Euroscepticism and fear of immigrants.

However, the analysis of blame games and how Italian politicians use them to shift the blame for the migration crisis on the EU cannot end here. In fact, having analyzed the data of two politicians representing the Italian far-right, I can conclude that the

position changes are evident. It is not only the key events of the crisis that have impacted the opinions and statements of politicians, but also their position in government has a strong impact. For this, a subsequent study on the effects of external agents on the opinion of politicians must be carried out. This type of study would also help with understanding the effectiveness of blame games. Looking at the current Italian political situation, we can wisely conclude that the political decisions of the Italian right-wing parties were the right ones to increase their electoral base since 14 regions are governed by the center-right and only 5 by the center-left. They were able to present the EU as the scapegoat for the migration crisis and capitalize on the emotions of fear and anxiety that the situation evoked in the citizens, to gain more votes. The Union was portrayed as an external entity actively working against the interests of the nation, which is instead highly respected and protected by the political parties of the right. Overall, leveraging nationalist, anti-establishment, and populist sentiments, has been shown as a productive way to enlarge the electorate base.

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