Unwanted People and Desired Citizens

Contemporary Attitudes, Challenges and Perceptions of Migration and Integration

Edited by
**Cezary Smuniewski, Andrea Zanini,
Cyprian Aleksander Kozera, Błażej Bado**

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ELIPSA
Warsaw 2024

The publication was financed by the Interdisciplinary Research Center of the University of Warsaw "Identity – Dialogue – Security"

The publication is the result of the international research project "Mikrogranty INOP – 2 Ed." carried out at the Institute of Political Science Foundation from 1st November 2020 to 31st October 2022. Research team: Cezary Smuniewski (principal investigator), Andrea Zanini (co-investigator 1), Cyprian Aleksander Kozera (co-investigator 2), Marcin Górnikiewicz (co-investigator 3)

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Cover design
Agnieszka Miłaszewicz

ISBN 978-83-8017-565-5

DOM WYDAWNICZY ELIPSA

Published by:
Dom Wydawniczy ELIPSA
ul. Inflancka 15/198, 00-189 Warszawa
tel. 22 635 03 01, e-mail: elipsa@elipsa.pl, www.elipsa.pl

Contents

DOI:10.33896/978-83-8017-565-5.10

Andrea Tomaso Torre

Between Perception and Reality. Migration to Italy in the Last 20 Years

Abstract

This contribution aims to summarize the development of immigration in Italy over the past 20 years. The analysis shows a gap between political propaganda and the public policies implemented. This leads to the paradox that the presence of foreign nationals has increased during periods governed by center-right governments despite their hostility to immigration.

Keywords: immigration, policy, European Union, Mediterranean

1. Introduction: the beginnings of foreign migration to Italy

Foreign immigration to Italy increased significantly in the late 1970s when a socioeconomic phase – the post-Second World War period – was coming to an end. The previous three decades were characterized by migration from Mediterranean countries such as Italy, Spain, Greece, and Portugal, which had settled in northern European nations (Ferrara, Pianciola 2012; Gatrell 2021).

Russell King, in one of the first studies on the genesis of foreign immigration in Italy, describes its development as being linked to several concomitant factors.

> "The first factor, or set of factors, centres around the ease of entry to Italy and its evolving function as a 'replacement destination' for migrants excluded by the closing off of the traditional immigration countries of NW Europe during the second half of the 1970s. Restricted entrance to France, Germany, Belgium etc. diverted the migration flows originating from southern Mediterranean and Third World countries to the more marginal areas of Western Europe's economic system – initially to Italy and then, although to a lesser extent, to Spain, Greece and Portugal. Italy's geographical position in the centre of the Mediterranean, the permeability of its borders (with a long coastline and a land

> border easily crossed by remote mountain routes) and the laxness of formal entry control procedures have made the country a magnet for immigrants from poor countries. Tightening of entry controls would be inconsistent with Italy's open-door policy to tourists. In fact many immigrants arrive on one-month tourist visas and simply stay on as illegal immigrant workers.
> The second reason for the growth of immigration into Italy is the country's growing prosperity. Italy has led the way in the reduction of the economic and social gap between the countries of N and S Europe. Much of N and central Italy is now on a par with France, Britain and the Benelux countries as far as income and welfare levels are concerned. Italy's growth in per capita GDP was the highest in the EC Nine over the period 1960–85 – at constant prices the increase was 129.7% for Italy, compared to Belgium 121.9%, France 121.7%, (West) Germany 105.3%, Ireland 104.5%, Denmark 98.3%, the Netherlands 93.9% and the United Kingdom 74.4%. This increasing standard of living, paralleled by the tardy but ultimately effective establishment of a welfare state, made Italy an attractive destination for labour migrants seeking a foothold in Europe. Probably more important than the simple increase in prosperity, however, have been the peculiar character and evolution of the Italian labour market and the ways in which the economy has been restructured in the postindustrial era. These processes of restructuring – which can be considered the third factor in our list – have created a dual economic system and labour market in which the informal or underground economy and the secondary labour market of casual, unorganised labour have flourished. As deindustrialisation and the contraction of certain areas of public service employment have reduced the size of the primary labour market of secure, unionised, pensionable jobs, so the secondary labour market has become relatively more important, partly as a strategy of maintaining competitiveness by reducing labour costs." (King 1993: 288)

Immigration then grew more decisively in the early 1990s in a deregulated context with characteristics that Maurizio Ambrosini summarized in his definition of an "implicit model of integration," where the state's regulatory actions appear to be chasing dynamics first addressed by intermediary actors in the territories where they develop most. Using another brilliant definition, we can say that immigrants have been welcomed from the outset with the status of "useful invaders." (Ambrosini 1999)

2. Migration policies in Italy

The legislative regulation of immigration has been developing since 1986 (Act 943/1986 – Foschi) and continued throughout the 1990s with Act 39/1990 (Martelli) and Act 40/1998 (Turco-Napolitano), which was systematized in Act 286/1998, and culminated with Act 189/2002 (Bossi-Fini).

The legislative output was accompanied by several measures that remedied the position of persons in an irregular condition – 12 between 1982 and 2020. The practice of these measures, in itself an "extraordinary" act, has over the years become an ordinary norm, certifying the failure of "ordinary" policies. In 1986, the "Foschi Act" brought 116,000 people out of irregularity. Only four years later, the "Martelli Act" regularized 215,000. In 1995, the Dini government's amnesty affected 244,000 foreigners, while three years later, the regularization under the "Turco-Napolitano Act" involved 217,000 immigrants. In 2002, the amnesty connected with the Bossi-Fini Act, despite very stringent conditions, regularized as many as 634,000 people.

Precisely with Act 189/2002, the new millennium opened with a foreign presence in Italy estimated at around one and a half million people, which increased to just over five million twenty years later (*ISTAT* 2023). The interesting aspect of this twenty-year process is its decisive articulation into two distinct migratory periods with significantly different numbers between them. In summary, the decisive decade for the structuring of the foreign presence in Italy is the first decade of the 2000s. Let us look more analytically at where the main differences between the two decades reside.

3. Work-related entries into Italy

In common discourse, Italian immigration legislation is considered lax. In fact, the regulations structured by Act 286/1998 are quite strict and allow for very few adjustments. To explicate the concept, a person who enters Italy with a tourist visa would have no chance of converting that visa into a work permit, even if they had a concrete offer of well-paid work available. Thus, the hypothetical person would have to return to their own country and activate the pathways for legal entry for work offers from there.

Entry for labor reasons is regulated by an annual flow decree provided for in Article 3, paragraph 4 of Act 286/1998, which establishes the number of people authorized to enter Italy from non-EU countries with a labor contract each year. It should be remembered that this procedure is not activated by the foreign national but by the employer in the presence of a permanent employment contract.

This mechanism has two clear weaknesses. The first is evident from its normative constitution: the labor sectors in which foreign workers are

mostly employed are still (and even more so 25 years ago) concentrated in the lower-middle segments of the labor market. It seems very unrealistic for an entrepreneur to activate the entry procedure for a worker, whom they theoretically should not know because the worker resides in another country, to hire them according to their business-related needs. This glaring contradiction highlights that entry quotas, in the great majority, are nothing more than disguised annual amnesties that allow for the regularization, with a "pitiful" lie, of people already residing in Italy.

In spite of this "flaw," the mechanism related to entries for work reasons (which, being used by people who are already working, allows for the quick activation of family reunification processes) has been fundamental to the growth of the foreign population, especially in the decade 2002-2011. As can be easily seen from Table 1, the entry quotas in the first decade were significantly higher than in the following decade, regardless of the political orientation of the government. Indeed, in the first decade, center-right coalitions governed for a significantly longer time than in the second, where governments were predominantly center-left.

Table 1

Quotas of work-related admissions and governments that enacted them

Year		Prime Minister	Year		Prime Minister
2002	79.500	Berlusconi	2012	59.923	Monti
2003	79.500	Berlusconi	2013	33.236	Monti/Letta
2004	115.500	Berlusconi	2014	30.850	Letta/Renzi
2005	179.000	Berlusconi	2015	30.850	Renzi
2006	340.000	Berlusconi/Prodi	2016	30.850	Renzi/Gentiloni
2007	219.317	Prodi	2017	30.850	Gentiloni
2008	135.234	Prodi/Berlusconi	2018	30.850	Gentiloni/Conte I
2009	136.332	Berlusconi	2019	30.850	Conte I/Conte II
2010	72.360	Berlusconi	2020	30.850	Conte II
2011	90.483	Berlusconi/Monti	2021	69.700	Conte II/Draghi
	1.447.226			**378.809**	

Source: own elaboration.

4. Family reunifications

Contrary to popular belief, most entries of foreign nationals into Italy take place regularly, and reasons of family reunification (allowed for spouses and minor children) are generally the primary reason for entry. As we have seen, the 2000s opened with the amnesty connected with Act 189/2002, regularizing the position of 634,000 workers. If we combine these numbers with those listed above from the flow decrees, we can see a stock of foreign workers who, possessing the formal requirements, activated a massive process of family reunification.

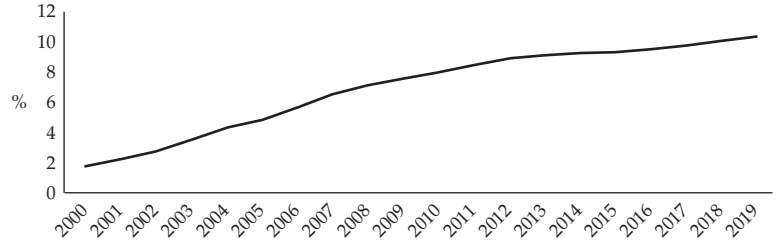
Table 2
Residence permits for family reasons

Year	Number of residence permits for family reasons	Year	Number of residence permits for family reasons
2003	477.959	2007	763.744
2004	545.300	2008	1.238.678
2005	624.404	2009	1.424.680
2006	682.365	2010	1.608.322

Source: *ISTAT* 2023.

Table 2 shows how impressive the growth by family reunification has been, quadrupling between 2003 and 2010. The entry of reunified children had an immediate impact on the school population. As seen in Figure 1, the percentage of foreign students in the school system rose from 1.7 percent in 2000 to 8.4 percent in 2011 (it is currently at 10.2 percent).

Figure 1
Growth of foreign students in Italian schools



Source: Openpolis 2023.

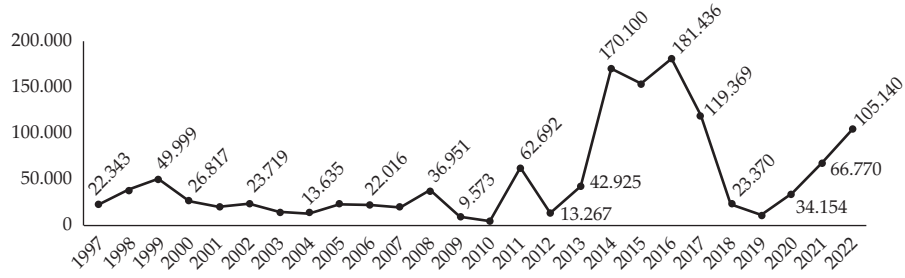
5. Entry of Romania and Bulgaria into the EU in 2007

Another event that marked the increase in the foreign population in the first decade was the EU enlargement process, in Italy particularly with regard to Romania (2007). Over the course of a few years, the presence of Romanian citizens in Italy grew significantly, from 555,000 in 2006 to about one million at the end of 2011. Currently, according to the latest ISTAT (the National Statistical Institute) survey as of December 31, 2022, citizens of the Carpathian country represent the largest foreign national component (1,081,836), more than double the second largest nationality (Albania, with 416,829 presences).

6. The issue of arrivals from the Mediterranean

Let us now analyze the issues of arrivals from the southern Mediterranean, which have, for more than two decades, monopolized media attention and political debate (Ambrosini 2020a). Figure 2 uses a black line to depict the sequence of landings of people in Italy over the past 25 years. However, these numbers deserve careful analysis because migration during this period has gone through different phases and significant changes that have not been adequately addressed.

Figure 2
Entries from the Mediterranean.
Number of people landed by sea on Italian coasts each year, from 1997 to 2022



Source: Openpolis, Actio Aid, Centri d'Italia 2022.

Around the turn of the 21st century, entries by sea primarily involved crossing the Adriatic Sea, with departures mainly from the coasts of Albania. These were the effects produced by the collapse of the Berlin Wall. In 1999, 49,999 persons landed in Italy (Table 3), almost entirely on the Apulian coast.

Table 3
Landings of migrants in Italy through the Mediterranean

Year	Numer of migrants	
1997	22.343	Prevalent inputs from the Adriatic Sea
1998	38.134	Predominant inputs from the Adriatic Sea
1999	49.999	Predominant inputs from the Adriatic Sea
2000	26.817	Predominant entries from the Adriatic Sea
2001	20.143	Arrivals in Lampedusa
2002	23.719	Arrivals in Lampedusa
2003	14.331	Arrivals in Lampedusa
2004	13.635	Arrivals in Lampedusa
2006	22.016	Arrivals in Lampedusa
2007	20.455	Arrivals in Lampedusa
2008	36.951	Arrivals in Lampedusa
2009	9.573	Arrivals in Lampedusa
2010	4.406	Arrivals in Lampedusa
2011	62.692	Effect of the Arab Spring
2012	13.267	Interlocal phase
2013	42.925	Prevailing effects of the disintegration of the Libyan state
2014	170.100	Prevailing effects of the disintegration of the Libyan state
2015	153.842	Prevailing effects of the breakup of the Libyan state
2016	181.436	Prevailing effects of the breakup of the Libyan state
2017	119.369	Prevailing effects of the breakup of the Libyan state
2018	23.370	Effects of Italy-Libya agreements and Niger closure
2019	11.471	Effects of Italy-Libya agreements and Niger closure
2020	34.154	Effects of the COVID-19 lockdown
2021	67.040	Prevalent arrivals of North African people
2022	105.129	Prevalent arrivals of North African people
Total	1.287.317	

Source: own elaboration.

Over the course of a few years, the scenario of sea traffic changed decisively. In the period between the two centuries, the routes of human migration moved along three lines: towards Sicily from the Maghreb, towards Calabria from the eastern Mediterranean, and towards Puglia from the Albanian and Montenegrin coasts. Of these routes, only the first remained active. In 2004, for example, only 18 people landed in Puglia and 23 in Calabria (13,594 in Sicily, almost all in Lampedusa). From then on, the largest of the Pelagie Islands became the "seasonal" symbol of migrant arrival. Numbers today highlight how those flows were decidedly limited, often influenced by the strategies of Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi, who used migration as a topic of negotiation with Italy and the EU.

The scenario changed further in 2011 when, within a few months, all regimes in North African countries were put in check by the so-called Arab Spring. Mobilizations and protests quickly dismantled decades-old leaderships such as Ben Ali's in Tunisia and Gaddafi's in Libya. Above all, the Libyan crisis, with the consequent fading of a "legitimate" state authority – since then the country has been divided into at least two areas of influence – generated scenarios that fostered the departures of people from the shores of that country (Torre 2021: 49–51).

From 2014 to 2020, approximately 700,000 people arrived in Italy via the Mediterranean. These arrivals, larger between 2014 and mid-2017, were interpreted by many media outlets as the vanguard of "epochal" migration flows that would be generated from Sub-Saharan Africa to Italy (and Europe) by exploiting Libya's "soft underbelly." In fact, the most authoritative studies on African migration show only a slightly growing process.

In the conclusions of the recent volume "Migration in West Africa," Joseph Kofi Teye recalls that:

> "The presentations have demonstrated that despite the popular narratives which suggest mass movement from West Africa to Europe and which have partly led to increased efforts by the EU to prevent irregular migration from West Africa through strict border control (Zanker et al., 2020), a majority of migrants from the West sub-region still migrate intra-regionally. Current intra-regional migration flows in West Africa have largely followed historical patterns, where labour migrants continue to move from Sahelian countries (e.g. Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger) to the mineral-rich and plantation communities in coastal countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal. Recent data supports historical patterns which indicate that circular migration is still very dominant in West Africa (Awumbila et al., 2014)." (Teye 2022: 261)

In 2018–2019, the political debate in Italy was largely monopolized by the issue of the decrease in the number of people landing, which was attributed (either as merit or fault, depending on political orientation) to the agreements signed by the Italian government in 2017 with the government in Tripoli. These agreements included the allocation of large sums aimed at strengthening the Libyan Coast Guard to deter migrant departures. In fact, compared to arrivals from Sub-Saharan Africa, other factors have had a greater impact and have significantly limited migratory transit to Libya. Sub-Saharan flows largely converged on Niger and then crossed the desert from there.

In 2015, the Niger government adopted Act 36, passed to combat the illicit smuggling of migrants (Act 36/2015 "relative au trafic illicite de migrants"). This law, which came into effect in early 2016, was specifically intended to discourage the transportation of migrants crossing Niger in the direction of Libya and Algeria (Brachet 2018: 16–35).

Foreign migrants found traveling north of Agadez (the main hub before transit through the desert for people arriving from Mali, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, and Nigeria) have since been subjected to increased checks and arrests. Traffickers, who until then had been *de facto* "regular" figures, have been placed under arrest, and their vehicles confiscated. Another consequence of the law has been to create a "blockade" of the mobility of migrants present in Agadez and Arlit, where the most vulnerable have been exposed to greater risks, including exploitation and trafficking. Additionally, there was a major impact on the local economy that had been organized around the "logistics" of migration (provision of housing, food, and water for migrants in transit waiting to leave for the desert), resulting in protests and growing tensions between migrants and host communities.

Act 36/2015 is certainly one of the "symbolic" achievements that EU (especially French) policies, have brought about through a series of economic "incentives" for governments. Opinions differ on the effectiveness of these policies in the medium and long term (Bøås 2020: 52–67), especially considering the fragility of these governments and the dangerous surge of jihadist guerrillas in this region.

In purely numerical terms, however, the impact has been immediate (Gabriel, Rijks 2020). The IOM observed a sharp decrease (-79%) in outflows already between 2016 and 2017; this was most noticeable in Séguédine, where the number of migrants fell from 300,000 in 2016 to just over 35,000 in 2017. In 2016, 65 percent of all registered migrants in Séguédine were

from other countries, while in 2017 this percentage dropped to 7 percent. Looking at absolute numbers, the decrease becomes even more evident: between January and September 2016, just over 230,000 foreign migrants had been registered traveling to Libya (Gabriel, Rijks 2020). In all of 2017, only 1,400 were counted. Subsequent monitoring has also shown that the routes passing through Arlit and Séguédine are overwhelmingly (over 90 percent) used by Nigerians or Chadians implementing short-scale migration, mainly to the area's gold mines (International Organization for Migration 2021).

The lasting result of Act 36/2015, however, has been that migrants have begun to use alternative, more dangerous, and less controlled routes to escape local police controls. Therefore, we can say that the main route to Libya has been greatly downsized in terms of passages, and this has been a key factor in the decrease of Sub-Saharan migrants to Libya and consequently to Italy.

During 2018, the change in routes has led, as *UNHCR Operational Data Portal* (2023) data highlights, to a greater convergence of transits of Sub-Saharan migrants to Spain, precisely by using alternative routes, including a notable upswing in sea routes to the Canary Islands.

In this context, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic also played a role, affecting migration dynamics in North Africa in different ways. The lockdown formally blocked all borders and most ports, making the transit of people even more complex throughout 2020. As evidenced by some monitoring, the risk of arbitrary arrest, labor and sexual exploitation were perceived to be on the rise by migrants surveyed, as well as increased transit costs and the use of more dangerous routes by smugglers to circumvent the border lockdown (Mixed Migration Center 2020).

The "reopening" after the 2020 lockdowns and 2021 restrictions has given rise to a new scenario. The Tunisian economic crisis, exacerbated by the collapse of the tourism sector during that two-year period, took such a toll that by the end of 2020, more than 36 percent of arrivals were by Tunisian nationals who had embarked from their country. In the following year, immigration from Egypt also grew, so that the sum of arrivals from the two North African countries reached 35.8 percent of the total.

During 2023, the situation varied further. Along with a large increase in arrivals, which more than doubled by mid-August 2023 compared to the same period the previous year (100,938 versus 48,295), there was also a change in nationalities. Indeed, the xenophobic policy implemented by Tunisian President Kaïs Saïed has prompted an increasing number

of people residing in the North African country, especially Ivorians and Guineans, to leave the country. Some have returned to their native countries while others have opted to head towards Italian shores. By the end of May 2023, their share in total arrivals by sea reached a significant percentage of 23.7 percent (Ministero dell'Interno 2023).

7. Immigration in Italy and structural issues

Leaving aside the contingent dynamics animated by the political-electoral market, we must bring the focus back to the structural issue connected with the foreign presence in Italy. When analyses address the more structural issues, they note how crucial the contribution of the foreign population has been, is, and will be in the difficult Italian socio-economic context. Regarding this contribution, a Bank of Italy paper highlighted the impact of immigration in the first decade of the 2000s:

> "Particularly important was the contribution to GDP growth in the decade 2001–2011: cumulative growth was positive by 2.3 percentage points while it would have been negative and equal to -4.4 percent without immigration. GDP per capita without the foreign component would have declined by -3.0 percent in the decade 2001–2011, instead of the -1.9 percent actually recorded. Still significant was the contribution of the foreign population for the last five years: the decline in GDP per capita (-4.8 percent) would have been in the counterfactual scenario of the absence of the foreign population more severe (-7.4 percent)." (Barbiellini Amidei, Gomellini, Piselli 2018: 18–19)

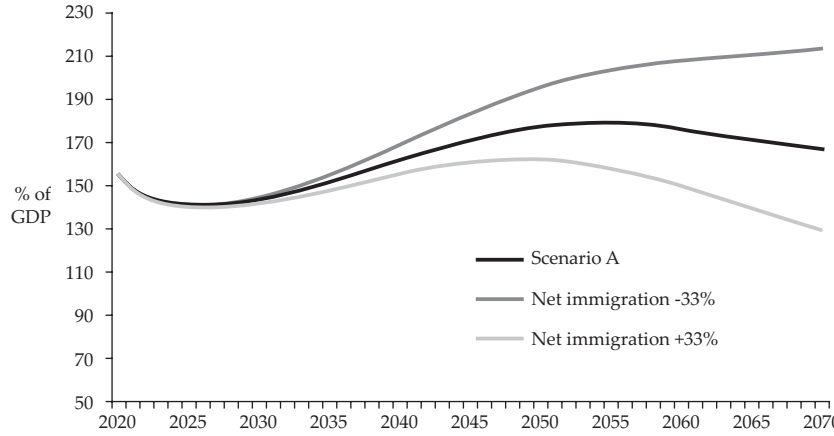
The same paper exercised a predictive dimension that highlights the main urgency facing Italy in the coming decades.

> "We now assess the contribution of demographics to the growth prospects of the Italian economy over the next half-century in international comparison, based on Istat's demographic forecasts (Istat 2017) and those made by the OECD for the main industrialized countries (OECD 2016a). The demographic dividend would turn out to be decidedly negative for Italy over the next four decades, with a minimum of -8 percent in 2031–41, before turning positive again in 2051–61. The specific contribution of immigration would be favorable over the next three decades, however, only partially offsetting the overall negative balance. From 2041 the contribution of immigration would also become negative." (Barbiellini Amidei, Gomellini, Piselli 2018: 19)

In short, the approaching retirement age of the "boomers" will pose serious issues to the sustainability of the social security and welfare system. These issues, difficult to address, cannot be managed without considering the presence of new immigrant citizens. For this reason, the need for serious migration policies is becoming increasingly compelling. This is acknowledged, albeit under the thin veil of electoral debate, in the public finance documents (budget law, DEF) that governments pass annually. These documents highlight in technical tables the ever-increasing need for young workers, a need unmet by current demographic dynamics. Figure 3, extracted from the current government's DEF, highlights the sustainability of public debt in relation to immigration variance.

Figure 3

Sensitivity of public debt to an increase/decrease in the net flow of immigrants (as a percentage of GDP)



Source: Ministero dell'Economia e delle Finanze 2023.

The Italian government seems to be aware of this situation, as it has not only increased the annual entry quotas for labor reasons (raised to 100,000) but also approved, in July 2023, a three-year program of more than 450,000 entries between 2023 and 2025. Additionally, a supplementary decree to the 2022 flows provides for an additional 40,000 entries, all for seasonal work, to absorb part of the surplus applications already submitted.

Beyond contingent controversies and the perennial representation of a country under siege by foreign immigration, there is a reality and more structural dynamics that governments must manage. As Ambrosini reminds us again about these representations:

> "So, the invasion has not been stopped, it simply never happened. The landings and asylum are a narrow component of a varied, complex, but basically stabilized phenomenon for several years. Flaunting the numbers on landings by going backwards and making it look like 600,000 people remained in Italy and hid somewhere is a gross falsification. What's more, actual immigration has a different demographic and legal profile than perceived and vituperated immigration." (Ambrosini 2020a: 25–26)

Only by approaching the matter with these understandings will it be possible to truly manage a process that appears necessary but must precisely be governed with foresight and a sense of reality.

8. Conclusions

In this contribution, we have tried to highlight how most of the themes used in the public discourse on immigration do not take into account the numbers or are even completely opposite (such as the invasion syndrome).

The long legislative process accompanying the 40-year development of foreign migration to Italy (Colucci 2018; Ambrosini 2020b) highlights how some assumptions, taken for granted, are not really so. Contrary to what appreas from the political debate, the key period in which immigration grew decisively was the 2001–2011 period, a decade largely governed by right-wing coalitions. This confirms a "double standard" (which, verily, does not only concern Italy) whereby immigration is a phenomenon that must be covertly accommodated and overtly opposed (De Haas 2023).

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