Country study

Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants

Italy country profile

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Key messages

Immigration as an issue in public opinion polls grew in importance considerably between 2015 and 2017 following the arrival of large numbers of refugees by sea, becoming the second most important issue for Italians. Since 2016, the salience of immigration has decreased, similar to trends across Europe.

Italian survey respondents overestimate how many immigrants are in Italy. In 2017, Italian respondents on average estimated the proportion of non-European Union (EU) immigrants in Italy at 24.6%, whereas the actual figure was 7% – the highest error rate in Europe.

In 2016, Italian respondents held the most hostile views towards migrants in Europe. More than half of respondents in a 2016 poll felt that refugees would increase the likelihood of terrorism in their country, and just under half believed refugees were more to blame for crime than other groups. Since 2016, however, negative attitudes have declined and positive attitudes increased. Segmentation data shows that half of the Italian population hold nuanced views or lack strong views about immigration.

Italy's ageing population and low birth rate mean there is a growing need for migrants. Migrants are needed to join the workforce, contribute to social welfare and ensure the sustainability of the pension system. They are also required to fill gaps in the elder care system, which is already extremely reliant on migrant care workers for home-based elderly care services.

In order to engage with Italians and shift public narratives towards recognising the benefits of migration, **debates must become less polarised and go beyond whether immigration is 'good' or 'bad'**. A more nuanced and holistic understanding is needed, addressing fears and misconceptions regarding the economy, security and different forms of identity.

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In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Italy was marked more by emigration to the United States than by immigration, with more than six million Italians passing through Ellis Island during the Great Emigration (Grande Emigrazione) (Florio, 2021). Others emigrated to North Africa during the period of Italian colonialism. Overall, roughly 13 million Italians left the country between 1880 and 1915, when large-scale emigration came to an end (see Figure 1) (Scotto, 2017). In large part, Italians emigrated in search of work and higher wages.

Following the Second World War, Italy experienced an 'economic miracle' (il boom economico) in the late 1950s and early 1960s, prompting a shift in the 1970s from emigration to immigration. By the early 1990s, more than one million immigrants from Africa, Asia and Latin America had arrived in Italy, and from the 1990s onwards immigration levels were consistently higher than emigration (King, 1993; see Figures 2 and 3). By 2006, four million immigrants lived in Italy, as people moved in search of employment and higher wages, particularly in the manufacturing, construction and agriculture sectors, as well as domestic service (Calavita, 2007). During the late 2000s, the main immigrant groups were Albanians, Moroccans and Romanians (Scotto, 2017). Since 2007, the tightening of borders by France, Switzerland and Austria has meant that Italy has become a country of settlement among asylum-seekers, rather than a country of transit (Politi, 2017).

Figure 1 Timeline of immigration to Italy
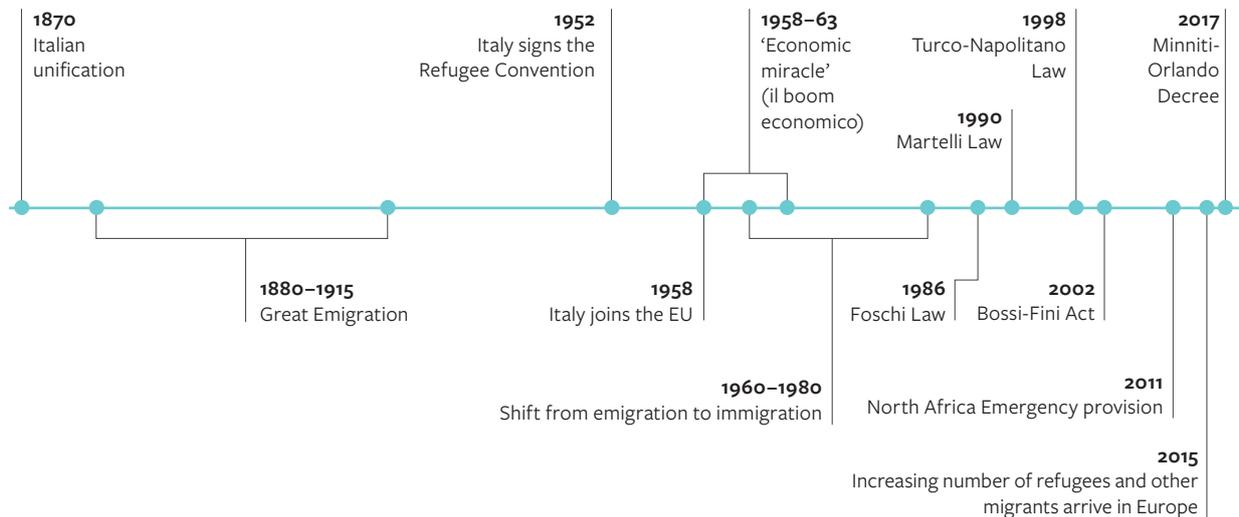
Figure 2 Italian net migration
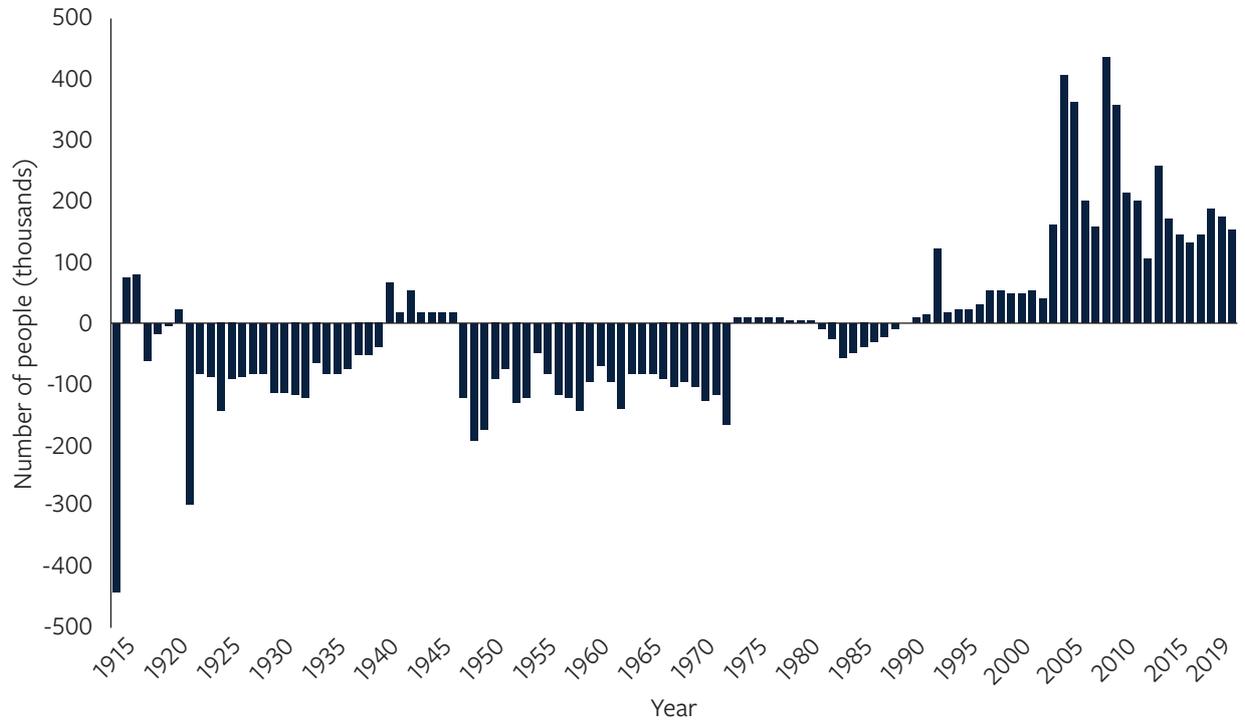
Source: Istat, 2020

Figure 3 Recent Italian migration trends

Source: Istat, 2020

Large numbers of highly skilled, working-age Italians have also moved to other EU countries. Since 2011, the number of emigrants has steadily increased; in January 2017, roughly five million Italians were living ab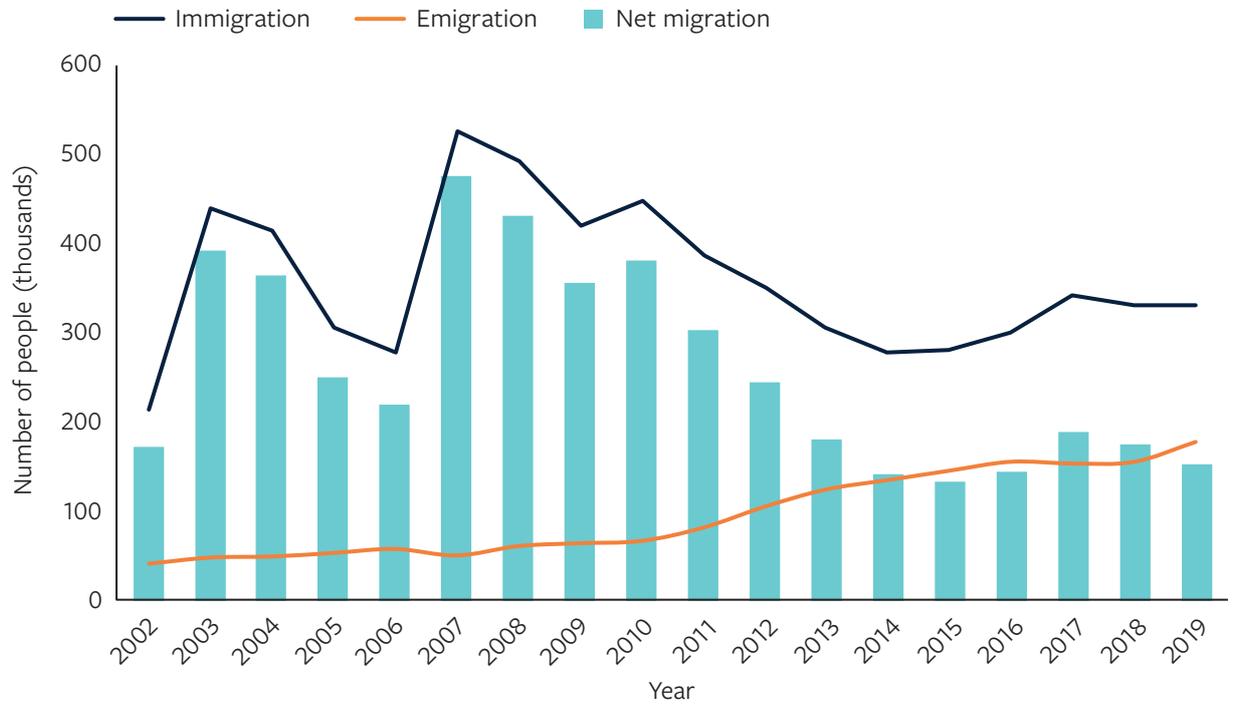road. Almost half of recent emigrants are young people between the ages of 18 and 34, and many are leaving southern, more rural regions of Italy (European Commission, 2018b). This emigration has occurred during a period of severe economic recession in Italy (and other countries in Southern Europe) following the global financial crisis in 2008. In the decade following the crisis, Italy consistently experienced low growth rates, high unemployment and very high levels of government debt (Peterson, 2018). Before the Covid-19 pandemic, Italy's youth unemployment rate had reached 29% – one of the highest in the eurozone and the cause of much of the continued out-migration of Italians of working age (Guterbock, 2020).

Immigration from other EU countries – particularly Romania and Bulgaria following their accession to the EU in 2006 and 2007 respectively – surpassed non-EU immigration in the 2000s (Scotto, 2017; Guterbock, 2020; see Figure 4). In the last few years, however, this trend has shifted, with non-EU immigration taking precedence. Notably, Italy has seen a large increase in the number of refugees and asylum-seekers entering the country – almost all of whom arrive from North Africa or the Middle East by sea (see Figure 5). This is largely due to Italy's geographic position as a southern peninsula in Europe, which has given it an 'outsized role' in the migration story (Scotto, 2017: n.p.). Between 2002 and 2017, 35% of asylum-seekers and refugees who arrived in Italy came from African countries, with highs of more than 70% in 2008, 2011, 2016 and 2017 (Florio, 2021). Sea arrivals to Italy peaked in 2016 at more than 180,000 (UNHCR, n.d.).

Figure 4 Immigration by origin (EU and non-EU countries)
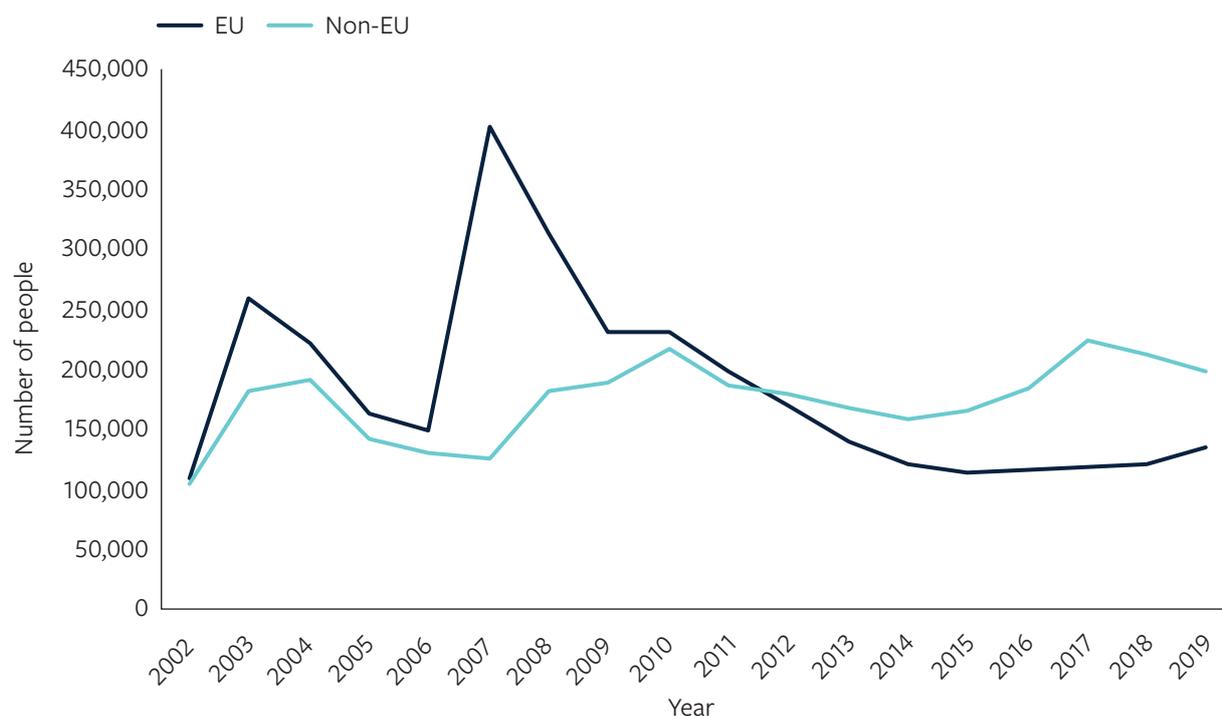
Source: Istat, 2020

In 2018 and 2019, Italy experienced a large decrease in the number of immigrants arriving by sea, dropping to 23,371 in 2018 and halving again to 11,471 in 2019 (UNHCR, 2020). In the first six months of 2021, however, the number of sea arrivals rose again, to surpass the 2019 total, with 20,532 migrants reaching Italian shores (UNHCR, 2021). This new increase in migration has largely been attributed to the economic decline brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic and stricter border controls in Greece (Squires, 2021).

Figure 5 Daily arrivals into Italy by sea, October 2015–July 2021
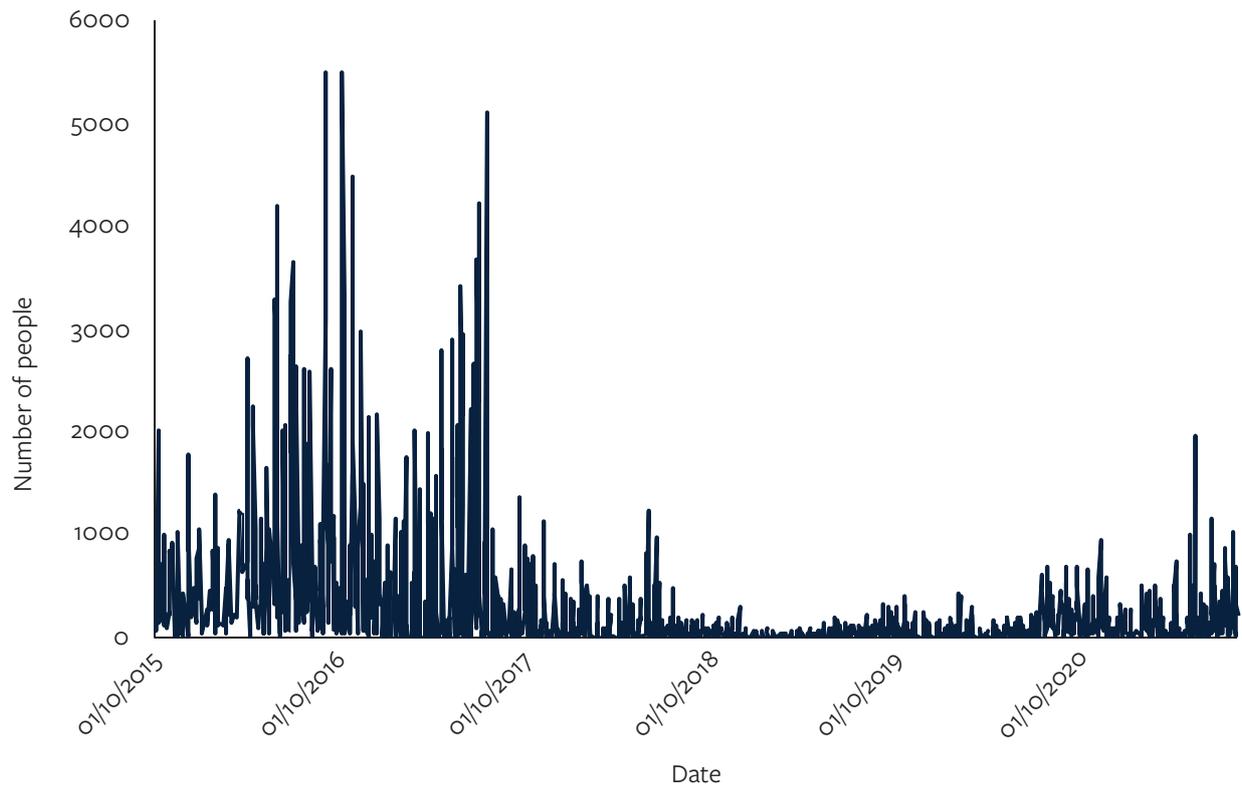
Source: UNHCR, n.d.

2 Current Italian immigration system and approach

Italian immigration law is based on two pieces of legislation passed in the 1980s: the Foschi Law (1986) and the Martelli Law (1989). These laws acknowledged equal social rights for legal migrants, but they did not provide adequate provision for the reception and assistance of regular migrants or the expulsion of irregular migrants, and they did not succeed in regulating economic migration (Calavita, 2007; Scotto, 2017). These laws remained in effect until the Turco-Napolitano Law, passed in 1998. This law, which separated the humanitarian issue of refugees from immigration policy and illegal immigration, has undergone several amendments to make it stricter. One such amendment, the Bossi-Fini Act of 2002, allows the Prime Minister to set a quota for non-EU workers every year, restricts entry to those who have a 'residence contract', limits residency permits to two years and limits family reunification to 'first degree' relatives, such as spouses, children and parents (Paparella and Rinolfi, 2002; Scotto, 2017).

In 2011, in the wake of the turmoil and civil unrest of the Arab Spring, the government temporarily relaxed migration policies for a specific group of asylum-seekers through the North Africa Emergency (Emergenza Nord Africa, ENA) provision. This automatically granted migrants who were citizens of a North African country and had arrived in Italy between 1 January and 5 April 2011 a six-month temporary residence permit for humanitarian reasons. This was later extended to 12 months and to other African countries experiencing high rates of food insecurity. The result of this provision was to increase acceptance rates for residence permits for those to whom the provision extended, while increasing denial rates for those were not included in the provision, either due to the extra administrative burden or because restrictions on the overall numbers of immigrants meant that those receiving the ENA provision occupied more spaces than had previously been the case (dalla Pellegrina et al., 2018).

The most recent piece of legislation regarding migration is the Minniti-Orlando Decree. Passed in 2017, the decree further distinguishes asylum-seekers from unauthorised migrants, speeds up the application process for asylum while banning those rejected from a second appeal, increases the number of detention centres and introduces voluntary work for asylum-seekers (Scotto, 2017). The ban on a second appeal is particularly problematic since the rejection rate at the first instance was 77% in 2020 (Bove, 2021). According to Esposito (2017), however, the main purpose of the law is to increase deportations by establishing detention centres for those awaiting repatriation in every region in Italy. These centres have been criticised for 'imposing prison-like regimes and failing to provide adequate environments for detainees' (Global Detention Project, 2019: 6).

In 2018, Interior Minister Matteo Salvini abolished the residency permit that had been issued on humanitarian grounds, though it was reinstated as 'special protection' in 2020. This gives a two-year residency permit to migrants who do not qualify for asylum but who would face the risk of inhuman

treatment or torture if they were sent home. It also applies to migrants with family in Italy or who have serious physical or mental health issues (Sunderland, 2020). It, and other short-term residency permits, can be converted into longer-term permits if employment is secured (ibid.).

As one of the first European destinations for arriving asylum-seekers, Italy is required to give them reception and assistance under European asylum regulations (Scotto, 2017). In 2018, Italian law established a system of reception centres, with asylum-seekers received, treated with first aid if necessary and identified. They are then sent to regional hubs if they wish to apply for asylum in Italy (Florio, 2021). If migrants cannot be identified, or if they do not apply for asylum, they are moved to repatriation centres and sent home (ibid.). From the regional hubs, they are moved to a second series of reception centres: either municipal centres – established in law in 2002 under the Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (SPRAR), where they receive food, accommodation, language courses, vocational support, health care, etc. – or privately run centres, established in law in 2015 as Extraordinary Reception Centres (CAS), which act as overflow facilities providing only food and accommodation (ibid.).

Although international law does not require asylum-seekers to claim asylum in the first country they enter, this has been codified in EU law through the Dublin Regulation. Many asylum-seekers, however, try to avoid registering in the hope of applying for asylum in countries further north. The regulation has put an increased burden on countries in southern Europe, which are geographically obvious points of entry into the EU.

Box 1 Overview of Italian immigration and asylum policies

Italian citizenship policy

Immigrants who wish to obtain Italian citizenship typically must live in the country legally and continuously for 10 years – though this is shortened to four years for EU citizens and five years for those who have been recognised as stateless or political refugees – and have registered their residency at the registry office. Applicants must also have earned a minimum salary for the previous three years, set at a level that is considered sufficient to support themselves, and have no criminal record (Refugee.Info, 2021b).

Italian asylum policy

Victims of persecution or people at risk of persecution in their own countries can apply for asylum in Italy at the Immigration Office of the Police (questura) or at the Border Police upon arrival. While an application is being reviewed, asylum-seekers have the right to a temporary residence permit. Applicants are granted refugee status, subsidiary protection or another type of protection, or their applications are rejected and can be appealed (Refugee.Info, 2021a).

3 Public attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: what do we know?

In the early 2000s, Italy was lauded for being more tolerant of immigrants relative to other countries in Western Europe (Calavita, 2007). In the autumn 2012 Eurobarometer poll, only 2% of Italians saw immigration as one of the two most important issues facing the country (Eurobarometer, n.d.). The importance of immigration in public opinion polls grew considerably between 2015 and 2017 – following the arrival of large numbers of asylum-seekers and refugees into Italy by sea – and became the second most important issue (Florio, 2021). According to Eurobarometer (n.d.) data, the percentage of respondents who cited 'immigration' as one of the two most important issues facing Italy reached a peak of 42% in autumn 2016 before falling again, as seen in other European countries such as Germany and Sweden (see Figure 6; Holloway et al., 2021a; 2021b). Although the salience of immigration declined considerably in the winter 2020–2021 survey, this is likely due to Covid-19 and the subsequent large jump in responses for 'health'.

Figure 6 Salience of immigration as a key issue in Italy
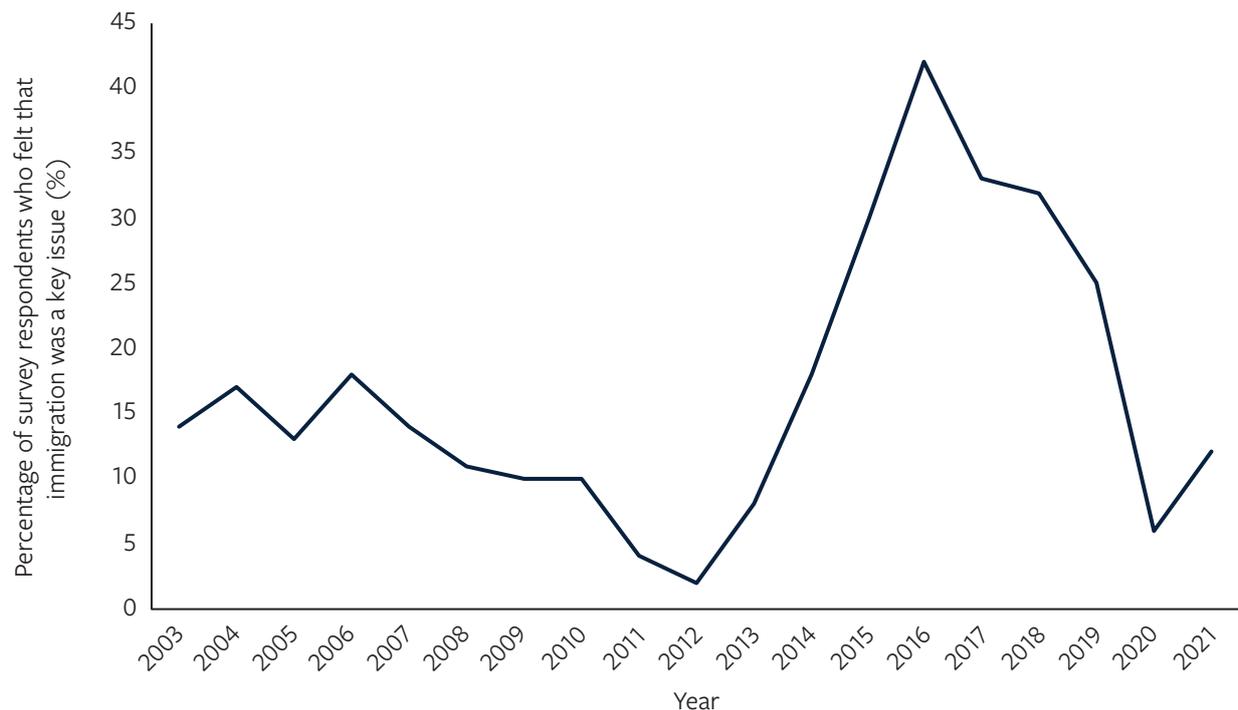
Note: This graphic shows the percentage of people answering 'immigration' to the question 'What do you think are the two most important issues facing Italy today?' Data is taken mainly from autumn surveys, though the Eurobarometer surveys were delayed due to Covid-19, with the autumn 2020 survey shifting to winter 2020–2021. Data shown here for 2021 is taken from the latest survey (spring 2021).
Source: Eurobarometer, n.d.

The perception of immigration as an important issue facing the country is attributed by Di Mauro and Memoli (2021: 55) to continued landings on the Italian coast, which 'have contributed over time to give value and salience to the immigration issue in the collective imagination, making Italian public opinion more sensitive and attentive to this issue'. In July 2017, 88% of respondents in an Ipsos MORI survey said that immigration had increased over the past five years, and two out of three (66%) believed there were too many immigrants in the country (Ipsos MORI, 2017).

Italian survey respondents, like most of their counterparts in other countries, overestimate how many immigrants are actually in Italy. According to a 2017 Eurobarometer survey on the integration of immigrants in the EU, Italian respondents on average estimated the proportion of non-EU immigrants in Italy at 24.6%, whereas the actual figure was 7% (European Commission, 2018a). As Valbruzzi (2018) points out, this error rate was the highest in Europe during this survey, and would have still been tied for the highest even if all migrants (EU and non-EU) were considered – a proportion of 10% of the population at the time of the survey. Valbruzzi links this misperception of the number of immigrants to public attitudes, highlighting how the countries with the highest error rates are the same countries with the highest scores on the Pew Research Centre's Nationalism Index. As he explains: 'as hostility towards immigration increases, so does the error in assessing the presence of immigrants in one's own country' (Valbruzzi, 2018: 4). In both of these measures, Italy ranks at the extreme, with the highest error rate and highest level of hostility towards immigration (ibid.).

This high level of hostility is apparent in other surveys undertaken in the past five years. In 2016, 60% of respondents in Italy who participated in a global attitudes survey felt that refugees would increase the likelihood of terrorism in the country – similar to the median percentage of 59% (Wike et al., 2016). In the same survey, Italians ranked the highest of those who said that refugees were more to blame for crime than other groups, at 47% (ibid.). In 2017, more than three-quarters (77%) believed that terrorists were posing as refugees to enter the country (Ipsos MORI, 2017).

In another survey in 2016, 65% of respondents felt that refugees were a burden because they take jobs and social benefits – significantly higher than the median percentage of 50% (Wike et al., 2016). Similarly, in 2017 61% of respondents were concerned about the pressure immigration placed on public services, while 47% were worried about immigration's impact on jobs (Ipsos MORI, 2017). Only 15% believed that immigration was good for Italy's economy in 2017 (ibid.), despite significant challenges given Italy's rapidly ageing population and demographic trends (see Box 2). During the Covid-19 pandemic, it was also revealed that foreign-born workers made up 18% of the essential workforce in Italy (Fasani and Mazza, 2020), underlining the general importance of immigrants in delivering public services and working in critical sectors in the country.

Box 2 Italy's ageing population

Like Germany (Holloway et al., 2021a), Italy's ageing population and low birth rate signal a growing need for migrants, which is directly at odds with popular anti-immigration rhetoric. In its 2018 report, the European Commission put Italy's 'old-age dependency ratio' at 34.3%, with a forecast of 60% by 2045, due to low fertility rates and increasing emigration among the highly skilled, working-age population, particularly from southern regions, which have had negative net migration rates since 2014 (European Commission, 2018b). Internal migration has been one of 'rural emptying', with younger Italians moving to larger cities and only older residents left in many villages (Guterbock, 2020).

While migrants are needed to join the workforce and contribute to social welfare, Italy's lack of appropriate elderly care has also led to Italians increasingly employing live-in migrant workers, called 'badanti', to look after ageing family members (van Hooren et al., 2018). For several decades these workers were given special provisions, such as work permits, and have been excluded from negative narratives linking migrants and criminality because these migrants are largely women and elderly care is seen as part of prioritising the needs of Italian families (ibid.).

Immigration, then, is 'essential to helping Italy to overcome its economic problems, especially to ensure the sustainability of the pensions system, since immigrants are on average younger than Italians and have a higher fertility rate' (Newell, 2019: 356). Immigration is also essential for filling gaps left by publicly provided elderly care, with foreign-born workers making up almost 90% of long-term home-based elderly care workers in Italy in 2012–2013 (OECD, 2015).

Public attitudes towards refugees are similarly negative. Two in three respondents (67%) in the 2017 survey mentioned above believed that migrants posed as refugees for economic reasons or to gain access to public services (Ipsos MORI, 2017) As Dixon et al. (2018) note, for many Italians the fact that roughly half of the almost 100,000 applications for asylum in 2017 were rejected lends credibility to the belief that many claimants do not have a legal right to stay in Italy.

Finally, in July 2017 only 10% of respondents in Italy said that immigration has had a positive impact on their country, and almost two-thirds (63%) agreed that immigration was changing Italy in ways they did not like (Ipsos MORI, 2017). When asked whether immigrants made Italy a worse or a better place to live, the majority of respondents have held negative views in the years Italy participated in the European Social Survey (2002, 2004, 2012, 2016 and 2018; see Figure 7). Predictably, this figure shows an increase in negative attitudes and a decrease in positive attitudes in 2016, though these had been somewhat reversed by the 2018 survey (European Social Survey, n.d.).

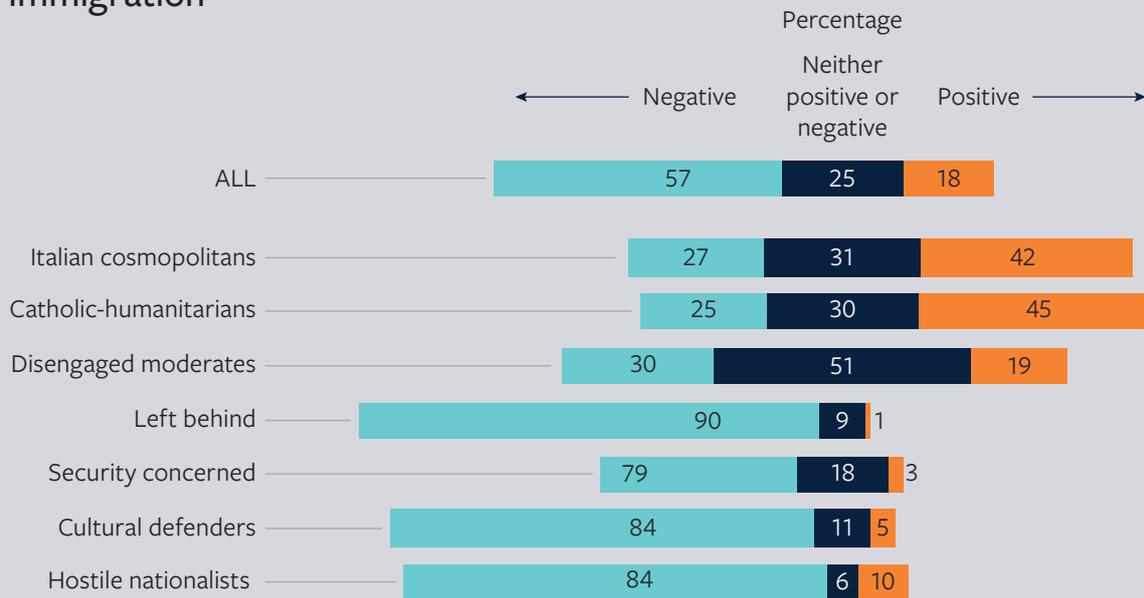**Figure 7** Attitudes towards immigration: does immigration make Italy a worse or a better place to live?
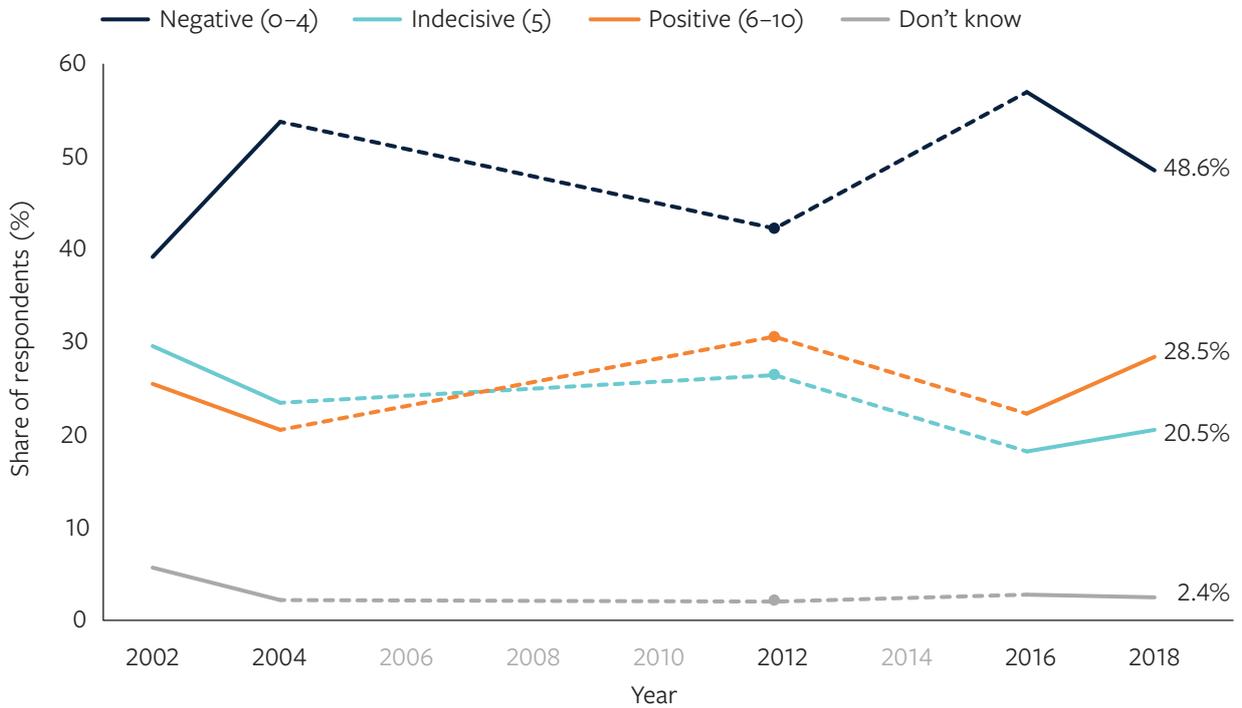
Note: This data has been extracted from the European Social Surveys. The survey scores respondents from 0–10 only and records 'don't know' answers. We have classified survey respondents who scored 0–4 in their answers to the question 'Does immigration make Italy a worse or better place to live?' as holding 'negative' views, those scoring 5 as being 'indecisive' and those scoring 6–10 as holding 'positive' views. Due to non-inclusion of Italy in some survey rounds, there is a gap in data between 2004 and 2012, and data from 2014 is also missing.
Source: European Social Survey, n.d.

According to segmentation analysis by More in Common, Italians can be grouped into seven categories according to their beliefs and values around identity, belonging and their place in the world (Dixon et al., 2018; see Box 3). Slightly more (28%) hold open views, with a more international outlook and desiring a more open society, than hold closed views (24%), tending to have narrower views on identity, more feelings of distrust and more negative opinions around immigration and trade. Roughly half of the Italian population (48%) lie in the middle of the spectrum, holding nuanced views – or lacking strong views – about the economy, cultural identity and security depending on their own priorities, values and concerns. In relation to immigration specifically, across all segments only 18% are positive about the general impact of immigration, with 57% reporting that the impact has been negative (Dixon et al., 2018).

Box 3 Segmentation of the Italian population and attitudes towards immigration

Percentage

	Negative ←	Neither positive or negative	Positive →
ALL	57	25	18
Italian cosmopolitans	27	31	42
Catholic-humanitarians	25	30	45
Disengaged moderates	30	51	19
Left behind	90	9	1
Security concerned	79	18	3
Cultural defenders	84	11	5
Hostile nationalists	84	6	10

Source: Dixon et al., 2018

Italian Cosmopolitans (12% of the population): people with strongly open views towards immigration, who believe it is good for Italy's economy and culture and who do not feel that Italian society and Islam are incompatible. They are more secular in their outlook and half are either atheists or practice non-traditional religions. They often see themselves as citizens of Europe and the world and dislike nationalism.

Catholic Humanitarians (16% of the population): people whose open views towards immigration are shaped by their Catholic religion and duty to be compassionate to others, particularly towards refugees. They feel that Italy's Catholic heritage should be protected, but also have more positive feelings towards Muslims than other segments. They are driven by a concern for social and economic inequality and Italy's history of solidarity and hospitality.

Disengaged Moderates (19% of the population): people who generally do not hold strong opinions on immigration, refugees or national identity, and who avoid debates on these issues. They are unsure whether immigration is good or bad for the Italian economy or Italian culture. They rarely express their views on these issues, but when they do they are often aligned with more open views based on feelings of empathy.

Left Behind (17% of the population): people who feel that societal changes and the economic crisis have affected them more than other Italians. The majority (61%) are unemployed. This shapes their views on immigration as they believe the economy is rigged to benefit the rich, and that immigrants exacerbate this problem by receiving the benefits that Italians struggle to get, and by working harder and for less money, making it difficult for Italians to find work.

Security Concerned (12% of population): people whose views on immigration are based on their fears for the security of their community and their country, especially from crime and terrorism, rather than on fears for the Italian economy or Italian culture. They believe Italy should prioritise stopping terrorism over supporting human rights, even if it means closing the country's borders, and are worried that refugees are more likely than Italian Muslims to become violent extremists.

Cultural Defenders (17% of the population): people whose closed views towards immigration are driven by concerns for its cultural impact on Italy, and the fear that Italian identity is disappearing. They see refugees and migrants as very different from Italians, and they feel they receive unfair priority in accessing services, benefits and housing. They want migrants to assimilate fully into Italian society and relinquish their own traditions and religions, particularly Islam.

Hostile Nationalists (7% of the population): people with strongly closed views towards immigration, who believe that the economy benefits the rich and that immigrants are draining Italy's limited resources. They have the most negative views of both immigrants and Muslims. Like Catholic Humanitarians, Hostile Nationalists believe Italy's Catholic heritage should be protected, but they do not feel a sense of duty to help migrants and refugees. Instead, they support sending migrant boats back across the Mediterranean and favour closing borders completely (Dixon et al., 2018).

Segmentation analysis suggests that a more targeted approach, based on individual concerns, could be used to engage the middle three segments, who should be prioritised in communication efforts as the least polarised groups. As Dixon et al. (2018: 29) suggest, 'understanding these differences – and especially the characteristics of the middle groups – is essential to understanding the landscape of public opinion and avoiding simplistic descriptions of Italy as having become hostile to migrants'.

Nuanced narratives that do not paint immigration in polarised terms could be used to promote more positive attitudes among a large section of the Italian population. Indeed, while some of the middle segments seem to be more closed in their attitudes than mixed, they differ in important ways. These middle groups are more concerned about rising levels of racism and discrimination (35% of Security Concerned and 23% of Left Behind, compared to 9% of Hostile Nationalists and 10% of Cultural Defenders) and protecting and helping unaccompanied minors (only 13% of Security Concerned and 14% of Left Behind believe they should not be helped, compared to 40% of Hostile Nationalists and 27% of Cultural Defenders). As Dixon et al. (2018: 43) highlight: 'These results suggest that if [the] security fears [of the Security Concerned segment] are adequately addressed, this group would be more welcoming of migrants and refugees and less aligned with closed views'.

4 Popular narratives

The attitudes towards immigration highlighted in the previous section have emboldened and been emboldened by the narratives of some political parties. Since the early 2000s, anti-immigration stances based on securitisation and, increasingly, fear of the 'Islamization of Europe' have moved from the far-right towards the centre (Caiani, 2019). In 2018, two populist political parties, the League (*Lega*, previously the Northern League, or *Lega Nord*) and Five Star Movement (*MoVimento 5 Stelle*, or M5S), began governing Italy by coalition – a coalition formed to create a governing majority between two parties that ran on anti-establishment and anti-immigrant rhetoric and that promised to 'put Italians first' (Dixon et al., 2018: 26). The League in particular 'has promised to repatriate half a million African and Arab migrants, ban sermons in Arabic, and require public votes before new mosques can be built' (ibid.). M5S promotes less forceful views on immigration, but emphasises Italian nationalism through culture, religion and shared values. It has, however, spoken out against the refugee situation, calling Italy the 'refugee camp of Europe' and 'the waiting room of the miserable', and it places the onus on solving the issue on stricter legal regulations, including repatriation (Caiani, 2019). This negative narrative is amplified in large part due to the fact that right-wing political parties make anti-immigration platforms central to their election campaigns, whereas left-wing parties tend not to mention immigration and do not extol the benefits of migration in their campaigning.

Italy's current government is made up of six parties (including M5S and the League), headed by Prime Minister Mario Draghi, a former chief of the European Central Bank. Migration is not a priority issue, with the government focusing instead on revitalising Italy's struggling economy, recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic and Italy's relationship with the EU (Johnson, 2021; Coratella and Varvelli, 2021). Seen as more technocratic, Draghi's appointment is viewed as a blow to right-wing populism and an opportunity to 'leave behind the populist, sovereigntist rhetoric that characterised the two previous governments' (Coratella and Varvelli, 2021, n.p.). As a result, public statements around migration have been limited, with a focus on externalised border controls and relationships with countries of departure (such as Libya), and working with the EU towards an agreement around relocating asylum-seekers who arrive in Italy taking precedence (Financial Times, 2021; Braude, 2021). Given that the League remains popular and staunchly anti-immigration, the impact of its presence within the coalition government and on resulting public narratives remains an open question.

As a counterpoint to the widespread negative rhetoric of recent years, a number of important actors in Italy are trying to promote more positive narratives around immigration. This is notable at the city level, with the mayors of Milan, Palermo and other cities taking a leadership role in seeking to change the narrative, emphasising cities as welcoming to refugees and other migrants, the dynamic benefits of human mobility for cities and a politics of solidarity, particularly with African cities (Mayors Migration Council, 2020). The Catholic Church has also consistently advocated on behalf of migrants under the leadership of Pope Francis (Guzik, 2018). While

recently Catholics have shifted to the right, supporting the government's strict immigration policies over the more open approach espoused by Pope Francis (Barigazzi, 2018), the Church has persisted in its efforts. Notably, following Salvini's elimination of residency permits, which left hundreds at risk of expulsion from reception centres, Italian priests offered to open churches to house them (Tondo, 2018).

Another narrative particular to Italy harkens back to stories of Italian emigrants to other countries in the hope that 'sharing a migratory experience might favor openness towards immigrants and reduce xenophobic behavior' (Florio, 2021: 2). Some critics of this tactic, however, feel that it might do more harm than good, as anti-immigrant attitudes may be a reaction, or even revenge, for the way Italian immigrants have been treated in the past. Florio (2021) finds that a history of previous emigration negatively influenced current refugee reception in the central and south of Italy – areas of high emigration in the past. He argues that this is due to increased conservatism, possibly down to more liberal Italians being more likely to emigrate from these areas, or the inter-generational transmission of trauma stemming from the racism and discrimination Italian immigrants often received in their new countries (ibid.).

5 Conclusion

The story of migration in Italy has been marked by a sharp turn from emigration, particularly to the Americas, in the late nineteenth century to immigration, first largely from the EU and then shifting to non-EU migrants following the Arab Spring in the early 2010s. Italy's geographic position as one of the southern-most countries in Europe, its long coastline and the location of Sicily and Lampedusa off the coast of Africa ensure that it remains at the forefront of the migration story – an initial, if not permanent, destination for those seeking a better life. Since the early 2000s, Italian migration law has become stricter as the country has struggled with its outsized role in the humanitarian and administrative aspects of Europe's refugee response.

Attitudes towards refugees and migrants have also changed significantly over time, with the salience of immigration growing proportionally to the number of migrants arriving in Italy. People's previous tolerance towards migrants shifted as the country became more diverse. Several global economic downturns have added to the pressure on Italy's economy, while the Covid-19 pandemic has particularly emphasised the role migrant workers play, and young, educated Italians have often left for other countries in the EU.

Increasingly negative attitudes towards refugees and other migrants have in turn been emboldened by political parties, whether fully anti-immigration like the League, or more ambivalent and focused on Italy first, like M5S. No political party has yet to take up a pro-immigration mantle, though some Italian cities and the Catholic Church have made efforts in this area.

Italy's story of migration, then, is more than just numbers of sea arrivals and rates of unemployment, but also a story of conflicting narratives and identities. As seen in the segmentation data, many Italians are shocked and saddened to see their country changing in ways they do not recognise, and they blame immigration for this, even as the struggling economy drives Italians from rural areas to cities and from Italy to other countries, leaving a vacuum in the labour market that is often filled by migrants and refugees.

In order to engage with Italians and shift public narratives towards recognising the benefits of migration and diversity, a more serious appreciation of the nature of Italy's economy, demographic trends and ageing population is needed. The security fears of particular segments of the population should also be addressed. In parallel, others should join the Church in emphasising the long tradition of hospitality in Italy. Both civil society and employers who need migrant workers have roles to play in encouraging people to be more welcoming of refugees and other migrants.

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