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## MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

### TURNING THE GLOBAL COMPACT INTO A RED HERRING IN ITALY AND EUROPE

**ABSTRACT**

The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration is, as The Economist described it in a recent column by Tom Nuttall, a dull piece of reading. *At best*, stressed Nuttall, *it helps build the trust between sending and receiving countries that is the foundation of any meaningful international policy*<sup>1</sup>. Then how did a non-binding, declaratory intergovernmental agreement become a crucial part of the political discourse in a considerable number of EU countries, effectively leading to the withdrawal of several governments from the Compact? The upheaval caused by the adoption of the Compact (which had already been discussed and agreed upon by all signatory governments in July, before becoming a token for nationalist propaganda) has once again demonstrated the inability of the EU to grow towards a sensitive migration policy, and the recklessness of many governments in refusing to engage in a reasonable conversation with other international actors in favour of a political line led by sensationalism and misinformation. The aim of this research paper is to map the development of the debate over the Global Compact in Italy building up to its abstention during the Marrakesh Conference on December 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup>. The research focuses on the main actors of the current political discourse in Italy, their inaccuracy and deliberate ambiguity in addressing concerns over the Compact during Parliamentary sessions and through the mass media, and the failure of the opposition, together with civil society, to leverage a valid counterargument to the growing hysteria about the migration crisis. The expected outcomes are the identification of common patterns in the nationalist discourse in Italy and the advancement of possible new practices to effectively foster a consistent,

<sup>1</sup> T. Nuttall, "European Governments in Melt-Down over an Inoffensive Migration Compact", The Economist, 8 December 2018, at <<https://www.economist.com/europe/2018/12/08/european-governments-in-melt-down-over-an-inoffensive-migration-compact>>.

level-headed conversation about migration management that steers away from sterile symbolism and responsibly addresses community issues at the national and EU levels.

**Key words:** global compact, migration, nationalism, Italy, UN

## INTRODUCTION

*As has become depressingly routine in Europe, the row over the UN compact has little to do with its ostensible target and everything to do with the smouldering embers of a culture war that the drastic reduction in illegal immigration since the surge of 2015 has failed to extinguish.<sup>2</sup> Immigration remains a powerful topic for nationalist parties, whether their arguments lie on facts or not. But in the absence of a genuine crisis to mobilise support, fake problems must be confected. The UN Compact is a sitting duck. There is no downside to hammering a multilateral agreement on a controversial subject negotiated by obscure officials in air-conditioned rooms abroad. That it was agreed by governments in plain sight, with parliamentarians invited to participate, is by-the-by.<sup>3</sup>*

Like many other European countries, Italy has been the theatre of a heated debate over the adoption of the Global Compact for Migration. And like many other European countries, critics of the UN Compact only raised their voices in late November, just one month prior to the Marrakesh Conference.

Until recent years, civil society and professional bodies had managed to challenge the implementation of anti-immigration policies and leverage a significant role in public debate.<sup>4</sup> However, the narratives adopted by the radical right and populist parties (i.e. the Northern League, the Five Star Movement, and Fratelli d'Italia) have progressively contributed to discrediting the work of NGOs and official bodies working together with migrants either by operating rescues at sea or by fostering integration. In 2016, the leaking of insider information by former policeman Pietro Gallo contributed to transforming rescue operations at sea into one of the most controversial topics of the debate on immigration. Gallo, who was working as a security officer on a vessel operated by the NGO Save the Children, claimed he had seen rescued migrants *smoking hashish and carrying knives*, while NGO operators allegedly carried out a number of other suspicious activities.<sup>5</sup> That same year, Luigi Di Maio took on the subject and first began circulating the expression “Sea Taxis” to define the boats operated by NGOs in the Mediterranean, referring to a FRONTEX report that highlighted the growing incidence of rescue operations by NGO vessels without any prior distress call or official

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> C. Sandelind (ed.), *European Populism and Winning the Immigration Debate*, Stockholm 2014.

<sup>5</sup> “L'uomo che ha creato il caso ONG”, *Il Post*, 2 February 2019, at <<https://www.ilpost.it/2019/02/02/pietro-gallo-scandalo-ong/>>.

information.<sup>6</sup> By the time the 2018 electoral campaign was underway, the public debate had already lost all contact with reality.

The first section of the paper will deal with the role of Italy in drafting the Global Compact on Migration. The analysis will focus on the strategies implemented by the Italian government until December 2018, and illustrate how in the past these have often lined up with most of the objectives and practices included in the Global Compact. The second section will deal with the dynamics of the debate in Europe and Italy, and try to assess common patterns among the topics brought forth by the political actors opposing the adoption of the Global Compact. The third and last section of the paper will briefly outline research questions and methodology.

## ITALY'S ROLE IN DRAFTING THE GLOBAL COMPACT

EU member states often spoke with one voice through the EU delegation at the United Nations.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, it is not that simple to pinpoint the proposals advanced by each Member State during thematic sessions for discussing the UN Compact. We can, however, trace back the contiguity between Italy's foreign policy concerning migration until the eruption of the debate in the Parliament.

A conference hosted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on February 6, 2018, involving representatives from origin, transit and host countries in Europe and Africa, has already showed how multilateralism and shared responsibilities represented a crucial point for the Italian agenda. Former Minister of Foreign Affairs Angelino Alfano described it as *a new dialogue format based on a strengthened partnership but increasingly effective in the integrated management of migration flows, capable of combining principles of solidarity and security*.<sup>8</sup> Among the topics discussed during the conference were those of strengthened cooperation, human rights protection, and investment programmes to help origin countries manage migration flows and provide alternatives to illegal routes. If this rings a bell, it is because all of these aspects of migration management make their appearance in the final draft of the UN Compact, as well.

On March 28, 2018, a few weeks after the elections, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs hosted a meeting between representatives of the civil society and NGOs to discuss the negotiations underway in the UN about the Global Compact for Migration. According to a press release by the Ministry, the themes concerning the Italian proposal for a global agreement to manage migration flows revolved around shared

<sup>6</sup> "La storia dei 'taxi per migranti'", *Il Post*, 27 April 2017, at <<https://www.ilpost.it/2017/04/27/taxi-migranti-ong/>>.

<sup>7</sup> M. Gatti, "EU States' Exit from the Global Compact on Migration: A Breach of Loyalty", *EU Immigration and Asylum Law and Policy*, 14 December 2018, at <<http://eumigrationlawblog.eu/eu-states-exit-from-the-global-compact-on-migration-a-breach-of-loyalty/>>.

<sup>8</sup> "Global Compact on Migration: the Farnesina meets the Italian civil society", *MAECI*, 28 March 2018, at <[https://www.esteri.it/mae/en/sala\\_stampa/archivionotizie/eventi/2018/03/global-compact-migrazioni-la-farnesina-incontra-la-societa-civile.html](https://www.esteri.it/mae/en/sala_stampa/archivionotizie/eventi/2018/03/global-compact-migrazioni-la-farnesina-incontra-la-societa-civile.html)>.

responsibility among countries at all stages of migration, integration of development policies into migration regulations, and protection of human rights.<sup>9</sup> Again, all three are clearly reflected in the final draft for the Global Compact, demonstrating the coherence between Italy's interests and the provisions included in the GCM.

On September 26, during the 73<sup>rd</sup> United Nations General Assembly, Italy's Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte went as far as to endorse the adoption of the Global Compact in an official speech. In his own words, *Migration phenomena require a structured, multilevel answer that takes into consideration short, medium and long period strategies. The international community needs to cooperate. It is on this basis that Italy endorses the Global Compact on Migration.*<sup>10</sup> At the end of November, when asked about his opinion on the agreement and the ongoing debate in Italy, the Prime Minister restated his support for the UN Compact: *The Compact is compatible with our structural, multilevel strategy regarding migration. I have not changed my mind on that. However, after a meeting with my colleagues, I have decided to have a parliamentary session on such an anticipated agreement, in order to give everyone a chance to bring forth their opinion. The Marrakesh Conference will be an important landmark, but this does not imply we will not be able to sign the Compact later on.*<sup>11</sup>

## THE DEBATE OVER THE GLOBAL COMPACT IN EUROPE

The zero draft of the Global Compact for Migration was published on 5 February 2018 and was followed by the "zero draft plus" on 5 March 2018, marking the beginning of the negotiations phase leading to the Marrakesh Conference. On July 13, 2018, the UN finalised the text of the Global Compact.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán declared he would quit the pact even before its final approval in July. In the words of Hungary's Minister of Foreign Affairs Peter Szijjarto, the UN Compact was *entirely against Hungary's security interests* and posed *a threat to the world from the aspect that it could inspire millions* [of migrants].<sup>12</sup> He also claimed that the final draft of the Global Compact for Migration was *totally at odds with the country's security interests* and announced that Hungary would not take part in the Marrakesh Conference.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> "Migranti, Conte: 'Non ho cambiato idea sul Global Compact, ma è giusto che decida il Parlamento'", *La Repubblica*, 28 November 2018, at <<https://video.repubblica.it/dossier/governo-lega-m5s/migranti-conte-non-ho-cambiato-idea-sul-global-compact-ma-e-giusto-che-decida-il-parlamento/320988/321615>>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> "Hungary to Quit U.N. Migration Pact Shunned by Washington", *Reuters*, 18 July 2018, at <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-hungary-un/hungary-to-quit-un-migration-pact-shunned-by-washington-idUSKBN1K81BS>>.

<sup>13</sup> "Hungary is Exiting the Adoption Process of the Global Compact for Migration" (2018), *Kormany*, 18 July 2018, at <<http://www.kormany.hu/en/ministry-of-foreign-affairs-and-trade/news/hungary-is-exiting-the-adoption-process-of-the-global-compact-for-migration>>.

The Orbán government had already expressed its concerns to the UN in March, when it advanced a 12-point proposal objecting to the premise that *migration is a beneficial phenomenon that cannot be avoided*. According to the document submitted by the Hungarian government, *migration only leads to the creation of parallel societies with serious security implications in the affected region*.<sup>14</sup> Among the twelve points, significant importance was also given to the principle of sovereignty and the necessity to secure borders.

Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz quickly followed suit, claiming that the government *viewed some points of the migration pact very critically, such as the mixing up of seeking protection with labour migration*.<sup>15</sup>

As of November, the governments of Poland, Bulgaria, Czechia, and Slovakia had all released similar announcements, with shared references to national interests, sovereign principles and the need to separate legal and illegal migration. Italy was among the last European countries to express its concerns about the compact (partly because, as will be shown in the next section, the government was largely in favour of its adoption before it was turned into a propagandistic tool).

## THE DEBATE OVER THE GLOBAL COMPACT IN ITALY

The first mass-media coverage of the Compact in Italy dates back to July 14, 2018, when the newspaper *La Stampa* published an interview with Bernardito Auza, permanent observer for the Holy See in the UN offices in New York. *The Holy See*, reads the article, *hopes that the Global Compact for Migration will lead not only to an improved governance of the migration crisis, but also to a step ahead in the comprehension about migration phenomena and in the way migrants, and humanity as a whole, are treated*.<sup>16</sup> According to Bernardito Auza, the global framework on migration would have been an international landmark not only for governments, but also for NGOs and religious associations working in the field to help migrants.

The first mentions of the alleged negative implications of the Global Compact for the Italian agenda appeared on major national news outlets only in November 2018, after Giorgia Meloni, leader of the nationalist party Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy) addressed the topic during a parliamentary session and over social media. In a video published on November 16, 2018, she appealed to Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini

<sup>14</sup> Z. Kovács, "‘Security First’: Hungary Responds to the UN with a 12-Point Proposal to Handle Global Migration" *About Hungary*, 2 March 2018, at <<http://abouthungary.hu/blog/security-first-hungary-responds-to-the-un-with-a-12-point-proposal-to-handle-global-migration/>>.

<sup>15</sup> F. Murphy, "Austria to Shun Global Migration Pact, Fearing Creep in Human Rights", *Reuters*, 31 October 2018, at <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-migrants-austria/austria-to-shun-global-migration-pact-fearing-creep-in-human-rights-idUSKCN1N50JZ>>.

<sup>16</sup> "Global Compact, il Vaticano: sia un passo avanti al servizio non solo dei migranti, ma dell'umanità", *La Stampa*, 14 July 2018, at <<https://www.lastampa.it/2018/07/14/vaticaninsider/global-compact-il-vaticanosia-un-passo-avanti-al-servizio-non-solo-deimigranti-ma-dellumanita-T08TxeRXd-Q7x0dgyrf863N/pagina.html>>.

asking him not to sign the Global Compact on Migration. She defined it as *extremely dangerous... the latest scam of the UN, and the victory of globalists, big capital, speculators, and all those who want to destroy national states*.<sup>17</sup> She went on to criticise what she described as *the recognition of any kind of migration as a universal human right*, which would be an obstacle to the Italian government undertaking any measures to control migration flows. On that occasion, she also confused the actual Compact with the New York Declaration, but that is by-the-by.

The video went viral, and soon after nationalist newspaper *Libero* published an article describing the UN Compact as *the agreement that condemns us to invasion*, since it *invites everyone to pack up their belongings and come to Europe*.<sup>18</sup> Again, issues of sovereignty and perceived threats to cultural identity were brought up. The newspaper also highlighted how the debate was raging in Germany at the time, and how many other Member States had already withdrawn from the Compact.

Since then, the number of articles and editorials dedicated to explaining what the Global Compact was, how it was going to affect Italy, and whether signing it would be a good move for the Italian government has grown exponentially. A number of “enemies of the people” were identified over the following weeks, namely the Minister of Foreign Affairs,<sup>19</sup> the President of the Republic, the “immigrationist” side of the government led by the Five Star Movement,<sup>20</sup> Germany,<sup>21</sup> and others.

On November 29, 2018, the Prime Minister announced that the Italian government would not take part in the Marrakesh Conference and that the Italian Parliament would have the opportunity to debate the issue of the adoption of the Global Compact before signing it.<sup>22</sup>

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The debate over the adoption of the Global Compact on Migration was characterised by blatant inaccuracies, sensationalism and populism at its worst. In the case of Italy, it

<sup>17</sup> G. Meloni, “NO al Global Compact, l’ultima fregatura dell’ONU per imporci l’invasione”, *Facebook*, 16 November 2018, at <<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=403762876828187>>.

<sup>18</sup> G. Bucci, “Migranti, cos’è il Global compact dell’Onu: il patto che ci condanna all’invasione”, *Libero*, 18 November 2018, at <<https://www.liberoquotidiano.it/news/esteri/13401156/migranti-global-compact-onu-patto-internazionale-invasione-italia-immigrazione.html>>.

<sup>19</sup> F. Storace, “Migranti, Storace: ‘Perché Salvini tace sul Global Compact?’”, *Affari Italiani*, 23 November 2018, at <<http://www.affaritaliani.it/politica/migranti-storace-perche-salvini-tace-sul-global-compact-573768.html>>.

<sup>20</sup> V. Benedetti, “La trappola del Global Compact. Così aprirà le porte all’invasione”, (2018), *Il Primato Nazionale*, 27 November 2018, at <<https://www.ilprimatonazionale.it/politica/la-trappola-del-global-compact-cosi-aprira-le-porte-all-invasione-97430/>>.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> “Migranti: Conte, sospesa adesione a Global compact, non andiamo a Marrakesh”, *AGI*, 28 November 2018, at <[https://www.agi.it/politica/migranti\\_global\\_compact\\_contes\\_adesione\\_sospesa-4681918/news/2018-11-28/](https://www.agi.it/politica/migranti_global_compact_contes_adesione_sospesa-4681918/news/2018-11-28/)>.



is unsettling to note how it only took less than two weeks to undermine an international agreement that had been underway for over two years. The first research question is related to (1) the identification of the main actors of the political discourse in Italy. The research will focus on the role of nationalist parties opposing the adoption of the Global Compact, as well as news outlets carrying on the same narrative, and how they contrasted with the position of the current government. At the same time, the role of left-wing parties, civil society and members of the Church will be taken into consideration in order to assess how whether they managed to leverage an effective counternarrative to the voices calling for a withdrawal from the UN Compact.

The second research question relates to (2) what could have been done to prevent the public debate from reaching extreme polarization and whether it would have been enough, as ISPI research fellow Matteo Villa suggests, to show more empathy when answering the concerns of the public opinion, instead of *hiding behind numbers and dismissing sceptical voices as uninformed, and thus not worthy of attention*.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, the research will try to assess (3) common patterns in the nationalist discourse in Italy and Europe, as well as the way the debate over the adoption of the UN Compact unfolded.

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<sup>23</sup> M. Villa, "Italy's Post-Fact Immigration Debate", *Politico*, 27 June 2018, at <<https://www.politico.eu/article/italy-immigration-debate-facts-dont-matter/>>.

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