



## Full Length Article

# ‘Battleship at the port of Europe’: Italy’s closed-port policy and its legitimizing narratives

Silvia Aru

DIST | Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning, Dipartimento Interateneo di Scienze, Progetto e Politiche del Territorio, Politecnico e Università di Torino, Viale Mattioli, 39, 10125, Torino, Italy

## A B S T R A C T

From March 2018 to August 2019, during Matteo Salvini’s mandate as Minister of the Interior, Italy implemented the so-called ‘closed-port policy’, the closure of Italy’s ports to migrant-rescue ships. This policy was initially pursued by Salvini’s direct will through circulars before being justified ex-post by a legislative act. This paper analyses the lively parliamentary debates around rescue at sea in order to illustrate the majority’s discursive rationales in support of the closed-port policy and its transformation into law. Theoretically, this work adopts a multidisciplinary perspective which combines the works on *critique* and *justification* (Boltanski, Thévenot 2006; Boltanski, 2011) with those on *legitimacy* (Schulze, 2015) to speak to the political geography debate concerning border and migration regimes. These literatures enable the paper to innovatively approach the crucial role of parliaments as conflictual arenas which require governing majorities to enact specific legitimization strategies. By adopting this perspective, this work sheds light on the disputed rationale of migration policies while exploring how legitimization practices worked within the Italian Parliament. My argument unfolds in three main stages: first, the article examines the genealogy of the closed-port policy; second, it explores the legitimization strategies put in place by the majority in order to justify its policy and law; and last, it looks at how specific geographical imaginaries underpin the main narratives constructed through these different legitimization strategies.

## 1. Introduction

On 17th June 2020, the leader of the radical right-wing *League* party Matteo Salvini stood in front of the Italian Senate to emphasise the rightness of the actions undertaken by the former government in which he was the Italian Minister of the Interior. Among them, there was the decision to close the Italian ports to migrant rescue ships, which had caused him a series of judicial allegations.<sup>1</sup> During his eloquent speech in defence of his ‘closed-ports’ policy, Salvini made an unexpected Freudian slip: “Open ports have saved lives, closed ports sentence [people] to death”.<sup>2</sup> After an initial moment of general embarrassment, he corrected the sentence, turning back to his old mantra as Minister of the Interior that only closed ports could prevent migrants from dying in the Mediterranean. However, like the proverbial elephant in the room, Salvini’s slip of the tongue revealed, in a single moment, two interrelated elements from which this paper takes its cue. First, the fragility of the rationale supporting his argument, and second – and more importantly – the existence of an underlying discursive framework within which this fragile rationale that linked “closed-ports” and migrant safety was rooted, finding its own logic and seeking its own legitimacy. In a nutshell,

something had turned the obvious statement “People are safe if ports are open” into a slip of the tongue.

This paper aims to question this ‘something’; namely, the discursive rationales that supported the emergence and establishment of the so-called ‘closed-port policy’ in Italy between 31st May 2018 and 5th September 2019, when Salvini was Minister of the Interior. This policy was initially pursued by his direct will through declarations and circulars before being justified ex-post by a legislative act called “Security Package II”, approved on 5th August 2019 shortly before the government crisis that ended Salvini’s mandate. In particular, this article looks at the legitimization strategies used by the governing majority to justify the closed-port policy and its conversion into law, in the face of strong criticism from the center-left minority in the Parliament. The focus on the Parliament is analytically valuable because it leads this work to reveal the legitimacy struggles that played out within the Italian Government and the complex processes underlying the deterioration of migration policies and legislation in the country.

Theoretically, this paper assumes a multidisciplinary perspective in order to speak to the political geography debate about border and migration regimes, by proposing a “practice-oriented” view of policies

E-mail address: [silvia.aru@unito.it](mailto:silvia.aru@unito.it).

<sup>1</sup> Salvini has been investigated for failing to disembark the shipwrecked people at least 5 times: *Diciotti* own by the Italian Coast Guard on the 16th August 2018; *Sea Watch 3* Dutch-flagged German NGO (24-30<sup>th</sup> January 2019); *Sea Watch 3* (16th-29th June 2019); *Gregoretti* owned by the Italian Coast Guard (27th-31st July 2019); *Open Arms*, a Spanish NGO (14th-20th August 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. <https://video.repubblica.it/politica/migranti-il-lapsus-di-salvini-in-senato-porti-chiusi-condannano-a-morte-migliaia-di-persone/362439/362993>.

and law in the institutional arena. First, the article draws on Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot's understanding of *critiques* and *justification* (Boltanski, 2011; Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006) intended not as mere rhetorical actions carried out by powerful actors, but rather as social practices "founded on an intersubjectively and normatively based process of ordering" (Gadinger, 2016, p. 193). In line with this perspective, the need to make one's own value system explicit arises precisely during disputes, as is well exemplified by Salvini's opening case. Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot's work focuses on political actors and, in particular, on "critical moments" (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999) – called 'tests' – which people must constantly undergo to execute their ideas and actions. This theoretical perspective helps us bring attention to when and how "different moral claims by the majority and minority are tested in legitimacy struggles" (Gadinger, 2016, pp. 188–189). Second, this paper looks at scholarship on *legitimacy* (Cianciara, 2021; Ochoa et al., 2021; Oppermann & Spencer, 2018), which converges with work on *critiques* and *justification* to stress the pragmatic arena on which legitimacy is built through strategies that are linguistically constructed and shaped (Reyes, 2011, p. 781). In particular, this second branch of study provides an ideal foundation for methodologically setting the discourse analysis of the Italian parliamentary debates (Schulz, 2015).

On the one hand, Boltanski and Thévenot's perspective allows this paper to recognise the crucial role of parliament as a conflictual arena for divergent claims; on the other, research on legitimation provides useful categories for analysing the majority's legitimation strategies in greater detail. These two scholarly strands lead to the adoption of a "legitimacy-oriented view" (Ochoa et al., 2021, p. 211) of the parliamentary arena, seen as a *pragmatic field of inquiry*. Seeking to contribute to both these perspectives, I illustrate the disputed rationale of migration policies and laws while exploring how a governing majority's legitimation practices work inside parliament. In doing so, this work does not only contribute to political geography studies on border and migration regimes, but also responds to the need to make "more conceptual and empirical efforts to unveil the dynamics of [...] political controversies" (Ochoa et al., 2021, p. 211).

The paper is structured as follows: the next section frames my work both in theoretical and methodological terms by introducing the nexus of critical moments and legitimation strategies and by depicting parliamentary debates as an arena for analysing it. The third and the fourth section respectively introduce the Italian political context framing the closed-port policy and the main criticisms raised in the parliamentary arena by the centre-left minority against this policy and its conversion into law. These sections provide the paper with a necessary chronicle of the key events related to the closed-port policy and law, while identifying the main parliamentary debates under scrutiny (Fig. 2). The fifth section analyses majority's legitimation strategies via the categories identified within the theoretical framework and the sixth section foregrounds how specific geographical imaginaries underpin the legitimation strategies themselves. My analysis shows how, in the field of contention, the Italian majority had to build coherent discourses capable of holding together different strategies aimed at delegitimising the discourse of others while legitimising its own truth. The final section outlines the main findings and highlights the contribution this paper offers to the existing literature.

## 2. About *critiques* and *justifications*: legitimacy practices in action

Scholars in political geography (Casaglia & Coletti, 2021; Horowitz, 2009; To & Mahanty, 2019) and, in particular, critical migration researchers have already paid special attention to the interplay between dominant discourses, legitimacy and the law, by drawing from a rich tradition of critical social theory of law from Marx to Bourdieu and Foucault. They have looked at what happened in western countries in the post-9/11 context (Mountz, 2011; Brigden, 2019), where a growing concern towards 'security issues' led to a general worsening of migration laws over time (Bauman, 2013; Butler, 2004; De Genova, 2007; Fassin,

2019) as well as to a deterioration of existing laws on the ground (Eule et al., 2019; Gill & Good, 2019). The political discourses that have constructed migration as a negative phenomenon are 'productive', in the sense that they have the potential to affect change (Ochoa et al., 2021, p. 214). In this regard, Freistein and Gadinger (2020) have convincingly presented the political storytelling as an intrinsically power-imbued action used by political actors in order to legitimise a specific sense of reality and, accordingly, set the political agenda (Huysmans, 2011). Other scholars, inspired by Bruno Latour and his work on the *Conseil d'État* (Latour, 2002), have analysed migration 'law(s) in the making', by focusing on practices of different actors (migrants, judges, police officers, NGO officers ...) after the adoption of migration laws (Gill & Good, 2019). What still seems to be missing, in this broad and complex landscape of studies, is proper attention to what happens *before the law*, when disputed policies and new norms need to be discussed and formally approved at the governmental level. This study tries to fill this gap by identifying the parliamentary arena as a conflictual ground to pragmatically explore how the majority's legitimacy practices around migration policies and laws manifest while coming into conflict with the minority's criticisms.

In order to develop my argument, this paper is based on two theoretical frameworks which set up its conceptual and methodological approach. First, this paper relies on concepts of *critique* and *justification* as developed by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (Boltanski, 2011; Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). In line with these authors, disputes and controversies are at the core of the following analysis. These peculiar moments have the power to 'test' a person's (or, in our specific case, groups of people's) beliefs and ideas; said person (or people) must defend their views through justification and critique of others' competing beliefs and ideas. In these kinds of circumstances, the person has to remove themselves from the immediate situation and elevate their argument to a level of generality by appealing to higher common principles in order to gain consensus (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). In his analysis of institutional representation, Boltanski (2011) defines the moment in which one is deliberately open to critique as a 'reality test'. As the name suggests, this test concerns a clear disagreement between different actors on what reality is. Parliamentary debates fall into this typology of test, representing a "prime example of this format" (Ochoa et al., 2021, p. 216). In a parliament, the rightness and effectiveness of political decisions are tested in the debates between the majority in power and the opposition minority. During reality tests, critiques from the minority force the majority to engage in legitimacy practices (Suchman, 1995) based on specific strategies. From a pragmatic perspective, therefore, legitimation is a "non-linear interplay between critique and justification in the everyday" (Ochoa et al., 2021, p. 214).

But how to explore different legitimation practices in their making? For this purpose, a second strain of literature on *legitimation* is relevant to the conceptual tools of this work (Cianciara, 2021; Reyes, 2011; Rojo & Van Dijk, 1997; Schulze, 2015). Within debates on legitimation, scholars have considered different "grammars of legitimation" (Van Leeuwen, 1995), namely, discursive strategies put in place by political actors as powerful means for gaining consensus (Rojo & Van Dijk, 1997). By drawing on the works of Schulze (2015), this paper identifies six major strategies used to support legitimacy claims during Italian parliamentary debates: *Denial or singularity*; *Shifting responsibility and delegation*; *Rationalisation*; *Authorisation*; *Legitimation through security* and *Legitimation through altruism* (Fig. 1). These strategies can appear in different versions<sup>3</sup> and operate individually or in relation to one another. In particular, the last two – *Legitimation through altruism* and *Legitimation through security* – allow for a clearer identification of the value systems (Van Leeuwen, 2007) and worldviews of the actors involved in the justification practices. As we will see in the next few pages, these strategies are linked to specific plots of a story "where there is a villain, a victim and a hero" (Reyes, 2011, p. 781) and "particular types of places"

<sup>3</sup> See the column "Key futures" in Fig. 1.

Strategies of legitimation	Key features
<i>Denial or singularity</i>	- Denial of the existence of a norm transgression or attacking its accusers. A norm transgression can also be presented as a single case by stressing its limited effects.
<i>Shifting Responsibility and Delegation</i>	- Blaming other responsible actors in order to shift responsibility and delegate it. - Referring to experts in a specific field in order to support a speaker's ideas and acts.
<i>Rationalisation</i>	-Decisions are presented as a result of a heeded, evaluated and thoughtful procedure. -Extensive use of numbers and statistics to stress the objectivity and credibility of specific ideas presented as “unquestionable truths” (see also Van Dijk, 2005).
<i>Authorisation</i>	- Reference to an authority, which can say what is to be done. - Authorisation can also act in relation to a specific role model; it means that “the mere fact that these role models adopt a certain kind of behaviour, or believe certain things, is enough to legitimize the actions of their followers” (Schulze, 2015:195). - Reference to (the impersonal) law.
<i>Legitimation through security</i>	- A threat construction which has high legitimizing power. The “other” is negatively represented while a positive self-representation is built. -Use of hypothetical future arguments (“if we don't do X...then Y will happen”).
<i>Legitimation through altruism</i>	- Institutional actions and security policies are described as beneficial for a specific group or society as a whole (see also Reyes, 2011).

Fig. 1. Strategies of legitimation.  
Source: Schulze (2015), Van Dijk (2005).

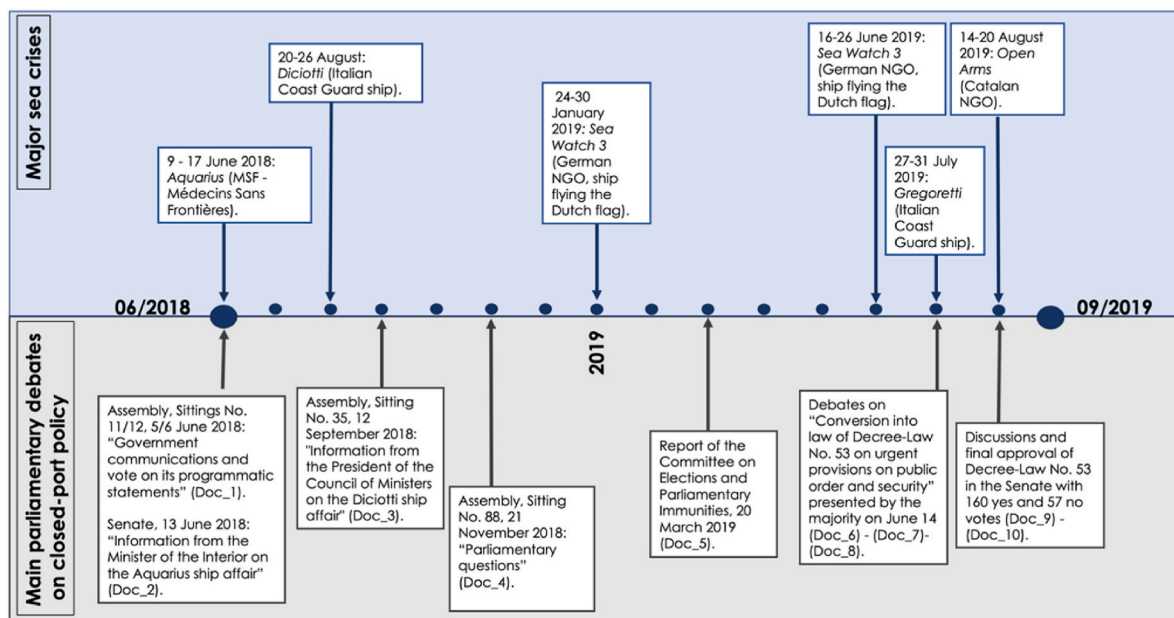


Fig. 2. XVIII Legislature of the Italian Republic - Conte Government I (from 1st June 2018 to 5 September 2019). Chronicle of the key events related to the closed-port policy and the main parliamentary debates under scrutiny.

(Tuathail & Agnew, 1992, p. 190).

In Schultz's work, strategies of legitimation are defined by their different argumentative features (Fig. 1). Each strategy can in turn include various rhetorical figures, such as irony, similes, metaphors, etc., the purpose of which is to create an effect – of meaning or even just sound – within a sentence.

Methodologically, this work is based on a critical discourse analysis (CDA)<sup>4</sup> of the transcripts of Italian parliamentary debates which are

<sup>4</sup> CDA views language as a form of social practice and focuses on hidden power relations and ideologies embedded in discourse (Johnson & McLean, 2020) by taking into consideration “grammatical, lexical, semantic, pragmatic, argumentative, narrative, metaphorical, conversation-interactional and so forth features of the text” (Fairclough, 2011, p. 8).

relevant for this study. They occurred in Italy, both in the Chambers of Deputy and in the Senate during Salvini's mandate as Minister of the Interior, between 31 May 2018 and 5 September 2019. By searching for the word ‘migration’ on the Government's website, I downloaded the transcripts of all the Italian parliamentary debates related to migration issues within the timeframe. Then, I uploaded these textual documents in the software *Atlas.ti*,<sup>5</sup> a qualitative research tool which supports the coding process of text, audio, video, and image documents. I then read textual data and manually developed and assigned codes and themes in line with the theoretical framework adopted. The first coding process helped me recognise the context in which the main dispute on

<sup>5</sup> Cf. <https://atlasti.com/>.

closed ports took place, namely the sequence of events, the dominant actors, and the most relevant moments in which the debate on ports was undertaken (Fig. 2). Then, I identified and charted the specific debates on closed-port policies and the subsequent Security Package II, with the aim of bringing out the different legitimization strategies used by the majority to respond to the minority's criticism, and to pursue the change of migration frameworks. Annex 2 presents the list of the main documents on closed-port policies selected during this second phase of analysis. Only after this stage were the selected phrases and passages translated from Italian into English in order to as much as possible anchor my argument to the language actually used during the debates.

In the section that follows, I put this conceptual and methodological framework into practice.

### 3. Setting the scene: the Italian closed-port policy

On 4th March 2018, the centre-right alliance, in which Matteo Salvini's *League* emerged as the main political force, won a majority of seats in the Chamber of Deputies and in the Senate, while the anti-establishment Five Star Movement (M5S) led by Luigi Di Maio became the party with the single-largest number of votes. On 31st May 2018, after 88 days of negotiations and several impasses, a deal between the *League* alone, without the other parties of the centre-right alliance, and the Five Star Movement (M5S) led to the formation of a new government.

This unexpected partnership brought to government two parties already considered to be, each in its own way, strongly populist (Zappettini & Maccaferri, 2021). They had both presented themselves as the "vox populi" (Foster et al., 2021, p. 80) and promoted a reified 'will of the people' (Casaglia & Coletti, 2021) against 'the global elite' (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2017; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Wodak, 2015). Moreover, the two parties were, at the time, joint by the urgency of redefining Italy's role in the EU, particularly in relation to migration issues (Casaglia & Coletti, 2021). During the election campaign, the *League*,<sup>6</sup> along with its centre-right coalition, called for a stop to 'illegal immigration' and for the systematic deportation of thousands of *clandestini* [irregular migrants] already in the country, on the grounds of security. For its part, M5S stressed the urgency to fight the 'migration business', accusing NGOs involved in rescue at sea of providing migrants with a 'sea-taxi service' between the shores of Libya and Europe (Ben-Arieh & Heins, 2021).

In line with what the two parties had declared during the election campaign, migration issues and the EU became two key and intertwined topics in the government agenda, as the words of an M5S representative clearly reveal:

"The concept of *Italy* as the '*port of Europe*' has made us slaves to the idea that it was enough to *pay us*, among other things little and poorly, to leave us alone to manage the *migration crisis*".<sup>7</sup>

The need to (re)define Italy's centrality within the EU was a leitmotiv

<sup>6</sup> Well-known studies in political geography have already focused their analysis on the *League* (League), the Italian party founded in 1991 under the name *Northern League* (Lega Nord), and its evolution over time (Agnew, 1995; Agnew & Brusa, 1999; Albertazzi et al., 2018; Casaglia & Coletti, 2021; Diamanti, 1996; Giordano, 2000). At the beginning, the party was based on a very strong regional identity embedded in the north of the country (the so-called 'Padanian') and it presented itself as a force for the interests of the people of the North against the excessive power of 'Rome', namely, the central state. The party has changed especially since 2013 when the new leader, Matteo Salvini, gave the party a new nationalistic slant. This change was also reflected in the name which became *League* (Lega), with the removal of the geographical reference to the northern area of the country. Although this article does not fit directly into the field of studies on Italian nationalisms, it can certainly contribute to the debate on this topic.

<sup>7</sup> Manlio di Stefano (M5S - Doc\_1).

which encompassed the various legitimization strategies of the ruling majority for their speeches and acts. The closure of ports soon moved from a discursive level to a concrete one. In June 2018, as soon as he was appointed Minister of the Interior, Matteo Salvini declared Italian ports "closed".<sup>8</sup> Between June 2018 and August 2019, during Salvini's mandate, NGO vessels were denied a port in Italy 28 times (Villa, 2021). Although Villa (2021) has demonstrated how Salvini's closed-port policy mostly resulted in delaying the entry of rescue boats into the port rather than avoiding the effective migrants' disembarkation in Italy, the idea of stopping migration flows through this policy had a highly mediated strategic role in Salvini's digital propaganda apparatus. Several Tweets and Facebook posts with the hashtag '#closetheports' appeared as a reminder of the priority of the governing majority 'to stop the invasion of the barconi [dinghies, boats]' (Zappettini & Maccaferri, 2021, p. 249; Casaglia & Coletti, 2021).

### 4. Setting the scene: Italian Parliament as a conflictual arena

From the get go, Salvini's ubiquity on social media, as well as his direct approach to ports, received strong criticism in the parliamentary arena by the centre-left minority. He was accused of 'depriving' parliament of power by making important decisions in terms of migration policies without reporting back to the chambers.<sup>9</sup> Within Italian parliamentary debates, the centre-left minority's critiques against the closed-port policy focused specifically on two elements. First, the centre-left minority criticised the use of migrants in the "arm wrestling"<sup>10</sup> between Italy and Europe. Even if criticism against Europe was also shared by several representatives of the opposition parties,<sup>11</sup> they pointed out how closing Italian ports was an act against "human lives and people's dignity",<sup>12</sup> as problematic as leaving migrants stranded in Libya, an unsafe place for them. Regarding this, some members of the minority emphasised the obligation to protect human rights non only for moral reasons but also to comply with national legislation which stated that "national security cannot be considered as a valid reason for derogating from the inviolable rights of the individual".<sup>13</sup> The minority's critique also addressed Salvini's populist rhetoric of speaking for the 'people' and not using the due democratic procedures.<sup>14</sup> During earlier debates on closed-port policy, the same minority had highlighted the need to properly change the law in order to pursue a closed-port policy in the correct way,<sup>15</sup> because a Minister should not have had permission to be "above the law".<sup>16</sup>

These early critiques against the closed-port policy prompted Salvini, supported by his majority, to strongly advocate for a new legislative act called Security Package II. Said package was greenlit two months before the collapse of the government in September 2019, when Salvini "played a crucial role in opening a crisis, [...] sanctioning the fall of the executive" (Casaglia & Coletti, 2021, p. 8). The Decree was presented by the majority as an urgent measure "necessary [...] against certain conducts" of NGOs,<sup>17</sup> in order to justify ex-post the closed-port policy from a legal point of view. Article 1 of the new legislative package gave the Minister of the Interior the right to block the transit and permanence of ships in national waters "in order to guarantee order and security within the

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2018/06/10/news/porti\\_salvini-198644488/](https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2018/06/10/news/porti_salvini-198644488/).

<sup>9</sup> Laura Boldrini (Leu) – (Doc\_6).

<sup>10</sup> Loredana De Petris (Misto-Leu) – (Doc\_2).

<sup>11</sup> Loredana De Petris (Misto-Leu); Roberta Pinotti (Pd) – (Doc\_2).

<sup>12</sup> Loredana De Petris (Misto-Leu) – (Doc\_2).

<sup>13</sup> Gregorio De Falco (Minority Rapporteur of the Committee on Elections and Parliamentary Immunities) – (Doc\_5).

<sup>14</sup> Vasco Errani (Misto-LeU) – (Doc\_5).

<sup>15</sup> Vasco Errani (Misto-LeU) – (Doc\_5).

<sup>16</sup> Pietro Grasso (Misto-LeU) – (Doc\_3).

<sup>17</sup> Flavio di Muro (L-Sp-Psd'az) – (Doc\_6).

country".<sup>18</sup> Article 2 established sanctions ranging from a minimum of €150,000 to a maximum of €1,000,000 for the ship's captain in case the prohibition to *enter, transit or stop* in Italian national waters was violated. Thus, the closed-port policy kicked off (or, rather, was the pretext for) a deterioration of the Italian migration legislation and contributed to "the transformation of the Mediterranean Sea into a carceral seascape" (Stierl, 2021, p. 3).

The implementation of the closed-port policy and the presentation and approval of the law was not, however, straightforward or simple within the Parliament. The centre-left minority also strongly criticised the Law Decree under discussion by mentioning jurists and their official opinion as evidence of its unlawfulness.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, the decree "regulate [d] very different matters: immigration, reform of the penal code, stadium safety" and this went against the rule that "decrees must be homogeneous in content"<sup>20</sup>. Moreover, the Law Decree did not fit the requirements of *urgency* and *necessity* mandatory for the enactment of such measures. Finally, international bodies, such as the UNHCR, were also mentioned by the centre-left minority to prove the international illegitimacy of this Decree<sup>21</sup> as well as Italian constitutionalists "who [had] stated the unconstitutionality of the first two articles of the decree".<sup>22</sup> In a nutshell, for the minority the decree was "in open violation of international conventions and other norms of international law and [...] [was] contrary to Article 117 of the Constitution",<sup>23</sup> which recognises legislative constraints arising from international obligations.<sup>24</sup>

Looking in depth at the parliamentary debates around closed-port policies and the Security Package II, we can identify different 'critical moments' (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999) where competing rationales were tested and forged discursively in relation to each other (Fig. 2).

It is within this context that legitimisation strategies of the ruling majority came into play, and it is to these strategies that the paper turns to next.

## 5. Legitimacy in the making: questioning the creation of the Italian closed-port policy

To understand what was at stake in the parliamentary arena, it is now necessary to move to the analysis of the majority's legitimisation practices during debates. In these contexts, the Italian majority clearly outlined the rationales of closed-port policies and acted in order to respond to the minority's critiques while justifying their rightness. Following Schulze's categorisation (2015), this section is structured around the six legitimisation strategies adopted by Salvini and the ruling majority.

### 5.1. Denial or singularity

As seen in Section 4, one of the minority's main critiques addressed the legitimacy of closed-port policy and the Security Package II because they were presented as a serious transgression of national and international legislations. The majority replied to this specific critique by denying the existence of such transgressions. Concerning the national level, the majority justified the legitimacy of the closed-port policy arguing that democratic procedures were followed because Salvini was acting as Minister of the Interior, namely the person "responsible for coordinating the control of external borders", as the "the national public

security authority".<sup>25</sup> In this case, the institutional role was mobilised to deny an alleged personal use of power on the part of the League's leader. While providing the justification, the majority also reasserted that Italy would never fail to protect human rights by providing relief to migrants stranded on ships and disembarking the most vulnerable.<sup>26</sup> The charge of transgressing international norms was also denied. The majority stated that international obligations were not broken because search and rescue services were always provided; the only effect of the closed-port policy and the associated new law was to counter "migrant trafficking" practices carried out by NGOs<sup>27</sup> (Stierl, 2021). Accordingly, not only was there no normative breach, but closing Italian ports actually fostered the proper application of the principle of 'the country of first entry', outlined in the EU Dublin Treaty. Because of this treaty – the majority stated – the member state whose flag is associated with the ship rescuing migrants at sea should be the one responsible for processing asylum seekers.<sup>28</sup>

### 5.2. Shifting responsibility and delegation

The majority used another legitimisation strategy to respond to and fight back against its centre-left minority's accusers.<sup>29</sup> In the theoretical section, I have defined this strategy as *Shifting responsibility and delegation*. This strategy worked with reference to the EU, which was described as being responsible for (not) providing "special channels for refugees", and as one of the "fantastic institutions that, however, [had] not lifted a finger so far, leaving [Italy] alone"<sup>30</sup>. In the transcriptions, it emerges a strong conflict not only with Europe, but also with certain Member States, blamed for shirking specific responsibilities. For example, France was accused of having a "hypocritical attitude"<sup>31</sup> towards internal border management and of not having "guaranteed integration, inclusion or social inclusion" to the 700,000 migrants who had entered via Italy.<sup>32</sup> Malta was repeatedly cited as guilty of not welcoming boats through its search and rescue area (SAR) and of pushing them intentionally towards the Italian coast. Through this legitimisation strategy, Italy (and therefore the majority that governed it) was portrayed as blameless and not at fault in relation to shortages in migration management, which were instead to be blamed on Europe or, on a case-by-case basis, on specific member states.

It is worth mentioning that legitimisation through *delegation* was not always aimed at delegitimising other actors such as the EU and the other member states. On the contrary, political opponents' past actions were often functionally used to legitimise the policies put in place by the current majority. In this case, the narrative of change and rupture gave way to a plot of continuity and alignment, which played a double role. It justified the implemented actions by showing their natural evolution with respect to the given situation. Between the lines, it also delegitimised the critiques received: why criticise the majority if what it was doing was in line with what *you* had already done? A clear example of this legitimisation strategy concerned the dispute on Libya and, in particular, it addressed the minority's criticism that this country could not be considered a safe place for migrants. To respond to this critique, the majority evoked the agreement signed in 2017 by the previous coalition government with the Libyan government of national unity, which effectively legitimised a Libyan search-and-rescue (SAR)

<sup>18</sup> Luca Rodolfo Paolini (L-Sp-Psd'az) – (Doc.6).

<sup>19</sup> Riccardo Magi (Misto- + E-Cd) – (Doc.6).

<sup>20</sup> Rossella Muroli (Misto-Leu) – (Doc.6).

<sup>21</sup> Massimo Ungaro (Pd) – (Doc.6).

<sup>22</sup> Laura Boldrini (Leu) – (Doc.7).

<sup>23</sup> Riccardo Magi (Misto- + E-Cd) – (Doc.6).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. [https://www.senato.it/documenti/repository/istituzione/costituzione\\_inglese.pdf](https://www.senato.it/documenti/repository/istituzione/costituzione_inglese.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Nicola Molteni (State Secretary for the Interior, L-Sp-Psd'az) – (Doc.6).

<sup>26</sup> Matteo Salvini (L-Sp-Psd'az) – (Doc.2).

<sup>27</sup> "Breaking the sea business" was one of the mantras most invoked by the M5S during the election campaign, as the congressman Devis Dori (M5S – Doc 6) pointed out.

<sup>28</sup> Riccardo Molinari (L-Sp-Psd'az- Doc 4).

<sup>29</sup> Luca Rodolfo Paolini (L-Sp-Psd'az) – (Doc.6).

<sup>30</sup> Daisy Pirovano (L-Sp-Psd'az) – (Doc.10).

<sup>31</sup> Alberto Stefani (L-Sp-Psd'az) – (Doc.6).

<sup>32</sup> Nicola Molteni (State Secretary for the Interior, L-Sp-Psd'az) – (Doc.6).

maritime area.<sup>33</sup> A similar argument was made regarding the EU, which had been financing the “Libyan coastguard and the strengthening of the activities of coordination of SAR operations by the Libyan coastguard”.<sup>34</sup>

### 5.3. Rationalisation

During parliamentary debates, there were numerous *rationalisation* strategies at work. As explained in the theoretical section, legitimisation strategies are used every time decisions are presented as a result of a heeded, evaluated and thoughtful procedure. For example, in order to reply to the minority’s accusation that Libya was dangerous for migrants, Salvini in person reassured that he was monitoring the situation in the third country, which was (according to him) improving, and that he planned a visit precisely to ensure equal rights for migrants.<sup>35</sup> During one rationalisation practice, Italy was metaphorically depicted as a ship with structural problems to be fixed.<sup>36</sup> In this context, the majority made extensive use of numbers and statistics to identify the beneficial and immediate effects of the closed-port policy<sup>37</sup> both in terms of preventing people from illegally landing in Italy and dying in the Mediterranean:

“These are the numbers. Rather than open ports, someone was an advocate of open cemeteries and that is not my case: fewer departures, fewer landings, fewer deaths”.<sup>38</sup>

“I repeat, therefore, that the results can be seen, they are clear and cannot be denied”.<sup>39</sup>

As these quotes show, rationalisation strategies were used to openly respond to the critiques made by the centre-left minority that the government was letting people die and creating an emergency that was not actually there. The following quote is emblematic in this regard:

“At a certain point, Mrs. Mironi [member of the Chamber of Deputies, *ed.*] said: ‘there is no emergency’. Of course, there is no emergency because this government has reduced the number of landings, otherwise there would have been an emergency. Of course, there is no emergency, but the emergency, if you had won the elections, unfortunately, would have been there and it would have increased”.<sup>40</sup>

### 5.4. Authorisation

Several times during the debates, the majority mobilised the strategy of *Authorisation*. Different figures were used to give authority to the closed-port policy as well as to the conversion of the Decree into a law (e.g., Italian prosecutors against international law, newspaper journalists against NGOs, Immigrant communities denouncing the trafficking of human beings ...). However, especially in the first phase, it was Salvini’s figure above all – the most voted person who spoke “in the name of a people”<sup>41</sup> – who played a pivotal role in legitimising the closed-port policy.<sup>42</sup> There was an intimate connection between the legitimacy strategies of the closed-port policy and the discursive construction of its promoter, *who put himself out there*,<sup>43</sup> a *balanced, wise, and courageous*

leader.<sup>44</sup> Salvini presented himself as *a good family man* who was protecting Italians.<sup>45</sup> Through this narrative, typical of other charismatic leaders (Schulze, 2015), he appeared to be “‘one of us’, who made people feel represented, different, and closer with respect to the transnational elites who pursued their own interests” (Casaglia & Coletti, 2021, p. 9). At the same time, Salvini’s institutional role as Minister of the Interior reinforced his position as an “authority which [could] say what [was] to be done” (Fig. 1). Within this framework, it is not a coincidence that Salvini was called “the captain”<sup>46</sup> by his supporters. The nickname ‘captain’ came from Salvini’s communications’ office, as part of a bigger (and successful) communications strategy via social media. However, even in the two political chambers, we can find this nickname directly quoted<sup>47</sup> or indirectly alluded to by the *League’s* members.

*Authorisation* is a strategy that can also be found whenever reference was made to the law. The majority not only denied the violation of law of which the minority accused it (5.1), but responded by mobilising the law itself as a source of legitimacy. As Rojo and Van Dijk (1997) eloquently put it, during a political controversy, words like ‘policy’, ‘law’, ‘justice’, ‘regulation’, ‘mandatory’ “are the strongest ways to legitimise an action, especially if the rule of law is a normative principle in a society” (Schulze, 2015, p. 195). In my case-study, the use of the law as a source of authorization can be traced in particular during security discourses, when constitutional provisions were mentioned as fundamental principles to be upheld (e.g., security of the state). For instance, the majority mobilised existing laws, in particular the SAR Convention, as a justification to not automatically consider Italy as a safe harbour of “all ships sailing in the Mediterranean, whatever the rescue zone”.<sup>48</sup> In all these cases, the law was not suspended but bent and redefined through a precise hierarchy of priority (internal security over human rights) and scales (national over international).

### 5.5. Legitimation through security

*Legitimation through security* was central to Salvini and his majority’s justification of a closed-port policy.<sup>49</sup> This fifth legitimisation strategy was clearly embedded in a broader nationalistic and security-based rhetoric that pitted an *us* (e.g., Italy and the majority) against a (generic) *them* outside (e.g., other EU member states, but also the minority, NGOs ...) (Anderson & Hughes, 2015). Through this strategy, the migratory phenomenon was described as an element of destabilisation of “the evolutionary path of *our civilisation*”, which “[would have] a profound impact on levels of well-being, economic structures, and so forth”<sup>50</sup>. For these reasons, the majority called for embracing “an evolutionary and *dynamic concept of safety*”, which would “prevent [ed] rather than treat [...]”<sup>51</sup> migration flows, in order to avoid a bleak future:

“We want our children to be able to grow up in peace in the land that our fathers gave us, with all that goes with it, with our being in the West evolving in accordance with *natural processes*, and not under the effect of *traumatic events* brought about by the wishes of the international government, the lobbies, the Soros or anyone else.”<sup>52</sup> [...]

<sup>33</sup> Nicola Molteni (State Secretary for the Interior, L-SP-Psd’az) – (Doc.6).

<sup>34</sup> Nicola Molteni (State Secretary for the Interior, L-SP-Psd’az) – (Doc.6).

<sup>35</sup> Matteo Salvini (L-Sp-Psd’az) – (Doc.2).

<sup>36</sup> Luca Rodolfo Paolini (L-Sp-Psd’az) – (Doc.6).

<sup>37</sup> Massimiliano Romeo (L-Sp-Psd’az) – (Doc.3).

<sup>38</sup> Matteo Salvini (L-Sp-Psd’az) – (Doc.5).

<sup>39</sup> Massimiliano Romeo (L-Sp-Psd’az) – (Doc.3).

<sup>40</sup> Luca Rodolfo Paolini (L-Sp-Psd’az) – (Doc.6).

<sup>41</sup> Matteo Salvini (L-Sp-Psd’az) – (Doc.2).

<sup>42</sup> Alberto Stefani (L-Sp-Psd’az) – (Doc.6).

<sup>43</sup> Matteo Salvini (L-Sp-Psd’az) – (Doc.2).

<sup>44</sup> Toni Iwobi (L-Sp) – (Doc.2).

<sup>45</sup> Matteo Salvini (L-Sp-Psd’az) – (Doc.2).

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/stegara1/>.

<sup>47</sup> Michelina Lunese (L-SP-Psd’az) – (Doc.10); Francesco Bruzzone (L-SP-Psd’az) – (Doc.10).

<sup>48</sup> Mattia Cruciolli (M5S) – (Doc.10).

<sup>49</sup> Nicola Molteni (State Secretary for the Interior, L-SP-Psd’az) – (Doc.6).

<sup>50</sup> Gianni Tonelli (L-Sp-Psd’az) – (Doc.7).

<sup>51</sup> Luca Rodolfo Paolini (L-Sp-Psd’az) – (Doc.6).

<sup>52</sup> Gianni Tonelli (L-Sp-Psd’az) – (Doc.7).

Otherwise, we will soon find ourselves discussing the banning of *prosecco* and *mortadella*".<sup>53</sup>

As already seen (Fig. 1), the use of this hypothetical future argument is a key feature of this specific strategy. Also in the Italian case, thus, a dystopian future is replaced by a future in which Italians "take back control"<sup>54</sup> thanks to the government's actions. A positive discursive construction of the self-image (i.e., the majority) emerges clearly. It is the majority that made it possible once again for Italians to "be masters in [their] own home, to be masters of [their] own destinies and to choose the future path of [their] own".<sup>55</sup> Thus, by closing Italian ports, the deputies of the majority "defend [ed] the millions and millions of Italians who [were] asking for border control"<sup>56</sup> because they "[had] the right to self-determination in the choice of their future!":<sup>57</sup>

### 5.6. Legitimation through altruism

*Legitimation through security* is not sufficient to gain consensus on the basis of a shared higher common principle (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). For this reason, in parliamentary debates the majority also used another legitimation practice, namely *Legitimation through altruism*. This strategy was mainly addressed to the minority's critique of not respecting human rights, the accusation of kidnapping migrants stuck on vessels, and to reassure the right-wing Catholic electorate of the ethicality of the policy pursued. The mantra that "only closed ports save lives" was rooted in this specific narrative, and its main passages can be found in some excerpts of Salvini and his governing majority's speeches:

"I am tired of children dying in the Mediterranean Sea, because someone deludes them into thinking that in Italy and Europe there are homes and there are jobs for everyone! I am tired of these state deaths! [...] In the past few hours, I have had a considerable weight on my shoulders. Political criticism is fine, it is fair, it is healthy. My objective is to save lives; my objective is to ensure that these children can grow up in the best possible way, without running away from their villages and towns to get into rubber dinghies, which the criminals in the business of trafficking in human beings now send out already deflated, because there is always someone who will go and collect these unfortunate people".<sup>58</sup>

Salvini claimed to be acting for the good of the country and for the good of the migrants, presented no longer as two conflicting objectives. In this case, the use of irony is a rhetorical reinforcement of what was said:

"Someone has not understood that, in order to go to trial, I would have to lie to this Senate and to the Italians, and I would have to say that I have not served the public interest of my country. [...] We help everyone and [...] I will never be the minister, the man or the member of the government who lets a single person die in the Mediterranean Sea without lifting a finger: never a single person. Let this be clear to everyone. We have saved lives. We have rescued [them]. We have treated [them]. We have fed [them]".<sup>59</sup>

This *altruistic narrative* was also associated with the mantra of "helping migrants in their own home"<sup>60</sup>. The policy of closed ports was thus presented, in one fell swoop, as a way of helping migrants 'at

home', of avoiding their death during the crossing, of better implementing humanitarian protection for people who deserved it<sup>61</sup> and, finally, as means to give priority to Italy's own young people.<sup>62</sup> In this story, Italians, as their 'captain' Salvini, played the role of the 'good people' (Favero, 2010); they were *generous, hospitable, supportive* people who "[had] nothing to learn from anyone".<sup>63</sup> Meanwhile, the character of villains was played by the NGOs, guilty of "not respecting orders given by the Italian police, and through their conduct, of putting people at risk, endangering the lives of the migrants on board".<sup>64</sup>

In what follows, I move to how the majority tried to construct a coherent narrative based on these different legitimation practices and, in particular, to the role played by the peculiar geopolitical imagination which underpinned these practices (Tuathail & Agnew, 1992, p. 190).

## 6. Constructing coherent worlds: geopolitical imaginaries between land and sea borders

In between the lines, how the six legitimisation strategies worked in concert has already emerged. A single strategy may respond to a specific critique, but their combined use aims at building coherent universes of *values* and ideas of *the world*. In order to construct a solid justification, the legitimation strategies rest on specific narrative plots with their peculiar geopolitical imaginaries (Tuathail & Agnew, 1992; see also *Geopolitics*, 2006; Müller, 2008).

In the Italian case study, the analysis identified three main plots with their related geopolitical imaginaries: the relationship between a certain idea of 'home' and migration management, the one between Italy and the 'outside' and, finally, the 'battle' in the Mediterranean between, on the one hand, Salvini and the ruling majority, and, on the other hand, NGOs.

First, the mantra of "helping migrants at home"<sup>65</sup> is a storyline that is clearly patterned on positive notions of 'home' (Kalir, 2017) and rooted in a specific geopolitical imagination made by bounded spaces of belonging (Rashidi et al., 2020). Not helping people in 'their home (country)' "would be *unjust*", because "every time we take people in under the pretence of false charity, it is increasingly dangerous, and we continually impoverish African countries".<sup>66</sup> Thus, the *altruistic narrative* was based on a specific idea of 'help' but not on a universalistic idea of human rights. The latter would have made it completely incoherent for the majority to link *Legitimation through security* and *through altruism* which, although not always used in the same discourse, had to nevertheless find a point of consistency. Reference to a hierarchy of 'citizenship' rights (Anderson & Hughes, 2015) is the key to presenting an exclusive and nationalistic version of altruism. Following this rationale, the Minister of the Interior went as far as to formulate a new interpretation of the evangelical dictum of *Love your neighbour as yourself*:

"Love your neighbour as yourself. Right. My neighbours, therefore, are the women and children who are fleeing the war and who are the first victims of the confusion we are experiencing. Those few young people, women and children who are fleeing the war must have their own home in our house and cannot be mixed with illegal immigration that simply leads to social confrontation. But 'love your neighbour as yourself' also means loving *the millions of Italians who have silently lost their homes, jobs and hope*. I repeat: *who have lost their homes, jobs and hope*. So, with all my limitations and all my faults, I will do everything humanly possible *to give a voice to the real refugees, to the legal and decent immigrants who come here to build a future for*

<sup>53</sup> Gianni Tonelli (L-Sp-Psd'az) – (Doc\_7).

<sup>54</sup> The 'take back control' narrative is a common trait of other contemporary populisms and nationalisms (see. Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017; Richardson, 2019; Agnew, 2020; Casaglia & Coletti, 2021).

<sup>55</sup> Gianni Tonelli (L-Sp-Psd'az) – (Doc\_7).

<sup>56</sup> Alberto Stefani (L-Sp-Psd'az) – (Doc\_6).

<sup>57</sup> Gianni Tonelli (L-Sp-Psd'az) – (Doc\_7).

<sup>58</sup> Matteo Salvini (L-Sp-Psd'az) – (Doc\_2).

<sup>59</sup> Matteo Salvini (L-Sp-Psd'az) – (Doc\_5).

<sup>60</sup> Francesco Bruzzone (L-Sp-Psd'az) (Doc\_10).

<sup>61</sup> Gelsomina Vono (M5s) – (Doc\_10).

<sup>62</sup> Matteo Salvini (L-Sp-Psd'az) – (Doc\_2).

<sup>63</sup> Matteo Salvini (L-Sp-Psd'az) – (Doc\_2).

<sup>64</sup> Simona Bordonali (L-Sp-Psd'az) – (Doc\_6).

<sup>65</sup> Francesco Bruzzone (L-Sp-Psd'az) – (Doc\_10).

<sup>66</sup> Gianni Tonelli (L-Sp-Psd'az) – (Doc\_6).

themselves and their children, respecting our history, our culture and our traditions, and above all I will do everything so that these Italians who have lost hope can have it returned to them, and to this I will dedicate all my future years as Minister, but above all my life, honoured to be able to do so for the Italian people”.<sup>67</sup>

Consistent with this vision of home, the new dominant discourse stressed the need to not only reverse the relationship between *Italians* and *the others*, but also between *Italy* and *the outside*. Here, the family narrative was mobilised to explain the relationship between Italy and the EU. Europe was depicted as a family, of which Italy was a member but a secondary one.

“[T]he Government of Change is a government legitimized by the desire and hope to regain national pride, dignity and sovereignty over those who, in recent years, *have treated our country as a subject and not as a brother*”.<sup>68</sup>

This geopolitical imagination was reiterated whenever the EU was presented as “fraternal only on paper”<sup>69</sup> and guilty of having left Italy “alone” with regard to migration. Europe “ignore [d] the so-called European peripheries”<sup>70</sup> such as Italy, treating them as “B countries”<sup>71</sup> and, for this reason, Italy would have matured over time “a sort of inferiority complex”.<sup>72</sup> Reversing this situation meant, thanks to the new government, “going [anywhere in Europe] with a plate in our hand begging for help”.<sup>73</sup> In short, Italy was presented as a child treated differently from other member states by ‘parent Europe’, so its process of emancipation from the family coincided with no longer accepting “everything [Italy was] told”.<sup>74</sup> A certain idea of ‘home’ as well as the need to increase strength and independence from the ‘EU family’ explains an increasingly systematic use of referencing national borders (Casaglia et al., 2020; Kallis, 2018; Lamour & Varga, 2017) during Salvini’s mandate. However, reference to the Italian national borders was not always so linear. For instance, the strong belief that migrants arrived in Italy to “reach Europe”<sup>75</sup> left room for the idea that “our borders, our coasts, before being of Italy, are of Europe”.<sup>76</sup> In this specific case, an ephemeral overcoming of a nationalistic view of the Italian border was functional to implicitly go against the Dublin Regulation and its country of first entry rule (Aru, 2022).

Finally, the Mediterranean is where the tension (and ambiguity) of land borders shifted to those in the water. The new approach given by the majority to port management was presented as a way to place “Italy at the centre of the dynamics of the Mediterranean and therefore of Europe as a whole”.<sup>77</sup> In the Mediterranean, Italy had to deal with “those NGO boats that circumvent international treaties and, above all [...] do not respect the orders given by the Italian police forces”.<sup>78</sup> Italy thus had an opportunity to no longer be a secondary member of the EU family, but to be a guarantor of compliance to national and international regulations in the Mediterranean Sea.

During Salvini’s mandate, an incident related to NGOs made the headlines. On the 12th of June 2019, Carola Rackete, the captain of the Sea-Watch 3, a German-based private rescue organization, refused to

dock at Tripoli with 53 migrants for safety reasons and headed towards the Italian port of Lampedusa. On 14 June, Italy closed its ports to migrant rescue ships and on 29 June, Carola Rackete decided to dock without authorization because of the exhaustion of the passengers on the ship. After docking, Rackete was placed under house arrest by the Italian authorities for disobeying orders from a warship as well as aiding and abetting illegal immigration.<sup>79</sup> The Sea Watch 3 case caused international uproar; the magazine *Fortune* called Rackete the “fresh new face” of the European migrant crisis<sup>80</sup>. It is of great interest to look at the way in which the conflict between ‘captain’ Salvini and ‘captain’ Carola Rackete<sup>81</sup> was constructed within the parliamentary debate, as in the following example:

“The so-called captain is a lady who, after 14 days of roaming ‘on and on’ at sea, says she acted in a state of necessity. [...] I could have hypothesised a state of necessity if Captain Rackete had, one, two, three days after the rescue, headed straight for the port of Lampedusa and attempted to disembark there. She did not. The fact that she remained at sea for fourteen days proves that they had food, fuel, seaworthiness - there was no engine failure, there was nothing -, this proves that this emergency is *more narrated than real*”.<sup>82</sup>

If Salvini was the male, Italian, thoughtful and fair ‘captain’, Carola Rackete was not a true captain, but reductively represented as a ‘lady’ without judgement and fairness in actions. She was a lady who lied, as her reckless actions against Italian laws would reveal. Overlooking the clear gender construction of the two figures, which would deserve its own article, what is interesting is the fact that in this case there was not an *emergency*, one of the concepts (and words) most often used by the majority parties to justify the need for restrictive migration policies. In this case, for the majority the emergency was “more narrated than real”.<sup>83</sup> The Sea Watch 3 incident was used to repeatedly affirm that those who violated national and international law were the NGOs, not the Minister of the Interior. As in the words of a representative of the majority:

“Commander Rackete has challenged the State and its institutions, not Salvini; she has challenged the State, she has challenged the Guardia di Finanza, she has challenged the Coast Guard, saying ‘I don’t care about your laws’”.<sup>84</sup>

Carola Rackete was presented as “unconcerned about international conventions, deciding to *arbitrarily* head to the Italian port, *risking human lives*”.<sup>85</sup> Rackete’s choice to dock in Italy was considered arbitrary also for a geographical reason. The MEP Riccardo Molinari (League) ironically wondered whether “international law ha [d] subverted the rules of geography [...]. If the emergency occurs in Libyan territorial waters or just outside, until proven otherwise, the nearest ports are Libyan or Maltese ports”.<sup>86</sup>

## 7. Concluding remarks

Drawing on Schulz’s work (2015), this work explored the different legitimization strategies at play during Italian official debates on closed

<sup>67</sup> Matteo Salvini (L-Sp-Psd’az) – (Doc\_2).

<sup>68</sup> Nicola Molteni (State Secretary for the Interior, L-Sp-Psd’az) (Doc\_1).

<sup>69</sup> Alberto Stefani (L-Sp-Psd’az) – (Doc\_6).

<sup>70</sup> Manlio di Stefano (M5S – Doc\_1).

<sup>71</sup> Elio Lannutti (M5S) – (Doc\_10).

<sup>72</sup> Gianni Marilotti (M5S) – Communications from the President of the Council of Ministers ahead of the European Council of December 13 and 14, 2018 and ensuing discussion, Sitting No. 70 of Tuesday, 11 December 2018.

<sup>73</sup> Simona Bordonali (L-Sp-Psd’az) – (Doc\_6).

<sup>74</sup> Simona Bordonali (L-Sp-Psd’az) – (Doc\_6).

<sup>75</sup> Ugo Grassi (M5S) – (Doc\_10).

<sup>76</sup> Ugo Grassi (M5S) – (Doc\_10).

<sup>77</sup> Manlio di Stefano (M5S – Doc\_1).

<sup>78</sup> Simona Bordonali (L-Sp-Psd’az) – (Doc\_6).

<sup>79</sup> For those interested in how Carola Rackete’s arrest turned out: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/02/more-than-1m-raised-for-rescue-ship-captain-carola-rackete-italy>.

<sup>80</sup> <https://fortune.com/2019/07/01/shes-31-a-ships-captain-and-she-just-to-rpedoed-italys-relationship-with-eu-partners-2/>.

<sup>81</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/migrant-rescue-vessel-sea-watch-3-what-you-need-to-know/a-49433631>.

<sup>82</sup> Luca Rodolfo Paolini (L-Sp-Psd’az) – (Doc\_6).

<sup>83</sup> Luca Rodolfo Paolini (L-Sp-Psd’az) – (Doc\_6).

<sup>84</sup> Luca Rodolfo Paolini (L-Sp-Psd’az) – (Doc\_6).

<sup>85</sup> Alberto Stefani (L-Sp-Psd’az) – (Doc\_6).

<sup>86</sup> Riccardo Molinari (L-Sp-Psd’az- Doc\_4).



ports between 31 May 2018 and 5 September 2019, when Matteo Salvini was Minister of the Interior. In particular, this paper showed how different legitimisation strategies concurred to discursively justify the majority's decision to launch the so-called *closed-port policy* and to foster the approval of a new legislation package related to it.

This study took as its starting point the idea that what emerges as dominant in the institutional arena, especially when it establishes legal terminology, has a very concrete role in determining what things are like (definitions of objects of some significance) and in confirming what matters, what needs to be respected, and what does not deserve to. In other words, the majority's legitimisation strategies work in defining specific migration policies from a governmental level. This is the case of the Italian closed-port policy, which has had substantial practical and political consequences not only at the Italian but also at the EU level (e. g., the temporary redistribution of migrants between different Member States).

Whilst the practical and political consequences of the closed-port policy are beyond the scope of this article, the theoretical intervention I look to make here may, however, foster further research on them. Inspired by Boltansky and Thévenot's works on critiques and justification (Boltanski, 2011; Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006), parliamentary debates were conceptualised as the 'scene of a trial', where politicians must declare and submit their interpretations of the world while establishing qualifications to other people, places, and objects. The focus on parliamentary debates as an empirical and pragmatic field of inquiry is therefore of complete centrality, even if it is often overlooked in migration and border debates. Through the Italian case, this paper tried to fill this gap by focusing on disputes and controversies within the Parliament where, according to Ben-Arieh and Heins (2021, p. 201), the "fusion of law, narrative and policy [...] [redefines] the legality of actors and actions along the migration routes".

My argument unfolded in three main stages. First, the article examined the genealogy of the closed-port policy and its introduction to serve the declared purpose of redefining migration management at the EU level. Secondly, it directed attention to the conflating legitimisation discourses on closed-port policy in order to explore legitimisation practices carried out by the majority in Government in order to implement their policies and changes in national migration law. Thirdly, this work questioned how mechanisms of justification inevitably mobilise and spread specific geopolitical imaginaries and assumptions about places and their relationship, which play a crucial role, as Tuathail and Agnew argue (1992), in determining policies in action.

The analytical sections reveal how the idea that "*Open ports sentence to death, closed ports have saved lives*" is rooted in a discursive rationale based on different practices of legitimisation as well as on specific geopolitical imaginaries. In particular, what emerged was the majority's effort to pursue a securitarian and exclusionary discourse while avoiding the accusation of not respecting migrants' human rights. Within the majority's discursive framework, the closed-ports policy was presented as a kind of defence of Italy against the unfair (EU, other member states) or threatening (migrants, NGOs) behaviour of other actors, represented by both the 'outside' and the 'others'.

By drawing attention to the institutional debate, and thanks to a legitimacy-oriented view, this work allowed light to be shed on "the way reality is shaped" (Bogusz, 2014, p. 135) by ruling parties in order to foster and legitimise the deterioration of the Italian migration policy and law. The pragmatic approach adopted to analyse legitimacy strategies has allowed this paper to engage in a twofold theoretical move. This work breaks new ground in taking a finer-grained look at the different forms of 'legitimacy' by illustrating how parliamentary debates reflect underlying struggles to gain legitimacy through specific practices and narratives (Gupta, 1995; Sharma & Gupta, 2006). Besides adding insights to scholarship on political legitimacy, this paper contributes to ongoing attempts in critical migration and border studies "to complicate simplistic top-down, inside-outside, inclusion-exclusion binaries", by emphasising "the deeply relational but also frictional ways in which

humans and their movements are differentially regulated and contained today" (Stierl, 2021, p. 2).

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### Acknowledgement

I thank Rocco Bellanova (Université libre de Bruxelles), Anna Casaglia (Università di Trento), Laura Cleton (University of Antwerp), and Darshan Vigneswaran (University of Amsterdam), who provided insight and expertise that greatly assisted my works in different stages, although they may not agree with all of the interpretations of this paper. I would also like to thank Andrea Pollio and Marco Santangelo (Politecnico di Torino) for helping me finalize the manuscript.

### Annex 1. Acronyms of Italian parties:

#### Ruling parties:

**L-Sp-Psd'az** = Lega-Salvini Premier-Partito Sardo d'Azione [coalition: *League-Salvini Premier-Sardinian Action Party*].

**M5s** = Movimento 5 Stelle [*5 Star Movement*].

#### Minorities parties:

**Misto-Leu** = Gruppo Misto e partito Liberi e Uguali [coalition: *Mixed Group and "Free and Equal" parties*].

**Pd** = Partito Democratico [Democratic Party].

**Misto- + E-Cd** = Misto- + Europa-Centro Democratico [coalition: *Mixed Group, " + Europe" and Democratic Centre*].

### Annex 2. List of documents:

(Doc\_1): Assembly. Sitings No. 11 and 12, "Government communications and vote on its programmatic statements", 5/6 June 2018.

(Doc\_2): Senate of the Republic, "Information from the Minister of the Interior on the Aquarius ship affair", 13 June 2018.

(Doc\_3): Assembly. Sitings No. 35, Public session, "Information from the President of the Council of Ministers on the Diciotti ship affair", 12 September 2018. [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/BGT/1074618.pdf](https://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/BGT/1074618.pdf).

(Doc\_4): Assembly. Sitting No. 88. "Chamber of Deputies -Parliamentary questions", 21 November 2018.

(Doc\_5): Report of the Committee on Elections and Parliamentary Immunities on the request for authorisation to bring legal proceedings under Article 96 of the Constitution against Senator Matteo Salvini in his capacity as Interior Minister pro tempore (Doc. IV-bis, n. 1), 20 March 2019.

(Doc\_6): Sitting No. 212, Discussion of the bill: Conversion into law of Decree-Law No. 53 of 14 June 2019 on urgent provisions on public order and security (A.C. 1913-A), 22 July 2019.

(Doc\_7): Sitting No. 215, Continuation of the discussion of the bill: Conversion into law of Decree-Law No. 53 of 14 June 2019 on urgent provisions on public order and security (A.C. 1913-A), 25 July 2019.

(Doc\_8): 2nd Standing Committee (Justice), No 113, Discussion and approval of Decree-Law No. 53 of 14 June 2019 on urgent provisions on public order and security, 30 July 2019.

(Doc\_9): 14th Standing Committee (European Union Policies), Opinion for Commission 1<sup>a</sup> (Constitutional Affairs), No. 119, Discussion and approval of Decree-Law No. 53 of 14 June 2019 on urgent provisions on public order and security, 1 August 2019. [chrome-](https://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/BGT/1074618.pdf)

extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.senato.it/application/xmanager/projects/leg18/file/repository/commissioni/comm14/pareri/plenaria/1437\_Decreto\_Sicurezza\_bis.pdf.

(Doc\_10): Senate of the Republic - Assembly No. 142, Discussion and approval of Decree-Law No. 53 of 14 June 2019 on urgent provisions on public order and security (Approved by the Chamber of Deputies). Discussion and approval of the question of confidence DDL S. 1437, 5 August 2019. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/BGT/01123152.pdf.

## References

- Agnew, J. (1995). The rhetoric of regionalism: The northern League in Italian politics, 1983–94. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 20(2), 156–172.
- Agnew, J. (2020). Taking back control? The myth of territorial sovereignty and the Brexit fiasco. *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 8(2), 259–272. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2019.1687327>
- Agnew, J., & Brusa, C. (1999). New rules for national identity? The northern League and political identity in contemporary northern Italy. *National Identities*, 1(2), 117–133.
- Albertazzi, D., Giovannini, A., & Seddone, A. (2018). 'No regionalism please, we are leghisti'. The transformation of the Italian Lega Nord under the leadership of Matteo Salvini. *Regional & Federal Studies*, 28(5), 645–671. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2018.1512977>
- Anderson, B., & Hughes, V. (Eds.). (2015). *Citizenship and its others*. Berlin: Springer.
- Aru, S. (2022). I had no idea that Europe had internal borders: Migrants' secondary movements' before the EU internal border regime. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 40(7), 1421–1436. <https://doi.org/10.1177/239965442210823>
- Bauman, Z. (2013). *Postmodernity and its discontents*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.
- Ben-Arieh, G., & Heins, V. M. (2021). Criminalisation of kindness: Narratives of legality in the European politics of migration containment. *Third World Quarterly*, 42(1), 200–217. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1855074>
- Bogusz, T. (2014). Why (not) pragmatism? In S. Susen, & B. S. Turner (Eds.), *The Spirit of Luc Boltanski: Essays on the pragmatic Sociology of critique (129–52)*. London: Anthem Press.
- Boltanski, L. (2011). *On critique: A sociology of emancipation*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Boltanski, L., & Thévenot, L. (1999). The sociology of critical capacity. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 2(3), 359–377.
- Boltanski, L., & Thévenot, L. (2006). *On justification: Economies of worth (Vol. 27)*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bridgen, N. K. (2019). *The migrant passage*. Ithaca (NY): Cornell University Press.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*. Brooklyn: Verso.
- Casaglia, A., & Coletti, R. (2021). Territorializing threats in nationalist populist narratives: An Italian perspective on the migration and covid-19 crises. *Space and Polity*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562576.2021.1991783>
- Casaglia, A., Coletti, R., Lizotte, C., Agnew, J., Mamadouh, V., & Minca, C. (2020). Interventions on European nationalist populism and bordering in time of emergencies. *Political Geography*, 82. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2020.102238>
- Cianciara, A. (2021). De-)legitimizing differentiated (dis)integration in the European union: Between technocratic and populist narratives. *Third World Quarterly*, 42(1), 128–146. <https://doi.org/10.30950/jcer.v17i2.1179>
- De Genova, N. (2007). The production of culprits: From deportability to detainability in the aftermath of "homeland security". *Citizenship Studies*, 11(5), 421–448. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621020701605735>
- Diamanti, I. (1996). The northern League: From regional party to party of government. In S. Gundle, & S. Parker (Eds.), *The new Italian republic, from the fall of the Berlin wall to Berlusconi* (pp. 113–129). London: Routledge.
- Eule, T. G., Borrelli, L. M., Lindberg, A., & Wyss, A. (2019). *Migrants before the law. Contested migration control in Europe*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fairclough, N. (2011). Discursive hybridity and social change in critical discourse analysis. Unpublished public lecture. Naples. Available at: [https://www.academia.edu/3776026/Discursive\\_hybridity\\_and\\_social\\_change\\_in\\_Critical\\_Discourse\\_Analysis\\_2011](https://www.academia.edu/3776026/Discursive_hybridity_and_social_change_in_Critical_Discourse_Analysis_2011).
- Fassin, D. (2019). *Le vite ineguali: Quanto vale un essere umano*. Milano: Feltrinelli.
- Favero, P. (2010). Italians, the "good people": Reflections on national self-representation in contemporary Italian debates on xenophobia and war. *Critical Practice Studies*, 12(2), 138–153. <https://doi.org/10.7146/ocps.v12i2.2370>
- Foster, R., Grzyski, J., & Busenbauch Meislová, M. (2021). The limits of European legitimacy: On populism and technocracy. Introduction to the special issue. *Third World Quarterly*, 42(1), 76–86.
- Freistein, K., & Gadinger, F. (2020). Populist stories of honest men and proud mothers: A visual narrative analysis. *Review of International Studies*, 46(2), 217–236. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026210519000421>
- Gadinger, F. (2016). On justification and critique: Luc Boltanski's pragmatic sociology and international relations. *International Political Sociology*, 10(3), 187–205. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olw007>
- Geopolitics. (2006). In V. Mamadouh, & G. Dijkink (Eds.), *Special issue on: The politics of geopolitical discourse*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650040600767859>. *Geopolitics* 11.3.
- Gill, N., & Good, A. (Eds.). (2019). *Asylum determination in Europe: Ethnographic perspectives*. Cham: Springer Nature.
- Giordano, B. (2000). Italian regionalism or 'Padanian' nationalism—the political project of the Lega Nord in Italian politics. *Political Geography*, 19(4), 445–471. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0962-6298\(99\)00088-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0962-6298(99)00088-8)
- Goodwin, M., & Milazzo, C. (2017). Taking back control? Investigating the role of immigration in the 2016 vote for Brexit. *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 19(3), 450–464. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481177117107>
- Gupta, A. (1995). Blurred boundaries: The discourse of corruption, the culture of politics, and the imagined state. *American Ethnologist*, 22(2), 375–402.
- Hawkins, K. A., & Kaltwasser, C. R. (2017). The ideational approach to populism. *Latin American Research Review*, 52(4), 513–528. <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.85>
- Horowitz, L. (2009). Environmental violence and crises of legitimacy in New Caledonia. *Political Geography*, 28(4), 248–258. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2009.07.001>
- Huysmans, J. (2011). What's in an act? On security speech acts and little security nothings. *Security Dialogue*, 42(4–5), 371–383. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010611418713>
- Johnson, M. N. P., & McLean, E. (2020). Discourse analysis. In A. Kobayashi (Ed.), *International encyclopedia of human geography* (pp. 377–383). London: Elsevier Ltd.
- Kalir, B. (2017). Between 'voluntary' return programs and soft deportation: Sending vulnerable migrants in Spain back 'home'. In *Return migration and psychosocial wellbeing* (pp. 56–71). Routledge.
- Kallis, A. (2018). Populism, sovereignty, and the unlikely Re-emergence of the territorial nationstate. *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 11(3), 285–302. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40647-018-0233-z>
- Lamour, C., & Varga, R. (2017). The border as a resource in right-wing populist discourse: Viktor Orbán and the diasporas in a multi-scalar Europe. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 35(3), 335–350. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2017.1402200>
- Latour, B. (2002). *La fabrique du droit. Une ethnographie du Conseil d'État*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Mountz, A. (2011). The enforcement archipelago: Detention, haunting, and asylum on islands. *Political Geography*, 30(3), 118–128. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2011.01.005>
- Mudde, C., & Kaltwasser, C. R. (2017). *Populism. A very short introduction*. Oxford: University Press.
- Müller, M. (2008). Reconsidering the concept of discourse for the field of critical geopolitics: Towards discourse as language and practice. *Political Geography*, 27(3), 322–338. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2007.12.003>
- Ochoa, C. S., Gadinger, F., & Yildiz, T. (2021). Surveillance under dispute: Conceptualising narrative legitimization politics. *European Journal of International Security*, 6(2), 210–232. <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2020.23>
- Oppermann, K., & Spencer, A. (2018). Narrating success and failure: Congressional debates on the Iran nuclear deal. *European Journal of International Relations*, 24(2), 268–292. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066117743561>
- Rashidi, Y., Ahmadypoor, Z., Alemi, A., & Bayat, M. (2020). The role of geographical imagination and geopolitical representation in dividing space/place into. *Geopolitics Quarterly*, 16(60), 79–100.
- Reyes, A. (2011). Strategies of legitimization in political discourse: From words to actions. *Discourse & Society*, 22(6), 781–807. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926511419927>
- Richardson, P. B. (2019). Sovereignty, the hyperreal, and 'taking back control'. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 109(6), 1999–2015. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2019.1587283>
- Rojo, M. L., & Van Dijk, T. A. (1997). There was a problem, and it was solved! Legitimizing the expulsion of 'illegal' immigrants in Spanish parliamentary discourse. *Discourse & Society*, 8(4), 523–567.
- Schulze, M. (2015). Patterns of surveillance legitimization. The German discourse on the NSA scandal. *Surveillance and Society*, 13(2), 197–217. <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v13i2.5296>
- Sharma, A., & Gupta, A. (2006). Introduction: Rethinking theories of the state in an age of globalization. In A. Sharma, & A. Gupta (Eds.), *The anthropology of the state: A reader* (pp. 1–41). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Sterl, M. (2021). The Mediterranean as a carceral seascape. *Political Geography*, 88, Article 102417. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102417>
- Suchman, M. C. (1995). Managing legitimacy: Strategic and institutional approaches. *Academy of Management Review*, 20(3), 571–610. <https://doi.org/10.2307/258788>
- To, P. X., & Mahanty, S. (2019). Vietnam's cross-border timber crackdown and the quest for state legitimacy. *Political Geography*, 75, Article 102066. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2019.102066>
- Tuathail, G.Ó., & Agnew, J. (1992). Geopolitics and discourse: Practical geopolitical reasoning in American foreign policy. *Political Geography*, 11(2), 190–204. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0962-6298\(92\)90048-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0962-6298(92)90048-X)
- Van Dijk, T. A. (2005). War rhetoric of a little ally: Political implicatures and Aznar's legitimization of the war in Iraq. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 4(1), 65–91.
- Van Leeuwen, T. (1995). *The grammar of legitimation*. London: School of Printing, School of Media.
- Van Leeuwen, T. (2007). Legitimation in discourse and communication. *Discourse & Communication*, 1(1), 91–112. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750481307071986>
- Villa, M. (2021). Migrazioni nel Mediterraneo: Tutti i numeri, in ISPI. Istituto per gli studi di politica internazionale. Available at: <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/migrazioni-nel-mediterraneo-tutti-i-numeri-24892>.
- Wodak, R. (2015). *The politics of fear: What right-wing populist discourses mean*. London: Sage.
- Zappettini, F., & Maccaferri, M. (2021). Euroscepticism between populism and technocracy: The case of Italian Lega and Movimento 5 Stelle. *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, 17(2), 239–257. <https://doi.org/10.30950/jcer.v17i2.1184>

**Silvia Aru** is currently an assistant professor of *Economic and Political Geography* at the University of Turin. She has specialised in human geography since her Master's degree at the University of Florence (2d005). Her training progressed at the University of Trieste (2009), where she obtained a doctorate in *Geohistory and Geoeconomics of the Border*

*Regions*. She benefited from a Marie Curie fellowship at the University of Amsterdam (2018–2020) on the right of asylum in the European Union, of which this work is one of the outputs. Her research interests encompass migration policies and their socio-territorial impact, as well as related issues of justice and socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion.