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What does Salvini's decree mean for migrants and refugees?

Patrick McCarthy Memorial Series on Intellectuals and Politics

The European Union has been grappling with how to address the influx of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers as flows from conflict regions significantly increased in 2015. The perceived 'crisis' and increase in the number of arrivals into EU countries have led to anti-immigration movements and political parties gaining popularity in EU countries. Although this crisis has been somewhat inflated by politicians and the media, as the number of people seeking refuge in Europe is much less – in absolute and per capital terms - than in the neighboring countries such as Turkey, Sudan, Bangladesh. Maurizio Molinari, Editor-in-Chief of La Stampa, joins us to discuss the new immigration and security decree outlined by Italy's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for the Interior, Matteo Salvini. Mr. Molinari has worked as an Italian journalist for over twenty years, and outlined why Italian's voted for Salvini's party in record numbers in March 2018, and why they continue to support Salvini. He also noted concerns for migrants and refugees following the approval of Salvini's decree, which will reduce support for asylum seekers.

In Italy and other EU states there is increasing support of populist and anti-immigration parties with groups like Italy's La Lega rising to power. In a recent poll, 32% of Italians indicated that they are in support of Salvini and his actions taken in the last year to curb immigration and secure Italy's borders. Just this week, Salvini's decree was voted in confidence in the Italian House Chamber with 336 votes in favor and 249 against. Historically, Italy has been a relatively open country with previous progressive and pro-migration decrees being implemented to support humanitarian agencies and regions with high numbers of migrants. Mr. Molinari argues that Italy's progression into a country with anti-immigration policies is the consequence of two complementary events; 1) the refugee crisis of 2015 that caused a spike in migration numbers, and 2) the inability of the European Union to unanimously make a decision for how to address the influx of migrants from the Middle East and Northern Africa. Since 2015, European Union member states have failed to find a coordinated solution to the increase in refugees fleeing predominantly from crises in Syria and Libya. Instead, states were largely left to pursue their own policies to resolve the issue. In the case of Italy, Mr. Molinari notes that the domino effect of stringent immigration policy and "tough against migrant" political rhetoric revived popular support for Italian nationalist parties. Further, it catalyzed anti-immigrant sentiment and negative perceptions of migrants, as people grew fearful of a threat to traditional Italian national identity.

In comparing Salvini's decree to previous Italian decrees for immigration, there are notable differences that Mr. Molinari identifies as problematic for migrants and refugees in Italy. For example, under the new decree there is a contraction of asylum seeker assistance with reduced thresholds for how many people can seek asylum and will abolish the humanitarian protection category. It also has implications for those pursuing residence permits that are required for jobs, government assistance, and their overall livelihood in Italy. Essentially, migrants and refugees are facing immense barriers to enter into Italy's private and public sectors and therefore become vulnerable to exploitation. In the practitioner panel discussion

following Mr. Molinari's presentation, many of these issues were also addressed and it is clear that the complexities of integrating refugees into Italian society will only be exasperated when Salvini's decree is formally established.

In Mr. Molinari's opinion, there needs to be a greater effort by the Italian government and migrants themselves to ensure immigrants are well-integrated and accepted in Italian society. He drew parallels between Italian families immigrating to the United States, these Italians also had to make compromises to thrive in the United States. He argues this is a moment for Italy to adjust its perception of migrants and develop a new conception of national identity, which is not based on *jus sanguinis* (i.e. citizenship by blood). However, questions from the audience and the remarks from the subsequent panel shed light on how many the case of Italians migrating to the United States case is very different from the migration patterns to Italy today. Firstly because many who arrive in Italy are involuntarily on the move, and forced to leave their home countries. Secondly, because Italians in the US shared the same colour or skin with the local population making integration ultimately easier, whereas many asylum seekers and migrants in Italy do not. The discussion and panel debate highlighted the challenges, and diverging opinions on how Italy should deal with immigration and asylum seekers.