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The Externalisation Gamble: Italy and Spain at the Forefront of Maritime Irregular Migration Governance

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Abstract: Irregular migration is rapidly becoming a permanent feature of the twenty-first century. Amid the European “refugee crisis”, Italy and Spain represent two major destination countries that are affected by substantial irregular flows. Despite this comparable condition, and notwithstanding the significance of their relevant policies, they have rarely been compared, a gap in the literature that this research addresses through a novel comparative analysis of their irregular migration governance. Following a broad contextualisation of destination countries’ strategies against irregular migration, this article delves into the two case studies’ external dimension of control policies from the 1990s to 2024 inclusive. In doing so, it assesses the nature of their foreign policy on irregular migration, their specific measures, and their geographical scope. It finds that there is a noticeable convergence towards readmission measures and externalisation, along with the growing use of informal deals. In terms of differences, the article highlights Italy’s much higher number of irregular arrivals compared to Spain, and the impact that this has had on domestic debates, priorities, and relevant policy formulation processes. As a novel investigation of two influential case studies, this article therefore contributes to the literature on both externalisation and Italy’s and Spain’s foreign policy.

Keywords: irregular migration; externalisation; readmission; foreign policy; Italy; Spain



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1. Introduction

The evolution of irregular migration control has been marked by the emergence of recurrent “migration crises”, especially in the European context (Crawley et al. 2017). Specific policies adopted by destination countries seemed to be effective at one moment, only to appear dated and ineffective when facing new flows of irregular migration. Governments are then harshly criticised by oppositions and accused of having failed in preserving the most vital of a state’s imperatives: the safeguard of its borders and, consequently, the right to decide who can and who cannot enter the country (Koser 2010). Governments’ ensuing reaction usually takes the form of a harshened rhetoric, the promise of tougher measures to “stop the invasion” and, inherent in this process, a further securitisation of irregular migration (Robinson 2017). The less visible aspect of this process, hidden from public scrutiny, involves a whole-of-government effort aimed at devising novel solutions (or revamping older ones), adopting new strategies, and testing creative tools. Things may seem to normalise once again, until the next “migration crisis” restarts the emergency cycle.

This cyclical nature, which has characterised the tension between human mobility and states’ irregular migration control imperatives for decades now, calls into question the very concept of “migration crisis”. To wit, the term “crisis” implies the idea of something short-lived, momentary, exceptional. However, what has emerged so far is that the divergence of migrants’ and states’ perspectives is everything but exceptional; rather, it is a structural feature of contemporary global society (Bommes and Sciortino 2011; Echeverría 2020). The multiplication of efforts on the part of destination countries is matched by an opposite

effort on the part of migrants. This conflictual relationship has been compared to an arms race (Broeders and Engbersen 2007) whose end is difficult to foresee. Yet, the representation of state–migrant relations in purely conflictual terms can be misleading, as it oversimplifies the complex and, at times, counterintuitive tensions between the two. In fact, while it is true that preventing irregular migrants from reaching their territories is a key element of states' sovereignty, it is also true that societies and labour markets often require the arrival of these migrants. Consequently, when states prevent such flows, they unintentionally create labour-related issues (Pastore 2014; Talani 2019). Additionally, and especially in the case of liberal democracies, stern policies aimed at controlling irregular migration often exhibit a tension with states' constitutive principles and international law commitments. In light of the great significance of irregular migration—and the difficulties in governing it—for twenty-first century politics, it is unsurprising that the spectrum of policies has continuously expanded, along with related research endeavours aiming to keep track of this evolution.

This growing and multidisciplinary research effort comprises several scholarly niches, which we group into four categories for reasons of space and analytical clarity (see the following section for a detailed discussion). This article's analysis, in particular, is concerned with two broad trends, namely destination countries' external dimension of migration policies and their externalisation measures. The former comprises all of states' international agreements aimed at managing irregular migration (such as readmission agreements, by way of example). The latter, on the other hand, is more complex to define. In the words of Crisp (2019), externalisation comprises “measures taken by states in locations beyond their territorial borders to obstruct, deter or otherwise avert the arrival of refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants who do not have prior authorization to enter their intended country of destination”. Put simply, externalisation is conventionally understood as a joint effort to prevent irregular migrants from leaving origin and/or transit countries and entering destination countries' territory (see also FitzGerald 2020; Czaika et al. 2023; Fontana and Rosina 2024). An additional policy typology, within externalisation measures, is the extraterritorial processing of asylum claims, a potential “externalisation 2.0” that Italy is currently developing with Albania.

Although certainly not a new phenomenon (Bigo 2000; Zolberg 2003), the externalisation of migration control has gained salience in the strategies of receiving countries since the “migration crises” of the 1990s and, even more so, those of the 2000s, and it is rapidly becoming a widespread approach among “Global North” countries. This strategy has gradually developed into a wide variety of more specific tools (Boswell 2007; Carrera et al. 2018; Longo and Fontana 2022; Fontana and Rosina 2024). In the case of Europe, this evolution has been the result of complex interactions, encompassing both divergent and converging patterns, emulative and distinctive processes, and complementary and competitive efforts among member states and in relation to the European Union's own strategies (Boswell 2007; Wolff 2012).

Although the “externalisation gamble” can be understood as part of the ever-evolving world of migration management, this particular evolution calls for a more specific explanation, along with several related questions. Could the convergence on externalisation be affected by the politicisation (and polarisation) of migration debates and the tendency to equate migration in general with the irregular migration phenomenon? Similarly (and consequently), could it be a result of destination countries' wariness of irregular migrants, as attested by recent international polls (Pew Research Center 2019)? Could it be related to the entrenchment, in most destination countries, of a set of laws and norms that are difficult to revert, as per the theoretical tenets of path dependence (Page 2006)? Or could it be due to the asymmetry of the EU asylum system—further tightened by the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum (European Commission 2024)—which places a disproportionate logistical and financial burden onto member states at the southern border? If proven correct, the above questions support the idea that, for such states, the avoidance of a direct involvement with mixed flows of asylum seekers and economic migrants may be perceived as a viable

strategy to escape a number of logistical, economic, and political challenges. According to this perspective, perhaps turning a blind eye on its humanitarian implications, the possibility to externalise the management of irregular migration may very well be a foreign policy priority for destination countries. In light of the complexities of migration management and the evident shortcomings of previous approaches, externalisation currently appears to be a pivotal area of policy innovation in this domain and governments' main bet on regaining control and alleviating the mounting anxieties of the electorate. All in all, it appears to be a risky gamble. While there are tangible costs associated with outsourcing such a sensitive issue to other governments, which may jeopardize fundamental principles at the core of their regimes, the benefits are all to be seen.

Amid the ongoing European "refugee crisis", and the widespread adoption of externalisation to attempt to manage irregular migration, Italy and Spain stand out as two highly-relevant case studies. Both are major destination countries at the border of the European Union, and both have implemented complex and controversial irregular migration strategies since the 1990s, some of which have later been deemed as viable models to be adopted in other destination countries. Despite their remarkable usefulness for debates on irregular migration governance, they have seldom been analysed together in this respect, a noticeable gap in the literature that this article seeks to address through a novel comparative analysis focused on Italian and Spanish policies on irregular migration, thus comprising both their broader external dimension and their externalisation measures, from the last decades of the twentieth century to the present day. From a methodological viewpoint, this is achieved through a comparative case study (CCS) approach (Bartlett and Vavrus 2016), that is broadly considering the same elements for the comparative analysis. These elements are as follows: the countries with which externalisation agreements are struck; the characteristics of such agreements, including the presence or absence of other provisions apart from irregular migration governance; and the specific measures they entail.

This article is structured as follows. First, this introductory section outlines the significance of irregular migration and the article's analytical framework. Second, a literature review on the attempts to control irregular migration is offered to better contextualise the comparative analysis. Next, two distinct sections respectively investigate Italy's and Spain's measures. The following section draws key comparative insights, therefore shedding light on similarities—the growing trend in implementing readmission agreements and externalisation measures—and differences (both exogenous and endogenous) between Rome's and Madrid's approaches over time. Lastly, the conclusion retraces the article's premises, goals, means, and findings. As a novel investigation of two significant case studies whose irregular migration policies have been rarely analysed together, this article therefore contributes to the literature on the evolution of irregular migration governance (and the current trend towards externalisation) and the specific foreign policy of the two countries.

2. The Multidisciplinary Literature on Migration Policies

The study of migration policies and, in particular, those focusing on irregular migration governance, is a substantial and growing multidisciplinary body of the literature (for a comprehensive review see Echeverría 2020). While this article certainly does not make pretence to comprehensives, it can shed light on some of the key research directions in this area, here grouped into four distinct yet complementary categories. A first important strand of research has focused on how irregular migration policies are formed in each context. Especially in the case of liberal democracies, although the same can apply to all types of regimes (see Adamson et al. 2024), states must deal with different actors and societal stakeholders, with diverse migration-related demands that are often difficult to reconcile (Freeman 1995; Money 2010; Lahav and Guiraudon 2006; Czaika and de Haas 2013). These may range from total closure and the expulsion of migrants, usually advocated by anti-immigration parties, to the explicit request for the arrival of thousands of foreign workers, usually advanced by the agricultural, manufacturing, or construction sectors of the economy.

Yet states do not deal only with societal interests, they must also balance their own interests amid their different functional imperatives. Boswell's (2007) seminal analysis includes four such imperatives, all related to the management of migration: (a) to provide internal security for citizens; (b) to promote wealth accumulation; (c) to provide a certain level of social "fairness"; and (d) to maintain institutional legitimacy. Similarly, Hollifield and Foley (2022) have underlined the role of four factors influencing state's policymaking: (a) national security; (b) cultural and ideational concerns; (c) markets; and (d) rights. To further nuance this landscape, a variety of international institutions, regulatory frameworks, and interests also exert tangible influence over these processes (Geddes 2003). The fine balance between external demands and internal obligations implies for every state a continuous adjustment process that is influenced by both the historical path of each country and an ever-changing scenario posing new challenges and old dilemmas (Arango 2023).

A second important area of inquiry has focused on the different policies that states have progressively adopted. Such effort has produced several taxonomies that, given the arms race-like nature of irregular migration governance, require continuous updates. Although the idea of an ongoing convergence among state practices has been advanced multiple times (Cornelius et al. 1994; Doornik and Jandl 2008), national approaches still display significant differences. To wit, each state exhibits a different combination of policies and implementation trends (de Haas et al. 2018). Focusing on migration policies (Hammar 1985), a first distinction concerns the difference between external control and internal control policies (Cornelius 2005). The former includes border enforcement policies (Cornelius and Salehyan 2007); remote control policies, such as carrier sanctions, international and bilateral agreements (including those concerning externalisation), visa regimes, and entry policies (Finotelli and Sciortino 2013; Triandafyllidou and Ambrosini 2011; Zolberg 2006); the use of military assets to patrol transit areas and intercept and possibly repulse migrants; and policies aimed at reducing push factors in sending countries (for instance, funds for development) (Hollifield 2004). On this last aspect, however, other scholars argue that increased development levels are actually associated with higher emigration rates (de Haas 2023). The second group includes three main elements: policies seeking to make irregular residence and work difficult and costly, such as labour market controls, employer sanctions, and the exclusion of irregular migrants from public services (Broeders 2009; Van Der Leun 2003); policies directed towards the identification, detention, and expulsion of irregular migrants (Broeders 2009; Schinkel 2009); and policies aiming to regularise irregular migrants (Baldwin-Edwards and Kraler 2009; Chauvin et al. 2013).

Further, there is a limited though growing scholarship adopting international relations (IR) lenses to examine the irregular migration phenomenon. While the latter was relegated to the realm of "low politics" throughout the Cold War, as opposed to "high politics" matters such as national and international security, such distinctions progressively disappeared in the post-1991 world, with migration being a salient illustration of this shift (see Teitelbaum 1994). Consequently, as irregular migration benefited from globalisation, technological advancements, and other enabling elements, and while irregular flows gradually grew in magnitude, states and international organisations began to include irregular migration governance in their foreign policy priorities. Moreover, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the subsequent "war on terror", and the ensuing securitisation of irregular migration further cemented the latter's importance for destination countries' foreign policies (Messina 2014). Though small in numbers, studies straddling international relations and irregular migration studies investigate the implications of irregular migration for the IR discipline (Wihl de Wenden 2023), security-related concerns (Sobrinho Heredia 2022), region-specific analyses (Álvarez-Miranda and Brey 2023; Finotelli and Ponzo 2023; Geddes et al. 2019, by way of example), country-specific examinations (Rosina and Fontana 2024; Abbondanza 2023b; Ceccorulli and Coticchia 2020; Gökalp-Aras and Mencütek 2018; Natter 2014; among the several), and others which are not mentioned here for reasons of space. In essence, the nexus between irregular migration and IR (along with related foreign policy measures) is gradually gaining salience, as attested by this multidisciplinary research niche.

Fourth, another strand of research has delved into the implementation process and the overall effectiveness of irregular migration control policies. This line of inquiry began by acknowledging the gap between what laws and policies stated on paper and what they actually achieved (Cornelius et al. 1994; Castles 2004). Four aspects have been suggested in this respect: the distinct domestic regulatory styles and traditions; the organisational culture of bureaucracies and their degree of discretionality; the grade of isolation of bureaucracies from external pressures; and the social attitude and toleration towards informality (Lahav and Guiraudon 2006; Van Der Leun 2003). In terms of implementation strategies, Guiraudon and Lahav noticed a substantial shift more than 30 years ago. Before the migration crisis of the 1990s, irregular migration policies were usually limited to border enforcement and were implemented exclusively by destination countries. However, in more recent years, controls have moved “away from the border and outside of the state” thanks to a threefold strategy (Guiraudon and Lahav 2000): an outward shift, with the increasing adoption of remote control policies (externalisation); an upwards shift, with the development of control-related international frameworks; and a downwards shift, with the delegation of control duties to the local institutional level. Similarly, Doomernik and Jandl (2008) suggested that states’ controls were expanding forwards, externalising implementation outside of national borders; backwards, adopting internal controls in public places and workplaces; and inwards, with an expansion of the specific requirements for migrants.

With reference to the external dimension of migration policy, Fontana and Rosina have recently identified nine main specific tools, namely: (a) readmission agreements; (b) quota schemes; (c) agreements on labour migration and circular mobility; (d) resettlement and humanitarian corridors; (e) technical and operational agreements; (f) migration-specific agreements; (g) migration clauses in broader bilateral agreements; (h) political dialogue; and (i) military missions (Fontana and Rosina 2024). Lastly, there is a further foreign policy tool on irregular migration, namely the offshore or extraterritorial processing of asylum seekers. This has been implemented by the US and Australia for a long time (Abbondanza 2023a), is currently being tested by Italy with Albania (Echeverría and Finotelli 2024), will potentially be attempted by the UK (and possibly Denmark) with Rwanda (Holden 2024), and is increasingly envisaged by other states and institutions (EU included) as a potential pathway.

3. Externalising Irregular Migration Control: The Italian Experience

A migrant-receiving country since the second half of the 1970s, Italy’s first law on irregular migration was the 1986 “Foschi Law”, under the government of socialist leader Bettino Craxi. While it sanctioned the smuggling and the employment of unauthorised migrants, it was counterintuitively followed by an amnesty for 118,000 irregular migrants, a paradox that would feature in Italy’s policies ever since (Abbondanza 2017). The country’s irregular migration governance unfolded in the 1980s and 1990s (regardless of political affiliations), as a consequence of growing numbers of undocumented migrants residing in the country, which rose to 235,000 in 1998 despite another amnesty in the same period (Dal Lago 2004). Against this backdrop, this article argues that Italy’s foreign policy on irregular migration emerged under a threefold approach: (i) the constant development of externalisation measures agreed on with transit and/or origin countries; (ii) the use of military and civil-military assets to detect, halt, and, at times, repulse migrants attempting to reach its territory; and (iii) new readmission agreements with origin countries (the first of which was struck with Poland in 1994, see Table 1), invariably accompanied by development aid and preferential immigration quotas for partner countries’ workers.¹

By way of example, Albania’s civil unrest in 1997 led to massive emigration towards Italy. In the same year, Italy’s centre-left government led by Romano Prodi led an international mission in Albania (Operation Alba) and concluded a readmission agreement with Tirana, which was signed along with other provisions granting privileged legal pathways for regular Albanian migrants and broader financial and development assistance (International Organization for Migration 2006). Similarly, one year later, the Prodi government signed an

agreement with Tunisia which comprised a new development partnership and strengthened legal pathways for regular Tunisian migrants, while concurrently entailing a readmission agreement for irregular migrants found in Italy, Tunisian efforts to halt irregular flows in its own territory, the establishment of Italian-funded migrant centres in Tunisia, and the provision of Italian “technical and operative means” (Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1998). Similar deals were concluded with a number of other countries, such as the ones with Georgia in 1997 and Morocco in 1998 (see Italian Chamber of Deputies 2000).

The twenty-first century brought forth several momentous changes, resulting in a rise in both irregular migration and its securitisation. In this complex context, Italy was no exception (see Bello 2021). With a yearly average of around 23,500 irregular maritime arrivals (IMAs) between 2000 and 2002, Silvio Berlusconi’s conservative governments reached new externalisation and (informal) readmission agreements with Libya with a bilateral agreement signed in 2000, later bolstered in 2003 (Cassarino 2005). These also entailed financial and logistical assistance to Libya, alongside Italian naval deployments in the Mediterranean to intercept and repel (“pushback manoeuvres”) migrants’ boats. Mediterranean patrols were also supported by Italy’s strong support for the establishment of the EU’s Frontex agency in 2004. Paradoxically, Italy’s domestic response was the approval—in 2002—of the largest amnesty for irregular migrants in recent Italian history (647,000 people, see (Colombo and Sciortino 2004)). During these years, Italy also reached a number of readmission agreements with Algeria and Nigeria (2000), Sri Lanka (2002), the Philippines (2004), and Egypt (2005), and began negotiations for comparable deals (Cassarino 2005).

Italy’s revolution in terms of migration foreign policy emerged in 2008, when it resolved decades of disputes with its former colony by reaching a comprehensive strategic partnership with Libya. Unsurprisingly accompanied, in the following year, by yet another amnesty for 222,000 irregular migrants residing in Italy, the new Italy-Libya treaty also provided for stronger and broader externalisation and readmission agreements (article no. 19), as well as multilevel cooperation and development programmes (Italian Government 2008), supported in turn by wider deployments of the Italian navy in the Mediterranean. While this “Mediterranean Solution”², developed by Berlusconi’s conservative governments, routinely violated migrants’ human rights—Libya was not a signatory party to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, and migrants could not lodge asylum applications there—it contributed to a decrease in IMAs (4400 in 2010). Eventually, it became the blueprint for Italy’s externalised irregular migration governance onwards, regardless of the political affiliation of future governments (Abbondanza 2017).

The “Arab Spring”, unfolding since December 2010, then dismantled Italy’s main framework for irregular migration governance, since it rendered its agreement with Libya *de facto* void, leading to 63,000 IMAs in 2011. Despite this, during the country’s political crisis, Mario Monti’s technocratic government—along with a new amnesty for 22,000 irregular migrants working in Italy—concluded a memorandum of understanding with the Libyan National Transition Council, which, with the exception of pushback manoeuvres—declared illegal by the European Court of Human Rights (2012)—maintained the same provisions of the 2008 Italy-Libya treaty (Marfleet and Cetti 2013). In the same period, Italy concluded voluntary readmission agreements with Ghana, Senegal, and Gambia in 2010, as well as Djibouti in 2012 (Italian Migration Treaties 2018).

Due to a number of factors, including the public opinion and political pressure due to several shipwrecks, and Rome’s attempt to “force the EU’s hand” (Abbondanza 2023b), Italy ceased its externalised foreign policy on irregular migration under two centre-left governments (Enrico Letta’s and Matteo Renzi’s, 2013–2016). Accordingly, Italy utilised its extensive naval capabilities to rescue seaborne migrants in both international and other nations’ waters, and more than 505,000 people were rescued at sea and reached Italy, between 2014 and 2016 inclusive, thanks to search and rescue (SAR) missions performed by Italy’s *Mare Nostrum* mission and numerous NGOs. Rome also pressured the EU to replace Italy as the provider of such policy and amend the Dublin III regulation,³ advocated

an equitable distribution of financial costs and migrants among EU member states, and took command of two EU missions (Operation Triton and Operation Sophia) which only partially replaced Italy's previous Mare Nostrum operation (Panebianco 2016). On top of this, Rome reached a readmission agreement with Sudan in 2016.

The EU's insufficient support to Italy in managing the world's busiest and deadliest maritime route (see International Organization for Migration 2024), coupled with a dissatisfied public opinion and booming costs for the "non-restrictive" approach as a whole (EUR 3 billion only in 2017; see Villa et al. 2018) led to a reversal of Italy's migration foreign policy. In 2017, Paolo Gentiloni's centre-left government reached a memorandum of understanding with Libya's Government of National Accord, lasting for three years and with an automatic renewal clause. It was comparable to the 2008 and 2012 deals in terms of goals and means, but it also bolstered its externalisation component through the provision of Italian patrol boats to Libya's coast guard (Italian Government 2017). Subsequently, Italy established the "Africa Fund", identifying Libya and Niger as key transit countries, promoting voluntary readmissions in both, and providing funds for these and other measures. The following year, Rome launched the MIASIT and MISIN missions, respectively operating in Libya and Niger with, among other things, the tackling of irregular migration flows as key priorities (Riccardi 2020).

Italy then had two atypical political administrations between 2018 and 2021, both led by Giuseppe Conte, affiliated with the anti-establishment "Five Star Movement" party. The first was populist and right-leaning, the second one was also populist but more left-leaning. Despite significant differences in terms of domestic policies and rhetoric,⁴ both governments maintained the country's existing migration foreign policy framework with Libya and Niger (Rosina and Fontana 2024). Additionally, the second Conte cabinet also struck a new readmission agreement with the Ivory Coast in 2020. While the Conte governments were favoured by a somewhat stable regional geopolitical environment (34,154 IMAs in 2020), the opposite applied to the subsequent technocratic administration led by Mario Draghi. On the one hand, Russia's new invasion of Ukraine and the resulting security and energy crises spurred a leading Italian role among otherwise uneven European responses. On the other, the worsening of Libya's civil war and the early collapse of the government, due to the withdrawal of the Five Star Movement's parliamentary support, meant that Rome had to resort to existing approaches to irregular migration governance (105,140 IMAs in 2022), and therefore the Libyan memorandum of understanding was renewed for three more years under a caretaker administration (Barana 2022).

Italy's ongoing government, the first led by a woman and the first with a leading far-right component, further expanded Italy's externalisation approaches amid a new peak of 157,652 maritime arrivals in 2023 (Echeverria and Finotelli 2024). Domestically, despite tougher measures against NGOs and human traffickers, it authorised the arrival of more than 450,000 foreign workers for the 2023–2025 period. Internationally, it spearheaded a new EU externalisation agreement with Tunisia (an increasingly-important transit country), it facilitated a new comparable EU deal with Egypt, and it took command of the EU's new EUMPM Niger mission (Abbondanza 2023b). Italy's international activism also produced a new offshore processing agreement with Albania, the first extraterritorial processing of asylum claims ever made by an EU member state. It entails up to 36,000 asylum seekers sent by Italian authorities to Albania every year for three years (with renewability clauses), in centres to be built with Italian funds and operating under Italian jurisdiction, starting from 2024. However, feasibility doubts and legal concerns still linger (Celoria and De Leo 2024).

Notwithstanding these uncertainties, Italy's role in advancing Europe's broader externalisation trend stands out. This can be seen not only in the case of Tunisia and Egypt, but also with reference to Albania, whose agreement is cited as "a model" by a recent proposal, made by more than half of all EU members and directed at the European Commission, to assess the feasibility of lawful asylum claims' extraterritorial processing (Danish Ministry of Immigration and Integration 2024). With reference to readmission agreements, on the other hand, out of 54,645 expulsion orders issued by Italy in 2022 and 2023, only

6185 (11.3%) of them actually eventuated (Eurostat 2024), with more than half involving Tunisia. This condition highlights a noticeable gap between the country's externalisation approach (controversial, yet "paradigmatic" and growing) and its readmission capability (somewhat stagnating).

Table 1. Italy's externalisation and readmission agreements.

Externalisation Foreign Policy Framework	Select Readmission Agreements
Libya (unevenly) since 2008, Niger since 2017, Tunisia since 2023, Albania since 2024 (the latter under a deal concerning the extraterritorial processing of asylum claims)	Poland (1994), Georgia (1997), Albania (1997), Tunisia (1998), Morocco (1998), Libya (2000), Algeria (2000), Nigeria (2000), Sri Lanka (2002), Philippines (2004), Egypt (2005), Ghana (2010), Senegal (2010), Gambia (2010), Djibouti (2012), Sudan (2016), Ivory Coast (2020). *

* This list is not exhaustive, as Italy has concluded tens of comparable deals. It comprises both voluntary and non-voluntary return agreements, some of which may have not been ratified (although they may be active nevertheless, such as Morocco's).

4. Externalising Irregular Migration Control: The Spanish Experience

Spain's transformation into a country of immigration was characterised by a combination of insufficient entry channels, growing migration flows, and an "attractive" informal economy, which resulted in irregular migration becoming a structural feature of the Spanish migration regime. As in Italy, the implementation of regularisations to periodically reduce the number of irregular migrants was accompanied by increasing efforts to strengthen the external dimension of migration control, including externalisation. The increase in migration flows at the end of the 1990s, following a decade of sustained but still modest entries, prompted the Spanish centre right government (2000–2004), led by José María Aznar, to take decisive measures to protect the Spanish-African border. These mainly consisted in the implementation of sophisticated border technologies, such as the Sistema Integrado de Vigilancia Exterior (SIVE), an integrated system of external surveillance in the Strait of Gibraltar, and the construction and reinforcement of fences between Spain and Morocco through border "Berlinisation" in Ceuta and Melilla, two of Spain's exclaves in Africa (Godenau 2014; Gabrielli 2014). The most controversial consequence of such "Berlinisation" was represented by the pushbacks at the Spanish-Moroccan border, which were widely criticised by NGOs and human rights movements, despite having been endorsed by the European Court for Human Rights, on the grounds that "the lack of an individualized removal procedure had been a consequence of the applicants' own conduct" (European Court of Human Rights 2020).

Despite criticism mainly originating from the third sector, the establishment of a military asset to detect and repel migrants has earned Spain the reputation of "model student" in EU border management (Gabrielli 2023). However, the pivotal role in the development of the external dimension of Spain's immigration policy was played by bilateral agreements with third countries, mainly from Sub-Saharan Africa (see Table 2). While Italy had a pioneering role in the signature of bilateral agreements with third countries, it was Spain—more than other Southern European countries—that was able to develop a full-fledged external dimension of immigration policy, which contributed to transform border externalisation into a priority of the European agenda (Gabrielli 2023).

Spain has signed two types of bilateral agreements with transit countries and countries of origin: (1) readmission agreements and (2) framework agreements on cooperation in immigration matters. The objective of the first type of agreements is the mere readmission of irregular immigrants found in Spanish territory. The two most important agreements in this group were signed with Morocco (1992) and Mauritania (2003). The former only contemplates the readmission of irregular migrants proceeding from third countries and was met with several practical difficulties from the outset. Firstly, Spanish authorities had to demonstrate that irregular migrants detected in Spanish territory had arrived from Morocco. Secondly, the readmission requirement had to be presented within 10 days of the migrant's entry in Spain (Asín Cabrera 2008). Such difficulties, in conjunction

with Morocco's reluctance to implement the agreement, resulted in protracted case-by-case negotiations until the reactivation of the agreement in 2018 (Gabrielli 2023). The agreement signed with Mauritania established the possibility of readmitting Mauritanian citizens found irregularly on the Spanish territory (a negligible number), as well as citizens from third countries that departed from Mauritania. As was the case with Morocco, the implementation of the agreement encountered numerous difficulties, largely due to the fact that Mauritanian authorities were reluctant to accept migrants with unclear citizenship (Larramendi and Planet 2009).

The second type of agreements pursued a deeper involvement of origin and transit countries and approached readmission as part of a more global conception of cooperation on immigration, one that linked readmission with development aid and therefore paved the way for a progressive externalisation of migration control. During the Sevilla Summit of 2002, the conservative government ruled by José Maria Aznar advocated the need to create a link between cooperation on immigration and development aid, while also proposing a clause of negative conditionality that allowed to suspend development aid in the case of the lack of cooperation (Gabrielli 2023). The proposal was rejected, but the idea of exchanging immigration cooperation—which included measures to prevent migrants' departure—for development aid, as an externalisation strategy persisted in the mind of Spanish policymakers. To illustrate this point, the arrival of about 32,000 people from Africa to the Canary Islands, during the "cayuco crisis" in 2006, provided an opportunity for the left-wing Spanish government (2004–2008) led by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero to enhance "migration diplomacy" through the implementation of the so-called "Africa-Plan". The Plan reoriented Spain's externalisation strategy and led to the development of framework cooperation agreements (also called "second-generation agreements"). Their goal was to increase African countries' interest in collaborating with the Spanish government on border controls to prevent departures from their territories (Gabrielli 2023). To this end, they combined elements of migration control with other types of bilateral cooperation, such as development aid, foreign investment, trade facilitation, and legal entry channels for foreign workers.

Second-generation agreements also included more informal cooperation instruments, the so-called Memoranda of Understanding, which were negotiated by the competent administrative and consular authorities at the margin of parliamentary procedures and official publications. For instance, this is the case of the informal agreements with Ghana (2005), Senegal (2006), Mali (2007), and Mauritania (2007). Memoranda of Understanding arguably represent the least transparent tool within Spain's externalisation strategies, since they are not published in official sources so that access to their content is very difficult—if not impossible (Asín Cabrera 2008).

Overall, the series of informal and formal agreements signed by the Spanish government constituted a "variable geometry" (Gabrielli 2023) of agreements which were not only driven by the priorities of the destination but also very much depended on the characteristics of the country involved. Negotiations with Sub-Saharan countries were less arduous than with Morocco, a country with a complex historical relationship with Spain and strong geopolitical interests in Africa (Gabrielli 2023; Álvarez-Miranda and Brey 2023). In this regard, the collaboration with Senegal was regarded as a particularly-illustrative example of the efficacy of Spain's externalisation strategy. As President Zapatero explained in Dakar in 2009, the implementation of deterrence measures—such as the campaigns on the perils of sea journeys—reduced the expectations of potential migrants *before* departure and, therefore, the number of new irregular arrivals in Spain (Martínez and Rivero 2010).

The signature of second-generation agreements developed along with Madrid's efforts to turn Spanish concerns about raising migration rates on the Western Mediterranean route into a European priority. This also explains Spain's influence of an "unusual nature" in the operations of the European border agency (Frontex), which started to operate in 2004 (Bialasiewicz 2012; Carrera 2007). Spain's externalisation efforts after the peak of arrivals in the Canary, together with increased border surveillance, resulted in the redirection of

certain migrant flows from Africa to Greece, as it occurred in the case of Italy’s agreements with Libya before the Arab Spring (Godenau 2014; Kasimis 2012). The Great Recession of 2009 stopped the Spanish engagement for readmission and cooperation agreements with transit countries and countries of origin. Cooperation projects were turned down, and the creation of formal entry channels for foreign workers remained limited to seasonal workers from Senegal and Morocco, due to a sharp reduction in labour demand as a consequence of the economic crisis.

It was with the new waves of arrivals on the Spanish coasts in 2018 that the Spanish government resumed its bilateral efforts, focusing on Morocco as a major cooperation partner. On the one hand, Spain recognised Morocco’s strategic importance for migration control since the two countries share “blue” borders, while the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla represent the only land border between Africa and the European continent. On the other, the Moroccan government was well-aware of its strategic importance for EU immigration goals, and has been rather successful in influencing EU policy imperatives (Gazzotti et al. 2023). As a result, Spain was granted EUR 30 million by the EU for its cooperation with Morocco between July and August 2018. Since then, a good deal of the funding provided by the EU Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) has been granted to Spain, turning it into one of the major recipients of cooperation funds with Morocco, together with France and Germany. Such funds are currently used by Spanish agencies to implement two major projects. The first one is coordinated by the Spanish development agency AECID and focuses on the fight against racism and xenophobia. The second is coordinated by FIIAPP (*Fundación Internacional y para Iberoamérica de Administración y Políticas Públicas*), and its goal is to reinforce Morocco’s security system. Such a Janus-faced cooperation—as the two projects display opposite goals—has been sharply criticised as an example of the “neurotics politics” that characterise border externalisation (Gazzotti et al. 2023).

Spain and the EU have recently addressed Mauritania as a second strategic partner for managing the Western African route. In 2020, Mauritania received EUR two million from the EUTF to improve its migration management. This was implemented by FIIAPP and also included strengthened cooperation with the Mauritanian policies and the reinforcement of maritime border control. In February 2024, Spanish and European authorities gathered in Mauritania to further foster cooperation on this issue. On that occasion, the Spanish Ministry of the Interior, which joined the signing of the partnership agreement between the EU and Mauritania, praised the memorandum of understanding between Spain and Morocco as an example of efficient bilateral cooperation schemes with third countries.

The new migration partnership between the EU and Mauritania certainly represents further evidence of Spain’s effectiveness in promoting a more active role of the European Union in the externalisation of the Southern European border. Nevertheless, available data also indicate that externalisation remains a challenging process. Spain has returned 47.8% of the 22,745 migrants who were ordered to leave in 2022 and 2023. However, the majority of these migrants were from Colombia and Honduras, while African migrants are absent from the statistics, with the exception of a few hundred Moroccans (Eurostat 2024). To what extent the migration agreement between the EU and Mauritania will be effective in streamlining readmission procedures—and reducing the number of arrivals from this country—remains to be seen.

Table 2. Spain’s irregular migration agreements over time. Sources: Asín Cabrera (2008) and Gabrielli (2023).

Formal and Informal Readmission Agreements	Formal and Informal Second-Generation Agreements (Readmission and Larger Migration Cooperation)
Morocco (1992), Nigeria (2001), Algeria (2002), Guinea-Bissau (2003), Mauritania (2003), Nigeria (2005), Ghana (2005)	Senegal (2006), Gambia (2006), Guinea-Conakry (2006), Mauritania (2007), Mali (2007), Cabo Verde (2007), Guinea Bissau (2008), Nigeria (2008), Gambia (2020)

5. Comparative Insights

Italy and Spain, the “new guardians” of the southern EU border following the implementation of the Schengen Agreement, were *prima facie* confronted with the challenge of border control and were among the first to adopt externalisation measures as the lodestar of the external dimension of migration control. The analysis of their experiences offers interesting elements for comparison, comprising both similarities and differences (see Table 3). With regard to similarities, externalisation tools have become a central feature in the migration foreign policy strategy of both countries for more than three decades. Starting in the 1990s, when irregular arrivals were relatively limited, both Italy and Spain envisaged the involvement of origin and transit countries as part of their strategies of migration control. The logic behind this approach was not centred yet on cooperating with partner countries in controlling migration flows, but rather on ensuring the success of expulsions through readmission agreements. Spain’s first readmission agreement was signed with Morocco in 1992; Italy’s was with Poland in 1994. However, as irregular arrivals grew and expulsions started to show their limitations (legal, logistical, and financial), a new logic began to unfold—the “externalisation gamble”.

Given the difficulty in effectively expelling irregular migrants—Spain’s effectiveness in this regard is much higher than Italy’s, although African migrants are virtually absent from Spain’s readmissions—the new imperative was to avoid their arrival as much as possible through externalisation measures. Partner countries were systematically involved in patrolling their territory, as well as in deterring other people from migrating through irregular pathways to reach Europe. The logistical burden for transit countries was offset on a *quid pro quo* basis. From the late 1990s onwards, the Italian and Spanish agreements—with Italy pioneering such deals—displayed increasingly complex provisions in exchange for transit countries’ support. These included technical, operative, financial, and, in some cases, military support to the partner’s control operations; the establishment of larger quotas for the legal emigration of their citizens; the facilitation of development aid; financial investments; preferential trade agreements, and others. As regards the geographical focus of their efforts, both countries gave prioritised agreements with the main countries of origin and transit. Italy’s efforts hence focused chiefly on Libya, Niger, and Tunisia; Spain’s focused on Morocco, Mauritania, and Senegal. In this respect, concerns of neocolonial nature stand out. Another common feature in Italian and Spanish externalisation efforts is the gradual transition from formal, tailored, and transparent agreements to more informal, generic, and often secretive deals. Madrid’s and Rome’s memoranda of understanding, respectively, signed with Mauritania and Libya, are clear illustrations of this trend.

With the main similarities outlined, it is possible to explore the main differences between the Italian and Spanish approaches. First, the contextual causes behind the development of each country’s strategies and policies are not identical. Although the development of Italian and Spanish externalisation strategies is invariably associated with recurrent “migration crises”, the evolution of Italy’s foreign policy on irregular migration appears to have been more markedly influenced by both external and internal dynamics (Abbondanza 2023b). On the one hand, the much higher number of seaborne irregular arrivals over the years (around 1.4 million people in Italy between 2000 and May 2024, and approximately 0.5 million in Spain during the same period; see Figure 1) spurred a broader use of externalisation measures. On the other, and relatedly, restrictive policies on irregular migration policies have traditionally featured as prominent elements in Italy’s public opinion debates, political parties’ rhetoric, and electoral campaigns (Dennison and Geddes 2022). In Spain, conversely, this issue has been less conspicuous due to a less polarised public debate on the issue (González-Enríquez et al. 2024), as well a strong difference in terms of arrivals.

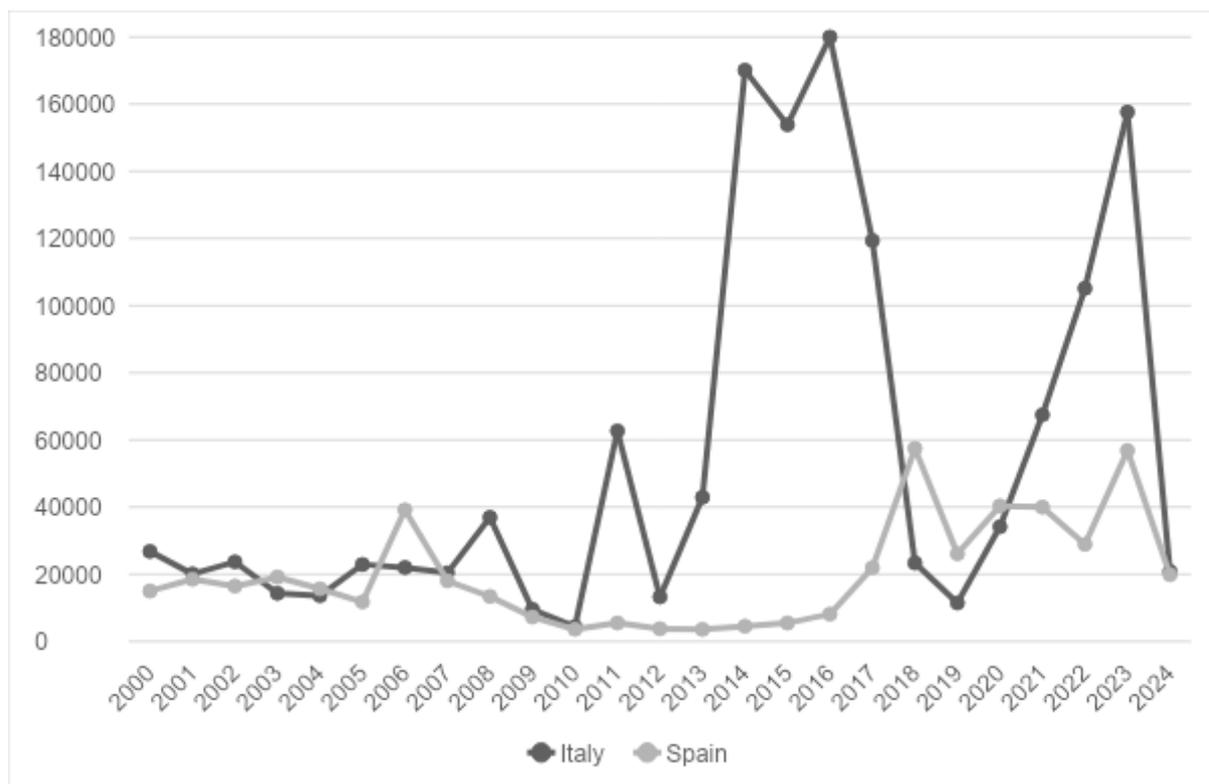


Figure 1. Seaborne irregular arrivals in Italy and Spain from 2000 to May 2024 inclusive. Source: official data collated by the authors.

To wit, Italy has displayed a more frenetic and, at times, contradictory approach, conditioned by the need of subsequent governments to show determination against substantial irregular flows, discontinuity with previous administrations, and a capacity to innovate. Permanently under the scrutiny of an anxious public opinion and pressing electorates, policymaking has therefore been marked by the urgency to show results and change ideological priorities. Spain, by contrast, has exhibited a more linear process, supported by smaller irregular flows, more stable governments, a less polarised public discourse, and a tacit bipartisan agreement between the two major alternative parties on the guidelines of migration policy. Madrid's evolution of the externalisation strategy seems to have been shielded from the pressures of electoral politics and, hence, more influenced by socio-economic dynamics. During the global financial crisis, whose consequences were particularly dire in Spain, the drastic decrease in irregular arrivals managed to relegate border control policies to a marginal role in governments' priorities. The stronger or weaker political push for externalisation, in the Spanish case, was due more to structural issues than political urgency (Echeverría and Finotelli 2024).

The permanent need for Italian governments to "raise the bar" and show increasingly-tougher approaches—due to large and steady irregular flows, electoral concerns, and, to a certain extent, growing political pressure within the EU on the main destination countries—may also help to explain the country's role as a forerunner in Europe's irregular migration control direction. Out of the many illustrations of this, the 1997 agreement with Albania and the 2017 agreement with Libya stand out as substantial examples of controversial but novel policies exerting a tangible influence over other EU members. More to the point, the unfolding Italian policy, concerning asylum claims' extraterritorial processing in Albania, represents a further "turn of the screw" in Italy's externalisation strategy, a potential "externalisation 2.0" that is already resonating well with some other EU countries. More specifically, this can be seen in a recent formal request, signed by

15 member states, to design similar measures to be implemented at the EU level ([Danish Ministry of Immigration and Integration 2024](#)).

With reference to more specific policy aspects, the two countries have shown different priorities in building the conditionality structure of their agreements with third countries. Italy has generally provided for concurrent legal pathways for partner countries' citizens, whereas Spain has not, partially due to the fact that Spain's strategy in this respect has been interrupted by the economic crisis. Conversely, Spain more frequently linked the provision of development aid to its irregular migration-related agreements, compared to Italy's policies. Lastly, it is important to note that the establishment and functioning of migration agreements with major countries of origin and transit is strongly dependent on the specific characteristics of the governments of the countries that are involved. Given their geographical position, Italy had to deal with more politically-unstable partners (Libya, Niger, and Tunisia) than Spain (Morocco), thus leading to a continuous necessity to update previous agreements. In the case of Libya, the country's civil war and the weight of its colonial legacy have made formal negotiations with Italy remarkably complicated, while Morocco has managed to become a partner with a strong migration diplomacy that has been successful in influencing European priorities.

Table 3. Similarities and differences in Italy's and Spain's irregular migration governance.

Similarities	Differences
Increasing implementation of return agreements. On account of the difficulty in expelling irregular migrants, a growing formulation of externalisation policies since the 2000s stands out. Informal and often secretive deals are becoming the norm. Both Italy and Spain embrace the "externalisation gamble" since they engage in responsibility shifting, which also entails serious risks for migrants, as well as stronger leverage for transit countries involved in the agreements.	Spain's effectiveness in "returning" irregular migrations is greater than Italy's. Italy's much higher number of irregular arrivals has polarised the domestic debate, spurred a broader use of externalisation, and led to more creative (albeit less linear) forms of irregular migration-related foreign policy compared to Spain. Italy conventionally links its readmission and externalisation agreements with strengthened legal pathways, whereas Spain links them more frequently to the provision of development aid.

6. Conclusions

Externalisation is embedded in a complex range of factors, spanning from domestic pressures to external dynamics such as geographical exposure, historical or economic dynamics, magnitude of irregular flows, and the geopolitical and economic interests of countries of origin and transit. At the same time, it is important to recall that bilateral cooperation can have unexpected spill-over effects, as bilateral agreements that have proved successful for one country may have negative externalities for others, and given the bargaining power that transit countries gain due to destination countries' reliance on agreements with them. To assess this complex landscape, this article has retraced the policy evolution of the external dimension of irregular migration control along with externalisation measures. Next, it has investigated the specific policies that have been implemented by two highly-relevant yet rarely compared case studies. Subsequently, it has shed light on the many similarities and few but significant differences between the Italian and the Spanish cases.

Interestingly, and despite their differences, countries that were once defined as the "least equipped" ([Schuster 2011](#), p. 17) to address the challenge of irregular migration governance, due to their recent migration history and previous lack of control infrastructures, have become the testing ground for tighter EU asylum procedures (see the new Pact on Migration and Asylum, [European Commission 2024](#)) and newer European externalisation policies, thus confirming what has been dubbed the "southernisation" of European migration control policies ([Finotelli and Ponzio 2023](#)). While Italy's externalisation strategy—pushed by regional instability, high migratory pressure, and consequent electoral pressure—stands out as a more prominent yet fragile migration foreign policy, the Spanish one seems to have reached a more coherent, long-term stability. As shown

in this article, the challenge of attempting to govern irregular migration leads to a clear “externalisation gamble” in which different pressures, from different levels of analysis, come into play simultaneously. In the light of the remarkably-low figures of returned migrants following an expulsion order, it can be argued that externalisation might represent an unsurprising answer in attempting to manage irregular flows more effectively. Yet, in its current form, it frustrates destination countries’ goals (arrivals cannot be reduced to zero, deterrence does not fully work, repatriations do not increase substantially) and it severely impacts on migrants’ human rights. Whether more sophisticated—and difficult to implement—measures such as Europe’s variants of the offshore processing of asylum seekers (“externalisation 2.0”) can help to address these issues or not, is something that will likely be ascertained in the following years.

However, doubts linger on delegating migration management to third countries that do not have the same legal standards as destination countries, which renders asylum claims’ externalised processing a “policy unknown” within the European context. While the effectiveness of externalisation is still the subject of debates, the dire humanitarian consequences of its “conventional” iteration have been largely documented. Among the many examples pertaining to both destination countries and supranational organisations such as the EU, the literature highlights the possibility of severe and protracted risks for migrants’ human rights (see [Celoria and De Leo 2024](#); [Bialasiewicz 2012](#)). As a result, “externalisation 2.0” has much to prove in this respect. In conclusion, it may be the case that a desired win-win gamble outcome can only be achieved by also including tangible cooperation opportunities which go beyond “pass the buck” strategies, such as the creation of stronger legal pathways to compensate for the control efforts of countries of origin and transit, as partially done by Italy and Spain not long ago.

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Notes

- ¹ Most readmission agreements, expensive and difficult to implement, are the product of a cumulative process whereby older deals are expanded (or ceased) over the years. This article does not necessarily refer to the first or last iteration of such agreements and makes no pretence to comprehensiveness, also in the light of Italy’s secretive approach in this respect (see [Associazione per gli Studi Giuridici sull’Immigrazione 2022](#)).
- ² Several parallels have been drawn with Australia’s contemporary Pacific Solution. See ([Abbondanza 2023a](#)).
- ³ It states that responsibility for addressing immediate migration emergencies and asylum seekers’ procedures falls on the first EU members that migrants reach.
- ⁴ Including the removal of humanitarian protection permits and the “security decrees”, which penalised migrant-rescuing NGOs (first Conte cabinet), and a new amnesty (second Conte cabinet), which will likely regularise more than 150,000 irregular migrants once entirely processed.

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