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Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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Meloni continues the restrictive migrant policy, but this time in cooperation with the EU

Giorgia Meloni will begin the first year of her term as prime minister with a major political crisis brought on by a new wave of refugees from Africa for which there is still no obvious answer.

The Italian prime minister received criticism from two sides. In the country, as a result of her failure to implement the strict anti-migrant policy she supported during the campaign, and in Europe, as a result of the criticism she received as her attempts to address the issue of illegal immigration were considered inhumane and ran counter to the European spirit of respect for human rights.

The past week has been particularly chaotic on the small southern Italian island of Lampedusa, Europe's most common first stop for illegal migrants from Africa, as more than 7,000 people disembarked in just a few days, outnumbering the island's population.

Local authorities have declared a state of emergency, unable to absorb the massive number of immigrants from across the Mediterranean. This pattern suggests more pressing issues.

Since the start of the year, more than 126,000 migrants in Italy have applied for asylum in the EU, which is twice as many as last year and even 3 times more than in 2021.

Pressure from friends

Meloni has recognised the threat of significant political pressure due to poor projections of migrant movements. These pressures are more pronounced from the right to which she belongs than from the still-divided political left in Italy, which presents even more risks for her politics.

The prime minister continues to have high support in surveys. Her Brothers of Italy party maintains by far the highest popularity, with around 30% support (Politico), and with a stable 10% difference compared to the centre-left Democratic party.

Matteo Salvini of the right-wing League, Meloni's coalition partner, has recognised that the prime minister is in trouble due to the large influx of migrants. He has been trying to use radical rhetoric to reduce her popularity and seize it for himself.

"This is an act of war against Italy", said Salvini regarding the invasion of migrants on the island of Lampedusa, and at the same time, blamed organised people smugglers as the opposite side in that "war".

Did the deal with Tunisia fail?

The key to the problem in which the Italian Prime Minister finds herself lies in the non-fulfilment of the agreement on the detention of illegal migrants in the north African country, which the EU, under her initiative, concluded last July with the President of Tunisia, Kais Said.

This agreement, in which the EU committed to providing Tunisia with significant financial support in return, is clearly not working.

Tunisia is still the main transit corridor for refugees from Africa to Italy and a meeting point for organised smugglers who illegally transport migrants across the Mediterranean.

The Italian Prime Minister invested a lot of power so that the EU would generously assist Tunisia and prevent the flow of migrants to the Mediterranean from various regions of Africa.

The arrangement includes $1 billion in soft loans, of which about 120 million is for strengthening border control and preventing people smuggling and the return of migrants.

Giorgia Meloni also took on the difficult task of negotiating more favourable terms with the IMF so that Tunisia receives the $2 billion loan it desperately needs to improve its challenging financial situation.

However, the latest wave of migrants means that Tunisia is not the EU's "external border", as promised. Its territory is still permeable to

thousands of migrants and the illegal managers of their transfer to Europe.

Is a naval blockade certain?

It is unknown what Giorgia Meloni means by "extraordinary measures", which, after several days of silence, she announced regarding the crisis on the island of Lampedusa. At the same time, she called for the establishment of a naval blockade to protect against illegal convoys.

Meloni wants to resolve the crisis in cooperation with the EU, not to be in conflict with it. This suggests that she has prospects of overcoming the internal political crisis.
She indicated this by inviting the head of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, to visit Lampedusa and speed up the implementation of the agreement with Tunisia, in which the German politician participated with the Italian Prime Minister.

Giorgia Meloni has asked the EU to share responsibility for the new refugee crisis with this move. This still defines her as an anti-migrant politician in front of the voters, which is why she gained their trust, but not as an anti-EU politician.

With this, Prime Minister Meloni has made a difference between herself and Matteo Salvini, her partner and competitor, who is already creating an anti-EU narrative regarding the migrant crisis, accusing the Union of being ineffective.

Salvini will soon host his French colleague from the extreme right, Marine Le Pen, thus confirming his anti-EU policy.

Expansion of manoeuvre space

During the first year of her mandate, Giorgia Meloni dispelled all doubts that she would be a disruptive factor in Euro-Atlantic integration. She even established solid partnerships with the most influential EU and NATO leaders, and her support for Ukraine is one of the leading and most decisive in the Western bloc.

The choice of the EU as an ally in the fight against illegal migration is a responsible step, giving the Italian Prime Minister more room for manoeuvre regarding the domestic public than if she had faced the crisis independently.

Meloni has turned to the EU by highlighting that she has taken responsibility for the arrangement, which involves paying for border security.

Also, if she continues to insist on establishing a naval blockade against migrant convoys, Italy would do it more effectively and with more international legitimacy in cooperation with the EU and NATO than alone.

The Italian Prime Minister has gained the reputation of a reliable partner in both blocs within a year, and she can rightfully expect support in solving the challenge that threatens her policy and position.