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IMPLICATIONS OF THE ITALY-ALBANIA MIGRATION PROTOCOL FOR LOCAL AND NATIONAL SECURITY IN ALBANIA

Abstract: *This paper examines the implications of the Italy-Albania migration protocol for Albania's national and local security. It explores the externalization of EU migration policy, the motivations of the parties behind promoting the protocol, and the consequences of establishing migrant reception/repatriation centers under Italian jurisdiction. The analysis draws on legal and policy documentation, NGO reports, media sources, and academic literature to assess the protocol's implications. By linking externalization of migration to the securitization of Albanian governance, the paper contributes to the emerging literature on how global migration policies reshape domestic security regimes. The content outlines risks stemming from legal ambiguity, limited institutional capacity and preparedness, and social constraints. Special consideration is given to human rights concerns, the risk of migrant exploitation, and the impact on public order. The study argues that inadequate risk assessment and a lack of transparency threaten both the agreement's effectiveness and the credibility of the parties involved. It affirms that protecting migrant rights, promoting the rule of law, and fostering civic engagement are key to mitigating the adverse effects of the protocol and maintaining regional stability. Ultimately, it offers policy recommendations for enhancing transparency, legal accountability, and security preparedness in host countries affected by externalization.*

Keywords: *migration, externalization, security governance, EU migration policies, Italy, Albania*

Introduction

The signing of migration protocols by Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni on November 6, 2023, has sparked considerable concerns within the nations involved and the broader international community. The terms of the agreement establish a framework for constructing migrant centers on Albanian territory under Italian jurisdiction, specifically a migrant reception center for those rescued at sea in the port of Shëngjin and a temporary accommodation facility in Gjadër, in the northwest of the country, both of which were expected to be fully operational from October 2024 (Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 2023). This agreement was the latest result of the migration policy pursued by the Meloni government and some other EU members, aimed at externalizing migration management. The construction of these facilities not only underscores the urgent need for effective migrant management strategies but also conveys the EU's changing perception of borders in the context of ongoing migration crises. Navigating the novel implications of migration agreements requires governments to conduct a meticulous examination of the numerous challenges that may arise in the process. A failure to provide a thorough analysis of the centers' impact on local communities, regional and national stability, and international humanitarian obligations might result in a misguided implementation of the protocol, undermining its objectives.

While the legal aspects of the agreement are in the spotlight in the academic world (Belardo & Squadrani, 2024; Celoria & De Leo, 2024), societies are no less concerned about the security aspects of its implementation, both for migrants and local communities. Experts in the field of human rights and migration highlight the issues surrounding dual jurisdiction: Italian legal authority will apply within the camps and entry points; however, Albania will be responsible for security in the area. Key concerns include protecting migrants' rights, ensuring humane treatment, and establishing a secure environment inside and outside the camps. Thus, the main objective of this paper is to analyze the possible negative impact of the protocol on local and national security in Albania. The study adopts a qualitative analytical approach combining a case study with documentary research. The Italy–Albania migration protocol serves as a framework for examining broader trends in externalization and security governance. The research draws primarily on official policy and legal documentation released by both governments and EU institutions, as well as academic literature, NGO reports, and media coverage from the first two years since the signing of the protocol. The analysis proceeds through thematic coding of the collected

materials, focusing on three interrelated dimensions: (1) the legal and institutional design of the protocol, (2) its implications for Albania's domestic security governance, and (3) the broader regional and geopolitical context of European migration externalization. The plurality of sources allows for a comprehensive understanding of both the legal framework and the political and social discourse surrounding the agreement. The study is structured as follows: the first part defines the concept of externalization of migration policies; the second part examines the rationale for Albania's selection as an area of action for Italian externalization practices; the third and final part analyzes the possible impact of such policies on Albania's local and national security. Analyzing the challenges and implications of externalization policies through a case study contributes to a better understanding of how such strategies are designed and implemented, as well as their political, social, and economic consequences across diverse settings.

Externalization of Migratory Policies

Scholars define externalization of EU migration policies as "the incorporation of migration in the scope of the external relations of the European Union and the engagement of countries of origin and transit in managing migration to the EU, through various tools and instruments" (Fontana & Rosina, 2024, p. 3). Externalization emerged as a response to the difficulties that the Union faced in containing migratory influxes and resolving long-standing political divisions among member states on migration management. As Zaiotti (2016) notes, it has increasingly been framed as a "cost-effective policy tool" that allows states to manage mobility away from their borders, thus avoiding local repercussions.

The growing reliance on externalization reflects broader dynamics identified by the Copenhagen School's securitization theory, which explains how political actors transform migration management from a social or administrative issue into an existential security threat that standard legal frameworks are "unable to handle" (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998). This securitizing prism thus paves the way for extraordinary, extraterritorial, and innovative (though legally ambiguous) practices, including offshore detention, remote processing, and the delegation of border functions to third countries.

The countries attempting to restrict irregular arrivals beforehand do so at distinct stages of the migration process through:

1. The most far-fetched agreements signed by the European Union aimed at reducing migration flows by addressing the "root causes" of the phenomenon in migrants' countries of origin, e.g., the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa.

2. The agreements signed with transit countries outside the European continent aimed at reinforcing local border controls and deterring migrants from reaching EU borders, e.g., those signed by Italy with Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt.

3. The agreements signed with third-party countries that do not constitute a major migratory route but can partially divert and host the migration influx with the means provided by the initial destination country, e.g., the United Kingdom-Rwanda asylum plan or the Italy-Albania migration protocol.

Suppose the first two options imply only indirect participation through investment and the coordination of restrictive migratory policies. In that case, the third case implies not only direct management of migratory policy outside the country's borders but also the complex projection of one's sovereignty over third-party territories. Such extraordinary measures become justifiable only when irregular migration is framed as a national security emergency. In Italy, this has become possible for several reasons. In 2015-2016, Italy's reception and integration system proved incapable of managing the overwhelming number of refugees, which ingrained the debate on the social, administrative, and fiscal consequences of the crisis into the core of modern Italian politics. The growing mediatization of the issue and the population's unrest led to a loss of public trust and the "crisis of legitimacy" of the state (Castelli Gattinara, 2017). Slow economic growth and rising political polarization reinforced populist and right-wing narratives, which in turn amplified societal divisions. The issue of migration and identity has become an inseparable part of the ruling right-wing party's rhetoric, and the "solutions" to migration – a central field of debate in the order of the day.

The Italy–Albania protocol thus constitutes a paradigmatic example of how securitized discourses can enable exceptional governance techniques outside of traditional legal frameworks. Engaging Albania as an extension of Italy's security perimeter can then be viewed as a direct operational consequence of migration securitization within the EU. The mechanisms of this engagement can be explained in Didier Bigo's analysis of contemporary migration control. Bigo (2002) argues that the migration field is dominated by risk-management logics and dispersed forms of surveillance, where borders do not disappear but instead become mobile and externalized. Rijpma and Cremona (2007) define

it as the extraterritorialization of boundaries, which represents the dynamics of changing border nature. In the Albanian case, the territory of the camps technically constitutes an extension of the Italian border area, being transferred from Albanian sovereignty into an Italian-regulated legal limbo with no clear final destination. It serves as a "banopticon" space where migrants are categorized, filtered, and governed through security rationales rather than humanitarian or legal principles.

According to Carlotta Giordani (2024), this protocol consolidates the legal fictions of *non-entry* and *functional extraterritoriality*, thereby increasing flexibility in the use and definition of borders. The new vision stemming from the New Pact on Migration and Asylum allows states to move asylum seekers further away from the Italian legal border, regardless of their presence at the physical border. This means that a country is not obliged to legally acknowledge and act on a person's presence on its territory (i.e., process asylum claims) if the conditions for legal entry had not been fulfilled, which allows the destination country to escape legal obligations to accept asylum seekers and the consequences of mismanaging this process.

The Albanian Setting

Several reasons can explain the choice of Albania as an acting area. One can note that the position of Western Balkan states, including Albania, has gradually changed over the years, with a transformation in the perception of these countries through the prism of migration management. At first, following the crises of socialist systems in the region, these states presented a significant source of migration due to political, social and economic instability. Since the 1990s, Albanians have been among the largest immigrant groups in Italy, and Albania was the first country to sign a readmission agreement with Italy in 1998 (Danaj & Elbasani, 2006). While some migration flows from the region persist, the advancement of European integration, visa liberalization policy, and new, more significant migration sources have changed these countries' status. In the eyes of the Union, these factors turned the Balkan states from emigration countries into transit countries, which later enabled the development of externalization policies. The latter happened not only due to geographical proximity and a shared maritime border, or to historical factors of Italian influence in the region, but also to diplomatic and political reasons. The agreement, which thus contributes to the image of Meloni as a determined migration deterrent and that of Rama as a negotiator of Albania's way into the European reality, presents a possibility for

both countries' political elites to claim significant progress in the absence of due regulation, understanding of realities on the ground, and transparent legal and political accountability.

In Albania, the decision was made without public discussion and amid repeated revisions and appeals challenging the agreement's unconstitutionality. Since no information was made available to the public or the opposition, the deal was perceived as a personal initiative of the Prime Minister within the framework of behind-the-scenes relations with Italy (Dervishi, 2023). From a state-capacity perspective, the arrangement puts significant pressure on Albania's administrative and security apparatus. Still on its way to steady democratic development, Albania falls into the category of states with limited institutional penetration and bureaucratic capacity, which hinder the implementation of complex governance tasks and can undermine the effectiveness of rule-of-law policies (Migdal, 1988). There are public concerns about Albania's readiness to manage migrant influx effectively, given these limitations, as well as about the legal implications of transferring sovereignty over the camps' territory to Italy. Hosting extraterritorial detention and screening facilities might prove a crucial challenge to Albania's institutional resilience, and the facilities could magnify existing governance weaknesses.

It remains subject to debate whether Italy's investment (estimated at €670 million) will serve its cause and contribute significantly to reducing migration flows to the peninsula. The Albanian centers are designed to process and accommodate up to 3.000 people per month, or 36.000 per year—less than a third of the total annual influx of illegal migrants to Italy. Furthermore, the stay of these migrants will be limited to 28 days; during that period, Italy must decide whether to grant them asylum or repatriate them. However, agreements with the migrants' countries of origin, necessary for the repatriation process, are mostly absent. As a result, migrants may remain in legal limbo in the centers for much longer (Siviero, 2023). The first-stage recipient centers in the Italian legal system lack a clear normative framework of guarantees (Ceccorulli, 2021), while persistent delays in asylum procedures restrict asylum seekers' freedom of movement, infringe their fundamental rights, and pose legal risks for Albania (Albanian Helsinki Committee, 2024). The decree adopted by the Italian government on March 28, 2025, expanded the centers' expected functions to include serving as repatriation hubs for migrants in possession of an Italian deportation order (Gazzetta Ufficiale, 2025). Questions arise regarding Italy's ability to manage migration flows effectively in this ambiguous setting, and about which side is

responsible for those left in legal limbo: these and other unaddressed challenges fuel further skepticism about the agreement.

Implications for National and Local Security

The protocol establishes a hybrid system of security governance that is characterized by fragmented authority and shared responsibilities between the two states. As governance structures relying on multiple actors often face coordination problems and blurred accountability, the separation of duties in internal and external control of the camps in the Albanian case produces an inherently fragile structure that may compromise both effectiveness and due oversight (Krahmann, 2003).

Suffice it to say that, while leading migratory policies, especially in such unclear terms, the issues of protecting human rights by ensuring a secure environment for migration paths, as well as the recipient's self-securitization, become of utmost importance. In such a dichotomic security setting, the establishment of migrant camps on one's territory is nowadays one of the most problematic – though inevitable – products of migratory processes. Hindered by states unable to deal with unprecedented flows of immigration, people on the move find themselves stuck in unsafe, overcrowded, underequipped facilities while facing hostility from fellow migrants, security forces, and hosting societies. In the resulting legal vacuum, the enjoyment of substantive rights proclaimed in the Geneva Convention may be consistently postponed. In cases like Libya, for Savio Vammen, Cold-Ravnkilde and Lucht (2021), the externalization of EU border policies becomes the externalization of violence to a place beyond legal, moral, and public scrutiny. These risks highlight a tension between state-centric and human security, as securitization of border procedures creates conditions in which migrants may face violation of their fundamental rights, heightened exposure to trafficking networks, and prolonged uncertainty – all core human-security concerns with direct implications for local stability.

Among the internal security problems inherent to temporary migrant detention camps, experts outline violence and threats to the health and safety of migrants, which may arise both from external sources and within the camps, particularly in areas where large numbers of migrants from different ethnic and religious groups or extremely impoverished countries are present. A lack of rule of law due to inadequate organization of security by camp personnel—stemming from unfit training of local security forces, their insufficient numbers, or, conversely, overcrowding in the camps—could exacerbate the situation. This

lack of internal stability and security could turn the camps into hotspots for conflict, organized crime, human trafficking, and illegal arms and drug trade. Violence and instability within the camps may spill over into local communities, potentially leading to conflict with local populations and heightened regional tensions (Jacobsen, 1999). These developments correspond to standard early-warning indicators identified in conflict-prevention scholarship, including rising local grievances, protest mobilization, social polarization and migrant exposure to exploitation and criminal activity. If unaddressed, these dynamics may escalate into more persistent forms of instability, underscoring how migration externalization can generate security risks not only within camps but also within surrounding communities. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the possible impact of these camps on local and national security in the recipient country is crucial for ensuring stability.

As of July 2025, the centers have hosted a total of 132 migrants – a tiny fraction of the projected figures (Varcounig Balbi, 2025). This result is primarily due to numerous procedural complications and legal opposition from the Italian courts. Nevertheless, given the Meloni administration's resolve to use the project and the already noticeable security challenges within the camps, a multi-level risk assessment is due. A lack of thorough risk analysis before establishing the camps in Shëngjin and Gjadër created a vacuum of awareness, expectations, and behavioral patterns regarding the situation on the ground, while the challenges continue to arise. Numerous NGOs have reported serious procedural shortcomings concerning human rights standards already at the stages preceding the delivery of migrants to the centers. The screening of migrants is carried out by military personnel, often with disregard for timeframes and screening conditions, under unclear procedures for age and vulnerability assessment, and without individual certification (Mediterranea Saving Humans, 2025; ASGI, 2025). The biometric and personal data of migrants collected by the Albanian border police upon arrival at Shëngjin is stored in the Total Information Management System (TIMS), which has faced numerous cyberattacks and security breaches involving organized crime networks over the years. Moreover, Millona (2025) argues that once Albania becomes an EU member, the identical fingerprints may be used to deny these migrants entry into another EU member state.

The influx of thousands of migrants into the camps, as prescribed by the protocol, presents additional legal and operational challenges. Carlotta Giordani (2024) states that in the absence of adequate protection, regulation and integration mechanisms, the demand for

a cheap workforce by local enterprises could put irregular migrants at risk of trafficking and exploitation for labor and sexual purposes, putting them into a newly created condition of vulnerability. The prolonged psychological distress, as noted by visiting parliamentarians and NGO reports, already lies behind registered suicide attempts and psychotropic drug use among the still small population of the camps. The Albanian healthcare system, to which migrants are referred in emergencies, has severely limited operational capacity, especially in rural areas such as Gjadër. External risks also involve local criminal networks that could take advantage of shortcomings in the rule of law to engage migrants in drug and arms trafficking. Status irregularity might incite migrants to go beyond Albanian land and maritime borders, to routes old and new, where the lack of legal pathways puts them into the hands of migrant smugglers and leads to the use of risky crossing points and conflicts with the police and soldiers (Bobić & Šantić, 2019). This particularly concerns individuals who cannot be either admitted to the camps or returned to their country of origin.

In the immediate vicinity of the camps, the initial enthusiasm of many Shëngjin residents about potential influxes into the local economy is now being replaced by growing disappointment as expectations remain unmet. After unsuccessful migrant delivery attempts, the only ones present at the camp sites are the Italian and Albanian police and human rights protesters. Public discontent materialized in manifestations organized by the Italian-Albanian Network Against Migrant Detention to overturn the implementation and financing of the protocol, unfolding in Shëngjin and Gjadër before moving to Tirana and Rome (Candito, 2024). As the Meloni government struggles to justify the centers' lack of functionality, some reports state that discontinuing or 'freezing' the protocol could lead to the camps being used as prisons for Albanian citizens detained in facilities throughout Italy (*La Repubblica*, 2024). The proposal to requalify these centers as 'return hubs', as promoted throughout recent EU policy discussions, still largely lacks juridical and practical underpinning, and the possible directions and outcomes of a similar development are not yet clear before 2026.

Nationwide, the implementation of the agreement risked sparking political instability due to Prime Minister Rama's unilateral decision to sign the protocol, the ongoing debate over its constitutionality, and backlash from opposition and human rights activists over its economic and humanitarian implications. Socially, it is seen that even though many locals aren't strangers to migration themselves, the thought of the abrupt introduction of migrants onto the Albanian territory, combined with social and racial

prejudice, contributed to the rise of xenophobia among some layers of the Albanian population, especially online.

Politically, despite a historical domestic equilibrium in favor of active migration, Albania has been consistently complying with EU migration management demands in the context of promised European integration (Dedja, 2012). In continuation of this policy, Rama, talking about the protocol, portrays himself as a friend and 'a lending hand' of Italy and Europe, as well as a migrant caregiver (*Euronews Albania*, 2023a). While the rate of Rama's public approval saw an insignificant drop in the aftermath of the agreement (*Euronews Albania*, 2023b), how the failure to meet the protocol's expectations and the Albanian government's subsequent actions will affect its legitimacy in the following period remains to be seen.

Difficulties in implementing novel externalization policies are not inherent to the Italy-Albania case. The United Kingdom's plan to transfer asylum seekers to Rwanda, now abandoned, illustrates how such schemes can collapse when they lack legal robustness, credible protection guarantees, and political legitimacy. The UK–Rwanda agreement was ultimately blocked because Rwanda's asylum system was deemed unable to ensure non-refoulement and fair procedures, while British courts questioned the scheme's compatibility with international and domestic law. Mounting political opposition, high projected costs, and limited deterrent effects critically undermined the policy's viability. In the Albanian case, these risks persist even though Albania offers a more predictable political environment and closer alignment with EU norms than Rwanda. The Italy–Albania protocol still rests on fragile governance arrangements, unclear accountability, and unresolved questions about compliance with international protection standards. More broadly, the UK case suggests that the long-term viability of extraterritorial asylum processing is uncertain: legal challenges, financial costs, reputational risks, and human-rights concerns consistently undermine such initiatives. Whether these models have a future will likely depend on developing more durable, cooperative, credible and legally coherent mechanisms within Europe's existing asylum framework rather than outside of it.

Conclusion

The Italy-Albania migration protocol encapsulates both the promise and the peril of externalization policies. While the initiative reflects a growing trend of transnational cooperation in migration management, its ambiguous legal framework and inadequate risk

assessment stand in the way of achieving the protocol's objectives. As a result, its initial implementation has stalled due to insufficient migrant transfers. This and other eventual quagmires stem from the legal unpreparedness of both parties, the lack of an organizational base, and the initial lack of transparency.

The awaited implementation of the protocol carries significant implications for Albania's local and national security. In Shëngjin and Gjadër, the air of skepticism surrounding the camps causes public discontent as locals voice their concerns about potential increases in criminality and human rights violations. Nationwide, unresolved legal and operational ambiguities risk escalating political and social tensions, which, paired with the lack of public debate, strain institutional credibility. While the collaboration on the protocol appears to strengthen interinstitutional cooperation between the two countries, potential breaches of international law and violations of migrants' rights raise concerns among the international community and human rights organizations. They may negatively affect the global standing of Italy, Albania, and the European Union. Therefore, all developments of related strategies warrant serious consideration of both internal and external factors.

Suppose the centers are functional in some way or another. In that case, the well-being of migrants and the stability of the host society will serve only as keys to potential positive developments of this model. Given the government's commitment to advancing the project, Albanian national and local security should be safeguarded through proactive measures: providing professional training for local security forces, closely monitoring conditions within the camps, and promoting cooperation with international agencies to ensure compliance with legal and humanitarian standards. Increased transparency and civic engagement in similar decision-making processes should help mitigate domestic backlash and foster societal concord. In complicated settings like these, such steps should allow countries to safeguard human rights better and maintain regional stability.

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