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Sandra Rossi

Abstract

This article presents a novel dataset designed to measure and compare the migration diplomacy strategies of the European Union (EU) and Italy toward five key North African countries: Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia. By quantifying and categorising 181 migration diplomacy measures, the article offers an empirical basis for assessing how migration diplomacy operates within a multi-level governance context. A central question guides the analysis: Do the EU and Italy pursue converging, complementary, or competing strategies in their migration diplomacy toward North Africa? To address this, the study employs a comparative policy analysis methodology and a conceptual framework to identify patterns across their engagement with the selected countries. Findings indicate that EU and Italian approaches can be described as both complementary and convergent. On one side, Italy adopts a more bilateral model based on flexible tools and historical ties, while the EU operates through formal and multilateral channels. Yet, despite these differences, both actors share similar aims to externalise border control and strengthen partner states' capacities to curb irregular migration. This work contributes to international relations research by introducing a systematic approach to measuring state-led migration diplomacy. It adds to the understanding of the EU external action and Italian foreign policy, while shedding light on the increasing informalisation and politicisation of migration policy.

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Introduction

Migration has become a contentious issue of political debate due to its perceived potential to challenge the demographic composition and socio-political balance of states, as well as to influence inter-state relations in significant ways. This has led to the emergence and consolidation of ‘migration diplomacy’ as a structured area of international relations, particularly institutionalised in regions like the Mediterranean (Adamson and Tsourapas, 2019). This article investigates the intersection of the migration diplomacy strategies of the European Union (EU) and Italy towards five North African states: Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia. These countries are strategically important within European efforts to manage migration beyond its borders, as they serve as origin, transit, and destination states for international migrants. In doing so, the research uncovers the overlapping strategies of EU and Italian migration diplomacy, understood as the external strategies and instruments governments deploy to shape migration trends and outcomes (Tsourapas, 2017).

Migration diplomacy has emerged as a central instrument in the external policies of both Italy and the European Union towards North Africa. The analysis is guided by the key question of whether these actors pursue converging, complementary, or competing strategies in this domain. In addressing this question, the study also considers whether they rely on similar types of agreements, pursue comparable objectives, and make use of the same diplomatic tools. Additionally, it explores how migration diplomacy intersects with other strategic policy areas. Understanding how these approaches align or diverge is decisive to assess the effectiveness, coherence, and broader implications of European migration governance.

The article sets two main goals. First, it introduces a novel dataset of 181 migration diplomacy measures enacted between 2011 and 2023, of which 116 were led by the EU and 66 by Italy. These measures were identified, categorised, and coded using a conceptual framework that captures their main characteristics. Second, the quantitative data gathered through this dataset are used to examine the migration diplomacy at both the EU and Italian levels, identifying convergent, divergent, or complementary patterns.

Comparative policy analysis forms the methodological foundation of this research. After establishing a shared conceptual framework for classifying and evaluating the identified migration diplomacy measures, a quantitative comparison of EU and Italian strategies based on the collected data is presented. This is followed by country-specific analyses of the EU’s and Italian measures. This dual approach enables the identification of common patterns and divergences, while accounting for the political and diplomatic contexts shaping each bilateral relationship.

The central hypothesis driving the research is that the differing governance systems of the EU and Italy lead to significantly different approaches to migration diplomacy. This assumption draws on the literature on EU and national-level migration governance. While both actors share the overarching objective of controlling and reducing irregular migration, they often operate with distinct tools and strategic interests. Within the EU, internal political divisions among member states have often led to a policy paralysis, hindering the development of a robust and unified migration system. In response, the EU has increasingly shifted its focus from internal burden-sharing to external containment, producing a set of policy tools aimed at preventing irregular migrants from reaching European territory.

Italy, by contrast, has developed its own approach to migration diplomacy in line with national priorities. As one of the primary points of entry for migrants crossing the central Mediterranean route, Italy has repeatedly called for EU solidarity in redistributing responsibility. Yet, in the absence of binding burden-sharing mechanisms, it has increasingly pursued bilateral engagement with North African states.

The article is structured into three main sections. The first section provides the theoretical and normative foundations of the research, introducing the literature on migration diplomacy and situating the EU and Italian approaches within their respective institutional and political contexts. The second section outlines the research design and presents the dataset. The final section discusses the findings of the comparative policy analysis.

This study contributes to understanding migration diplomacy within multi-level governance by analysing the interplay between EU and Italian strategies in North Africa. It offers new insights into the strategic and diplomatic logics shaping external migration management, highlighting the evolving dynamics of international cooperation in an increasingly fragmented policy landscape.

Migration Diplomacy

Migration is an inherent characteristic of human societies, present throughout all historical periods due to both voluntary and forced movements (de Haas, Castles and Miller, 2019). Despite its historical continuity, migration constitutes one of the most divisive areas of public policy today, reflecting broader ideological tensions (Wihtol de Wenden, 2023). Domestically, migration has attracted significant attention because of its potentially transformative effect on the demographic composition of states, threatening to alter one of the core elements defining the nation-state (Hollifield, 2004; Wihtol de Wenden, 2023). At the same time, migration is inherently an international phenomenon, given its cross-border nature and its implications for bilateral and multilateral relations.

For these reasons, migration has become an impactful element in national and international politics. Hollifield (2004) introduced the concept of ‘migration states’, underlining how migration management has become a central policy concern for many states. Migration has also exposed a tension within modern liberal democracies, often referred to as the ‘liberal paradox’ (Hollifield, 1992). While liberalism – the guiding principle of the current international order – promotes openness at the international level through trade and cooperation, it increasingly clashes with domestic demands for protection and border control. These demands aim to curb rising migration flows into Western states, a trend partly driven by globalisation and the borderless dynamics fostered by the very liberal order itself (Zolberg, 1989). This has generated a tension in which states struggle to reconcile commitments to openness with pressures for migration restrictions.

The paradox is reflected in the rise of state-to-state relations in which migration has become an issue of debate. Historically, states negotiated intergovernmental arrangements to regulate labour flows and politically motivated transfers. More recently, cooperation has shifted towards attempts to limit migration at the international, regional, and bilateral levels (Wihtol de Wenden, 2023). These interactions have led to the surge of ‘migration diplomacy’ as a distinct field of international relations, which explores the external actions of states

aimed at shaping migration trends. The term encompasses a range of diplomatic strategies, including both the instrumentalisation of migration for political or economic purposes and efforts to manage migration through state-to-state relations (Tsourapas, 2017).

European destination states have increasingly adopted diplomatic measures aimed at exercising “remote control” over migrants in third countries (Zaiotti, 2016, p.4), resulting in the externalisation of migration control responsibilities to transit and origin countries. This frequently exposes migrants to human rights abuses, as extensively documented in Libya (Amnesty International, 2024).

There is great variation within migration diplomacy approaches due to differences in bargaining power, bilateral relations, and foreign policy goals of states (Adamson and Tsourapas, 2019). Actors can be broadly classified into three categories: i) destination states, focused on immigration control (e.g., EU member state, the US); ii) origin states, which may encourage emigration to boost remittances or enhance diplomacy; and iii) transit states, which leverage their geographic position to secure concessions (e.g., Türkiye). Migration diplomacy strategies include labour agreements, secondment schemes, diaspora-related agreements, readmission or deportation agreements, and efforts to shape migratory flows (Adamson and Tsourapas, 2019; Tsourapas, 2017). These may be formalised through legal instruments, articulated in political declarations, or implemented via technical cooperation (Fontana and Rosina, 2024).

While migration agreements typically aim to manage irregular migration, address root causes, and create legal pathways (Fontana and Rosina, 2024), they may also involve ‘issue-linkage’ practices tying migration to trade, security, or aid measures. This allows powerful states to exert influence but can also enable weaker states to extract concessions by leveraging migration (Tsourapas, 2017).

This “weaponisation” of migration has been deployed by several transit countries (Greenhill, 2016, p. 23), as in the case of Türkiye. Under the 2016 EU-Türkiye Statement, Türkiye agreed to strengthen its border controls and readmit irregular migrants arriving in Greece in exchange for visa liberalisation, €6 billion financial assistance, and a revitalised EU accession dialogue (European Parliament, n.d.). The deal endowed Türkiye with considerable bargaining power – as demonstrated later in 2016, when Turkish President Erdoğan threatened to suspend cooperation over stalled EU membership negotiations (Adamson and Tsourapas, 2019). The threat materialised in early 2020, when Türkiye temporarily opened its borders with Greece in protest over unfulfilled EU commitments, enabling thousands of migrants to enter EU territory (Wihtol de Wenden, 2023).

This case well illustrates a broader trend of outsourcing migratory procedures to third countries in exchange for financial and political incentives. Within this context, contemporary migration diplomacy is marked by informal, transactional arrangements that marginalise affected individuals. These include deportation and readmission agreements negotiated without the participation or consent of those subjected to them (Greenhill and Adamson, 2023). Despite their inconsistency with humanitarian standards, such practices have been normalised and sometimes involve major international organisations like the IOM and the UN (Wihtol de Wenden, 2023).

1. *The migration diplomacy of the EU: balancing values and control*

The EU has played a central role in shaping migration dynamics across the continent through policies encouraging foreign labour, the removal of internal borders, the establishment of a common asylum framework, and the externalisation of migration management. These strategies are in principle rooted in treaty-based values such as solidarity, human rights, and responsibility-sharing (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2022). Such a values-based posture has been a defining feature of the EU, which has often pursued a strategy that transcends socio-economic concerns to integrate migrants and protect their rights. This, coupled with the regionalisation approach based on the establishment of a regional migration system under supranational authority, has offered member states a way to mitigate the ‘liberal paradox’ (Hollifield, 2004). However, the rise of nationalist and right-wing parties linking migration to security threats has exposed the persistence of this paradox (Schain, 2018). Thus, while some rights have been extended to third-country nationals, securitisation pressures have consistently undermined the attempt to overcome of the liberal paradox.

The EU began diplomatic engagement with countries of origin and transit after the dismantling of internal borders under Schengen, recognising the need for enhanced external controls (D’Humières, 2018). The 2002 ‘Sevilla Council’ formalised a dual strategy of addressing root causes and reinforcing borders (Council of the European Union, 2002), operationalised through partnerships to strengthen security cooperation and integrate migration with development. Since then, the EU has increasingly engaged in partnerships aimed at enhancing cooperation on security, strengthening border controls, and combating human trafficking (Lavenex, 2006). In parallel, the EU restructured its Southern Neighbourhood policy through the ‘European Neighbourhood Policy’ (ENP) in 2003, which supported reforms through bilateral ‘Association Agreements’ (Del Sarto and Schumacher, 2005).

After the Arab Uprisings, the EU revised its strategy under the ‘Global Approach to Migration and Mobility’ (GAMM), shifting its focus from democracy to prioritising stability, control, and migration containment (Ghanem *et al.*, 2023; Limam and Del Sarto, 2020). Under the GAMM, the EU proposed third countries to conclude ‘Mobility Partnerships’ (MPs), based on a conditionality approach in which visa facilitation and financial assistance were tied to cooperation on readmission and border control. This “more for more” strategy was met with resistance across North Africa, as it prioritised EU security over genuine mobility or development (Carrera *et al.*, 2013, p. 5). Tunisia (2014) and Morocco (2013) agreed to MPs under significant pressure, whereas Algeria and Egypt declined, perceiving the partnerships as disproportionately security-focused and restrictive (Abderrahim, 2019; Geddes, 2014).

The 2015 crisis deepened the securitisation approach, notably through the ‘European Agenda on Migration’ and the ‘Migration Partnership Framework’ (MPF), which extended the logic of the GAMM while intensifying its security emphasis (Carrera, 2018). The shift is exemplified by the outcome of the ‘Valletta Summit’, where it was decided that 55% of the €400 million ‘Emergency Trust Fund’ would be allocated to border control, while only 3% would support legal migration channels (D’Humières, 2018).

This period marked a turning point in the EU’s normative rationale and affected its credibility as a values-based institution. In the trade-off between short-term perceived security and long-term governance approaches, the EU has favoured border control over structural solutions (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2022). Thus, as halting irregular arrivals became a priority over rights protection, the EU formalised its cooperation with authoritarian regimes

such as Türkiye and Libya to obtain swift reductions in migratory flows (Raineri and Strazzari, 2021). The 2016 ‘EU-Türkiye Statement’ became a central pillar of externalisation by reducing irregular arrivals in exchange for financial support and political concessions (Terry, 2021; European Commission, 2016). Similar deals followed with Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, and Morocco, often lacking adequate rights safeguards (Düvell, 2017; Carrera, 2018). A further strong role was played by Frontex, the ‘EU’s Border and Coast Guard Agency’, whose mandate expanded after 2016 (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2022). However, its involvement in illegal pushbacks and cooperation with Libya raised serious human rights concerns (Sunderland and Pezzani, 2022; Statewatch, 2024).

Simultaneously, the EU has prioritised efforts to accelerate returns of irregular migrants. While 18 formal ‘EU Readmission Agreements’ (EURAs) exist, mainly with non-African states, the EU increasingly embeds return in informal Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), ‘Joint Statements’, ‘High Level Dialogues’ and broader development cooperation measures (European Commission, 2016; Jorge, 2021). Yet, return enforcement remains weak due to limited cooperation by partners and the inconsistencies among member states (Carrera, 2018; Savino, 2018).

Recent measures underline how the EU has continued to deploy a flexible diplomacy that merges development cooperation with migration control. In 2023, the ‘NDICI-Global Europe’ funding instrument institutionalised the use of development aid for migration control (Fabiani, 2021). Moreover, the agreements with Tunisia (2023), Mauritania (2024), and Egypt (2024) offered financial packages in exchange for enhanced border enforcement, despite documented instances of migrant abuse (UNHCR, 2023b; ECCHR, 2021; Global Detention Project, 2024). Such deals increasingly reflect neo-colonial dynamics and bolster authoritarian regimes, demonstrating how the EU has compromised its normative ambitions in favour of migration control (Raineri and Strazzari, 2021; de Larramendi and Azaola Piazza, 2024).

In 2024, the EU’s ‘Pact on Migration and Asylum’ represented an effort to harmonise internal asylum rules, enhance returns, and formalise external partnerships (Riehle, 2024). It included initiatives to increase coherence and complementarity within member states under the umbrella of ‘Team Europe Initiatives’ (EMN and OECD, 2024). Nonetheless, divergent national strategies continue to fragment EU migration governance (Parusel, 2023). Ultimately, the EU has built an expansive network of migration instruments and partnerships, while its normative coherence and foreign policy credibility are increasingly being eroded by its migration control strategy.

2. *The migration diplomacy of Italy: balancing interests and cooperation*

Italian policymakers have often described the country as a ‘natural bridge’ between Europe and the Southern Mediterranean, a role exemplified by the regional influence of ‘ENI’, the state-linked Italian energy company. Libya and Egypt, which respectively supply around 20% and 10% of Italy’s hydrocarbons, have traditionally been at the core of Italian diplomacy in the Mediterranean (Colombo and Varvelli, 2016; Brighi and Musso, 2017). This diplomacy has been guided by a mix of political dialogue, support for self-determination, and economic interests (Pizzigallo, 2015). Nonetheless, Italy’s broader foreign policy has often struggled to articulate a clear strategic vision for the Mediterranean (Croci, 2007). This reflects Italy’s traditionally ‘gregarious’ role in international affairs, even as it maintains membership in major

institutions such as the EU, G7, G20, and NATO. At times, however, Italy has managed to leverage soft power and foster public-private partnerships, most notably through the 2015 humanitarian corridors, which were praised by the EU for offering legal pathways to migration (Marchetti, 2018).

Migration became a salient issue in Italy in the 1990s, following the arrival of Albanian migrants and the post-9/11 shift linking migration to security. Since then, both centre-right and centre-left governments have increasingly framed migration through a security lens (Scotto, 2017). During this decade, Italy began employing migration diplomacy through bilateral consultations, seasonal work programmes, and readmission agreements – first with Albania and later with Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt (Fontana and Rosina, 2024). Domestically, the 1998 ‘Turco-Napolitano Law’ introduced a quota system for labour migration and family reunification, laying the foundations of Italian migration governance (Szulc and Szymaniak, 2020).

Italian engagement in North Africa has also posed a ‘European dilemma’ in balancing national interests with EU commitments to rights and norms (Brighi and Musso, 2017). Libya offers a key example of this balancing act. Italian relations with the country are key due its vast oil reserves and to ENI’s long-standing presence, in addition to Libya’s role in curbing Sub-Saharan migration to Europe (Amnesty International, 2024). In 2008, the ‘Treaty of Friendship’ formally linked political reconciliation with renewed economic ties and migration deterrence, illustrated by Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi’s declaration that it would bring “less clandestine [migrants] and more Libyan gas and oil” (Camera dei Deputati, 2008, p. 1651). The Treaty deepened cooperation with Libya by integrating migration control with development and energy deals (Ceccorulli, 2022).

Following the fall of Gaddafi, which led to the disruption of these arrangements and a surge in migration, Italy began engaging with both Libyan governments¹ (Brighi and Musso, 2017). In 2012, the ‘Hirsi Jamaa Ruling’ (ECtHR, 2012) exposed the illegality of Italian Libyan cooperation, prompting a shift from direct pushbacks to Libyan-led pullbacks supported through Italian funding (Statewatch, 2024; Achour and Spijkerboer, 2020). This approach also characterised Italy’s 2015 response (Openpolis, 2023). The EU’s ‘one-stop shop’ system² for asylum placed Italy under considerable strain due to its geographic proximity to countries where human smugglers operate, which facilitated high volumes of arrivals (Basile and Olmastroni, 2020). At the same time, the 2016 EU-Türkiye Agreement redirected migratory flows towards Italy, fuelling grievances regarding the EU’s failure to implement equitable burden-sharing (Wihtol de Wenden, 2023).

In response, Italy expanded bilateral cooperation with African countries, often linking migration control to labour quotas. Centre-left governments under Renzi and Gentiloni launched the ‘Africa Fund’ to finance voluntary returns and development initiatives (Zotti and Fassi, 2020; Fontana and Rosina, 2024). A key turning point came in 2017 with the renewal of the MoU with Libya’s Government of National Accord, effectively reviving earlier cooperation with the Gaddafi regime through a “replication” of the EU-Türkiye model (Palm, 2017, p.

¹ Since the end of Gaddafi’s government, Libya has been governed by two constituencies: the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) and the Libyan National Army (LNA) (Ceccorulli, 2022).

² Under this system, legal responsibility for processing asylum claims of individuals first reaching EU territory rests with the country of first arrival.

1). This shift revealed both the perceived urgency of flow management and the difficulty of securing formal and binding partnerships.

Concurrently, since 2017 informal agreements have increasingly replaced formal re-admission or labour agreements (Fontana and Rosina, 2024). These lack legal accountability and transparency, heightening the vulnerability of migrants – particularly in Libya, where they have resulted in well-documented abuses in detention centres (UNHCR, 2023a). Despite their limited effectiveness, as they tend to push migration routes further into Africa, such cooperation persists and is regarded as a model for future agreements (Scotto, 2017; Palm, 2017).

Under the current government led by Giorgia Meloni, Italy has reinforced a dual approach combining domestic restriction with externalised control. This includes reintroducing closed-port policies, stricter asylum procedures, and establishing offshore asylum processing centres in Albania (Alonzi, 2024). The legal framework for these centres has raised serious concerns, as they would fall under Italian jurisdiction despite being located on foreign territory (Carrera *et al.*, 2023). In 2024, the government launched the ‘Mattei Plan’ for Africa, a development agenda focused on addressing the root causes of migration through job creation, training, and sustainability (Italian Government, 2024). In this respect, Tunisia has emerged as a key partner, supported by EU-backed funding for border management initiatives (European Parliament, 2023). Taken together, these measures reflect a broader Italian strategy that prioritises deterrence over integration and relies on migration diplomacy to strengthen Italy’s role in EU-African relations (Mezran and Pavia, 2023; Alonzi, 2024).

Methodology

This study adopts a comparative policy analysis approach to examine the migration diplomacy strategies of the EU and Italy towards five North African countries: Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia. The selected countries play a pivotal role in both Italy’s and the EU’s migration agendas, making them critical cases for exploring potential policy alignment or divergence.

The analysis is structured around a central research question: to what extent do Italy and the EU adopt converging, complementary, or competing migration diplomacy strategies in North Africa? To explore this question, the study examines several core dimensions of their external migration engagements. It first considers whether the two actors consistently employ the same types of agreements. It then assesses the degree to which their stated objectives are aligned across different policy contexts and timeframes. The analysis also investigates whether similar tools are used to implement these objectives, including funding mechanisms, diplomatic initiatives, and technical cooperation. Finally, it explores whether migration diplomacy is systematically linked to broader issue areas at both national and EU levels. These additional research questions guide the analysis of the measures presented in the dataset (Table 1).

The methodology of comparative policy analysis enables the systematic examination of the processes, goals, and instruments underpinning migration diplomacy through the examination of policy measures – understood as the main tools used by governments to implement their goals (Fontana and Rosina, 2024). This approach helps reveal how political, social, and economic factors shape policy formulation and implementation (Steiner-Khamsi and

Morais de Sa e Silva, 2024). Therefore, this method proves particularly useful in capturing both policy content and contextual factors.

Policy measures were identified based on their alignment with the working definition of migration diplomacy adopted in this article – namely, the strategic use of diplomatic tools to influence migration flows or negotiate migration-related outcomes (Tsourapas, 2017). Policy measures are analysed along several dimensions, which are outlined in more detail in the following section. After the collection and coding of the migration diplomacy measures database, the intersection of Italian and EU migration diplomacy has been assessed through the identification of three key dynamics: competition, complementarity, and convergence. *Competition* occurs when Italy's actions conflict with EU policies, such as when Italy's readmission agreements bypass EU frameworks. *Convergence* occurs when both Italy and the EU align their strategies, for instance in joint efforts for border security or humanitarian resettlement. *Complementarity* occurs when Italy's actions support EU policies without direct overlap, often via bilateral agreements or migration clauses (Fontana *et al.*, 2022).

1. The Migration Diplomacy Dataset

To support the comparative analysis, a novel dataset was constructed compiling relevant migration diplomacy measures adopted by Italy and the EU towards the five selected North African countries. The dataset was assembled through a two-phase process. First, relevant policy measures were identified through a systematic review of primary sources, including official government and EU websites, legal texts, bilateral agreements, press releases, and policy communications. An extensive review of secondary literature was conducted to ensure the inclusion of informal or less publicly documented policy measures. For Italy, the 'DEPMI Project Database' (Fontana and Rosina, 2024) provided a foundational list of migration diplomacy initiatives. For the EU, the absence of a centralised database entailed a manual review of official documentation from several EU institutions and agencies.

This comprehensive review process led to the identification of 181 policy measures spanning 1980-2024, including 115 EU measures and 66 Italian measures, targeting the five North African countries.

In the second phase, the dataset was categorised using a conceptual framework developed on the basis of existing studies (Longo and Fontana, 2022; Tsourapas, 2017; Adamson and Tsourapas, 2019; Fontana and Rosina, 2024). To classify these measures, a typology developed by Fontana and Rosina (2024) – identifying key categories within the Italian migration diplomacy toolbox – was adapted to align with the specific measures analysed in this study (Appendix A). Additionally, several dimensions were considered, including the year of implementation, the level of engagement (bilateral, regional, or multilateral), the legal basis (legal, political, or operational), and the formal or informal nature of the measure. The study also categorises measures by their objectives, tools, and issue-linking strategies, as provided in the representation of the conceptual grid displayed in Table 1. Some variables were coded as binary or categorical variables with a single value per measure. Others allowed for multiple values to reflect the multidimensional nature of many policy instruments (objectives, tools, issue-linking).

Table 1. Conceptual framework guiding the comparative policy analysis

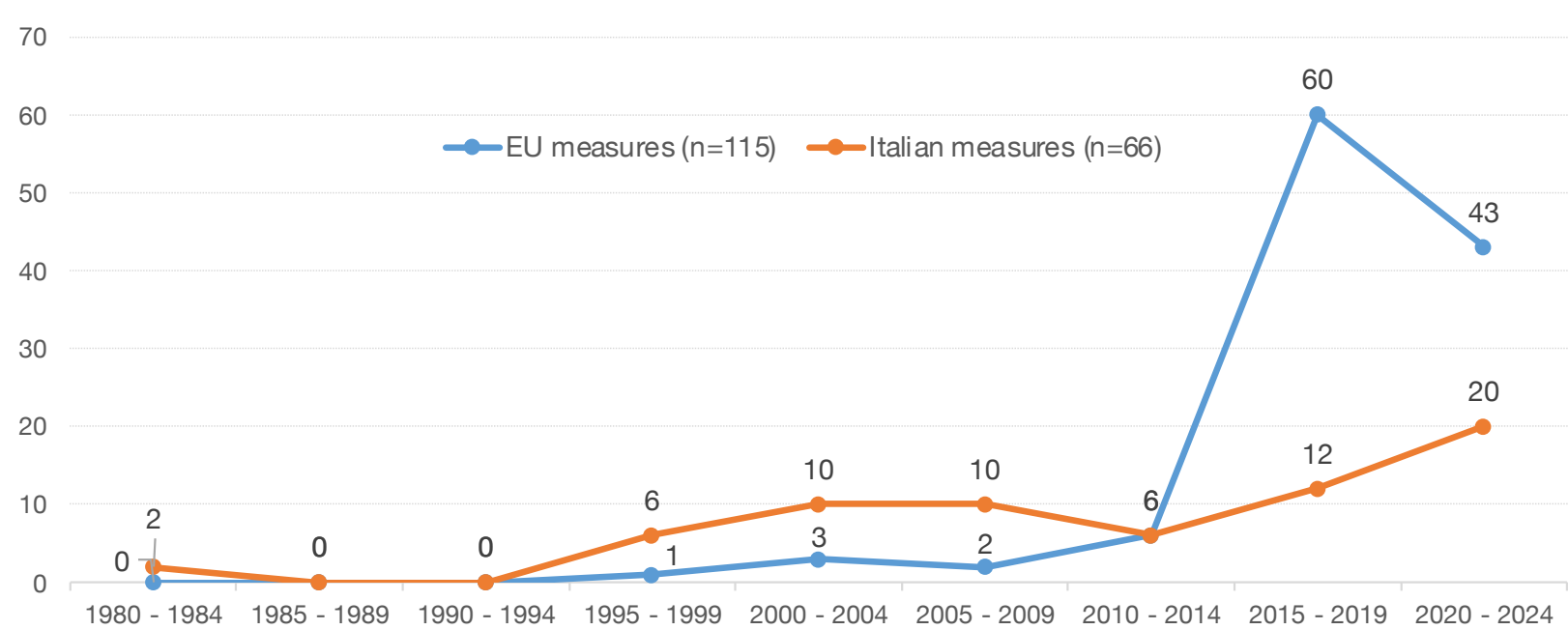
Dimension	Variable	Criteria to assess intersection
Year	/	
Level of engagement	Bilateral, multilateral, regional	
Type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Political dialogue - Readmission agreements - Agreements on border control / countering migrant smuggling - Agreement on legal mobility - Other type of agreement - Programmes on return, resettlement, integration - Programmes on humanitarian assistance - Programmes on development - Programmes on border management / human trafficking - Other programmes - Military missions 	Do the EU and Italy consistently use the same types of agreements?
Legal basis	Legal, political, operational	
Nature	Formal, informal	
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Migration management and prevention - Border management - Fight smuggling - Return / resettlement - Human rights protection of migrants / vulnerable people - Integration of migrants - Legal migration - Youth employment - Skills development - Private sector development - Regional cooperation - Peace and stability 	Do Italy and the EU focus on the same objectives in their migration diplomacy?
Tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Training - Capacity-building - Financial assistance - Provision of equipment - Dialogue - Reintegration assistance - Mobility schemes - Awareness-raising campaigns - Scholarship - Education / vocational training - Investment / trade facilitation 	Do Italy and the EU employ similar tools in their migration diplomacy?

Table 1. (continued)

Issue-Linking	<div><div>- Youth unemployment</div><div>- Development</div><div>- Economic stability</div><div>- Social integration</div><div>- Human trafficking</div><div>- Governance/rule of law</div><div>- Security concerns</div><div>- Job opportunities</div><div>- Migrant protection</div><div>- Health/education</div></div>	Is migration diplomacy linked to broader issues in Italian and EU-level migration diplomacy?
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Most measures in the dataset belong to the periods 2015-2019 and 2020-2023 (Figure 1). For the EU, migration-related measures in the dataset begin in 1999, peak after 2014, and remain significant after then. Italy’s engagement with migration diplomacy dates to the 1990s, with steady growth except for a brief decline between 2010 and 2014. These patterns suggest the increasing strategic relevance of migration diplomacy in recent years, reinforcing the idea that migration has long been a key element in diplomatic exchange, while also showing a marked intensification of migration diplomacy efforts in the last decade.

Figure 1. Time Distribution of migration diplomacy measures, 5-year interval (n)



Comparative Policy Analysis

This section presents the result of the comparative policy analysis conducted on the basis of the dataset described above. The first subsection assesses how the EU’s and Italy’s migration diplomacy measures towards five North African countries (Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia) interact, identifying patterns of convergence, complementarity, or competition based on the contextual analysis and the dimensions outlined in the conceptual

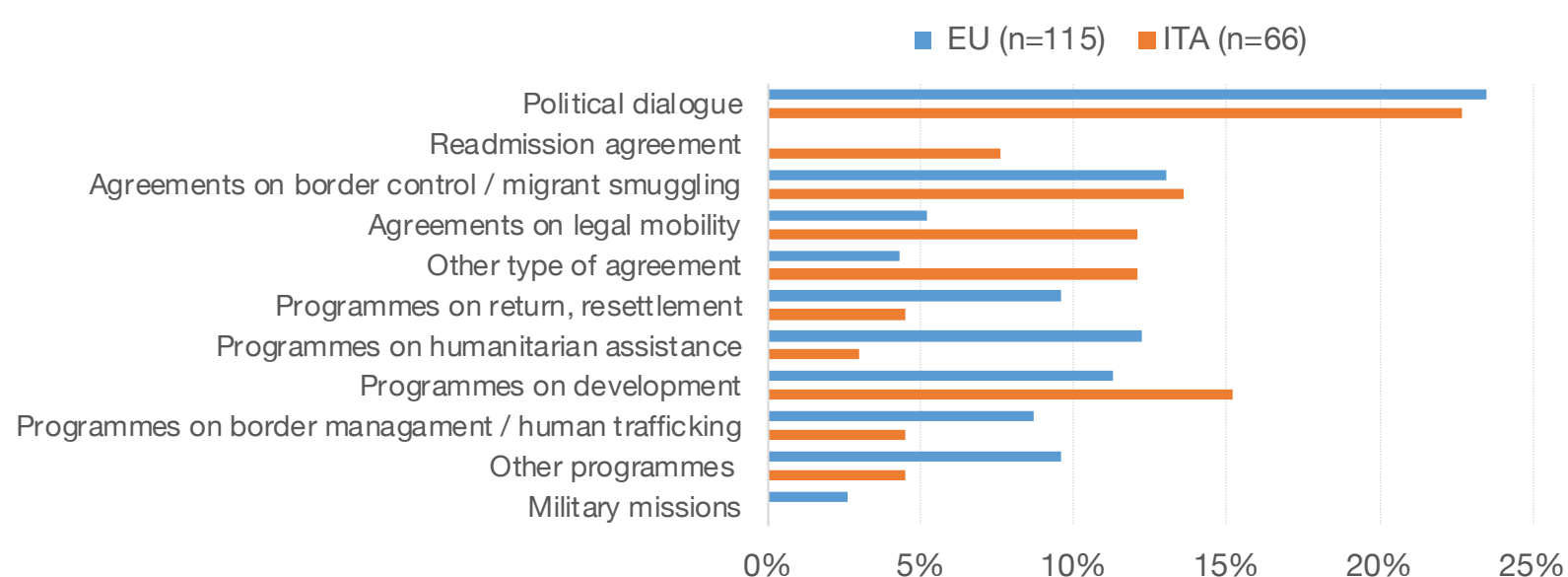
framework. It thus synthesises EU and Italian approaches to migration diplomacy in North Africa, drawing from the comparative analysis of the five country cases and the underlying dataset.

A second subsection provides a concise country-by country analysis of EU and Italian migration diplomacy with the countries of North Africa. For each case, it combines an overview of migration trends, an examination of the diplomatic measures adopted by both actors, and an assessment of how Italian and EU migration diplomacies intersect. This allows for an understanding of variations within migration diplomacy approaches based on the context and policy priorities at the national and supra-national levels.

1. *The EU's and Italy's migration diplomacy in North Africa*

The analysis reveals a significant convergence in the types of measures and tools employed (Figure 2). Political dialogue is the most frequently used instrument at both levels (24% EU; 23% Italy), and similar proportions are observed for agreements on border control and migrant smuggling, as well as development programmes. However, divergence emerges in specific areas. Italy makes extensive use of readmission agreements (8%), which are absent from the EU's repertoire, likely due to institutional constraints that limit the EU's leverage in negotiating such agreements. The EU more frequently employs return and resettlement programmes, humanitarian assistance, and multilateral initiatives. Italy favours bilateral frameworks (89%) and legally binding instruments (24% vs. 3% for the EU). The data also show that both actors predominantly use formal measures, despite the growing trend towards informalisation.

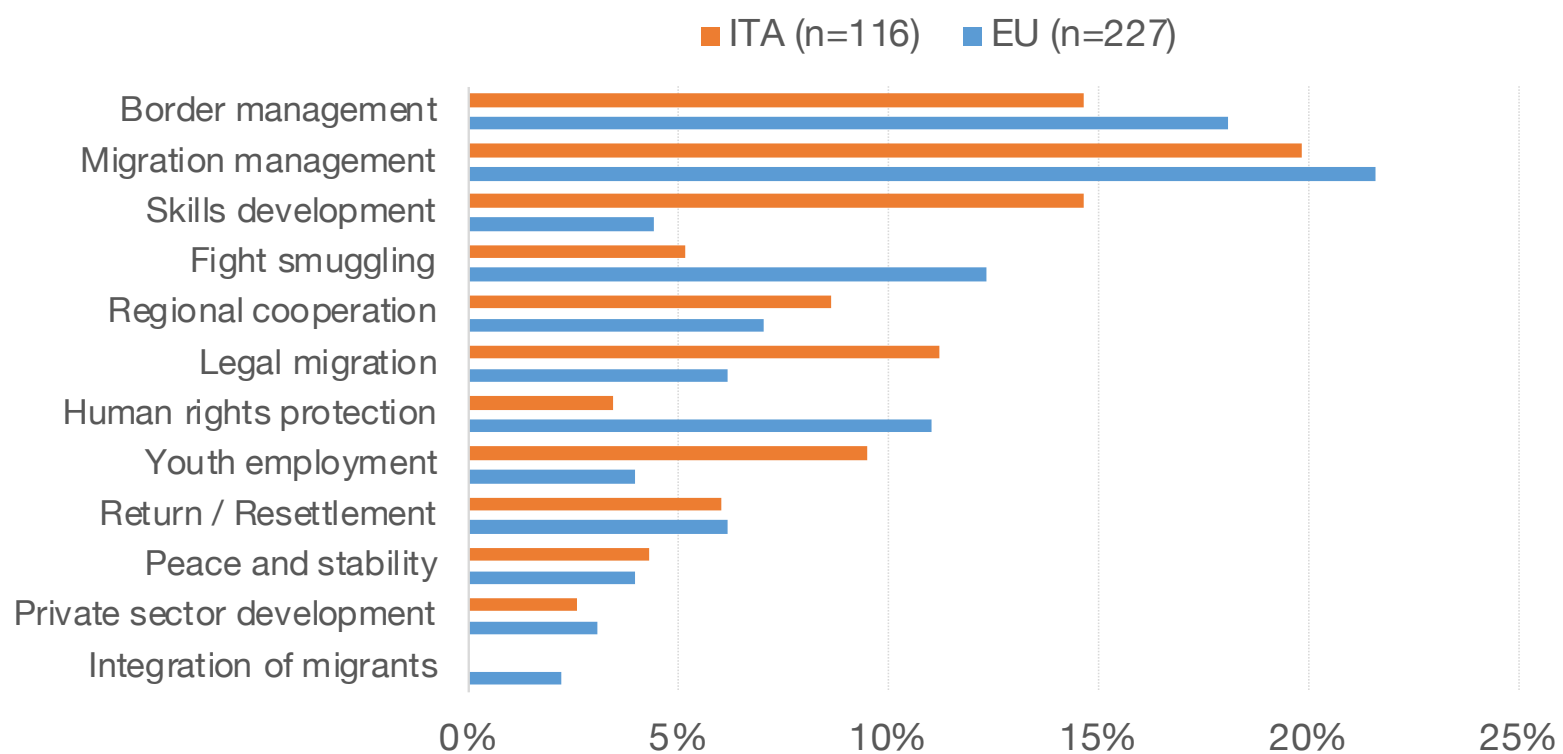
Figure 2. Types of measures used in EU / IT migration diplomacy in North Africa (%)



Objectives also reflect both convergence and complementarity: migration and border management dominate, but the EU places greater emphasis on counter-smuggling and human rights, whereas Italy prioritises skills development, legal migration, and youth employment (Figure 3). Alignment is also observed in the use of tools such as training (24% EU; 22% Italy), dialogue (17% EU; 11% Italy), and financial assistance (14% EU; 13% Italy). Finally,

issue-linking strategies reveal shared concerns with irregular migration (21% EU; 19% Italy) and human trafficking (20% EU; 12% Italy), although Italy places greater emphasis on trade and economic ties with North African countries.

Figure 3. Objectives of EU / IT migration diplomacy in North Africa (%)

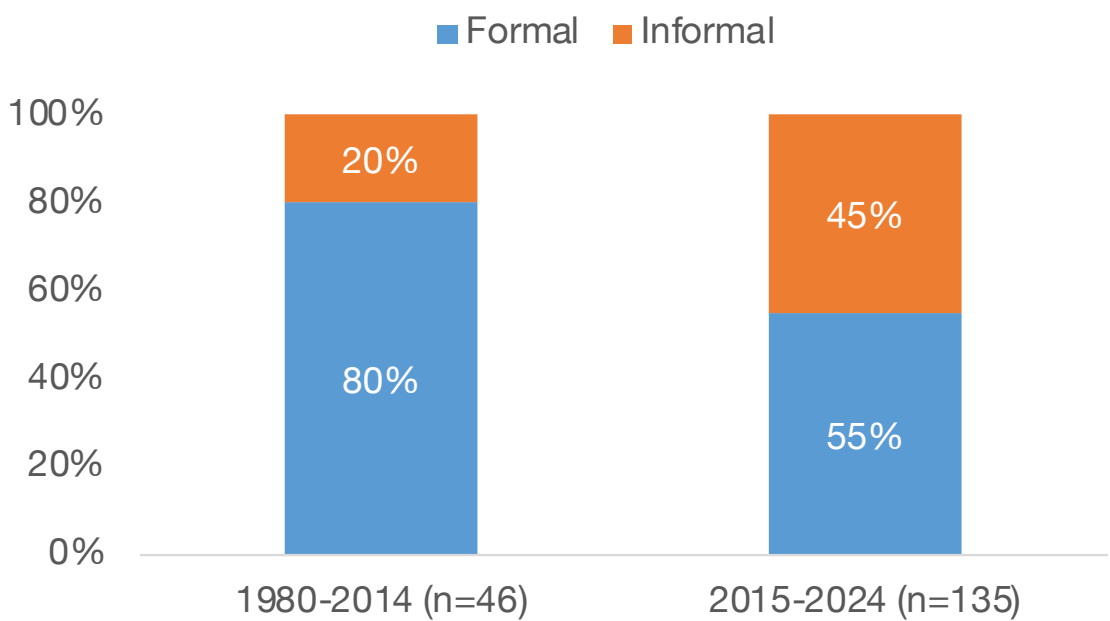


The comparison of EU and Italian migration diplomacy across the five cases reveals patterns of convergence and complementarity. In Libya, Italy and the EU have developed particularly convergent strategies, relying on shared instruments (training, reintegration, equipment provision, and operational partnerships), despite working through different diplomatic channels. In Algeria, by contrast, complementarity dominates: EU engagement is limited and indirect, whereas Italy maintains long-standing bilateral relations supported by sustained political dialogue, a readmission agreement, and targeted development assistance.

Tunisia illustrates a hybrid pattern: both actors engage actively, but Italy focuses on returns and conditional aid, while the EU has sought to balance mobility with migrant protection, as seen in the 2023 MoU. In Egypt, the EU has privileged border control and technical assistance, whereas Italy has increasingly linked migration policy with energy and economic diplomacy. In Morocco, where the EU has invested in regional cooperation and capacity-building, Italy's more limited involvement has nonetheless supported legal migration channels and employment schemes.

The temporal analysis of migration diplomacy measures (n=181) reveals evolving trends in EU and Italian engagement across North Africa. Bilateralism remains dominant (67%), although multilateral initiatives increased in 2015–2019, suggesting a short-lived openness to global cooperation. Political instruments have become more prominent since 2015, rising from 44% of total measures in 1980–2014 to 58% in 2015–2024, signalling a shift from operational initiatives towards diplomatic partnerships (Appendix Figure B.1.). A rise in informal agreements is also observable after 2015, with informal measures going from 20% in 1980–2014 to 45% in 2015–2024 (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Nature of EU / IT migration diplomacy in North Africa, by time intervals (%)



Overall, EU and Italian migration reveal a layered structure characterised by shared objectives, differing instruments, and country-specific approaches. Italy relies on bilateral agreements and development cooperation, while the EU operates through a multilateral framework centred on regional stability and normative governance. Together, they shape a multi-level model for migration diplomacy in North Africa.

The following section presents the result of the country-case comparison, offering deeper insights into EU-Italy engagement in the region. Here, complementarity and convergence largely prevail, although competition emerges in certain contexts – particularly when Italy’s bilateral readmission agreements complicate EU-level negotiations (Table 2). Tools may differ but often serve shared goals, as in Algeria, while they can be highly convergent, as in Libya. In most cases, even where strategies and instruments diverge, they tend to converge towards similar aims. Despite institutional and diplomatic differences, EU and Italian migration diplomacy increasingly operate within a complementary and convergent framework aimed at externalising migration governance.

Table 2. Assessment of Intersection: EU-Italian migration diplomacy in North Africa

	Algeria	Egypt	Libya	Morocco	Tunisia	North Africa
Type	Compete (RA) Complement	Compete (RA) Complement	Compete (RA) Complement	Compete (RA) Complement	Compete (RA) Complement Converge	Compete (RA) Complement Converge
Objectives	Complement Converge	Complement Converge	Complement Converge	Complement Converge	Complement Converge	Complement Converge
Tools	Complement	Complement Converge	Converge	Complement Converge	Complement Converge	Complement Converge
Issue-linking	Complement Converge	Complement Converge	Complement Converge	Complement Converge	Complement Converge	Complement Converge

2. Country cases

Algeria: Italy's strengthened position

Algeria is both a transit and origin country for irregular migration. Although more stable than some neighbours, it has experienced increasing emigration and hosts significant refugee populations, particularly Sahrawis (UNHCR, 2025). The domestic context is marked by social discontent, informal labour markets, and regional rivalries – especially tensions with Morocco over Western Sahara (AICS Tunisi, 2023). Algeria has traditionally pursued a non-aligned foreign policy and remains wary of European involvement due to its colonial past (Ghanem *et al.*, 2023; Zardo and Loschi, 2022).

This mistrust has shaped its limited cooperation with the EU. While the 2005 Association Agreement provided a basis for migration dialogue, practical engagement has been minimal. Notably, Algeria has not joined EU Mobility Partnerships and remains outside Frontex cooperation frameworks (Council of the European Union, 2024). EU cooperation has thus remained informal and project-based. Algeria has participated in regional programmes such as 'EUROMED Police' or border control initiatives via EU Trust Fund support, but no major country-specific instruments exist (DG Near, n.d.).

By contrast, Italy has maintained longstanding bilateral ties due to energy and migration interests. Such deeper engagement is underpinned by the 2000 Readmission Agreement (ratified in 2007) and the 2003 'Treaty of Friendship' (Cassarino, n.d.; Fontana *et al.*, 2022). Italian diplomacy also pursues development and humanitarian support, such as aid to Sahrawi refugees and border police training at the Assamaka-Niger crossing (AICS Tunisi, 2023).

This divergence in EU and Italian approaches is reflected in the instruments used: Italy relies primarily on bilateral (77%) and political (54%) tools, whereas the EU employs regional (79%) and operational (79%) mechanisms (Appendix Figures B.2.1, B.2.2). Italy's emphasis on political dialogue (38% of its measures in Algeria) contrasts with the EU's reliance on return and border management programmes (21% of its measures in Algeria, respectively).

In terms of objectives, there is convergence around shared priorities, such as migrant protection (15% EU; 14% Italy) border management (12% EU; 14% Italy), and regional cooperation (15% EU; 21% Italy). However, Italy has focused more on migration management (21% against 12% of the EU). Complementarity appears in the tools used: the EU relies on capacity-building (27%) and training (20%), while Italy has a more direct approach with diplomatic dialogue (35%). This reflects how Italy's diplomacy builds on sustained bilateralism, while the EU supplements with broader thematic programmes.

Issue-linking also illustrates differentiated but aligned interests. The EU connects migration to development (26%) and security concerns (19%), while Italy links it more closely to migrant protection (38%), countering irregular migration, and job opportunities (15% each).

Egypt: diversified cooperation and strategic interests

Egypt has increasingly served as a transit country, particularly for third-country nationals directed to Libya, and hosts an estimated 9 million migrants, including large numbers from

Sudan, Syria, and Yemen (Council of the European Union, 2024). Despite its role as both a destination and origin country, it has been reluctant to engage in binding migration frameworks, prioritising sovereignty and regime stability (Naceur, 2020a).

The EU-Egypt migration relationship is structured by the 2004 'Association Agreement' and the 2017 'Partnership Priorities'. Although Egypt declined a 'Mobility Partnership' in 2011, cooperation has intensified since 2015, particularly in the context of the EUTF and joint border control projects (Council of the European Union, 2024; Ghanem *et al.*, 2023). In 2023, a 'Joint Declaration' further strengthened EU financial commitments to Egypt, aligning migration with economic and security concerns (DG NEAR, 2024). EU's engagement has included governance support, border management, and capacity-building initiatives (EUTF, 2017). Egypt also participates in regional frameworks such as the 'Better Migration Management' programme and the 'Africa-Frontex Intelligence Community'.

Italy's bilateral migration diplomacy with Egypt pre-dates EU efforts and includes over 110 agreements since the 1950s (Fontana *et al.*, 2022). The 2007 Readmission Agreement remains active, and projects such as 'ITEMA' in cooperation with Frontex show sustained engagement in training and border security (Polizia di Stato, 2019). Development cooperation constitutes a central pillar of Italy's strategy. In 2023 alone, Italy allocated €240 million to Egypt, with migration-specific aid directed towards youth employment, technical training, and voluntary return programmes (AICS Cairo, 2023).

The data demonstrate both convergence and complementarity in EU and Italian migration diplomacy towards Egypt. The EU relies on formal (78%) and regional (52%) instruments, whereas Italy's approach is bilateral (100% of the measures analysed) and informal (67%). Objective alignment is partial: Italy emphasises skills development (25%), legal migration (18%) and youth employment, while the EU prioritises border migration and border management (22% and 20%) (Appendix Figure B.3.1). Issue-linkage is likewise complementary: the EU focuses on security (29%), the rule of law (20%) and human rights (17%). Italy prioritises development-oriented migration policies (Appendix Figure B.3.2). In turn, there is alignment in the tools used, namely training (35% EU; 31% Italy), educational programmes (15% EU; 17% Italy), and financial assistance (8% each); while other instruments are employed in distinct ways (Appendix Figure B.3.3). Overall, these distinctions suggest a complementary strategy: the EU supports regulatory and border-management frameworks, while Italy addresses root causes through targeted development diplomacy.

Libya: triangular dynamic and complementary partnerships

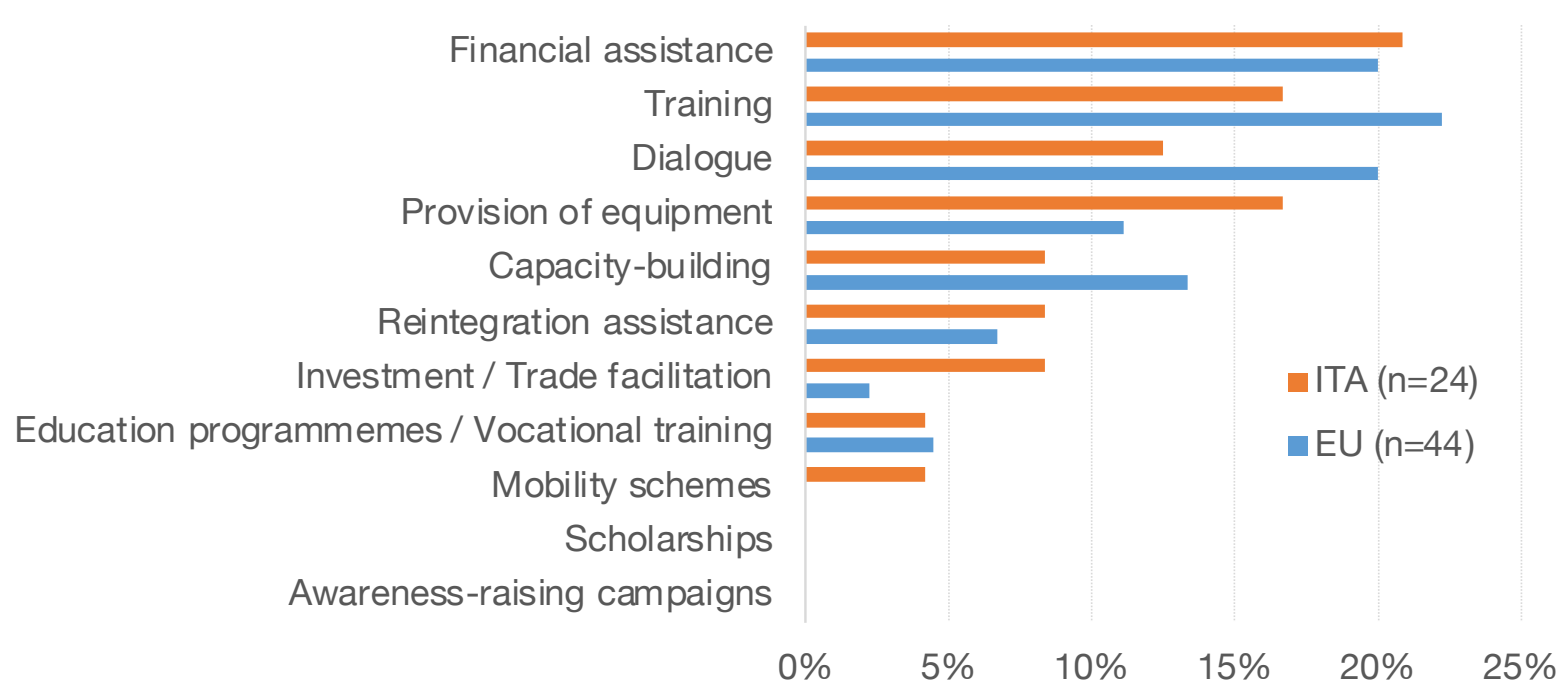
Libya has been a key transit country for irregular migration since the fall of Gaddafi in 2011. Despite persistent instability, it hosts approximately 720,000 migrants, including 60,000 asylum seekers (IOM, 2024). The lack of central authority has fragmented migration governance, with multiple state and non-state actors exerting control over detention and transit routes (AICS Tunisi, 2023).

EU migration diplomacy in Libya intensified after 2015, particularly through the EUTF (€465 million), Frontex coordination, and naval missions such as 'EU NAVFOR Sophia' and 'Operation Irini' (Council of the European Union, 2024). These initiatives have sought to externalise border control, despite widespread reports of abuse and human-rights violations (Akkerman, 2018; Statewatch, 2024).

Italy has acted as a key intermediary, building on long-standing bilateral ties. The 2008 Treaty of Friendship and the 2017 MoU with the GNA institutionalised cooperation on migration control, including joint patrols, equipment transfers, and training (Fontana and Rosina, 2024; Ceccorulli, 2022). Italy has pursued a strategy aimed at containing migration flows with limited formal accountability, including funding of Libyan pullbacks, despite ECtHR rulings (Achour and Spijkerboer, 2020). Security initiatives are complemented by development and humanitarian assistance. Between 2016 and 2023, Italy allocated €91.5 million to projects in health, energy, and reintegration. Cooperation also includes youth employment programmes, voluntary returns, and humanitarian corridors (UNHCR, 2023c; AICS Tunisi, 2023).

The Italy-EU-Libya relationship constitutes a distinct form of migration diplomacy. Italy's bilateral access facilitates implementation, while the EU provides funding, multilateral cover, and technical instruments (Ceccorulli, 2022). This triangular relation is confirmed by the data. While Italy favours bilateral (86%) and informal (57%) tools, the EU relies on multilateralism (60%) and formal (72%) mechanisms. EU measures centre on political dialogue (36%), while Italy focuses on border control and migrant smuggling (29%) (Appendix Figure B.4.1.) Objectives reflect both complementarity and convergence, as both levels include migration (25% each) and border management (23% EU; 29% Italy) within their migration diplomacy. Countering smuggling and fostering stability are majorly used by Libya (Appendix Figure B.4.2). Significant overlap exists in deployed tools – training, financial support, and reintegration – making Libya a rare case of convergence (Figure 5). Issue-linkage patterns show the EU prioritising governance (26% EU; 12% Italy) and security (31% EU, 19% Italy), while Italy more strongly associate its migration diplomacy with irregular migration containment (2% EU; 23% Italy).

Figure 5. Tools of EU / IT migration diplomacy in Libya (%)



Morocco: divergent diplomatic priorities and a leading EU role

Morocco occupies a pivotal role as a country of origin, transit, and increasingly destination. Moroccan nationals represent a significant share of irregular arrivals in the EU, particularly

via Spain (Council of the European Union, 2024). Italy also hosts a large Moroccan diaspora, although Morocco is not a major departure point for irregular migration to Italy (Fontana *et al.*, 2022).

EU-Morocco migration relations are governed by the 2000 Association Agreement and the 2013 Mobility Partnership. Implementation has been limited due to stalled readmission negotiations and Morocco's reluctance to accept the return of third-country nationals who transited its territory (Abderrahim, 2019). Migration diplomacy is influenced by Morocco's broader foreign policy goals, especially its stance on Western Sahara (de Larramendi and Azaola Piazza, 2024). EU cooperation includes the 'Anti-Smuggling Operational Partnership' (2022), the 2023 'Talent Partnership', and coordination with Frontex, EUAA, and EURO-POL (Ghanem *et al.*, 2023).

Italy has maintained long-standing relations with Morocco. The 1998 Readmission Agreement and preferential migration quotas form the backbone of bilateral cooperation. Italy has emphasised legal pathways, vocational training, and circular migration, supported by IOM projects (Fontana *et al.*, 2022). Development aid is modest but aligned with migration goals, targeting employment, infrastructure, and voluntary-return programmes (AICS Tunisi, 2023).

Italy's engagement, while less comprehensive than the EU's, complements broader European strategies through sectoral and legal migration frameworks. Both actors predominantly employ bilateral (64% EU; 100% Italy), formal (56% EU; 71% Italy), and political (80% EU; 86% Italy) instruments. They share objectives such as migration management (22% EU; 19% Italy) and legal mobility (10% EU; 13% Italy), although the EU focuses more on border control and protection (16%), while Italy emphasises employment and regional cooperation (Appendix Figure B.5).

Tools used include capacity-building (19% EU, 13% Italy), training (21% EU, 20% Italy), and dialogue (10% EU; 20% Italy). The EU prioritises humanitarian and institutional tools; Italy invests more in mobility channels and youth employment. Issue-linkage shows the EU aligning with security and governance, while Italy adopts a more development-oriented approach.

Tunisia: a strategic migration partner

Tunisia is both a source and transit country for irregular migration to Europe, as political instability, youth unemployment, and economic stagnation continue to drive emigration. Its geographic proximity has made it one of the top departure points to Italy, including for Sub-Saharan migrants (AICS Tunisi, 2023; Statistiques Tunisie, 2023).

Tunisia-EU cooperation began with the 1998 Association Agreement and was formalised through a 2014 Mobility Partnership. However, progress has been slow due to limited political consensus. Tensions rose in 2018–2019 over disembarkation platforms and responsibility-sharing for third-country migrants (Naceur, 2020b). A breakthrough came in 2023 with the signing of a MoU, combining EU financial support with commitments on return and border management (European Commission, 2023). Tunisia has received over €2.6 billion in EU support since 2011, mostly for migration containment, reintegration, and capacity-building (Naceur, 2020b).

Italy's migration cooperation with Tunisia is anchored in over 100 agreements, including the 1998 Readmission Agreement and a 2003 anti-crime agreement. Since 2020, Rome has increased returns and maritime patrol support, and in 2023 it allocated €400 million for development and migration governance (Fontana *et al.*, 2022). Italy's bilateral approach operates in parallel with EU frameworks but often achieves more direct results due to longstanding institutional links.

Both the EU and Italy rely heavily on bilateral arrangements and political tools, with dialogue (21% EU; 35% Italy), programmes on development (12% EU, 24% Italy), and agreements on legal mobility (8% EU, 12% Italy) being commonly used (Appendix Figure B.6). Their shared objectives include migration (24% EU, 21% Italy) and border management (18% EU; 12% Italy), but the EU places stronger emphasis on counter-smuggling (12% vs 6% of Italy) and human rights (8%). There is convergence around tools, such as financial assistance (22% EU; 23% Italy) and education-related measures (14% EU, 17% Italy), while Italy focuses more on training (20% vs. 10% of the EU). The complementarity observed in the data is reflected in the 2023 MoU, which formalised a division of roles within a shared strategic framework.

Conclusions

This study has shown that the migration diplomacy strategies of the European Union and Italy towards North African states are characterised by convergence and complementarity. Despite institutional differences, both actors pursue broadly aligned goals centred on migration management, return cooperation, and the externalisation of border control. Through bilateral and multilateral initiatives, they aim to enhance the capacities of partner states to curb irregular migration and address its root causes.

The comparative analysis also reveals that the EU's and Italy's distinct institutional frameworks shape their leverage and influence. Italy tends to adopt a pragmatic, bilateral stance, relying on historical ties, development cooperation, and informal agreements that enable a more direct engagement. In contrast, the EU employs a formal, multilateral approach based on legal frameworks, capacity-building, and human rights promotion. However, this often limits its negotiating power in sensitive areas, such as readmission agreements, and complicates the deployment of its financial instruments due to bureaucratic constraints.

These divergent approaches have often proved complementary, particularly in contexts such as Libya and Tunisia, where Italian initiatives have been supported by EU funding and operations. The dataset confirms this pattern, highlighting a shared reliance on tools like training, financial assistance, and policy dialogue, alongside an increasing informalisation of migration diplomacy. Italy has at times acted independently, especially in the area of readmission, yet both actors ultimately operate under a common strategic rationale of externalising migration control.

Thus, EU and Italian migration diplomacies towards North Africa constitute a model in which overlapping instruments and converging objectives form a complex system of external migration governance. The EU, driven by the imperative to reduce migratory arrivals, places significant emphasis on enhancing the border control capacities and detention infrastructure of North African states, while also aiming to improve local conditions to deter onward movement.

This analysis acknowledges several research limitations, notably the incompleteness of the dataset due to restricted access to informal or undisclosed measures. A more systematic approach for the collection of policy data may be refined to allow for a more complete compilation of migration diplomacy datasets. In this view, future research may also include a systematic review of development cooperation, political dialogue and financial provisions, for instance by weighting the financial provisions dedicated to each measure.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the understanding of the increasing politicisation of migration. Migrants are increasingly perceived as threats to be contained, regardless of their rights, fostering an illiberal turn in migration diplomacy. While migration remains a divisive issue in both national and international arenas, it also offers the EU a chance to redefine its external identity. A shift towards values-based and effective migration policies could reinforce the EU's international role. Rather than relying solely on securitisation and border control, the EU should pursue structural strategies to promote stability and development in its neighbourhood. Italy could support this shift through its geopolitical position and willingness to lead in migration diplomacy.

Supplementary material: The supplementary material for this paper can be found at: https://osf.io/dn8by/overview?view_only=a3f923ca9f5249ceb75bba035609dd2e

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