

The Italian Public Administration Governance under Vincolo Esterno: Implications for Democracy, Sovereignty, Public Management, Economic Growth and Immigration

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Abstract

The article explores the concept of Vincolo Esterno and its profound influence on Italy's governance, focusing on its impacts on democracy, public management, economic growth, and immigration. Vincolo Esterno, defined as the reliance on external constraints to enforce domestic reforms, has been pivotal in Italy's alignment with European Union (EU) standards and global practices. The research highlights the dual-edged nature of this governance approach. While it has driven modernization and economic integration, it has also imposed rigid frameworks that challenge sovereignty, democratic accountability, and social equity.

The analysis of democracy reveals tensions between EU mandates and Italy's parliamentary sovereignty, exacerbated by a perceived "democratic deficit" in supranational governance. Influenced by EU directives, public management reforms have modernized administrative systems but exposed regional disparities and bureaucratic inertia. The study also examines the mixed economic outcomes of Vincolo Esterno, emphasizing the constraints of fiscal austerity on infrastructure investment and regional development. Furthermore, immigration policies shaped by external frameworks, such as the Dublin Regulation, illustrate the challenges of managing migration flows and ensuring equitable burden-sharing within the EU.

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This research underscores the need for a more balanced and inclusive governance model that aligns external compliance with domestic priorities. It calls for future studies to explore mechanisms for enhancing democratic accountability, addressing regional inequalities, and adapting *Vincolo Esterno* to dynamic global challenges. The findings contribute to broader debates on multilateral governance and the evolving relationship between sovereignty and globalization, providing insights for policymakers and scholars.

Key words

Vincolo Esterno, governance, democracy, sovereignty, European Union, public management, economic growth, immigration

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Italy's adoption of *Vincolo Esterno* as a governance mechanism reflects a long-standing reliance on external constraints to drive domestic reforms. This approach emerged in the aftermath of World War II when Italy faced the dual challenges of economic reconstruction and political stabilization. The Marshall Plan (1948–1952) is an early example of external conditionality, tying financial aid to structural reforms. These measures, including labour market adjustments and fiscal stabilization, laid the groundwork for a governance model that prioritized external compliance as a means of enforcing domestic discipline (Giavazzi & Pagano, 1990; De Cecco, 2000).

During the 1970s and 1980s, Italy grappled with high inflation, mounting public debt, and political fragmentation, further solidifying the role of external frameworks in its policy landscape. The European Monetary System (EMS), established in 1979, marked a significant step in this direction. By pegging the lira to other European currencies, Italy sought to stabilize its economy through external anchors. However, this approach often exposed the country's vulnerabilities, particularly during economic shocks, such as the lira devaluation crises of the early 1990s (Dyson & Featherstone, 1999; Eichengreen, 1997).

The Maastricht Treaty of 1992 was a watershed moment in institutionalizing *Vincolo Esterno*. By committing to stringent fiscal standards – such as maintaining a fiscal deficit below 3% of GDP and a debt-to-GDP ratio below 60% – Italy embedded external obligations into its governance framework. These measures

were seen as a catalyst for modernization, driving reforms in public administration, social security, and labour markets. However, they also sparked significant domestic resistance, with critics arguing that these constraints prioritized fiscal orthodoxy over social welfare (Mody, 2018; Featherstone, 2001; Bagnai, 2012; Stiglitz, 2016).

Italy's reliance on external constraints has not been without controversy. Scholars argue that *Vincolo Esterno* reflects both an opportunity and a limitation. On the one hand, it provides a framework for implementing reforms that might otherwise face political inertia. On the other hand, it often marginalizes domestic actors, reducing policy flexibility and democratic accountability. For instance, during the 2008 financial crisis, Italy implemented austerity measures largely dictated by EU directives under the Stability and Growth Pact. While these measures were credited with stabilizing public finances, they drew widespread criticism for deepening social inequalities and undermining national policy autonomy (Morlino, 2011).

Recent studies highlight the evolving role of *Vincolo Esterno* in Italy's governance landscape. As Italy navigates post-pandemic recovery, the European Union's Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) has emerged as a new iteration of external conditionality. Under the RRF, Italy is expected to implement ambitious reforms in areas such as digitalization, green energy, and public administration in exchange for substantial financial support. This approach underscores the continued interplay between external frameworks and domestic policy-making, raising questions about the long-term sustainability of this governance model².

The concept of *Vincolo Esterno* has also shaped Italy's broader socio-economic trajectory. By aligning with European standards, Italy has benefited from increased trade integration, access to financial markets, and political stability. However, the trade-offs remain significant, particularly in terms of sovereignty and democratic governance. As Italy continues to engage with EU frameworks, the debate over the merits and limitations of *Vincolo Esterno* remains central to its policy discourse.

² OECD (2023). *OECD Economic Surveys: European Union and Euro Area 2023*. URL: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-economic-surveys-european-union-and-euro-area-2023_7ebe8cc3-en.html (accessed 29.09.2024); European Commission. (2021). *The Recovery and Resilience Facility Explained*. URL: https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility_en (accessed 29.09.2024)

In the next section, we define the nature of *Vincolo Esterno*. Then, in the following three sections, we discuss the implications for democracy and sovereignty, public management, economic growth and immigration. We then draw conclusions and suggest future research paths.

The Nature of *Vincolo Esterno*

The term *Vincolo Esterno*, or “external constraint,” has become a defining feature of Italy’s governance strategy, particularly in its efforts to align domestic policies with international and European standards. The concept encapsulates the idea that external obligations can be used as leverage to implement reforms that might otherwise face political resistance or inertia at the national level. While this approach has facilitated significant modernization, it has also raised concerns about the trade-offs between external compliance and national sovereignty (Dyson & Featherstone, 1999; Stiglitz, 2016).

Italy’s reliance on *Vincolo Esterno* can be traced back to its post-war reconstruction. Programs like the Marshall Plan tied financial assistance to structural adjustments, setting the stage for future reliance on external actors to enforce domestic changes. By the 1970s, Italy faced a new set of challenges, including high inflation, political fragmentation, and mounting public debt. These issues made external frameworks like the European Monetary System (EMS) particularly appealing as mechanisms for stabilizing the economy (Giavazzi & Pagano, 1990; Eichengreen, 1997).

The EMS, established in 1979, represented a turning point in the institutionalization of *Vincolo Esterno*. Italy effectively tied its monetary policy to external benchmarks by pegging the Italian lira to other European currencies. While this strategy succeeded in reducing inflation, it also exposed vulnerabilities during economic crises. For instance, the devaluation of the lira in 1992 underscored the risks of such dependence as Italy struggled to reconcile external demands with domestic economic realities (Eichengreen, 1997; De Grauwe, 1996).

The Maastricht Treaty of 1992 marked a new phase in the evolution of *Vincolo Esterno*. By committing to the treaty’s convergence criteria, Italy adopted stringent fiscal rules, including maintaining a budget deficit below 3% of GDP

and reducing its debt-to-GDP ratio to sustainable levels. These commitments necessitated widespread reforms in public administration, social security, and labour markets. While proponents argued that these measures were essential for modernizing Italy's economy and ensuring its inclusion in the European Monetary Union (EMU), critics contended that they prioritized fiscal orthodoxy over social equity (Featherstone, 2001; Stiglitz, 2016; Bagnai, 2013).

The theoretical underpinnings of *Vincolo Esterno* are rooted in broader discussions on governance and conditionality. Scholars often compare it to structural adjustment programs implemented by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), where external conditions are imposed to enforce compliance with fiscal and monetary targets. However, *Vincolo Esterno* differs in its multilateral context, particularly within the EU, which emphasizes collective decision-making and shared accountability. This integration into a supranational framework introduces both opportunities and challenges, as it requires balancing external commitments with domestic priorities (Morlino, 2011).

In practice, *Vincolo Esterno* has yielded mixed outcomes. While it has driven significant reforms, particularly in fiscal governance, it has also exposed Italy's institutional weaknesses. For instance, the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) required Italy to implement austerity measures during the eurozone crisis, stabilizing public finances but exacerbating socio-economic inequalities. These measures sparked widespread protests and highlighted the tension between external compliance and domestic well-being (Eichengreen, 1997; Pisani-Ferry, 2014).

Recent developments illustrate the continued relevance of *Vincolo Esterno*. The European Union's Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) represents a contemporary iteration of this concept. Under the RRF, Italy is required to implement structural reforms in exchange for financial support. These reforms include digitalizing public administration, enhancing environmental sustainability, and improving infrastructure. While these initiatives align with EU objectives, they also underscore the persistent challenges of balancing external obligations with domestic needs³.

³ European Commission. (2021). *The Recovery and Resilience Facility Explained*. URL: https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility_en (accessed 29.09.2024); OECD (2023). *OECD Economic Surveys: European Union and Euro Area 2023*. URL: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-economic-surveys-european-union-and-euro-area-2023_7ebe8cc3-en.html (accessed 29.09.2024)

Comparative studies reveal that Italy is not alone in its reliance on external constraints. Countries such as Spain and Portugal have faced similar dynamics under EU frameworks. These patterns highlight the broader implications of *Vincolo Esterno* as a governance strategy, emphasizing the need for a nuanced approach that accommodates external pressures and domestic priorities (Featherstone, 2001; De Grauwe, 1996).

The Impact of *Vincolo Esterno* on Democracy and Sovereignty

The adoption of *Vincolo Esterno* in Italy has profoundly influenced its democratic processes and notions of sovereignty, raising critical questions about the balance between supranational governance and national autonomy. By delegating significant policy decisions to external actors, *Vincolo Esterno* has reshaped Italy's political landscape, simultaneously strengthening its integration into the European Union and challenging the principles of representative democracy.

One of the central critiques of *Vincolo Esterno* is its impact on democratic accountability. In delegating authority to supranational entities such as the European Commission and the European Central Bank, Italy has often sidelined its national legislature. This dynamic is emblematic of what scholars term the EU's "democratic deficit," where decisions affecting member states are made by institutions that lack direct electoral accountability (Weiler, 1999; Majone, 2014).

Empirical studies reveal that Italian citizens increasingly perceive a disconnect between their preferences and the policies implemented under EU mandates. For instance, Eurobarometer 92 found that over 60% of Italians believe that EU directives often conflict with national interests. This perception has fueled the rise of Eurosceptic parties, such as Lega and Fratelli d'Italia, which advocate for reclaiming national sovereignty and revisiting Italy's commitments to EU frameworks.

The principle of parliamentary sovereignty has been a cornerstone of Italy's democratic system. However, the institutionalization of *Vincolo Esterno* has imposed significant constraints on the legislature's ability to shape fiscal and social policies. The Maastricht Treaty, for instance, required Italy to adopt stringent

fiscal measures to meet convergence criteria, effectively prioritizing compliance with external benchmarks over domestic deliberation (Dyson & Featherstone, 1999; Mody, 2018).

Parliamentary debates during the eurozone crisis illustrate these tensions. Opposition parties frequently criticized austerity measures as undermining Italy's social contract, while government coalitions defended them as necessary for maintaining credibility within the EU. These dynamics highlight the double-edged nature of *Vincolo Esterno* as both a mechanism for modernization and a source of political contention (Featherstone, 2001; Morlino, 2011).

The impact of *Vincolo Esterno* extends beyond parliamentary processes to broader debates about sovereignty in a globalized era. Scholars argue that sovereignty is increasingly shared or pooled in the context of regional integration. For Italy, this has meant balancing its obligations to the EU with the expectations of its citizens. For example, the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) imposes fiscal rules that limit Italy's ability to implement countercyclical policies, raising questions about the compatibility of these rules with democratic governance (Weiler, 1999; Eichengreen, 1997).

Comparative analyses with other EU member states reveal similar challenges. Greece's experience during the debt crisis underscores the risks of over-reliance on external constraints, where fiscal austerity measures led to widespread social unrest. Italy's case, while less extreme, highlights the trade-offs between economic stability and political autonomy, particularly in areas such as social welfare and labour market reforms⁴.

Civil society organizations and public opinion have played a crucial role in shaping the discourse around *Vincolo Esterno*. Protests against austerity measures, such as those held in Rome and Milan during the eurozone crisis, reflect widespread discontent with policies perceived as imposed by external actors. These movements underscore the importance of public participation in addressing the democratic deficits associated with *Vincolo Esterno* (Majone, 2014).

⁴ European Commission. (2021). *The Recovery and Resilience Facility Explained*. URL: https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility_en (accessed 29.09.2024); OECD (2023). *OECD Economic Surveys: European Union and Euro Area 2023*. URL: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-economic-surveys-european-union-and-euro-area-2023_7ebe8cc3-en.html (accessed 29.09.2024)

Furthermore, public opinion surveys indicate a growing divide between citizens' expectations and the policies implemented under EU mandates. For instance, the European Social Survey (2020) found that Italians are more likely than citizens of other EU countries to prioritize national sovereignty over deeper integration, reflecting a critical perspective on the trade-offs inherent in *Vincolo Esterno*.

While the critiques of *Vincolo Esterno* are significant, proponents argue that it has also strengthened Italy's governance capacity by embedding it within a multilateral framework. By aligning its policies with EU standards, Italy has benefited from enhanced economic stability, increased foreign investment, and greater access to European markets. However, balancing external obligations and democratic accountability remains a critical challenge (Morlino, 2011; Featherstone, 2001).

Recent reforms under the European Union's Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) offer an opportunity to address these challenges. By tying financial support to specific reform agendas, the RRF exemplifies a new iteration of *Vincolo Esterno* that seeks to align external constraints with domestic priorities. This approach is supposed to represent a potential path for Italy to reconcile the tensions between supranational governance and national sovereignty⁵, but the frame of conditionality and IMF-style *Vincolo Esterno* remains.

The Impact of *Vincolo Esterno* on Public Management

The concept of *Vincolo Esterno* has significantly influenced the evolution of public management in Italy. By tying administrative reforms to external frameworks, particularly those established by the European Union, Italy has sought to modernize its public sector, improve efficiency, and align with European standards. While this approach has driven substantial reforms, it has also highlighted persistent challenges, including regional disparities, bureaucratic inertia, and tensions between compliance and innovation.

⁵ Ibid.

One of the earliest manifestations of *Vincolo Esterno* in public management was Italy's adoption of administrative reforms to meet the requirements of the Maastricht Treaty. These reforms prioritized fiscal discipline and efficiency, leading to significant changes in public administration. For instance, Italy introduced performance-based budgeting systems and streamlined bureaucratic processes to reduce costs and enhance accountability (Ongaro & Valotti, 2008; Ongaro, 2009).

The influence of *Vincolo Esterno* became particularly pronounced in the 2000s, as Italy sought to comply with the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP). This period saw the implementation of austerity measures that significantly impacted public services, including healthcare, education, and infrastructure. While these measures were intended to improve fiscal sustainability, they often resulted in reduced service quality and public dissatisfaction. Regional disparities further exacerbated these challenges, with southern Italy consistently lagging behind the north in terms of service delivery and administrative efficiency (Capano, 2003; Capello, 2016).

The European Union's Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) has introduced a new iteration of *Vincolo Esterno* in public management. As a condition for receiving substantial financial support, Italy has committed to implementing ambitious reforms in areas such as digitalization, green energy, and public sector efficiency. These reforms aim to address long-standing inefficiencies in Italy's public administration, particularly the complex and time-consuming bureaucratic processes that have historically hindered economic growth and innovation⁶.

Digitalization has been a central focus of recent reforms driven by *Vincolo Esterno*. Under the RRF, Italy has invested heavily in digital infrastructure to modernize its public administration. Initiatives such as the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) include measures to digitize public records, enhance e-governance platforms, and improve cybersecurity (Ongaro & Valotti, 2008). While these efforts have yielded positive outcomes, including improved accessibility and transparency, they have also exposed significant gaps in digital literacy and infrastructure, particularly in rural areas.

⁶ European Commission. (2021). *The Recovery and Resilience Facility Explained*. URL: https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility_en (accessed 29.09.2024)

Healthcare reforms represent another critical area influenced by *Vincolo Esterno*. EU directives have driven the modernization of Italy's healthcare system, with investments in technology and infrastructure aimed at improving service delivery. However, these reforms have also underscored regional inequalities. While urban centres have benefited from advanced healthcare facilities and shorter waiting times, rural regions face limited access to specialized care (Borroni et al., 2018).

The impact of *Vincolo Esterno* on public management extends beyond structural reforms to include cultural and organizational changes. Studies indicate that external frameworks have encouraged greater professionalism and accountability within Italy's public sector. For example, the introduction of performance evaluations and merit-based promotions has incentivized efficiency and innovation among public officials (Ongaro & Kickert, 2020; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). However, these changes have also encountered resistance from entrenched bureaucratic structures, highlighting the challenges of balancing external mandates with domestic realities.

Comparative analyses reveal that Italy's experience with *Vincolo Esterno* in public management shares similarities with other EU member states. Countries such as Spain and Portugal have faced comparable challenges in aligning national administrative practices with EU directives. These cases underscore the broader implications of *Vincolo Esterno* as a governance strategy, emphasizing the need for flexibility and adaptability in implementing external mandates (Christensen & Lægveid, 2007).

Despite its challenges, *Vincolo Esterno* has played a pivotal role in driving Italy's administrative modernization. By aligning its public management practices with EU standards, Italy has enhanced its governance capacity and improved its international standing. However, achieving a sustainable balance between external compliance and domestic priorities remains a critical challenge.

Some national priorities, such as earthquake-resistant buildings, are not EU priorities. On the other hand, they are priorities of a higher order than digital reforms and energetic sustainability for the two very seismic countries of the EU (Italy and Greece).

As Italy continues to navigate the demands of *Vincolo Esterno*, the success of its public management reforms will depend on its ability to address regional disparities, foster innovation, and adapt to evolving socio-economic conditions. Nevertheless, the very nature of *Vincolo Esterno* is in sharp contrast with democracy and national sovereignty.

The Impact of *Vincolo Esterno* on Economic Growth

The adoption of *Vincolo Esterno* has profoundly influenced Italy's economic growth, shaping its fiscal policies, trade relations, and industrial structure. By aligning its economic governance with European Union standards, Italy has sought to foster stability and competitiveness. However, the reliance on external constraints has also exposed structural vulnerabilities, leading to mixed outcomes in terms of growth and development.

Italy's economic reliance on external frameworks dates back to the European Monetary System (EMS), which aimed to stabilize exchange rates among European currencies. Italy sought to curb inflation and restore fiscal discipline by pegging the lira to stronger currencies. However, the rigidity of this system often constrained Italy's ability to respond to economic shocks. The 1992 currency crisis, which forced Italy to devalue the lira, underscored the limitations of such an approach (Eichengreen, 1997; Giavazzi & Pagano, 1996).

The Maastricht Treaty further institutionalized *Vincolo Esterno*, embedding fiscal discipline into Italy's governance framework. Italy adopted measures to reduce its fiscal deficit and debt-to-GDP ratio by committing to the convergence criteria. These efforts were critical for securing entry into the European Monetary Union (EMU), but they often came at the cost of reduced public investment. Between 1990 and 2000, public investment as a percentage of GDP declined from 4.2% to 2.5%, raising concerns about its long-term impact on infrastructure and productivity (Dyson & Featherstone, 1999; Bagnai, 2016; Stiglitz, 2016). Some very qualified critical views emerged about the sustainability and effectiveness of the monetary union (Bagnai, 2012; Bagnai, Granville & Mongeau Ospina, 2017; Bagnai & Mongeau Ospina, 2018).

One of the key sectors affected by *Vincolo Esterno* is manufacturing, which has traditionally been the backbone of Italy's economy. While adopting EU trade policies has facilitated access to European markets, it has also intensified competition. High-tech industries, such as machinery and robotics, have benefited from increased demand, with exports growing by an average of 5% annually. However, traditional sectors, including textiles and agriculture, have struggled to adapt, leading to a decline in their global market share⁷ (Baccaro & Howell, 2017).

Fiscal constraints under *Vincolo Esterno* have also limited Italy's ability to implement countercyclical policies during economic downturns. During the eurozone crisis, austerity measures imposed under the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) prioritized deficit reduction over economic recovery. While these measures stabilized public finances, they also exacerbated unemployment and income inequality, particularly in southern Italy (Sacchi, 2015; Capello, 2016).

Comparative analyses highlight the uneven impact of *Vincolo Esterno* on Italy's economic regions. Northern Italy, characterized by a strong industrial base and advanced infrastructure, has adapted more effectively to EU directives. In contrast, southern regions have faced persistent challenges, including lower productivity, higher unemployment, and weaker institutions. These disparities underscore the need for targeted policies that address regional inequalities while maintaining compliance with external obligations (European Commission, 2021; Viesti, 2021).

The European Union's Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) represents a new chapter in Italy's economic governance under *Vincolo Esterno*. The RRF aims to address long-standing inefficiencies in Italy's economy by tying financial support to structural reforms. Key initiatives include investments in digital infrastructure, renewable energy, and education, which are expected to boost productivity and foster sustainable growth. However, the success of these initiatives will depend on Italy's ability to overcome bureaucratic bottlenecks and ensure effective implementation⁸ (Mazzucato, 2011).

⁷ OECD (2023). *OECD Economic Surveys: European Union and Euro Area 2023*. URL: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-economic-surveys-european-union-and-euro-area-2023_7ebe8cc3-en.html (accessed 29.09.2024)

⁸ European Commission. (2021). *The Recovery and Resilience Facility Explained*. URL: https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility_en (accessed 29.09.2024)

Despite these challenges, *Vincolo Esterno* has contributed to significant achievements in Italy's economic trajectory. By aligning with EU standards, Italy has benefited from increased trade integration, greater financial stability, and enhanced investor confidence. However, the trade-offs remain significant, particularly in terms of policy flexibility and social equity. As Italy continues to navigate the demands of *Vincolo Esterno*, its economic success will hinge on its ability to balance external compliance with domestic priorities, fostering inclusive and sustainable growth.

Some recent EU directives for electric cars have proven especially harmful for both German and Italian manufacturers, and they project a long shadow on the ability of the EU governance to plan for a sustainable industrial growth for its member states⁹.

The Impact of *Vincolo Esterno* on Immigration

The concept of *Vincolo Esterno* has profoundly shaped Italy's approach to immigration, framing its policies within the broader context of European Union directives and international obligations. As a frontline state in the Mediterranean migration crisis, Italy has played a pivotal role in managing migration flows into Europe. However, the reliance on external frameworks, particularly the Dublin Regulation, has imposed significant challenges, raising questions about burden-sharing, sovereignty, and the balance between security and humanitarian obligations.

Italy's geographical position as a gateway to Europe has made it a focal point for migration flows, particularly from North Africa and the Middle East. Under the Dublin Regulation, asylum seekers are required to apply for protection in the first EU country they enter, placing disproportionate responsibility on frontline states such as Italy, Greece, and Spain. This framework has created significant logistical and political challenges for Italy, straining its administrative capacity and public resources (Costello, 2016).

⁹ Nilsson, P., Storbeck, O., Inagaki, K. and Milne, R. (2024). Volkswagen is in crisis again. Can it be reformed?, *Financial Times*, 31 October 2024; Financial Times (2024), Vauxhall owner Stellantis blames EV rules for plan to close UK van factory, 28 October 2024.

The migration crisis of 2015–2016 exemplifies the limitations of *Vincolo Esterno* in addressing large-scale migration flows. During this period, Italy processed over 300,000 asylum applications annually, a tenfold increase compared to previous years. While EU funds and Frontex operations provided some support, the lack of equitable burden-sharing among member states exacerbated Italy's challenges. Northern European countries, including Germany and Sweden, implemented stricter border controls, leaving Italy and other Mediterranean countries to bear the brunt of the crisis (Guild et al., 2017; Carrera et al., 2018).

The reliance on *Vincolo Esterno* has also influenced Italy's border management strategies. EU directives, such as the Schengen Borders Code and the European Border and Coast Guard Regulation, have emphasized border security and surveillance, leading to increased investments in technology and infrastructure. For example, Italy has implemented biometric registration systems and expanded its naval patrols in the Mediterranean to comply with EU security standards. However, these measures have drawn criticism for prioritizing border control over humanitarian considerations, particularly in cases involving shipwrecks and migrant rescues (Papageorgiou, 2018).

One of the key criticisms of *Vincolo Esterno* in the context of immigration is its impact on asylum procedures and refugee integration. Italy's adherence to EU standards has necessitated the establishment of reception centres and processing facilities, which have often been criticized for overcrowding and inadequate living conditions. Reports by Amnesty International and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) highlight significant gaps in the protection and integration of asylum seekers, particularly in southern Italy.

The political implications of *Vincolo Esterno* on immigration have been profound. Anti-immigration rhetoric has become a central theme in Italian politics, with parties such as Lega and Fratelli d'Italia leveraging public dissatisfaction with EU policies to bolster their platforms. Surveys indicate that over 70% of Italians view immigration as a major challenge, reflecting widespread concerns about its social and economic impacts. These sentiments have shaped national policies, including the introduction of stricter immigration laws and agreements with countries like Libya to curb migration flows (Ambrosini, 2018; Del Sarto, 2021).

Comparative analyses reveal that Italy's experience with *Vincolo Esterno* on immigration is not unique. Countries like Greece and Hungary have faced similar challenges in balancing EU obligations with domestic political pressures. However, Italy's role as a maritime gateway and its historical ties to North Africa and the Middle East have made its case particularly complex. This complexity underscores the need for a more cohesive and equitable EU migration policy, one that addresses the limitations of *Vincolo Esterno* while ensuring solidarity among member states (Guild et al., 2017; Carrera et al., 2018).

Recent developments, including the European Pact on Migration and Asylum, offer a potential path forward. This initiative aims to reform the Dublin Regulation by introducing a more balanced system of responsibility-sharing and strengthening the role of EU agencies in managing migration flows. For Italy, these reforms represent an opportunity to address long-standing challenges while reinforcing its commitment to European integration.

Despite its challenges, *Vincolo Esterno* has also fostered significant achievements in Italy's immigration policy. By aligning with EU standards, Italy has enhanced its border management capabilities, improved its asylum procedures, and contributed to the development of a common European framework on migration. However, achieving a sustainable balance between security, sovereignty, and humanitarian obligations remains a critical challenge for Italy and the EU.

As an example, in October 2024, the Italian government announced plans to transfer migrants intercepted in international waters to processing centres in Albania. This initiative aimed to expedite asylum procedures and reduce pressure on Italy's domestic systems. However, the plan faced significant legal challenges, as Italian courts questioned the legality of detaining migrants outside the European Union (EU).

On 18 October, the immigration unit of the Rome Court ruled against the detention of 12 migrants sent to Albania, highlighting that their countries of origin, Bangladesh and Egypt, were not classified as "safe countries." The court ordered their return to Italy, citing the need to respect international asylum standards¹⁰. Subsequently, on 11 November, Italian judges blocked the detention of

¹⁰ ANSA. (2024). Court nixes detention of migrants taken to Albania. *ANSA English News*. URL: https://www.ansa.it/english/news/2024/10/18/court-nixes-detention-of-migrants-taken-to-albania_e2a70935-6db4-4570-bcaf-e0dfb82d2f3a.html (accessed 29.09.2024)

an additional group of seven migrants in Albanian centres and referred the case to the European Court of Justice for clarification on the legality of processing asylum seekers outside EU borders¹¹.

In response, the government of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni approved a decree specifying a list of “safe countries” to provide a legal basis for its policy. This measure sought to align the Albanian processing centres with EU laws and address concerns raised by the courts¹². Despite these efforts, logistical challenges, including adverse weather conditions, led to a temporary suspension of deportations. The centres were vacated, and staff returned to Italy, signalling operational difficulties in implementing the controversial plan¹³. These developments underline the complex interplay between national migration policies, EU legal frameworks, and international human rights standards under *Vincolo Esterno*. They also underscore the importance of crafting migration strategies that are both effective and legally sound.

Conclusion: Reflections on *Vincolo Esterno* and Paths for Future Research

The concept of *Vincolo Esterno* has played a central role in shaping Italy’s governance, influencing its democracy, public management, economic growth, and immigration policies. This unique governance approach, which emphasizes external constraints to achieve domestic reforms, reflects both the opportunities and limitations of multilateral frameworks in addressing complex national challenges. By embedding itself in European structures, Italy has aligned with global standards, modernized its administrative systems, and strengthened its role in the European Union. However, these achievements have come with significant trade-offs, particularly in terms of sovereignty, democratic accountability, and social equity.

¹¹ Le Monde. (2024). Italian judges deal new blow to Albania migrant scheme. *Le Monde Europe*. URL: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/europe/article/2024/11/11/italian-judges-deal-new-blow-to-albania-migrant-scheme_6732453_143.html (accessed 29.09.2024)

¹² HuffPost. (2024). El Gobierno de Meloni aprueba un decreto para blindar sus centros de inmigrantes en Albania. *HuffPost Global*. URL: <https://www.huffingtonpost.es/global/el-gobierno-meloni-aprueba-decreto-blindar-centros-inmigrantes-albaniabr.html> (accessed 29.09.2024)

¹³ El País. (2024). Meloni renuncia por ahora a las deportaciones a Albania: el centro de internamiento se vacía y el personal vuelve a casa. *El País Internacional*. URL: <https://elpais.com/internacional/2024-11-26/meloni-renuncia-por-ahora-a-las-deportaciones-a-albania-el-centro-de-internamiento-se-vacia-y-el-personal-vuelve-a-casa.html> (accessed 29.09.2024)

One of the most critical findings from this exploration is the dual-edged nature of *Vincolo Esterno*. While it has facilitated reforms in areas such as public administration and economic policy, it has also imposed rigid frameworks that often fail to account for Italy's unique socio-economic realities. For instance, applying fiscal discipline under the Stability and Growth Pact has constrained Italy's ability to implement countercyclical policies during economic downturns, exacerbating regional disparities and social inequalities. Similarly, the reliance on EU directives for immigration management has placed disproportionate burdens on Italy as a frontline state, highlighting the limitations of existing burden-sharing mechanisms.

The democratic implications of *Vincolo Esterno* are equally significant. By delegating decision-making authority to supranational entities, Italy has faced criticism for undermining parliamentary sovereignty and alienating its citizens from the policy-making process. These challenges underscore the need for a more inclusive governance model that balances external obligations with domestic priorities. Future research should explore innovative frameworks that enhance democratic accountability within multilateral systems, focusing on mechanisms for greater citizen participation and parliamentary oversight.

Public management reforms under *Vincolo Esterno* have revealed both successes and shortcomings. While digitalization initiatives and performance-based evaluations have modernized Italy's public sector, regional disparities and bureaucratic inertia remain persistent challenges. Comparative studies could offer valuable insights into best practices for implementing external mandates in diverse administrative contexts. Future research could also examine the long-term impacts of digital transformation on public sector efficiency, equity, and accessibility, particularly in underserved regions.

The economic impact of *Vincolo Esterno* provides another fertile area for future inquiry. The uneven effects of EU trade policies on Italy's industrial sectors, coupled with the constraints of fiscal austerity, highlight the need for more nuanced approaches to economic governance. Researchers should investigate alternative models that combine fiscal responsibility with investments in innovation and infrastructure, particularly in lagging regions. Additionally, the role of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in driving sustainable growth under external constraints warrants further exploration.

In the context of immigration, *Vincolo Esterno* has exposed significant gaps in Europe's collective migration framework. Italy's experience underscores the limitations of the Dublin Regulation and the challenges of balancing border security with humanitarian obligations. Future research should focus on developing equitable burden-sharing mechanisms within the EU, emphasizing solidarity and mutual responsibility among member states. Additionally, studies could explore the socio-economic integration of migrants in Italy, analyzing the interplay between national policies and local realities.

From a theoretical perspective, the concept of *Vincolo Esterno* raises important questions about the evolving nature of sovereignty in a globalized world. As countries increasingly pool their sovereignty within multilateral frameworks, the balance between external constraints and domestic autonomy becomes a critical area of inquiry. Future research should delve into the normative and practical dimensions of this balance, examining how governance systems can be designed to maximize both efficiency and equity.

Methodologically, the study of *Vincolo Esterno* benefits from a multidisciplinary approach, integrating insights from political science, economics, public administration, and sociology. Future research should adopt longitudinal and comparative methodologies to assess the long-term impacts of external constraints on governance outcomes. By comparing Italy's experience with those of other EU member states, scholars can identify patterns and divergences that offer broader lessons for multilateral governance.

Finally, the rapid technological and geopolitical changes of the 21st century present new challenges and opportunities for *Vincolo Esterno*. The COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and the digital revolution have underscored the need for adaptive governance systems that respond to dynamic global challenges. Future research should explore how *Vincolo Esterno* can evolve to address these emerging issues, ensuring resilience and inclusivity in the face of uncertainty.

In conclusion, *Vincolo Esterno* represents a complex and multifaceted governance approach that has profoundly influenced Italy's trajectory within the European Union. While it has facilitated significant achievements, its limitations highlight the need for more flexible, inclusive, and equitable frameworks.

By addressing these challenges through rigorous research and policy innovation, scholars and practitioners can contribute to developing governance models that balance external constraints with domestic priorities, fostering sustainable growth and social cohesion.

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Государственное управление / исследовательская статья

**Итальянское государственное управление и концепция «внешних уз»:
последствия для демократии, суверенитета, экономического роста
и иммиграции**

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Аннотация: В статье рассматривается концепция «внешних уз» (Vincolo Esterno) и ее влияние на государственное управление в Италии, прежде всего ее воздействие на демократию, государственное управление, экономический рост и иммиграцию. Концепция «Vincolo Esterno» – опора на внешние ограничения для обеспечения внутренних реформ – сыграла решающую роль в определении политики Италии в отношении Европейского союза (ЕС) и международных связей. Исследование подчеркивает двойственную природу этого подхода к управлению: хотя он и стимулировал модернизацию и экономическую интеграцию, он также навязывал жесткие рамки, которые ограничивали суверенитет, демократическую подотчетность и социальное равенство. Анализ демократии выявляет напряженность между мандатом ЕС и парламентским суверенитетом Италии, усугубленную «демократическим дефицитом» в наднациональном управлении. Под влиянием директив ЕС реформы государственного управления способствовали модернизации административной системы, но обнажали региональные различия и бюрократическую инертность. В исследовании также изучаются неоднозначные экономические результаты политики «Vincolo Esterno»,

подчеркиваются ограничения фискальной экономики для привлечения инвестиций в инфраструктуру и региональное развитие. Кроме того, иммиграционная политика, регулируемая в том числе и Дублинским регламентом, подтверждает проблемы управления миграционными потоками и обеспечения справедливого распределения миграционного бремени в ЕС. Автор подчеркивает необходимость формирования более сбалансированной и инклюзивной модели управления, которая бы смогла согласовать внешнюю политику с внутренними приоритетами, механизмов усиления демократической подотчетности, решения проблемы регионального неравенства и адаптации «Vincolo Esterno» к глобальным вызовам.

Ключевые слова: Vincolo Esterno, управление, демократия, суверенитет, Европейский союз

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