

Starmer and Meloni discuss war on migrants and against Russia

Thomas Scripps
16 September 2024

UK Prime Minister and Labour leader Keir Starmer travelled to Rome Monday for what he described as a “fantastic” meeting with Italian Prime Minister Georgia Meloni. Two things recommended the far-right admirer of Mussolini to Starmer: the leading role she has played in attacking migrants and refugees on behalf of the European Union, and her commitment to NATO’s involvement in the war in Ukraine.

The Labour leader has made a crackdown on migration a centrepiece of his government. He travelled to Italy with his newly appointed head of Border Security Command (BSC), the former head of the National Police Chiefs’ Council, Martin Hewitt. Starmer told reporters that Hewitt’s “unique expertise” would “protect our shores and bring order to the asylum system.”

Meloni is the darling of anti-migrant forces across Europe for having slashed illegalised migration to Italy by more than 60 percent in the last year. This has been achieved primarily by paying the governments of Tunisia and Libya to serve as Europe’s out-of-sight border force, implementing regimes of routine violence including torture and murder, and abuse including kidnap and ransom, arbitrary detention and even slavery, to prevent desperate people reaching Europe. Thousands taking riskier routes to avoid this fate have died in the Sahel and the Sahara or drowned in the Mediterranean.

Starmer pledged to contribute £4 million to the project through the so-called Rome Process while he was in the city. He praised the “remarkable progress” Meloni had made in “upstream work,” including “working with countries along the migration routes.”

The abuses suffered by those who do reach Italy have been extensively documented, most recently by Amnesty International. The organisation published a report this July explaining:

Over the years, lawyers, NGOs and national and international human rights mechanisms have

expressed concern about the detention system’s lack of compliance with international law and standards, including as to the proportionality of detention and the need to ensure dignified conditions.

Despite this the system of migration-related administrative detention has not been reformed with a view to increasing the protection of human rights. Instead, from 2023 the Italian government has expanded the detention of asylum seekers and migrants, including through planning the construction of new holding centres for repatriation, lengthening maximum detention times, and introducing measures aimed at applying “border procedures” to asylum seekers coming from “safe countries.”

The final string to Italy’s anti-migrant policy is its new five-year deal with Albania to have the Balkan country hold 3,000 asylum seekers picked up by the Italian coastguard at any one time—roughly 36,000 across a year—in two camps on its territory while their claims are processed. Rights groups have warned that the operation will seriously harm migrants’ ability to plead their case for international protection.

Starmer described himself as “very interested” in the scheme. Asked whether he was “happy with every aspect” of Italy’s “approach to human rights,” Starmer replied:

We are pragmatists, first and foremost. When we see a challenge, we discuss with our friends and allies the different approaches that are being taken, look at what works, and that’s the approach that we’ve taken today. And it’s been a very productive day.

Just how filthy the whole affair was had been underscored

by two events in just the two days prior: the drowning of another eight people in the Channel between the UK and France—after 12 people, including six children, died in another incident less than two weeks earlier—and the resignation of fascist dictator Mussolini’s granddaughter Rachele from Meloni’s Brothers of Italy Party after 20 years of membership, citing its overly extreme restrictions on citizenship for the children of migrants.

Starmer, who was handed leadership of Labour thanks to Jeremy Corbyn’s refusal to drive out the Blairites and whose election was supported by all of Britain’s pseudo-left groups, has again confirmed that his government’s agenda is to continue seamlessly the march to the right of the Conservatives he defeated. He always made clear that Labour’s opposition to the Tories’ Rwanda deportation scheme was based on its inefficiency, insisting that a tougher border force and faster deportations would be the better solution. Now it seems he wants both, with Albania or another country standing in for Rwanda.

Starmer’s visit, in fact, mirrors one made by the previous prime minister Rishi Sunak less than a year ago. The *World Socialist Web Site* observed at the time, “Without any social programme to offer the working class, capitalist parties across Europe are seeking to build constituencies based on the xenophobic nationalism associated with the fascist right.”

The political coloration of the government is irrelevant as the entire spectrum of official politics careens ever further to the right. Starmer is only the latest social democratic leader to enjoy Meloni’s hospitality, following Spain’s Pedro Sánchez and, multiple times, Germany’s Olaf Scholz. On the day the Labour leader spoke alongside Meloni, the German government began new border controls at all its land borders, an anti-migrant policy that makes a mockery of the Schengen agreement on free movement. German officials have even suggested making use of the UK’s abandoned Rwanda deportation scheme.

As the French National Rally leader Jordan Bardella answered recently when asked why the party was no longer pushing for France to leave the European Union: “You don’t leave the table when you’re winning the game.”

For the traditional parties of government in Europe, right and nominally left, there has only been one condition for a warm embrace of the far right: support for NATO in the war in Ukraine. And here, again, Meloni has led the way, courted first by Sunak and now Starmer.

She was one of the first world leaders Starmer called upon taking office, with a Downing Street readout noting that the pair had “agreed on the importance of close collaboration on shared challenges, such as migration and support for Ukraine.” They arranged a meeting at the NATO summit a

few days later, on July 9-10.

At the European Political Community summit just over a week later, hosted this year by Britain, the Labour government gave Meloni pride of place, tasked with hosting a breakout session on illegal immigration, attended by Starmer and chaired by Albanian leader Edi Rama. Closing the summit, Starmer said “resetting our approach” on “illegal migration... has been central today,” adding, “We are going to secure our borders.”

Fresh from his trip to Washington this weekend to discuss the next stages of the war against Russia with US President Joe Biden, Starmer again made clear that his visit to Rome was so important because of Italy’s role “as a leader in Europe, on the world stage, as a G7 economy and a NATO ally.” He thanked Meloni specifically “for your strong leadership, especially on Ukraine,” on which he pledged they would “work together side by side for as long as necessary.”

Asked about authorising strikes inside Russian territory with NATO weapons, both demurred, but stressed that there must be no retreat in support for Ukraine and that the question had been “discussed.” Bloomberg reported that Starmer was seeking Italy’s “support for a proposal to let Kyiv use non-US long-range weapons against Russia.”

Italy has so far supplied \$1-2 billion of direct military aid to Ukraine. The UK has supplied roughly £7.6 billion, with Starmer committed to £3 billion a year going forward. Among the announcements made during Starmer’s Rome visit was a £435 million investment by Italian defence, aerospace and security company Leonardo in its Yeovil site in the UK, and in research and development across its seven other locations in Britain.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact