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Yet another populist party? Understanding the rise of Brothers of Italy

By Gianfranco Baldini*, Filippo Tronconi, Davide Angelucci

Abstract

Born in 2012 as a marginal radical right splinter group, in the 2022 general election 'Fratelli d'Italia' (Brothers of Italy, FdI) was the most voted party, allowing its leader, Giorgia Meloni, to become the first Italian female Prime minister. While both the leader and the party can be classified as belonging to the populist radical right family, we argue that FdI must be understood also as a 'rooted newcomer', i.e. a party that can count on pre-existing organisational resources, building its appeal also on symbolic elements already known to the electorate when the party was formed. Focusing on the supply side, we tackle some of the main open questions related to the party's ambivalent nature, often fluctuating between a post-fascist profile, combined with a frequently reiterated support for other European radical right illiberal leaders and more moderate positions. We identify the politics of illiberalism as the key challenge that the party faces in its transition from opposition to government.

Keywords: Italian Politics, Populism, Radical Right, Post-fascism, Illiberalism, Brothers of Italy, Giorgia Meloni, 2022 Italian Elections

Over the last decade, Italian elections have resembled a rollercoaster. In 2013, with more than 25 per cent, the Movimento Cinque Stelle, founded by Beppe Grillo (M5S, Five Star Movement) interrupted the bipolar pattern of competition (centre-right vs. centre-left) that had emerged since 1994, with the entry into politics of Silvio Berlusconi. In the 2014 European election, the Partito Democratico (PD, Democratic Party), then led by Matteo Renzi, got more than 40 per cent. In the 2018 general election, the M5S won 32.6 per cent, entering government with the other winner of those elections, Matteo Salvini's League. The latter then triumphed, with over 34 per cent, in the 2019 European election. In the 2022 general election, compared to 2018, both M5S and the League halved their electoral result. This time, the winner was Fratelli d'Italia (FdI, Brothers of Italy), led by Giorgia Meloni, skyrocketing to 26.0 per cent, up from the 4.3 per cent obtained four and a half years before.

FdI has been classified as a 'populist radical right party' (PRRP) both by comparative analyses (e.g. Taggart & Pirro 2021; Zulianello 2020) and by recent works dedicated to the party's ideology (Donà 2022; Puleo and Piccolino 2022). In this article we study the party as it has evolved in its first decade of life, entirely spent in opposition before entering government after the 2022 Italian general election. To do so, as we terminate our analysis on the immediate aftermath of these elections, we

analyse the nature of FdI in the context of the ever-changing party system and we reflect, necessarily in a more speculative way, on some implications of its arrival in government. We argue that, differently from genuinely new parties such as FI or the M5S, FdI can be defined a ‘rooted newcomer’, i.e. a party that can count on pre-existing organisational resources, building its appeal also on symbolic elements, already known to the electorate when the party was formed. To show the importance of the party’s roots, we tackle some of the main open questions related to FdI’s somehow ambivalent nature, often fluctuating between a post-fascist profile - consistent with a frequently reiterated support for radical right populist leaders and illiberal policies such as those implemented by parties like Fidesz in Hungary or Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS, Law and Justice) in Poland - and more moderate (conservative) positions, especially on foreign policy.

The aim of the article is therefore to assess the nature of the party, how it has changed since its formation, and what the challenges of government can mean for it. Thus, the rest of the article is divided into four sections. In the first one we present the most important dimensions on which we then assess the party’s trajectory, namely its organizational and ideological evolution, between populism and illiberalism. We then focus on the party’s long roots and troubled genesis, which we subsequently analyse showing the importance of Meloni’s leadership in forging the cultural and organizational profile of the party, as well as her skilful communication strategy. While leadership matters, investigating programmes is no less important in order to get a full grasp of the party from whose ranks emerged the first Italian female Prime minister. A brief conclusion summarizes, reflecting on future challenges.

What kind of party? Identifying the roots of populism, illiberalism and party development

Italy has a long record of successful populist parties. The ‘Fronte dell’Uomo Qualunque’ (Common Man Front), briefly active soon after the return of democracy in 1945, was a forerunner and a prototype of this kind of party. Since 1992, then, populism has flourished (Tarchi 2015; Blokker & Anselmi 2019). First, the emergence of Umberto Bossi’s Northern League and Berlusconi’s FI marked the last stages of the so-called ‘First Republic’ and the birth of a totally new party system. The Italia dei Valori (Italy of Values), led by the anti-corruption judge Antonio Di Pietro, the M5S, and the reincarnation of the Lega led by Salvini, turned from a regional to a nationwide party, were further instances of different variants of populism. In this crowded market, how distinctive is the populism of FdI? And is this label justified at all?

As is well known, different interpretations and definitions have been proposed for this multifaceted concept. Some have defined populism as a strategy (Weyland 2001): more precisely the search for legitimacy in an unmediated support for a personalistic leadership. Others, most notably

Cas Mudde (2004), have proposed an ideational approach, where populism is considered as a ‘thin ideology’ based on a vision of society as divided into two opposing camps: the virtuous people and the corrupted elite. Another interpretation sees populism as a style of communication (Jagers & Walgrave 2007) characterised by a continuous reference to the people and to its enemies, i.e. the establishment and those social groups that endanger the homogeneity of the people itself. Populists are also known for being ‘taboo breakers and fighters against political correctness’ (Mudde 2004, 554), and for their frequent appeals to emotions, expressed in the form of a tabloid-style language.

As we shall see, FdI seems to come close to all these conceptualisations. For now, we limit ourselves to anticipate, for example, that the unmediated support for an individual leadership emerges in its proposed constitutional reform in a presidential direction, while the simplified vision of society as an opposition between the people and the elite is frequent in the leader’s speeches and in the party’s official documents. Moreover, Meloni’s style of communication is often regarded as making frequent use of populist rhetoric, and blaming politically correct language, for instance, with reference to sexual identities.

The leader of FdI has often expressed her admiration for the way parties such as Hungarian Fidesz and Polish Law and Justice run their respective countries. Many observers have labelled these parties as ‘illiberal’ and have expressed their concern for the fate of democracy in these countries (Enyedi & Whitefield 2020). Indeed, a stream of research has flourished about the very concept of illiberalism, and the related perils of democratic backsliding. Marlene Laruelle (2022, 309) identifies illiberalism with a reaction against ‘liberalism in all its varied scripts - political, economic, cultural, geopolitical, civilizational’ and defines it as the proponent of ‘solutions that are majoritarian, nation-centric or sovereigntist, favoring traditional hierarchies and cultural homogeneity’.

Pirro and Stanley (2022) articulate the illiberal playbook along three main types of actions, in increasing order of danger for the dismantling of the liberal order: forging, bending, breaking. *Forging* involves the reduction of liberal rights for certain categories of citizens that are not given unambiguous protection by the law or the constitution, for instance acts restricting abortion rights or preventing same sex marriage. Thus, forging means implementing policies that advance a traditional vision of society (and especially gender relations), without violating either the letter or the spirit of the law. At the opposite end, the act of *breaking* implies an open rupture of democratic procedures, for instance ignoring tribunal rulings, or allowing the illegal detention of asylum-seekers in spite of constitutional guarantees or international treaties. In between the two, *bending* means going against the spirit of the law while formally respecting its letter. For instance, passing *ad hoc* legislation that is in theory applicable to everyone, but in practice aims to weaken certain companies, or NGOs, or media outlets that do not align with the incumbent government. Inconceivably until fifteen years ago,

these practices inspired by illiberalism – and ultimately eroding liberal-democracy – have taken hold inside the European Union, in Hungary and Poland, as a consequence of the actions of two governments with which FdI has developed strong links. It is thus worth speculating if the closeness of FdI to such allies could anticipate a weakening of democratic institutions in Italy.

And yet, for a party that was born ten years ago, it is crucial to recall where it comes from and how its consolidation came about. While leadership is very important to understand the success of the party, in this article we argue that organisational, cultural, and ideological traditions are at least as important. From an organisational point of view, FdI can be defined as a ‘rooted newcomer’ party, i.e. a ‘new formation which at [its] breakthrough election [is] supported by a societal group that antedated the party’ (Arter 2016, 17). Differently from genuinely new parties such as Forza Italia (FI) or the M5S (Emanuele & Sikk 2021), rooted newcomers can count on pre-existing organisational resources, building their appeal also on symbolic elements, already known to the electorate when the party was formed. In the case of FdI, the obvious point of reference is the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI, Italian Social Movement), a neo-fascist party always represented in parliament between 1948 and 1992, with around 5 per cent of the seats. The cultural legacy of the MSI is easily recognisable in FdI and has never been denied, starting from the party symbol (still including the tri-coloured flame in 2022), and the composition of its parliamentary class and inner circle of leaders.

However, it is disputable that the organisational continuity is also reflected in the ideological positioning of the party. Indeed, it has been noted that FdI has accomplished a major ideological rebranding with respect to the Italian neo- and post-fascist traditions (Donà 2022; Puleo & Piccolino 2022). Moreover, and this is true both from the ideological and the organisational point of view, it is worth noting that the MSI had already undergone a profound reshaping, first in 1995, when it adopted the new name of ‘Alleanza Nazionale’ (AN, National Alliance) and then in 2008, when it merged with FI into the Popolo della Libertà (PdL, People of Freedom). After a troubled transition (Baldini & Vignati 1996), AN then moved more swiftly towards conservatism (Ignazi 2005). This meant that the party lacked the people-centred and anti-establishment rhetoric typical of populism, and, for this reason, it was not classified as a populist party (see Verbeek & Zaslove 2016).

Thus, the establishment and development of FdI are better understood as a mix of rediscovery of its past (the MSI’s political culture and organisation) and of innovation, ideologically, as a nativist radical right party, and organisationally, for instance in the emergence of a new style of leadership. To investigate this peculiar mix, in the next sections we contextualise the rise of the party within the centre-right camp. After its troubled genesis (2012-14), the consolidation of Meloni’s leadership (2014-) was based on organisational, cultural, and media factors which, combined, provided

important ingredients to trigger the spectacular rise of the party in opinion polls from January 2020 onwards (Figure 1).

Figure 1 about here

The troubled genesis of FdI in the camp long dominated by Berlusconi

Political parties split for various reasons, often related to a mix of the following factors: divergences on ideology and principles, policy priorities, and, last but not least, a clash between personalities. Sometimes, the unwillingness of incumbent party leaders to step aside plays a role. In the case of FdI, while all factors mentioned above mattered, the unilateral cancellation of the centre-right's primaries by Berlusconi was the most important factor. Despite his age (he was already 76) and several ongoing judicial investigations, the leader of the centre-right coalition did not keep his word to step aside in the future general election. In December 2012, FdI was founded by former Defence Minister Ignazio La Russa (MSI-AN), former (FI's) Under-Secretary Guido Crosetto, and Meloni, indicated as founders in article 1 of the first party statute. Meloni was then elected party leader in 2014 (see below).

FdI's institutionalisation and its capacity to gain relevance within the centre-right were related to Berlusconi's predominance in this camp, favoured by a combination of institutional and personal factors. On the first side, as many as three different electoral systems used since 1994 (the 'Mattarella Law', 1993; the 'Calderoli law' in 2005, the 'Rosato law' since 2017), despite important differences, have all incentivised the formation of coalitions. In the centre-right, until 2018, Berlusconi's party was the most voted one. His personal resources include a media and financial empire, wealth, charisma, and, last but not least, uncommon campaign skills. But while all this was crucial in the 1994-2006 period, things started to change in 2007, especially after Berlusconi (unilaterally) created the Popolo della Libertà (PdL, People of Freedom), merging FI with AN. This move was never really accepted by the most important faction of the latter party, *Destra Protagonista*. Things became more complicated when Berlusconi was ousted from power in 2011, replaced by the technocratic government led by Mario Monti. His personal decline was then also favoured by his disqualification as a Senator in 2013, after a criminal conviction for tax fraud (from which he was later rehabilitated).

Coming just two months ahead of the 2013 general election, the foundation of FdI might have seemed a very risky move. And yet, it was not a leap in the dark, for at least two reasons. First, the Calderoli law (assigning a majority bonus in parliament to the coalition of parties winning a plurality of votes) provided the splinter party with a robust 'safety net': Berlusconi needed FdI to compete against the centre-left. Second, the party could profitably build on the pre-existing MSI-AN network and organisation. Moreover, in the previous years, 'despite the evolution of AN towards mainstream

conservative politics, its electorate remain[ed] the most right-wing of the coalition, with 79 per cent identifying with this category' (Castelli Gattinara & Froio 2021, 184). In other words, there were 'orphans' of a radical right party, which in Italy had always been identified with the MSI's tri-coloured flame (Cheles 2022). Hence, when in 2014 the party won the right to reproduce the flame as part of the AN's old party symbol, this factor mitigated the dissatisfaction about the party's performance in its first two nationwide electoral contests (2 per cent in the 2013 general election, 3.6 per cent and no seat in the 2014 European parliament election). The use of the flame also helped to attract nostalgic far-right voters, thus contributing to avoid the failure experienced by all other splinter parties in this camp (Tarchi 2018). FdI also had to compete with the other radical right party of the coalition, the Northern League. While in 2013 the latter performed very poorly (4 per cent), the arrival of Salvini at the helm of the party, at the end of that year, slowly revitalized it. This party's re-branding as 'The League', in the attempt to shift its nature from 'regionalist' to state-wide, and nationalist party (Albertazzi *et al.* 2018) helped it become the most-voted party of the coalition in the 2018 general election.

All in all, then, the party foundation can be explained by a mix of rational calculation, ambition, ideological divergencies, and awareness of the existence of fertile ground for a challenge on the right to Berlusconi's declining political leadership. And yet, the party remained marginal until 2018. In a party system with record-high levels of deinstitutionalisation (Chiaromonte & Emanuele 2022), Italy also stands out among European democracies in terms of personalisation of politics, for the very strong rise experienced in the 1985-2015 period (Marino, Martocchia Diodati, and Verzichelli 2022). While the literature is divided on the importance of leadership (rather than party identification or values) for the predominance of the right in Italian politics in the last 30 years, this camp has been dominated by male leaders enjoying long stints at the helm of their parties (Berlusconi (1993-) and (Salvini 2013-)). So how important is Meloni's leadership?

FdI's cultural and organisational roots and Meloni's populist leadership

Ambition matters in politics. When FdI was founded, there appeared to be no clear hierarchy between La Russa (the first party leader), Crosetto, and Meloni. However, while the first two politicians appeared to have no ambition to lead the party, Meloni clearly did. For a country where no woman had ever been Prime Minister (or President of the Republic), and where very few parties have been led by women, a 35-year-old woman might have looked an unlikely leader. And yet, her arrival at Palazzo Chigi, the prime minister's official residence, ten years after the party's foundation is not due only to the decline of her coalition allies, but also to her own capacity, first, to foster a strong sense

of a cohesive cultural community (even before FdI was born) and, then, to develop a successful populist style of communication.

Meloni had been a political activist in the MSI since she was fifteen years old, soon gaining leadership positions inside the party's youth organisations. She was also the youngest female member of the Italian parliament ever, in 2006, when she was 29, and the youngest female Minister of the Italian Republic (aged 31, at the Ministry of Youth). Since 1998, Meloni has organised the politico/cultural Festival 'Atreju', which takes its name from the protagonist of the fantasy movie 'Never Ending Story'. This should not be surprising. The MSI had long cultivated a strong attraction to Fantasy culture, especially J.R.R. Tolkien and his 'Lord of the Rings'. For some years the youth section of the party organised 'Hobbit camps'. Fantasy culture and Nordic mythology were more neutral providers of myths ('fatherland', 'tradition', etc.), than the memory of Fascism, which caused ostracism from the other parties. Atreju morphed (though slowly: Meloni 2021, 74-78) from a youth festival to an important annual political happening, hosting politicians and intellectuals from other parties (and from abroad, including Steve Bannon in 2018, Viktor Orbán in 2019), as a means by which FdI could gain more visibility (and international links) as a future governing party.

Those gatherings also helped to build the party's inner circle, or dominant coalition (Panebianco 1988) of the party, which stemmed from the group of 'I gabbiani' (the *Seagulls*, also inspired by another novel, Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*), rooted in Rome. While remaining strongly anti-communist (and anti-USA), the 'gabbiani' brought in the party a more open attitude towards the environment and cultural elements that transcended the left-right divisions. The strong sense of community that the group created was combined with an ambiguous attitude towards the key cultural heritage of fascism. While claiming 'not to be anti-fascist' (Meloni 2021), but also pointing out not to have 'the cult of fascism', Meloni has shrewdly managed to cultivate the memory of fascism, inside her group, as 'an emotional heritage, the 'family album', the irrational, yet conscious first mover of (their) political activism' (Cappellini 2021).

At the time of writing, in 2022, most members of the current leading group within the party central bodies have a long political experience inside the MSI or its youth branch. Of the current 24 members of the party's National Executive, 22 started their political activity in the above-mentioned organisations. In most cases this has implied working their way up the ladder of local institutions before reaching a position in the national governing body of the party. The continuity with the neo-fascist and post-fascist parties, at least in the profile of its 'inner circle', could not be clearer.

A strong organisational and cultural identity, however, could only be enough for the party to gain significant results in the traditional areas (mainly in Central Italy) where the MSI-AN had thrived. But the spectacular rise of the party in opinion polls after the end of 2019 became possible

mainly thanks to two factors: the mistakes made by Salvini after his massive success in the 2019 European Parliament elections and the increasing popularity of Meloni. While for space constraints we cannot cover the first point (but see Cotta 2020), here we underline how Meloni has so far managed to navigate the complicated trade-offs that all populist leaders face, starting from the fact that ‘extraordinariness must be tempered with ordinariness’ (Moffitt 2016). If populist politicians need to be seen as ordinary persons, female leaders face a ‘double bind’ (Jamieson 1995), i.e. a difficult balance between assertiveness and motherhood, between femininity and competence, often struggling to combine the need to look tough enough to lead the nation in a war, but also caring enough to understand people’s worries and problems.

In such a context, Meloni’s leadership has grown out of her capacity to combine hard work and strong determination in overcoming the difficult start, facing non-friendly environments, both at the national level, in a country marked by a masculine culture, and especially within the centre-right led by Berlusconi. Meloni became party leader in February 2014, replacing La Russa (who had voluntarily stepped aside) in an ‘open primary’ vote which, while open to all Italian citizens, was only open in name as far as the contest for the leadership was concerned, as Meloni had no rival on the ballot. Her leadership has been crucially strengthened by a skilful use of social media.

While there is no exact turning point in the fortunes of Meloni, experts would probably agree in singling out the speech she gave at the centre-right coalition rally held in Rome on 19 October 2019, as a major occurrence in her political career. Framing a typically populist discourse, Meloni built a strong message on her key identities: ‘I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother, I am Christian, and no one is going to take this away from me!’ A few weeks later, this became a meme, as this part of the speech was mixed in a video which went viral, with almost 12 million views.¹

In a country where the popularisation of politics is particularly advanced (Mazzoleni & Bracciale 2019), Meloni has profited from the ‘memefication’ of her political message. When two young Milanese DJs (Mem & J) created this rap motive from Meloni’s speech, they (involuntarily) contributed to increase her popularity. Importantly, this happened particularly among the youth, who often focus on the first part of the song, struggling to make sense of the anti-LGBT message contained in the second part of the speech (Bracciale 2020). With few adaptations, this sequence was also reproduced in the structure of her autobiography, ‘Io sono Giorgia’ (Meloni 2021), which sold more than 100,000 copies, a figure hardly – if ever – reached by any Italian politician.

Research on social media shows that Meloni scores high on populism, as assessed via the three traditional indicators of appeals to the people, the attack on the elites, and the ostracism of others. This is especially the case on Facebook (Bobba & Roncarolo 2018) but also on Twitter

¹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fhwUMDX4K8o>

(Bracciale & Martella 2017). Also, as the first Italian politician to use Instagram, Meloni has shown a more ‘*oppositional and outspoken*’ tone, when compared to other contemporary female politicians of other parties (Micalizzi & Piccioni 2021). These confrontational attitudes became stronger after she unsuccessfully campaigned – necessarily with less anti-establishment tones – to become mayor of Rome, in 2016; and especially after 2018, when she refused to join the new government of Giuseppe Conte, formed by the M5S and the League.

The ideological profile: unequivocally populist radical right, equivocally Eurosceptic

In order to understand FDI’s ideological profile, we combine the analysis of electoral manifestos and congressional documents with parliamentary activity (speeches and bills presented).² More specifically, we rely on the three manifestos for the general elections of 2013, 2018, and 2022. However, the most comprehensive document presenting the identity and policy proposals of the party was issued during the second party Conference, held in Trieste in 2017.³ The ‘Tesi di Trieste’ will be extensively used, along with the speech Meloni gave at the party’s ‘programmatic convention’ held in Milan in April 2022⁴ and with some bills for constitutional amendments presented in the latest legislative term (2018-2022). In some cases, these documents (or speeches) are too fragmentary to identify a clear ideological evolution through time. In other instances, a transition between different positions, or at least a change in the set of priorities or in the framing of certain issues, can be detected.

State and Market

On the traditional economic divide, FdI proposals lean towards a mix of neoliberal policies and protectionism for Italian companies, often justified with references to national pride and patriotism. Lowering the level of taxation is among the main pledges in all FdI’s electoral manifestos. In recent

² While in this paper we focus on the supply side only, we reckon that a more comprehensive analysis of the distinctiveness of FdI should also look at its supporters. This is even more relevant in light of the disruptive electoral success of FdI in the 2022 general election. The latter in fact raises important questions concerning the composition of the current electorate of FdI, especially in terms of its ideological consistency. Furthermore, another important aspect (which we already emphasise in this paper) relates to Meloni’s capacity, as party leader, to attract new voters. Although for space constraints we cannot address these issues here, further research is already on the making and some preliminary results show that: 1) the FdI electorate today represents a consistent bloc of right-wing voters, with no systematic difference between old and new ones in terms of their ideological positioning (which is, by the way, aligned with the electoral platform of the party); 2) Voters’ evaluations of Meloni had an effect on their own merit in explaining the success of the party (Angelucci, Baldini, Tronconi 2022).

³ The party held its first congress in Fiuggi in 2014, but no official documents are available for that gathering. No congresses were held after 2017. The Tesi di Trieste were removed from the party official website in August 2022, but can still be read from Meloni’s personal page (<https://www.giorgiameloni.it/tesitrieste/>).

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ybpl5xiCy4Q>

years (FdI 2017a, 12; FdI 2018, 1–2; FdI 2022a, 8), the party has proposed to achieve this goal through the progressive introduction of a *flat tax*, that is a single tax rate bracket covering all levels of income. As often happens in this kind of document, the costs of such fiscal policy are not made explicit, nor is it clarified who will bear such costs; however, general references to a reduction of public expenditures are present. The 2013 manifesto states, for instance, that ‘the State should go back to its appropriate role, refusing an excessive leadership in the markets of goods and services’ (FdI 2013, 6). On the side of welfare policies, it sponsors a system based on the cooperation between the public and private sectors, and a prominent role for the voluntary sector, which in the Italian context is dominated by organisations affiliated (or close) to the Catholic Church. In the same direction is the proposal to issue ‘social vouchers’ (FdI 2013, 14) that would allow families to choose among private and public health services, a measure that has been criticised for reallocating public health funding to the private sector. More recently, FdI has insisted on the abolition or substantial reduction of the guaranteed minimum income, introduced in Italy in 2019 after having been one of the flagship policy proposals of the M5S (FdI 2022a, 17).

FdI often emphasises the defence of Italian companies and Italian trademarks from the threat of multinationals and, more generally, from the international competition brought by economic and financial globalisation. This is sometimes framed as a form of national pride: brave Italian entrepreneurs are able to hold high the flag of ‘Made in Italy’, notwithstanding a reckless international banking system, accused of acting with the only aim of pursuing huge private profits, regardless of the consequences of its actions (FdI 2017a, 7). Small entrepreneurs and shopkeepers should thus be supported, provided that they produce their goods and services in Italy, in order to balance the excessive power of large-scale retail companies, which are subject to supranational logics (FdI 2017a, 13), or against a penalising EU legislation, or the ‘unfair competition of illegal Chinese workshops and plants’ (FdI 2018, 3).

Overall, the economic stances of FdI can be framed in the context of its core nativist, authoritarian, and populist ideology, similarly to other PRRPs (Otjes et al. 2018). Beyond the State-market divide, it is the opposition between natives and immigrants, deserving and non-deserving, people and (economic) elites that defines the party’s economic visions and proposals.

Family policies

Within the economic agenda of FdI, family policies deserve a special reference. Supporting family and birth-rates is the first priority of the electoral manifesto both in 2018 and 2022. Family policies are relevant both for their material and post-material implications, as in this field the issue of resource redistribution is inextricably mixed with visions of gender roles and relations in our societies. Like

other European PRRPs, FdI supports a traditional vision of the family, based on the marriage between a man and a woman, as again made explicit in the ‘Tesi di Trieste’ (FdI 2017a, 15):

Defending the family and our identity also means defending our children from the aggression of gender ideology which would like to erase the difference between man and woman and impose the absurd utopia of the gender-neutral and the insanity of adoptions for homosexual couples in our society.

On the other hand, FdI supports a mix of family policies that is somewhat uncommon in similar parties outside Italy (Giuliani 2022). Along with traditional ‘familialist’ policy instruments, such as money transfers to families with children, the party also supports ‘de-familialist’ initiatives that would facilitate the relocation of caring functions outside the family, like the expansion of nursery school services, and fiscal incentives for widening women’s access to the job market. It goes without saying that such measures should be directed to Italians in the first instance, while access for migrants should instead be limited (FdI 2017a, 8; FdI 2018, 3).

The 2022 manifesto softens these radical views. It is stated for instance that the law on civil unions will be kept (while confirming opposition to adoptions by same-sex couples), and no reference is made to the nationality of beneficiaries. At the same time, on several public occasions Meloni has repeated her traditionalist views on family issues. For instance, in a rally supporting the radical right candidate for the upcoming elections in Andalusia in June 2022, Meloni argued that ‘No compromise is possible: it is either ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Yes to natural family, no to LGBT lobbies’. The video went viral on social media.⁵

Nativism and socio-cultural issues

Socio-cultural issues are often claimed to be of primary importance for populist radical right parties (Mudde 2007). FdI makes no exception. The vision of society that emerges from the documents here considered (as well as from the party leader statements on the social networks, in interviews, at public rallies) is always informed by traditional values. Nativism clearly emerges in the reiterated contrast to the ‘invasion’ of migrants. Immigration is framed as a problem of security and as a vector of ‘Islamisation’, corrupting of the Judeo-Christian roots of western societies. In the following excerpt from the Tesi di Trieste, the two frames are perfectly overlapped (FdI 2017a, 10):

Salafist fundamentalist theories spread openly in our countries by fundamentalist Islamic states are the *humus* in which the terrorism that stains our cities with blood is born and grows. This is why we want to prevent fundamentalist

⁵ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jMad7nLO3OM>

propaganda in Italy, limit Islamic immigration to Europe, reaffirm that those who want to live in Italy must accept our culture and our identity.

In 2018, among the pledges made to affirm the ‘priority for security and legality’ one could read about the ‘closure of the gypsy camps’, and ‘immediate expulsion for foreigners who commit a crime and execution of the sentence in the country of origin’. A few lines afterwards, in the paragraph dedicated to the ‘contrast to illegal immigration’, the same triangulation between immigration, security, and ethnic diversity is present: ‘[the party supports] Legal immigration quotas [...] only for nationalities that have proven to integrate and that do not create security problems’ (FdI 2018, 2–3). It is worth underlining the idea according to which it is not individuals who (might) create security problems, but nationalities as a whole.

In the ‘Tesi di Trieste’ (2017), immigration is described as an ‘indiscriminate and uncontrolled access of people from other continents in numbers that foreshadow a real ethnic replacement’. This hints at a widespread conspiracy theory, sometimes propagated by leaders such as Victor Orbán of Hungary and Róbert Fico of Slovakia. Originally expounded by the French author Renaud Camus in 2012, the theory of the ‘Great Replacement’ maintains that white Europeans are supposedly being replaced by immigrants from non-European countries (especially the Islamic ones) through the deliberate actions of politicians and power elites (Bergmann 2021), with the active cooperation of humanitarian NGOs.

More generally, FdI always has the idea of fatherland and national pride as a cornerstone of its electoral and programmatic documents. As an example, in the preamble of the ‘Tesi di Trieste’, it is stated that FdI is making a ‘call to the Patriots, to gather the Italians who believe in the value of national unity, want to preserve and renew the tradition of our people, enhance its cultural identity and its historical memory, protect its space of sovereignty and freedom’ (FdI 2017a, 1). In the preamble to the 2022 electoral manifesto, it is once again reiterated that ‘Fratelli d’Italia was born to defend and love its Fatherland’. The name of the party itself, indeed, repeats the opening verse of the Italian national anthem.

Populism

It is FdI itself that offers a self-portrait as an ‘identity populist’ party, the ‘only antidote’ against an ‘atomised society, in which community ties and bonds of belonging are scientifically broken to build a mass of citizen-consumers without history, without roots, without identity, without homeland, without community, without religion and without sex’ (FdI 2017a, 6). This framing is very close to the idea of the people-as-nation, as proposed by Yves Mény and Yves Surel (2000): a homogeneous organic community sharing a culture and a sense of belonging, reflected in its common history

(whether imagined or real) and common destiny. As we have seen, the main threat to the people-as-nation is the ‘ethnic stranger’, which in today’s Europe means immigrants, and those of Islamic faith in particular. Elsewhere, the people are defined in economic or political terms: in the words of Mény and Surel, these are the people-as-class and the people-as-sovereign.

The paradigm of sovereignty stolen from the hands of the people is also frequent. In 2013, the manifesto’s opening paragraph stated that Italy is ‘the only western democracy with a government that has not been chosen by its citizens’ (FdI 2013, 1), the reference being to the technocratic government led by Mario Monti which was ruling the country at the time. The typical populist juxtaposition between a virtuous people and a vicious elite is present in the same document, denouncing the corruption of politicians and public servants and calling for a ‘blast on the *cupola* [the highest governing body of the criminal organisation known as Cosa Nostra] of the privileged, the state super-managers, the anachronistic bureaucrats that no reform has ever managed to dent’ (FdI 2013, 4). The EU and its democratic deficit are other obvious target to blame when popular sovereignty is considered (see below).

The call for a presidential reform of the Italian state is also framed in terms of establishing the figure of a strong man (or woman) with a direct connection to the will of his (or her) people through direct election. This proposal has been consistently present and always reiterated since the birth of the party in 2012. It is promoted as a way to enhance the democratic nature of the state, by making the head of State respondent and accountable to the popular will. In this direction, FdI presented a proposal for a constitutional amendment in 2018.⁶

The institutional setting that would emerge from this amendment, however, is not a presidential one (where the legislative and the executive powers are separate institutions). While proposing a popular election of the head of State, in fact, the amendment leaves in place a cabinet, led by a prime minister, which would require a parliamentary vote of confidence. In other words, the proposed reform envisages a semi-presidential form of government, without substantially changing the powers of the President of the Republic. This is very different, for example, from the French model, where the President enjoys exclusive powers in foreign and security policies and – except in cases of ‘cohabitation’ with a prime minister from another party - is expected to play a strong leadership role in national politics. In the 2022 electoral manifesto the pledge is reiterated: the presidential reform (with no further details) is presented as necessary ‘to guarantee governmental stability and a direct link between the citizens and the government leadership’ (FdI 2022a, 35). All in all, the proposed reform seems to be less interested in fundamentally changing the form of

⁶ ‘Modifiche alla parte II della Costituzione concernenti l’elezione diretta del Presidente della Repubblica’, presented on June 11 2018, Atto Camera dei Deputati n. 716.

government, then in establishing the figure of a strong man (or woman) directly linked with his (or her) people.

Italy in the EU: Equivocal euroscepticism

The EU represents a perfect target for populist political actors. FdI is no exception to this general rule. EU institutions are described as technocratic, unelected bodies, transferring relevant decisions beyond the control of the (national) sovereign people. At a closer look, however, the position of FdI on European integration is more nuanced, in line with the recent positioning of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), the European party to which it belongs. It is claimed that European integration is necessary to compete in international markets with the US and China, but the current state of the EU has been described as an irreversible drift towards a bureaucratic, technocratic, and lobbyist organisation. Indeed, in 2017 a ‘controlled abandonment of the Eurozone’ was considered as a possible (FdI 2017a, 7) or necessary (FdI 2017b, 1) course of action.

In recent years, however, the party has dropped its initial opposition to the common currency and its overall position on the European integration project has been softened. A relaunch of European integration is now seen as desirable, in the framework of a ‘Europe of sovereign nations’. This also includes a strengthening of the cooperation between European states in the fields of foreign and defence policy (FdI 2022a, 37). Overall, FdI might be better described as a Eurorealist party (Steven & Szczerbiak 2022) or an ‘equivocal Eurosceptic party’ that ‘avoid[s] a clear rejectionist position (and even deny it), but at the same time engage[s] in objections to European integration that echo the arguments of hard Eurosceptic parties’. (Heinisch et al. 2021, 192–193). In other words, FdI does not support any form of ‘Italexit’, and even calls for a deepening of European cooperation in some policy fields; while also proposing changes to its institutions and a revision of its treaties, that would ultimately alter – or even dismantle – the European integration project.

The best example of the party's ambivalence is the proposed amendment to Article 11 of the Italian Constitution, that would make European Treaties and other European norms applicable in Italy only when compatible with the Italian Constitution.⁷ While FdI rejects the label of a eurosceptic party, here it is following in the footsteps of Poland, where the Constitutional Court has controversially ruled that the country's Constitution takes precedence over EU legislation. In fact, Poland and the Visegrad countries are often mentioned as a model of ‘opposition to the bureaucratic degeneration of the EU and the defence of the real, historical Europe’ (FdI 2017a, 7). The 2022 electoral manifesto

⁷ ‘Modifiche agli articoli 11 e 117 della Costituzione, concernenti l’introduzione del principio di sovranità rispetto all’ordinamento dell’Unione europea’, presented on March 23 2018, Atto Camera dei Deputati n. 291.

does not include similar endorsements, nor explicit challenges to the European institutions, beyond a generic reference to the ‘Europe of Fatherlands’ (FdI 2022a, 37). However, in October 2021 the party has aligned with the ECR parliamentary group in Brussels in voting against a resolution condemning Poland for the above mentioned ruling of its Constitutional Court; in September 2022 a European Parliament resolution arguing that EU democratic values are under ‘systemic threat’ in Hungary was similarly rejected by FdI MEPs.

The international positioning: Atlanticism and relations with Russia

FdI has been a clear supporter of Italy’s membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), and more generally of Italy’s loyalty to the Western alliance led by the United States. This is in line with the positions of its immediate predecessor, AN, and a significant evolution when compared to the MSI. As a neo-fascist party, the MSI was initially critical of Italian entry to NATO. Even after the party moved to a gradual acceptance of Italy’s international positioning in the Western camp, anti-Americanism remained a widespread sentiment among its members.⁸

Relations with the Russian Federation have obviously become salient during 2022, as a consequence of the invasion of Ukraine. FdI immediately condemned the invasion, supporting the Ukrainian government. Given the sympathies previously expressed for Putin’s Russia (Meloni 2021), this position could not be taken for granted. In 2022 Meloni stated that ‘like it or not, in Ukraine our future is at stake’ (FdI 2022b) and in the same weeks the party supported the shipping of military equipment to Ukraine. Although in opposition, FdI was very clear in its support to the foreign policy of the Draghi government during the Ukraine conflict. This marked a difference with Salvini’s League, that maintained a more ambiguous position, supporting a negotiated way out of the international crisis and questioning the real usefulness of European sanctions on Russia. This also marked a significant evolution of FdI from the positions expressed in the ‘Tesi di Trieste’ in 2017, well after the annexation of Crimea, where it was stated that ‘we [FdI] do not share the logic of hostility towards the Russian Federation, we instead believe that close economic and strategic cooperation between Europe and Russia is necessary and fruitful, also in terms of combating terrorism’ (FdI 2017a, 10).

Conclusion

⁸ In a survey among party delegates at the 1990 MSI congress, 94% defined the US as ‘an imperialist power’ (Ignazi 1994, 84)

In its first decade of life FdI has moved from a marginal position (at least until 2018-19), to centre stage in 2022. While no single factor can explain this rise, we have singled out a combination of political circumstances related to the decline of competitors in the same political camp (Berlusconi and Salvini) and agency-related elements. With regard to the latter, particularly important has been Meloni's leadership, decisively supported by a pre-existing organisational network and ideological identities which are well-established, while also divisive. Also important has been a context marked by high volatility. The party has succeeded in preserving the core of its long-term electorate, while also gaining votes from the disappointed supporters of the two successful parties of the 2018 general elections, the M5S and the League (Mannoni and Angelucci 2022; Vassallo and Vignati 2022).

At the beginning of this article, we identified three particular traits that can help understand this successful trajectory: populist characteristics, closeness to illiberal leaders and parties in Europe, and a mix of organisational and cultural elements originating from the Italian post-fascist tradition, all associated with an ideological rebranding towards the populist radical right party family.

We have shown traces of populism in the electoral platforms of FdI and in the leadership style of Meloni. We have also underscored how some of these characteristics have been softened in the wake of the 2022 general election, especially in its international positioning and attitudes towards the EU. FdI is then certainly yet another peculiar manifestation of the multifaceted populist phenomenon. At the same time, it remains difficult to foresee whether a Meloni-led government will tone down the populist claims which contributed to FdI's rise. Research has disconfirmed two old assumptions associated with the implications of access of populist parties to government, namely that these parties would ultimately lose votes in gaining responsibility, and that, to counter this risk, they would *necessarily* have to moderate their programmes. As recalled above, the constitutional policy of FdI, and particularly its will to insist on a presidential transformation of the form of government, could be a decisive litmus test in this field.

Illiberalism is another feature often surfacing in the political culture and policy positions of the party, an element confirmed by its alliances in the European arena. Some observers and political competitors have even feared that Italy could follow Hungary and Poland in their route towards autocratisation. Again, we are not in a position to foresee how grounded these fears are, but this is certainly a key challenge for the state of Italian democracy. One could argue that the social and intellectual bases of the liberal order are stronger in Italy than they are in Eastern Europe (Dawson & Hanley 2016). A hypothetical path in the direction of democratic backsliding would also meet several internal and external political constraints. Internally, FdI leads a coalition government, having secured 30 per cent of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 33 per cent in the Senate (whereas in Hungary, Fidesz controls on its own a majority of seats in parliament, while in Poland PiS is by far the

predominant party under the ‘United Right’ government coalition). Both the League and FI will be decisive for the survival of the government, and they will likely contest Meloni’s aspirations to dominate the coalition and, indeed, Italian politics at large. Externally, Italy will be closely monitored by its European partners and EU institutions. Italian cabinets have already experienced strong pressures from the EU in the past (e.g. Berlusconi in 2011, Conte in 2018). Italian reliance on the huge financial aids of Next Generation EU will make the blackmail power of EU institutions even stronger in the legislative term inaugurated in 2022. Following Pirro and Stanley (2022), we found that ‘forging’ some norms restricting civil rights for some minorities is possible also in Italy, but ‘bending and breaking’ liberal institutions involves many further steps that seem unlikely, at least for the time being.

Last but not least, we have shown how being a ‘rooted newcomer’ has helped FdI achieve electoral success. Being the only Italian party consistently in opposition since its foundation in 2012 is one element of ‘newness’ that Meloni skilfully played on during the 2022 electoral campaign. Other populist leaders in the recent past (Renzi, Grillo, Salvini) have benefited from their status of ‘outsiders’, either in their party, or in the political system in general. Still, their success has been ephemeral, as the electorate has invariably been quick to turn to the next populist newcomer. Meloni’s rootedness, that is, her reliance on the solid organisational background of FdI, will not by itself guarantee a lasting and consequential hold on power, also considering the uneasiness of both Berlusconi and Salvini to accept submissive positions in government. That said, a reliable organisational infrastructure, together with the moderation of its most extreme policy stances, could be a decisive asset to the consolidation of FdI as a government party, and Meloni’s leadership within it. After a period of years when many Italians voted ‘out of desperation’ (Orsina 2022), another important challenge for the future will be to convince them to vote, for once, out of conviction.

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