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Populism In The Age Of Social Media: The Case Of *Fratelli D'Italia*

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Introduction

The rise of populist movements represents one of the most significant political phenomena of the 21st century, fundamentally reshaping democratic institutions and challenging traditional political systems around the world. Characterized by the conflict between “the pure people” and “corrupt elites,” this complex ideological movement has generated particular interest among academics in trying to understand its influence on international relations, democracy and democratic institutions. By introducing new political dynamics, populism amplifies the voices of those who feel ignored or marginalized by established systems, favoring direct and often immediate communication with its supporters. Thus, populist leaders position themselves as the only authentic representatives of the people, further redefining the relationship between governance and citizens.

The ability of a political leader to achieve success and gain consensus is largely determined by the effectiveness of his political communication. However, in recent years, there has been a significant change in the way politicians construct and spread their political narratives. Traditional media, once the main gatekeepers of the public debate, have gradually lost importance, being overtaken by the rise of new digital platforms. The latter, not only ensure immediate dissemination of political messages, but also allow direct, continuous and unmediated interaction between leaders and the electorate. Therefore, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), Instagram and TikTok have become essential tools in the hands of politicians for a new contemporary political communication.

This phenomenon finds one of its most evident expressions in the case of *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brothers of Italy), the right-wing populist party led by Giorgia Meloni, which, in recent years, has not only consolidated its position in the Italian political landscape, but has also assumed national leadership - a contrast to the AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*), which has solidified its standing without yet entering national government. This thesis aims to investigate to what extent digital platforms have contributed to the rise and electoral strategy of right-wing populist parties in Europe, with a specific focus on *Fratelli d'Italia*. The research question guiding this analysis is the following: How have social media platforms influenced the rise and electoral strategies of right-wing populist parties in Europe? And, in particular, how important have they been for shaping the development and political positioning of *Fratelli d'Italia*?

To answer these questions, this research relies on a combination of secondary data analysis and supporting studies. Although engagement metrics, like trends, and follower growth on *Fratelli d'Italia*'s official social channels are taken into account, these quantitative insights come mainly from existing studies and reports, rather than from original data collections. My empirical contribution consists in synthesizing and critically analyzing these secondary sources to assess the role and relative importance of social media in the party's rise and in its electoral strategies. This critical perspective also extends to the methodological approach used to examine a specific speech held by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, "*Io sono Giorgia*." Through the integration of discourse analysis and semiology, this research uncovers the symbolic meanings embedded in Meloni's words, revealing how cultural references and nationalist imagery reinforce her message. While semiology highlights these underlying symbols, discourse analysis focuses on the linguistic and thematic structures of its rhetoric, particularly the contrast between the "pure Italian people" and the perceived "outsiders", such as immigrants and LGBTQ communities, whom populists frame as threats.

The structure of this thesis is organized into three main chapters. The first chapter provides the theoretical foundations by defining populism and exploring its broader implications. In particular, it engages with the work of scholars of populism such as Cas Mudde, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, and Jan-Werner Müller. These scholars offer distinct but complementary perspectives on populism: Mudde and Kaltwasser frame it as a thin-centered ideology based on the fundamental opposition between the people and the elite, while Müller characterizes it as an anti-pluralist movement that seeks to delegitimize all those who do not share the same ideas. Based on these theoretical frameworks, the first chapter also investigates how populist leaders construct their political identity, transforming digital platforms into political tools. At this stage, Paolo Gerbaudo's concept of "populist media," will highlight how social media platforms themselves become part of the populist project. Moreover, this chapter includes a comparative analysis of the communication strategies of *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) and *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI), illustrating both their common digital strategies and the unique aspects of FdI's approach.

The second chapter focuses on the figure of Giorgia Meloni, offering a detailed analysis of the origins and evolution of her party, paying particular attention on how she exploited social media to gain ever greater success. As charismatic and polarizing figure, Meloni has established herself as a champion of Italian identity and cultural heritage, promoting values linked to traditionalism, nationalism and

Euroscepticism, with a distinctive emphasis on the traditional role of women in society, valorizing the figures of mother, sister and daughter as pillars of the community.

Finally, the third chapter focuses on the famous 2019 speech “*Io sono Giorgia*” as a case study to illustrate the amplifying power of social media in contemporary populist communication. Through an in-depth analysis based on the methodologies of discourse analysis and semiology, the thesis will investigate how the language and symbols used by Meloni reinforced her political image. The speech, in which she stated: “I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother, I am a Christian,” quickly acquired a viral dimension, spreading through memes and remixes that amplified its reach, granting it unprecedented visibility even among her opponent. Therefore, the case of *Fratelli d'Italia* and its leader Giorgia Meloni represents an emblematic example of how digital platforms have transformed political communication, mobilizing consensus and changing the relationship between politicians and voters in an increasingly digital era.

I. Theoretical Framework: Populism in the Digital Era

A. Understanding Populism

1. The core features of populism: people vs elite

The definition of populism is complex. Populism is a political phenomenon in which populist leaders present themselves as the sole legitimate representatives of the people's will, positioning themselves in opposition to a corrupt elite. In this narrative, the "people" are idealized as authentic and virtuous, while the "elite" is portrayed as distant, concerned only in their own privileges and opposed to the collective good. This phenomenon often arises from a deep discontent among the population, who, feeling abandoned and unrepresented, turn to populist movements to gain that sense of security and recognition. As Kenny et al. (2021) state: "Populists argue that elites have usurped the people's sovereignty and by supporting a populist leader, the people are able to reclaim their power" (Kenny et al. 2021, 24).

Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) define populism as: "A thin-centered ideology that views society as fundamentally divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which holds that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people." (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 6). The authors emphasize the flexible nature of populism, arguing that it is not a fully developed ideology itself, but rather can be integrated into different ideologies, be they right-wing or left-wing. In particular, right-wing populist parties, which currently represent the dominant form of populism, focus mainly on issues such as immigration, national sovereignty and cultural identity, particularly racializing outsiders (such as immigrants, ethnic minorities and LGBTQIA communities), who are presented as a threat to the pure people. In contrast, left-wing populism focuses on economic inequality and fights for social justice, defining the elite as the political-economic stratum that undermines the people's social welfare.

However, this definition has been strongly criticized by Jan-Werner Müller, as he suggests that the anti-elitist aspect should not be considered the only defining characteristic of populism. Therefore, he states that in addition to being anti-elitist, true populists possess a distinctly anti-pluralist nature: "They claim that they and they alone represent the people. All other political competitors are essentially illegitimate and anyone who does not support them is not really part of the people" (Müller 2016, 101). Giorgia Meloni's political rhetoric is a clear example of this claim. In fact, during her

electoral campaign and in her public speeches, the Italian Prime Minister constantly defends traditional values such as family, religion and order, all principles that she claims are neglected by other parties. Furthermore, she portrays herself as the true defender of Italian identity, arguing that only her party is capable of restoring prestige and centrality to Italy. Paradoxically, as Kenny et al. (2021) argue: “In this politics of identity, the idea of ‘the people’ is presented by populists as representing the whole, while at the same time it excludes parts of society” (Kenny et al. 2021, 23).

2. Populism’s impact on democracy

Populists challenge established norms and political actors in modern democratic systems (Ruth-Lovell et al. 2019, 2). Scholars focus on discussing the impact of populist movements on democratic regimes, with different perspectives on whether their rise weakens or strengthens democracy. On the one hand, scholars such as Mudde and Kaltwasser argue that populism is a force that undermines liberal democracy. On the other hand, some scholars argue that populism can lead to better political participation and can also strengthen the relationship between politicians and citizens.

The concept of democracy itself remains somewhat vague, as it does not have a universally agreed definition. However, for the purposes of this thesis, democracy can be understood as a system of government in which political power ultimately resides in the hands of the people, ensuring that their interests and voice are represented and respected. Moreover, democratic systems also provide protections for minority rights and mechanisms for balancing competing interests. Today, the most widely accepted model is liberal democracy, which combines popular rule with constitutional protections for individual liberties and minority rights, guarding against the risk of majority tyranny (Ruth-Lovell et al. 2019, 4). In liberal democracies, the protection of these rights is intended to ensure that democratic governance remains accountable and transparent to all citizens, especially marginalized groups, through respect for the rule of law and constitutional checks and balances.

Populism in particular, as Mudde and Kaltwasser suggest, “argues that nothing should limit the will of the (pure) people and fundamentally rejects notions of pluralism and, therefore, the rights of minorities as well as the institutional guarantees that should protect them” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 81). An example that can be referred to it, is undoubtedly the behaviour of Silvio Berlusconi when he was in power. *Il cavaliere* (the knight), as he was known, spent years in court due to many known illicit activities, during which he attacked the integrity of the judiciary. According to him, his election to office by a popular vote meant that the judiciary had no right to prosecute him. This

behaviour is typical of populist actors, that is, whatever they do must be considered “untouchable,” because they embody the will of the people.

However, Mudde and Kaltwasser observe the dual nature of populism, which can have both positive and negative effects: populism can be seen both as a “spokesperson for groups that do not feel represented by the elite” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 83) and as a notion to discriminate against minority groups and institutions that protect fundamental rights.

By contrast, Müller argues that populism can only be seen in a negative sense:

“Populism is a form of exclusionary identity politics and tends to pose a danger to democracy. Democracy requires pluralism and the recognition that we must find the right conditions to live together as free, equal, but also irreducibly different citizens. The idea of an individual, homogeneous, and authentic people is a dangerous fantasy; populists thrive on conflict and encourage polarization by treating their political opponents as 'enemies of the people' and excluding them altogether” (Müller 2016, 4).

Unlike the more optimistic perspective of Mudde and Kaltwasser, Müller argues that populist rhetoric, whether from the right or the left, can cause political polarization and the disintegration of democratic discourse.

3. Populist leaders – who qualifies and why?

The rise of numerous populist figures and movements — from Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in the United States, to the Five Star Movement in Italy, Podemos in Spain, Marine Le Pen in France and Nigel Farage in the UK — has marked the beginning of what is called the “populist moment:” a historical phase marked by the rise of political forces that question the dominant neoliberal order (Gerbaudo 2018, 2).

Populist leaders play a central role in contemporary politics. Although each populist leader has distinctive traits, the general idea of populist leadership is that a powerful woman or man, thanks to a strong ability to impose decisions, leads the masses in the most charismatic and polarized way possible. Thiers et al. (2022) summarize this phenomenon as “the most extraordinary individuals leading the most ordinary people” (Thiers et al. 2022, 4). Another common trait of populist leaders is a negative view of institutions, such as courts and legislative bodies. Yet, paradoxically, populist leaders are often the first to strategically exploit these institutions – especially through electoral

campaigns – to expand their influence and consolidate consensus. Their primary goal is to uphold the rights of “the people,” who are portrayed as pure and virtuous, while opposing a corrupt elite. They have the ability to influence the minds of their followers, collectively pushing them to undertake journeys they would never have otherwise contemplated (Rhodes et al. 2014, 9).

Block and Negrine (2017) offer a critical framework to discuss the communication strategies of populist leaders, they state that:

“The specific style of rhetoric used by populists includes adversarial, emotional, patriotic and abrasive discourses through which they connect with the discontented, often through grassroots and community-oriented communication practices and spaces. Populist political actors use and interact with media to convey their messages and connect with their audiences. In contemporary societies, where all politics is to some extent mediatized, populist figures inevitably use the media in the articulation and representation of politics” (Block and Negrine 2017, 182).

The authors argue that, through a direct and simple message, populists manage to stand out and create an emotional appeal to connect with “common people.” By breaking traditional methods, populists have managed to gain even more success as the use of social media and their constant presence on social platforms has allowed them to connect directly with the public.

A recurring theme in populist leadership is the illusion of closeness that the leader builds with his followers. Citizens are often convinced that they support a politician “with whom they would like to have a beer” (Bucelli and Velasco 2022, 14). To reinforce this sense of intimacy, populist leaders often adopt informal and sometimes vulgar language, presenting themselves as “common men.” Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) provide a clear example of this behaviour: “The former leader of the Italian right-wing populist Northern League, Umberto Bossi, who inflamed the crowds by stating that ‘the League has an erection,’ while literally giving Rome the middle finger” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 64). A further example that demonstrates this controversial attitude concerns the statements made by the former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. In 2008, *the knight*, regarding the composition of his former government, called all the women in his party “*tutte belle*” (all beautiful). This statement has attracted much criticism, pointing out that this comment significantly reduces women's positions of power to mere objects of beauty.

B. Populism and the Media: From Traditional to Digital

1. The shift to digital platforms

With the advent of the digital age and the emergence of new technologies that have shaped political discourse, digital platforms have become the most important tool in the hands of politicians to ensure they can connect with the electorate in ways never seen before. Therefore, social media has become the most powerful contemporary tool, used mainly to give voice to the population that feels marginalized, not represented by institutions and corrupt elites. By promoting a direct and seemingly authentic relationship, social media has made it possible to bypass traditional controls that were once entrusted to the journalistic filter.

In the past, in fact, every information reached by the public had to first be approved by a rigorous editorial hierarchy, in compliance with professional journalistic standards. These strict controls carried out by traditional media have had repercussions. Criticized by both populist actors and the population, traditional media, defined by Gerbaudo (2018) as mainstream media (MSM), have been accused of favoring corrupt elites and of being disinterested in the real needs of citizens. Furthermore, they are accused of distorting or hiding the truth, driven by the interests of powerful economic and political actors who “don't want you to know” (Gerbaudo 2018, 748), thus making journalists themselves complicit in these selfish and false systems.

The peak of distrust in traditional media was reached with the global financial crisis of 2008, a crisis that journalists failed to anticipate or report adequately and promptly, thus being described as a “watchdog that does not bark” (Gerbaudo 2018, 749). However, the feeling of distrust may not depend exclusively on economic issues, but rather on a “cultural backlash,” that is, due to socio-cultural change and the loss of their values, the population who feel culturally marginalized wants to obtain a net change.

In this context, social media platforms have favored the rise of what Gerbaudo calls “populist media.” Social media have emerged as a place where, for the first time, citizens feel free to express their opinions, criticize elites and reclaim traditional values, without being hindered by journalistic filters. Gerbaudo defines them as: “A place where anyone can make changes and content, without any qualification or professional experience, thus demonstrating that anyone can now make their voice heard” (Gerbaudo 2018, 749).

2.The role of media in amplifying populist messages

At the core of populism lies the centrality of “the people.” Therefore, populist movements require an equally people-centered method of communication that can amplify their message. The advent of the internet has brought a radical transformation in political communication, permanently modifying the way political actors engage with their electorate.

Paolo Gerbaudo (2018) suggests that: “There is what could be provisionally described as an 'elective affinity' between social media and populism: social media have favored populist movements at the expense of institutional ones, providing the former with a suitable channel to invoke the support of ordinary people against the latter” (Gerbaudo 2018, 746). According to Gerbaudo, the digital age has allowed people to share their opinions and participate politically in ways that traditional media would never have allowed. Populist leaders “turn digital platforms into a militant support base and exploit their capacity for mass collaboration online” (Gerbaudo 2018, 749), thus ensuring an even greater diffusion of populist messages.

Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter have become the main platforms for expanding the populist message. They reward emotional expression, virtual messages and active interaction. As Hoster (2021) notes, Twitter/X is the best platform for populists who want to reach the public with short and simple, yet incisive messages. In contrast, Facebook and Instagram encourage emotionally charged interactions through endless scrolling, image and video sharing, and the ability to respond with likes, shares, and comments (Hopster 2021, 558). However, there is a contradiction: while social media platforms serve as powerful tools for populist mobilization, they are not neutral spaces. Social media are tools controlled and owned by capitalist companies, entities often criticized by populists themselves for serving corporate interests rather than the collective good (Gerbaudo 2018, 747).

“Social media are means to aggregate otherwise dispersed people” (Gerbaudo2018, 749). The primary purpose of social platforms is to catch the greatest possible attention. As Hopster (2021) explains: “People's attention is a scarce resource, for which different media compete. The more attention they manage to gather, the greater their value to advertisers” (Hopster 2021, 557).

To maximize this engagement, filters and algorithms have been created inside the platforms with the aim to track everything we like and what we do not, in order to prevent certain types of content from appearing on our profiles. The filters resulting from our interactions, that is, the time we spend in front of a certain type of video, or from sharing a picture/video with our friends, and even the comments, are all elements that social media are able to interpret as our area of interest, consequently

providing us with an overload of this information. This dynamic of filtering by interest and the “attention economy” associated with it, is the tendency behind the widely discussed “filter bubble” effect of social media.

In social media, it is essential to monitor the appearance of user interactions, since “interactions are the currency in the logic of network media” (Jost et al. 2020, 2084). Politicians can leverage these interactions to collect real-time data, assess “popularity cues,” and refine their communication strategies accordingly—amplifying what resonates and discarding what does not.

C. Comparative Populism in the Digital Age

1. *Alternative für Deutschland vs Fratelli d'Italia*

It is important to emphasize that despite populist parties sharing similar principles (true people vs elite) not all populist parties adopt the same communicative strategies. To illustrate this point, this section will compare two significant populist parties: *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI) in Italy and *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) in Germany.

The AfD, variably self-defined as a *Volkspartei* (people’s party), *Rechtsstaatspartei* (party of the rule of law), *Weckruf-Partei* (party of awakening) and *Partei des gesunden Menschenverstands* (party of common sense), rose to prominence during the 2017 federal election with 12.6% of the vote, becoming the third largest political force in the country (D’Amico et al 2021, 108). However, it is important to note that the AfD did not initially emerge as a populist party in the traditional sense. Founded in 2013, its initial program focused primarily on economic nationalism, fiscal austerity, and opposition to eurozone bailout packages, especially the financial bailout of Greece during the eurozone crisis. The AfD’s populist transformation occurred following the party’s rapprochement with the anti-Islam and anti-immigration Pegida movement, which led the party to adopt a more pronounced ethnonationalist rhetoric and anti-establishment discourse. This new ideology was seen as highly attractive, as it was able to capitalize on growing public anxieties related to migration, identity, and national sovereignty.

This racist, xenophobic, conservative party advocates the classic populist scheme of the “true people” versus corrupt elites, where the true people are the native white Germans, thus painting immigrants and ethnic minorities as a threat, and an elite composed of a manipulative and deceitful press. They

declared that: “When we arrive, we will put things in order, then we will clean up, then politics will be made for the people and only for the people” (D’Amico et al. 2021, 118).

Racial and immigration issues play a central role in the AfD’s campaign strategy. A clear example was the speech promoted against Africans: “As long as we are willing to accept this excess population, the reproductive behavior of Africans will not change. [...] Evolution has led Africa and Europe towards two different reproductive strategies. [...] The gap between African and European birth rates is currently increased by the decadent *Zeitgeist* that holds Europe firmly in check” (D’Amico et al 2021, 115). Thus, statements such as these reveal the AfD’s ideological commitment to strict immigration controls and the strengthening of national borders (Kim 2023, 6).

It is important to note that, although the AfD’s voter base tends to be older, anti-Semitic sentiments and hate speech are increasingly evident among the party’s younger supporters. These young activists often engage in politically incorrect, inflammatory, and provocative speech both online and in public forums. Their language is described by Verra (2020) as “a type of language, which is also expressed through elements of mimicry and gestures, as well as a particular tone of voice, which serves to stage the conflict and arouse the audience’s emotions” (Verra 2020, 158). Here follows an aggressive speech led by Sven Tritschler, Vice President of the *Junge Alternative*, regarding the harassment during Cologne on New Year’s Eve 2015:

“It seems that our Chancellor has not only given the impression to the world that we are a kind of social center for those who are not so happy at home, but she also seems to have given the impression that our country is one big, open-air brothel where everyone can let themselves go freely. If Chancellor Merkel wants to run such a brothel, and I absolutely do not want to deny that she has talent to do so, then she must resign from the office of Chancellor, because we will not allow our women to become prey for hunting” (D’Amico et al 2021, 117).

Emotional appeals are the basis of their speeches. Alexander Gauland’s speech, comparing the barbarian invasions at the end of the Roman Empire to the uncontrolled migration of Muslims, is an example of this. Creating a sense of anguish and fear, the populist leaders want to give the idea of dangerous immigrants that can harm the pure German people (Verra 2020, 152). Moreover, Irony is also a frequent rhetorical device used by AfD populists to ridicule their opponents. For example, the use of adjectives and adverbs such as *lächerlich* (ridiculous) and *lustig* (funny) are used sarcastically, intensified by adverbs such as *absolut* or *völlig*, or by the particle *doch*, which indicates their contradiction (Verra 2020, 155).

Furthermore, it is possible to link the linguistic strategies employed by AfD politicians with the language of the National Socialists. As D'Amico et al. (2021) suggest: “Language, often underestimated as a means of persuasion and exercise of power, has played a decisive role in the electoral and opinion-making successes of the AfD, just as it had played in Germany a century ago” (D'Amico et al. 2021, 121). In this context, the AfD's deliberate use of emotionally charged, exclusionary and historically charged rhetoric cannot be seen as a generic political strategy, but rather as the continuation of a specifically German tradition of linguistic manipulation linked to far-right ideology.

The approach of *Fratelli d'Italia* and its leader Giorgia Meloni is different. Despite being a far-right nationalist and populist party, Giorgia Meloni does not adopt an extremist and aggressive tone but rather a conservative one. Indeed, her party's populist rhetoric particularly emphasizes the traditional female roles of mother, sister and daughter, exalting the importance of motherhood and the traditional family, helping to outline a vision of cultural superiority that tends to reject everything that is perceived as “different.” However, Although FdI shares AfD's skepticism towards immigration, its leaders avoid veiled racist language by directing their discourse on the defense of identity and cultural heritage. The article by Indelicato and Lopes (2022) agrees on the anti-immigration nature and frames Giorgia Meloni as anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQIA: “Meloni perfectly embodies the current convergence of anti-immigration, anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQIA+ positions with white supremacist conspiracy theories” (Indelicato and Lopes 2024, 7).

Unlike AfD, *Fratelli d'Italia* addresses a traditional electorate through a more veiled and symbolic populist language, avoiding aggressive tones and using religious symbols as indicators of cultural identity. Giorgia Meloni plays on sentiments such as “Italian pride,” “God, country and family” and nostalgia for what Italy once was. Meloni's tone, while energetic, is more disciplined and professional, thus positioning herself as a competent alternative to the ruling elite.

2. Why Fratelli d'Italia presents a unique case study

Fratelli d'Italia (FdI), led by Giorgia Meloni, is a unique case among European radical right populist parties. The party shares the ideologies of right-wing movements – such as nationalism, criticism of immigration and national supremacy. However, FdI differs in terms of leadership, communication strategy, and historical lineage.

One of the most interesting aspects of FdI is its president, Giorgia Meloni, the first woman to lead a major right-wing party in a Western democracy, a phenomenon usually reserved for male figures. However, Meloni is not the only prominent female figure in European right-wing politics: Marine Le Pen in France is a key example. However, both their stories have been characterized by different beginnings: Marine Le Pen's career was favored by the succession to her father Jean-Marie Le Pen at the head of the Rassemblement National. On the contrary, Meloni has been deeply engaged since a young age, so much so that she has become part of Italian youth politics and has legitimized her political figure over the years.

Based on the concept of “strong man” theorized by Ben Ghiat (2020) and Schippers's (2007) notion of hegemonic femininity, both Meloni and Le Pen can be interpreted as “strong women.” Being strong women means possessing authoritative traits and culturally resonant feminine virtues at the same time. However, the performance of femininity in their respective political styles is significantly different (Griffini and Montecchio 2023, 5). Meloni strongly emphasizes her role as a “woman, mother, Christian and Italian,” basing her political rhetoric on family and national values. Le Pen, on the contrary, does not place motherhood and the role of women at the centre of her political line. This divergence underlines Meloni's deep rootedness in gender nationalism, while Le Pen interprets a more neutral and managerial version of femininity.

On the issue of gender and sexuality, their positions of thought are different. Although both criticize surrogacy, Le Pen's position on LGBTQ+ rights is decidedly more neutral and less harsh than that of Giorgia Meloni. The French leader does not base her policy on such criticisms, thus approaching a moderate position. On the contrary, Giorgia Meloni makes the defense of the heterosexual, monogamous, traditional and Christian family a pillar of her political program, harshly attacking the LGBTQ+ communities and anyone who does not represent the traditional model.

In terms of communication style, both leaders use social media as their weapon to reach out to the population, although with different approaches. Meloni's online presence captures attention through a well-studied emotional involvement, emphasizing her personal history, her family life and her patriotic values. On the contrary, Le Pen tends not to expose her private life, but focuses more on political communication and opposition rhetoric. This difference highlights Meloni's ability to relate personal identity in political communication more directly than her French counterpart.

The case of *Fratelli d'Italia* is unique in another aspect. Unlike the right-wing populist governments in Poland (PiS) and Hungary (Fidesz), Meloni has proven more collaborative towards European

institutions. Despite the Italian leader's eurosceptic and sovereignist positions, her government has adopted a less reluctant stance within the EU and NATO, unlike Viktor Orbán or Jarosław Kaczyński, who have clashed several times with EU authorities on issues related to the rule of law. On the issue of Ukraine, the prime minister has emerged surprisingly supportive, so much so that she managed to convince Orbán to approve military aid essential in the fight against Russia. Furthermore, another aspect that brought Meloni closer to the European Union was the work carried out in close contact with the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, obtaining funding from the EU for her internal agenda (Stille 2025).

Finally, FdI departs from the model of right-wing populism set by Silvio Berlusconi. Although both Meloni and Berlusconi capitalized on media influence, Berlusconi through television and Meloni through social media, their political ideologies and goals are clearly distinct. Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* was characterized by economic liberalism, a personalized media empire, and a populism rooted in individualism and spectacle. In contrast, Meloni's conservatism is culturally rooted, collectivist, and draws on a historical post-fascist tradition that emphasizes national identity, social order, and traditional values. Furthermore, while Berlusconi's populism was often performative and focused on his person, Meloni presents herself as part of a broader national mission, thus aligning herself more with the communitarian ethos of the radical right.

II. The Rise of *Fratelli d'Italia* and Giorgia meloni

A. Historical Context: The Roots of *Fratelli d'Italia*

1. From MSI to *Alleanza Nazionale*

To understand the roots of *Fratelli d'Italia*, it is essential to take a step back in history, precisely to 1946, the year of the foundation of the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI). Founded by some veterans of the Italian Social Republic (RSI) such as Pino Romualdi (former vice-secretary of the Fascist Republican Party), Giorgio Almirante and Arturo Michelini, the movement was a symbol of solidarity with the war losers. The MSI, also known as the “party of the flame” due to its coat of arms depicting a lit tricolor flame, was the cradle of Italian neo-fascism for over fifty years. However, despite enjoying a certain electoral consensus between 4% and 9% at the national level, it was progressively excluded from Italian politics during the First Republic (Forti 2022, 27).

Between 1992 and 1994, the Italian political landscape was hit by the scandals brought to light by the Milan Public Prosecutor's Office in the context of the “Clean Hands” investigation (Puleo & Piccolino 2022, 360), thus offering the MSI the opportunity to return to politics, more precisely under the first Berlusconi government (FI - *Forza Italia*). During the Fiuggi congress, and under the leadership of Gianfranco Fini (leader of the MSI), the MSI party was cleared and changed its name to *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN), increasingly distancing itself from fascist ideologies and aiming to become a moderate and conservative party.

In the following years, AN increasingly integrated into the Italian political system, continuing its evolution towards more moderate positions and becoming a traditional right-wing party. In November 2007, on the initiative of Silvio Berlusconi, AN joined the new unified center-right party, il *Popolo della libertà* (PdL), thus decreeing its end as an autonomous political entity. However, political differences between Fini and Berlusconi led to a split and the formation of *Futuro e Libertà per l'Italia* (FLI) in 2010 (Donà 2022, 780). Berlusconi's government ended in November 2011 due to the eurozone crisis, thus passing the reins to the Conti government (Donà 2022, 780). Retracing the history of the MSI party, later called AN, is essential to understanding the birth and evolution of Brothers of Italy (FdI). A party that is composed of many of the founders and leaders of MSI and AN (Forti 2022, 32).

2. The foundation and evolution of *Fratelli d'Italia*

The birth of *Fratelli d'Italia* dates back to December 2012 due to general discontent among some members of Berlusconi's former party, who did not agree with the latter's decision not to call primaries and to support the Monti government.

Therefore, this dissatisfaction led Giorgia Meloni, former member of the youth of the MSI and AN and at the time vice president of the Chamber of Deputies, together with Ignazio La Russa, another member of AN and the *Fronte della Gioventù* (the youth of the MSI), and Guido Crosetto, former moderate deputy of *Forza Italia*, to found a new political formation (Forti 2022, 32).

The new name of the party – initially launched as *Centrodestra Nazionale*, then renamed *Fratelli d'Italia – Alleanza Nazionale*, and finally simplified to *Fratelli d'Italia* (Puleo & Piccolino 2022, 362) – conceals a clearly patriotic message. Equally symbolic was the choice of the party symbol, namely the tricolor flame that represents the MSI, used on all electoral material and on the party flags. This choice demonstrated the will of *Fratelli d'Italia* not to deny the fascist origins of the party but rather to re-propose them within the new party. The party's desire to reconnect with its fascist roots was further confirmed by Giorgia Meloni's open criticism on the issue of the merger between *Alleanza Nazionale* and *Popolo della Libertà* (PdL). As Donà (2022) observes: “According to Meloni, Fini's decision to merge AN with PdL was not only a big mistake but also a betrayal of the Right's values and history for reasons of personal success.” According to Meloni, Fini's plan to build a mainstream right-wing conservative party is to be considered a failure (Donà 2022, 781). Through these criticisms, Meloni has emphasized the need to return to a coherent political identity, grounded in nationalism, positioning *Fratelli d'Italia* as a distinct and ideologically rooted alternative within the Italian right.

A further element of connection between Giorgia Meloni's party and the fascist party led by Mussolini is found in her statements at a rally held just before the elections, in Latina's Piazza del Popolo - a city historically significant as a center of fascist ideology. Flanked by Mussolini's niece, Rachele Mussolini, Meloni expressed her intent to reconquer this symbolic place in the history of the Italian right (Nadeau 2018, 14).

The first steps in the political landscape of FdI were the 2013 political elections, won by the 5 Star Movement. *Fratelli d'Italia* did not reach the minimum threshold of 3%, however it still obtained 1.96% with eight elected representatives (Donà 2022, 781). In this period, positioned in opposition during the large coalition governments, FdI started a process of improving the party, starting from its

structure and organization, so much so as to found the *Officina per l'Italia*, “a think tank aimed at unifying the dispersed and fragmented right in a shared cultural and political platform” (Donà 2022, 781).

The first congress of *Fratelli d'Italia*, entitled “In the name of the sovereign people,” was held on 8 and 9 March 2014 in Fiuggi, a city symbolic of the Italian right. During the congress, Giorgia Meloni was officially elected president of the party and, for the first time, formally introduced the flame logo inherited from AN, in memory of the party's ideological roots. Despite not having passed the 4% threshold, the party recorded a modest increase in electoral consensus, reaching 3.65% of the vote (Donà 2022, 781).

The second party congress, held in Trieste in 2017, further consolidated the ideology of *Fratelli d'Italia*, bringing to light issues such as immigration and the party's relationship with its fascist past. Meloni's choices were then discussed, in particular the use of the flame symbol of the MSI, judged by the premiere not as a glorification of the past, but as a symbol of the party's origins, while projecting a vision for the future (Donà 2022, 781). About the immigration topic, Meloni has also taken a firm stance on immigration and European integration, accusing the EU of facilitating migration flows, thus threatening the continent's Christian identity. As a solution, she proposed a selection mechanism for incoming migrants, giving priority to individuals with cultural backgrounds closer to Italian and European values, implicitly disadvantaging Muslim migrants (Puleo and Piccolino 2022, 370). This approach created a distinction between so-called first- and second-class migrants, framing immigration not only as a political issue, but as an existential threat to national identity, from which the true and pure Italian people had to be protected. The radical positions of this party, especially on immigration, were strengthened by the “irreversible crisis of Berlusconi's leadership and the parallel rise of Salvini's League, which also spread a feeling of Euroscepticism in the country” (Puleo & Piccolino 2022, 362).

B. Giorgia Meloni: a New Populist Leader

1. Biography and background of Giorgia Meloni as a political leader

Giorgia Meloni, born in Rome on 15 January 1977, is an important figure in the Italian political landscape who has held the office of President of the Council of Ministers of the Italian Republic since October 22, 2022. Following the separation of her parents, originally from Sicily and Sardinia, she moved to the working-class neighborhood of Garbatella in Rome, where she and her sister were

raised exclusively by their mother. Her father, who emigrated to the Canary Islands, was later convicted of international drug trafficking.

Meloni approached politics at a young age, motivated by the desire to change the Italian political system, which in those years was under strong pressure from mafia attacks, especially the massacre in Via D'Amelio, which cost the life of judge Paolo Borsellino (Meloni, 2022). In fact, in 1992 she joined the *Fronte della Gioventù*, the youth organization of the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI), the main party of the radical right after the Second World War. Consequently, in 1996, she took on the role of national head of *Azione Studentesca*, a student movement linked to *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN), and in 1998, at the age of 21, she was elected provincial councilor of Rome, holding the position until 2002 (De Giorgi et al 2023, 110).

Her rise within the Italian right continued in 2004, with her election to the leadership of *Azione Giovani*, the youth organization of AN, during the national congress in Viterbo (De Giorgi et al. 2023, 110). In 2006, she was appointed Vice President of the Chamber of Deputies on the proposal of Silvio Berlusconi, who in 2008 wanted her as Minister of Youth, making her one of the youngest women to hold a government office in the history of the Republic (De Giorgi et al 2023, 110). It was thanks to Berlusconi that Giorgia Meloni managed to climb the political ladder in a short time, both of them in fact shared the same political ideology and the same closeness to the ideals of Mussolini's fascist party. It is useful to remember that Berlusconi, on some occasions, compared himself to the figure of Benito Mussolini, defining his work as partly positive. An example of this was during the Day of Remembrance in 2013 in which Berlusconi expressed: “The racial laws were the worst fault of Mussolini as a leader, who in so many other ways did well.” (Nadeau 2018, 17).

In the following years, from 2009 to 2012, Meloni was president of *Giovane Italia*, the youth movement of the People of Freedom (PdL) and published her first book “*Noi credo. Viaggio nella meglio gioventù d'Italia*” (Sperling & Kupfer). However, in 2012, due to growing internal conflicts, she left the PdL and founded *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI), a national-conservative party, of which she became president in 2014. Between 2013 and 2018, Meloni consolidated the consensus of FdI, increasing the number of elected parliamentarians from nine to fifty, with a progressive growth in voting intentions (De Giorgi et al. 2023, 111). In 2016, she ran for mayor of Rome, a unique event in which for the first time a pregnant woman ran, obtaining 20.6% of the votes and being elected to the Capitoline Assembly, where she chaired the group “With Giorgia” (Meloni, 2022).

After a long period in opposition, *Fratelli d'Italia* emerged as the largest party in the 2022 general elections. Meloni was then tasked with forming the government, becoming the first woman to lead the Italian Council of Ministers (De Giorgi et al. 2023, 111). Her popularity has been fueled by a narrative that insists on personal merit and political competence, also reinforced by the editorial success of her autobiography “*Io sono Giorgia. Le mie radici, le mie idee.*”

2. Key themes in Meloni’s rhetoric: nationalism, sovereignty, cultural identity

Giorgia Meloni's populist rhetoric is linked to concepts of nationalism, sovereignty and cultural identity. She proposes the classic populism contrast between the “authentic people” and the “corrupt elites,” where the people represent the true Italian values, while outsiders and elites are perceived as threats to security and to the traditional way of life (Ventura 2022, 6).

Fratelli d'Italia, which presents itself as a conservative-sovereignist party, focuses its energies particularly on restoring national pride, often through an openly nationalist tone. The party program shows the importance of defending traditional Italian values, in which “God, Country, Family” are at the center of the populist discourse (Sondel-Cedarmas & Berti 2022, 61). Meloni’s communication strategy emphasizes the importance of rebuilding traditional collective values, which over time have been threatened by globalization, immigration, and supranational governance.

The Prime Minister, in an attempt to define the gap between the “real people” - native Italian citizens - and the outsiders, namely immigrants and corrupt elites, has theorized during the 2019 European elections the importance of “Italians First:” a loud call to prioritize assistance to Italians, for example in the provision of housing and public services (Sondel-Cedarmas & Berti 2022, 62). In this case, by excluding outsiders from receiving the same fair treatment, the idea of social solidarity is nationalized.

Meloni's economic rhetoric follows the same logic. She strongly criticizes *the Reddito di cittadinanza* - a subsidy introduced by the Five Star Movement to try to calm inequalities - accusing it of being used, especially by foreigners, as a way to collect money without working. Meloni proposed instead a change in the direction of those funds, which should be used to support companies with Italian labor or to mitigate VAT increases (Sondel-Cedarmas & Berti 2022, 62). Moreover, her economic nationalism extends also to the defense of Made in Italy, supporting the introduction of “civil duties”

(civilization tariffs) against foreign countries that do not respect Italian standards in terms of wages, workers' rights and environmental protection (Sondel-Cedarmas & Berti 2022, 62).

In terms of sovereignty, Meloni is known for her deep skepticism towards the current EU, which she considers an illegitimate supranational authority that imposes its decisions on member states (Sondel-Cedarmas & Berti 2022, 68). She also openly criticizes what she calls a “naive European federalism,” which requires the sacrifice of national sovereignty, and rejects the concept of a “two-speed Europe.” As an alternative, Meloni proposes a change of direction, in which each EU member maintains full autonomy, cooperating on strategic issues such as security, immigration and economic policy (Sondel-Cedarmas & Berti 2022, 68).

Giorgia Meloni, gives special importance to traditional values, which, founded by the ancient Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman civilizations (Sondel-Cedarmas & Berti 2022, 65), must be protected. In the context of protecting Italian cultural identity, Meloni openly criticizes mass Muslim immigration, which is not only perceived as a demographic shift, but as a threat to traditional and cultural values (Sondel-Cedarmas & Berti 2022, 66). Meloni insists on the need for immigrants to accept and integrate into Italian culture, leaving aside their traditions and customs.

However, another recurring theme in Meloni’s populist rhetoric is the question of the traditional family. Firmly believing that the issues addressed by LGBTQ+ communities reach schools to “divert” the young minds of children, *Fratelli d’Italia* defends the heterosexual and monogamous family model, opposing same-sex marriage, same-sex adoption, and surrogacy - the latter criticized by Meloni as the exploitation of “rented wombs” (Nadeau 2018, 18). In 2016, the prime minister openly opposed the legalization of civil unions between gay couples, in an attempt to re-establish a traditional social order. At the political level, by introducing social programs that only traditional couples can benefit from, Meloni is once again trying to prevent the disintegration of traditional values: “FdI proposes extensive social programs, including the family quotient, free nursery school, family allowances of up to 400 euros per month for young children, extended parental leave for mothers, and reduced VAT rates on baby products” (Sondel-Cedarmas & Berti 2022, 62).

Moreover, Meloni by presenting herself as a mother, a woman, an Italian and a Christian, strategically uses her person to offer a modernized image of femininity aligned with national-conservative ideals (Nadeau 2018). The meeting point between femininity and traditional values is clearly visible in the 2017 TV commercial against food importation, in which Giorgia Meloni is depicted while preparing a caprese salad of tomato and mozzarella in her kitchen.

Throughout her political career, Meloni has skillfully juggled between expanding fear of external threats and promoting pride in national identity. Her anti-migration, anti-globalization and anti-LGBTQIA+ positions have found strong support among a large segment of the Italian electorate, culminating in her landslide victory in the 2022 general elections. In conclusion, Giorgia Meloni's populist communication is characterized by a strategic and emotionally charged defense of the nation, sovereignty and cultural identity. Through her emphasis on a “people” in difficulty, a “nation” under threat and a lost “tradition,” Meloni effectively mobilizes collective fears and aspirations, shaping a populist vision that seeks to reclaim Italy's past in the name of securing its future.

3. Political rise: hypotheses of her success.

Giorgia Meloni is a clear, convincing, tenacious and prepared leader. Through a careful communication strategy, she has the ability to lead the people through elements of strength and gentleness, authority and humanity.

As mentioned above, her entry into politics was favored by the approval of Silvio Berlusconi, who appointed her Vice President of the Chamber and Minister of Youth, favoring her rise. However, over the years, her consolidation in politics occurred due to a climate of strong mistrust towards traditional parties, which have increasingly favored the interests of the elite to the detriment of the Italian people.

One of the keys to her success lies in her ability to represent a leadership model, traditionally considered masculine, in a feminine but at the same time authoritarian way. As Indelicato and Lopez (2024) point out, her behavioral strategy aims to maintain “a delicate balance between the harshness that is usually expected from right-wing populist male leaders and the sweetness that is normally expected from any woman in a position of power” (Indelicato & Lopez 2024, 9). Therefore, it is possible to notice how the Prime Minister does not hide her role as a mother, but on the contrary exalts it and makes a symbolic, almost mediatic use of it. In fact, Meloni very often shares moments of her private life with her daughter Ginevra on social media, increasingly reinforcing her image as an empathetic leader, common to any mother and woman. Here it follows a post published by the Prime Minister on the occasion of her daughter's birthday: “Thank you for how, despite your six years, you understood and tolerated my too many absences. [...] I love you” (Ciarniello et al. 2024, 13).

Her success comes from an individual path of redemption, demonstrating that, despite a difficult childhood, she managed to fulfill herself and reach power only thanks to her willpower, hard work, commitment and determination. As Ciarniello et al. (2024) underline, her story takes up the Cinderella archetype, re-proposed in a contemporary key: “In this way, the female version of the entrepreneurial man is interpreted through the mediation of the Cinderella archetype: her individual story shows that with individual will alone it is possible to achieve success and fulfilment” (Ciarniello et al. 2024, 9)

Although she is considered an icon of anti-feminism, her determination can be considered an example for future generations of Italian women, who, not many years ago, were forced to stay home, take care of the house and the children. As Ciarniello et al. (2024) write, “Even those who consider her the anti-feminist par excellence have achieved something with her: another glass ceiling has been broken. When they grow up, even little girls will want to become prime ministers, as well as astronauts. Right, left, center, it doesn't matter. What matters is the breadth of their horizon” (Ciarniello et al. 2024, 10).

C. Fratelli d'Italia's Social Media Strategy

1. Platform-specific approaches (Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram, TikTok)

Social media has become an essential tool in everyday life. In politics, it offers leaders the ability to spread their messages directly and quickly, often bypassing traditional journalistic gatekeepers. However, not all politicians take advantage of this tool, or at least not in the same way as populist leaders do. In particular, this section will focus on the social strategies promoted by Giorgia Meloni, focusing on the Prime Minister's use of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok during the 2022 election campaign.

Facebook has long been the main digital political communication platform in Italy, thanks to a very large user base (around 26 million). However, its use has proven to be unidirectional: more similar to a blog, focused on the transmission of content rather than on dialogue with users (Spoladore 2014, 229). Posts shared on Facebook, unlike Instagram, are less engaging, despite the fact that it is possible to easily stimulate political debates and interactions. Therefore, in 2022, *Fratelli d'Italia* significantly reduced the volume of content published on Facebook, thus marking a clear detachment with the platform, and investing in favor of Instagram and TikTok, more dynamic platforms (Giordano and Antonucci 2023, 81). Nonetheless, Facebook has maintained a higher level of engagement than

Twitter, while remaining half that of Instagram. In terms of content, among Meloni's ten most influential posts published on Facebook in 2022, about half were of a “pop” and personal nature (for example, her daughter Ginevra or her sister Arianna), while the others dealt with current political issues such as the Citizen's Income or responded to public criticism.

The use of paid media was also significant. *Fratelli d'Italia* invested over 170,000 euros in sponsorships on Facebook, about 40% of the total spending of Italian parties on the platform. This investment, higher than that of the *Partito Democratico* (94,000 euros) and *Lega* (65,000 euros), focused on high-cost content, optimized for advanced audience targeting (Piccio and Seddone 2025, 10). This highlights a targeted strategy moved by *Fratelli d'Italia* to publish quality posts and less on quantity, also made possible by greater economic resources possessed compared to other parties.

However, the platform that allowed the launch on social media of Fdl was Instagram. The success of this platform is also due to its visual nature, where the main purpose is to post images and videos to tell and share something with “friends” (in the political field “supporters”) of one's private life, making one's image authentic (Trillò & Starita 2023, 126). Meloni was able to adapt perfectly to the visual vernacular of the platform, alternating private moments (“off the job”) with public performances (“on stage”), presenting herself as an exceptional figure but close to the people - a typical trait of the so-called “populism of the middle region” (Trillò & Starita 2023, 123). The party's popularity peaked on Instagram during the 2022 election campaign, when both fdl's and the Prime Minister's Instagram pages recorded significant growth in followers, who interacted in large numbers with the posts and stories published, largely surpassing Facebook and Twitter.

Moreover, another platform that allowed the spread of Giorgia Meloni's political campaign was Tik Tok. Although the platform is mainly oriented to a young and non-traditional audience and entertainment content, such as dance and acting trends, Giorgia Meloni managed to make the most of it, thus reaching new voters. The growth in the number of followers on this platform was in fact the highest among all social networks, with over 200,000 new followers (Giordano and Antonucci 2023, 85) despite the fact that the published posts were significantly lower than on other platforms. Contrary to expectations for an entertainment-oriented platform, Giorgia Meloni chose to propose mainly political content on Tik Tok, probably to avoid falling into the “politics of memes” again, after the viral case of “*Io sono Giorgia.*”

Finally, Twitter played a more marginal role in Meloni's digital strategy. Although it is the platform most used by politicians and journalists, in the case of *Fratelli d'Italia* it is the one that recorded much lower levels of engagement than Facebook, Instagram and TikTok. The volume of posts was comparable to the other platforms, but the interactions were significantly lower (Giordano and Antonucci 2023, 88).

2. The type of language used to mobilize people

The years leading up to Giorgia Meloni's victory in 2022 were crucial in redefining her communication style, in order to avoid past mistakes such as the viral images obtained during "*Io sono Giorgia*" (a viral phenomenon that will be discussed in the next chapter) (Vitali 2023, 6).

Meloni makes populism not only an ideology, but above all a communication style, adopting a language designed to create belonging, polarize the debate and emotionally activate online users. As Vitali (2023) points out, it is "a use of words, signs and images that allows one to connect with the people and demonize the 'other', usually the elite or the establishment" (Vitali 2023, 16). Meloni presents herself on the front lines to protect Italians and their traditional values, while painting her political opponents as enemies of the nation and morality (Vitali 2023, 49). This pattern is typical of populist communication and is essential to activate identification and mobilization mechanisms among supporters.

Furthermore, it is possible to underline that the communication style of the Prime Minister combines the protection of women's rights with anti-immigration positions, in a framework that Daria Colella identifies as femonationalism. The safety and protection of women are jeopardized by the figure of the migrant, often non-white, represented as degenerate and aggressive. In this context: "It is through this mechanism that any existential threat to the rights and well-being of women, advocates of gender justice and the oppressed can be used to identify threats to the feminist project as a whole" (Vitali 2023, 24).

Meloni is described as a capable speaker, who makes extensive use of rhetorical *topoi* to mobilize the audience. Among these, the *topos* of threat (focused on immigration) and the *topos* of finance (linked to the negative impact of immigration on the national economy) stand out (Vitali 2023, 31). She chooses a simple, direct, often informal lexicon, with a "common sense" tone, thus making complex

issues understandable for all users. With her “true dialectic,” she shows herself as an image of an “ancient woman of the people.” This authenticity, as Giordano and Antonucci (2023) underline: “Is seen as a key to electoral success” (Giordano and Antonucci 2023, 89). Additionally, a further symbol of authenticity that characterizes the Prime Minister is represented by the use of emotions during speeches and electoral rallies, with the sole purpose of attracting more and more attention.

FdI's language is unique and personal, but at the same time it must make use of technical devices: it is essential to analyze the characteristics of each individual platform and publish posts according to a certain logic, since to obtain the maximum number of views and reactions it is necessary that the contents are distinct and studied in a workmanlike manner for each individual platform (Giordano and Antonucci 2023, 90). For example, regression models showed that appeals to negative emotions (fear and anger) were effective only with Twitter audiences. The use of elements of populist ideology, rarely predictive of the number of shares, involved Di Maio's audience on Twitter when he attacked the elite, while Salvini involved his followers on Facebook when he ostracized others (Bracciale et al. 2021, 1487).

3. The role of hashtags, memes and virality

In the digital age, memes have become one of the most effective communication tools for conveying political messages. According to Colombini (2023), the phenomenon of political memization consists of a gradual process of appropriation of particular themes or events committed by political actors, then transforming them into light and often ironic products, capable of entertaining but also of transmitting profound meanings. This transformation process is carried out through a creative remix of political content and references to popular culture (Colombini 2023, 49). Therefore, it is possible to establish that memes do not only have an entertainment purpose, but become narrative vehicles capable of expressing ideological visions, formulating political criticisms or spreading forms of propaganda in an implicit way (Colombini 2023, 50).

As Grundlingh (2018) observes, it is possible to distinguish two particular typologies in the category of memes: memes “as jokes,” oriented towards pure entertainment, and memes “as ironic comments or opinions,” in which humor becomes a tool to take a position on current issues (Colombini 2023, 49). It is precisely this latter typology that was used against Giorgia Meloni's electoral campaign, bringing to light her ideologies against immigrants and homosexual couples. However, in the specific

case of *Fratelli d'Italia* and the creation of ironic content on some of Meloni's statements, the memes did not achieve the desired result. Instead of making the public reflect on the contempt towards diversity felt by the prime minister, the use of memes proved to be a strategic way for FdI to increase its visibility as a party and its engagement on social media, reaching also the younger generations.

Bracciale et al. (2021) highlight how political parties that adopt a populist style – including *Fratelli d'Italia* and *Lega* – obtain higher levels of interaction on digital platforms. This communicative success is based on typical elements of populism such as the simplification of language, the appeal to popular wisdom and the strategic connection to emotionally and culturally sensitive themes (Bracciale et al. 2021, 1488). In this context, memes emerge as particularly effective tools because they reflect the polarizing dynamics typical of populist discourse: “us against others.” Marino (2019) identifies them as: “Devices of social inclusion and exclusion, which leverage shared knowledge within an ideological community and favor the phatic, identity-based and pragmatic aspects of communication” (Marino 2019, 107).

However, Meloni, despite being the subject of online memetic flows, had the ability to not limit herself to passive tolerance, on the contrary, her winning move was an active and strategically self-deprecating approach, transforming satire into a communication opportunity. Therefore, this strategy has redefined her public image, moving from an object of ridicule to a conscious protagonist of digital political discourse (Colombini 2023, 72). Colombini (2023) defines this repositioning strategy as:

“A way to build an authentic and spontaneous image, which has shortened the distances between institutional politics and the common user, contributing to the creation of an effective personal brand. By participating in an uninhibited way in the ironic dynamics of the network, Meloni has managed to intercept new segments of the electorate, expanding her audience well beyond the environments traditionally involved in politics” (Colombini 2023, 72).

However, Giorgia Meloni was not the only politician to address memes in a self-deprecating way: Matteo Salvini, for example, programmatically sought the viralization of his figure and his contents. A clear example of this are the photos published by Salvini himself at the end of the 2019 European elections with the writing “*Partito 1 in Italia / GRAZIE*” in front of a “Wunderkammer” of symbolic objects (Marino 2019, 121).

A fundamental aid that has allowed such an immediate and systematic diffusion of memes has been the use of hashtags, which have become a tool to encourage online participation and therefore involve

the electorate. They are defined by Colombini (2023) as: “Discursive pivots that connect concepts and ideas and facilitate the creation of coherent thematic flows, helping to make visible the centrality of the leader and his messages within digital networks” (Colombini 2023, 71). It is therefore possible to note how memes, although born as comic tools, reveal themselves to be sophisticated forms of political engagement that, through irony, manage to involve the electorate in new and extremely effective ways.

III Giorgia Meloni's 2022 Speech

A. The impact of “*io sono Giorgia*” on political discourse

1. Context and significance of the speech

On October 19, 2019, the political rally “*Orgoglio Italiano*” was held in Piazza San Giovanni in Rome. Organized as a protest against the then coalition government between the Five Star Movement and the Democratic Party, the event marked a significant moment for the Italian conservative and nationalist right-wing, thus showing a moment of strong unity. In fact, the rally was attended by the most important figures of the Italian right, including Giorgia Meloni (leader of *Fratelli d'Italia*), Matteo Salvini (leader of the *Lega*) and Silvio Berlusconi (former Prime Minister and leader of *Forza Italia*).

The rally is best remembered for Giorgia Meloni's iconic speech, in which she declared that her “being Giorgia” corresponds to three adjectives: Woman. Mother. Christian (Colombini 2023, 48). This phrase, which went viral as a remix on social media, identified a politics based on traditional and national values, in opposition to all those considered different, namely migrants, LGBTQ+ communities, and secular or non-Christian groups, considered by the prime minister as a threat.

Therefore, it is possible once again to link this particular speech with the classic populist rhetoric, in which there is a clear division between “us” (the people, the nation, the traditional family) and “them” (the selfish elite, immigrants), which has the aim of mobilizing conservative voters around that sense of collective belonging.

2. Speech analysis (Key themes of her speech)

To analyze the use and effectiveness of Meloni's rhetoric during her “I am Giorgia” speech, two methodologies will be employed: semiology and discourse analysis.

Semiotics, also known as semiology, is the study of signs and their meanings, first introduced by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure as “the science of signs.” Roland Barthes expanded on this idea, describing semiology as the study of any system of signs, including images, gestures, sounds, and objects, all of which create meaning in various contexts (Bouzida 2014, 1002). Media, as we all know, play a significant role in modern life. Semiological analysis helps to decode the visual messages to

understand the meanings behind them, especially at the level of connotation, where signs acquire cultural and personal associations (Bouzida 2014, 1003). This approach aims to reveal that the speech is more than just a collection of statements; it is a rich cultural text full of symbols, myths and meanings. Therefore, the semiological analysis will be the methodology used to examine in particular the second part of her speech, in which the famous phrase of “I am Giorgia,” leads back to the values of mother, woman and Christianity. However, discourse analysis is another important methodology used to study language and how it is used to construct meanings and convey values. It examines how language asserts authority and influences the audience by appealing to common emotions and frustrations. Therefore, this methodology will be applied to the first part of her speech, in which through polarized language, Giorgia Meloni emphasizes the populist struggle of the “pure people” against the “corrupt elites.”

Giorgia Meloni's speech begins by celebrating the importance of the meeting place, Piazza San Giovanni, a historic symbol of the left: “Where once there were red flags, now tricolor flags are waving. It is the signal, dear comrades, that you have been defeated by history” (Meloni 2020). Through the methodology of discourse analysis, it is possible to note how by contrasting the past political dominance of left-wing parties with the current presence of her party, the prime minister positions herself and right-wing ideologies as a new political force. Moreover, surrounded by tricolor flags which represent the national identity, Meloni structures her speech using the classic populist framework: “pure people” versus “corrupt elites.” The Italian people, depicted as victims, are urged to reclaim their legitimate identity, stolen by the choices of ruling classes that prioritize only global well-being and not national well-being. Her argument against immigration and granting citizenship to foreign children is framed as a defense of Italian sovereignty: “They say they want to give citizenship to foreign children who study with our children in our schools, but that’s not true: the truth is that they use children as human shields to give citizenship to everyone.” (Meloni 2020). With the metaphor of “using children as human shields,” Meloni delegitimizes her opponents by attributing manipulative intentions to their policies. This linguistic choice serves to invoke moral outrage and reinforce the alignment between her position and the values of her audience. However, it is possible to examine the phrase “using children as human shields” also in a semiological key, in which children are symbols of innocence and vulnerability and its opponents are corrupt figures.

Giorgia Meloni, through a strategic use of language and tone, manages to attract the attention of the audience. Within a discourse analysis examination, it is possible to note a passionate tone combined

with strategic pauses that frame the leader as a charismatic force who embodies both strength and stability. Her criticism against Giuseppe Grillo, the leader of the Five Star Movement, employs an ironic and colloquial tone, evident in phrases such as “Grillo dressed up as the Joker. Clearly, the leap from comedian to clown was short” (Meloni 2020) and “in the holes of Rome now people fish, wild boars have become pets” (Meloni 2020). In this case, the use of humor and mockery not only aims to discredit his political opponent (who has really channeled his career as a comedian into a political one), but also wants to make Meloni appear as a spokesperson who listens to people's frustrations, such as regarding the problems of infrastructure and roads in Rome, the latter famous for its perennial potholes. Once again, the language of the Prime Minister reflects the populist “us against them” discourse. Moreover, according to a semiological analysis, it is possible to add that, comparing Grillo to the Joker, it is a simple and direct way to make every person understand her words, since Joker is a familiar symbol from popular culture that portray him as frivolous and destabilizing.

Furthermore, it is possible to notice a repeated use of plural personal pronouns, such as “we will.” This represents a rhetorical strategy to promote collective identity and solidarity, creating a sense of inclusion in the population, pushing them to work together towards the common goal of a “free Italy.” By emphasizing collective action and perseverance – “we have been in opposition inside and outside the palace, and **we will** do so until the last day” (Meloni 2020) - she positions herself, together with her political movement, as firm defenders of Italian values and interests.

However, focusing on the central themes of her speech, it is possible to classify three: sovereignty, the criticism of immigration and the defense of traditional values, used as discursive tools to build a polarized narrative. Immigration is the emblematic theme that is presented as a direct threat to national identity and cultural continuity. Meloni's rhetoric suggests that immigrants, seen as outsiders, challenge national security: “We will fight against the Islamization of Europe, because we have no intention of becoming a Muslim continent. If walls are needed, we build walls; if a naval blockade is needed, we build a naval blockade, as we should have done a long time ago. Let's do what must be done to stop illegal immigration” (Meloni 2020). Meloni within the statements: “If we need walls, we build walls; if we need a naval blockade, we build a naval blockade” wants to put on the table concrete actions that can be implemented to protect national borders. Additionally, with the term “illegal immigration” she simplistically associates migration with illegitimacy making every immigrant a criminal.

Religious symbols also play an important role as indicators of cultural identity and exclusivity. During her speech, she declared:

“If you feel offended by the Crucifix or the nativity scene, well this is not where you should live! The world is big, and it is full of Islamic nations where you will not encounter a Crucifix because Christians are persecuted and churches are razed to the ground. But here we will defend those symbols, those churches and we will defend our identity. We will defend God, the Homeland and the family, and get over it.” (Meloni 2020).

According to a semiological analysis, the Crucifix and the nativity scene are the key symbols with powerful cultural codes. These objects are not only considered as religious artifacts, but they want to symbolize the tradition of the Italian community. However, the slogan “God, the Homeland and the Family” also retains meanings: “God” symbolizes the moral and religious foundation of the nation, “Homeland” means collective identity and “Family” evokes traditional values. Furthermore, with the metaphor “persecuted Christians and razed churches,” Giorgia Meloni wants to underline the threat led by Islamic power by making Christianity a vulnerable and endangered picture, thus appealing to the emotional aspect of the audience.

Furthermore, Giorgia Meloni’s speech employs a strong anti-globalist and nationalist discourse, criticizing a system controlled by major economic powers that have destroyed the Italian system: “They do it because the great economic powers that are their puppeteers, find it convenient to import masses of desperate people to have low-cost labor. This is the reason why they do it” (Meloni 2020). Through discourse analysis, the term “puppeteers” is intended to convey a metaphorical loss of autonomy by framing globalism as an oppressive force that prioritizes profit over people. The use of emotive language such as “masses of desperate people” further amplifies the sense of exploitation of immigration for economic gain, which endangers the well-being of Italian citizens. Furthermore, by portraying herself as the savior of Italian families and workers, Giorgia Meloni reinforces her discourse by leveraging terms such as safety and well-being:

“Freedom and sovereignty are the principles that have always united us. The freedom to raise our children in safety and well-being, to work and see that work recognized. And the pride of doing it also for our country, not just for ourselves. This is the Italy we want to represent, this is the Italy we will bring to the government. And to do this we need a clear, cohesive and strong project. A coalition held together by the principles in which it believes and not by the interests of the people who are part of it.” (Meloni 2020).

Especially with the emphasis on “freedom,” Giorgia Meloni affirms the autonomy of the Italian State, excluding any type of control, especially from Europe.

The traditional values supported by Meloni are made up of: traditional family, Christianity and gender identity as “single thought.” These themes, which resonate especially in some sentences pronounced by Meloni, will be analyzed through the semiological methodology:

“Now they are talking about removing the words ‘father’ and ‘mother’ from documents. Because family is an enemy, national identity is an enemy, gender identity is an enemy. For them everything that defines is an enemy. It is the game of single thought: they must take away everything we are, because when we no longer have an identity and no longer have roots, we will be devoid of awareness and incapable of defending our rights. It is their game. They want us to be Parent 1, Parent 2, LGBT gender, Citizen X, codes. But we are not codes, we are people and we will defend our identity. I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother, I am Italian, I am Christian. You will not take it away from me! You will not take it away from me!” (Meloni 2020).

“Woman. Mother. Christian. This is how Giorgia Meloni summarizes her ‘being Giorgia’ (Colombini 2023, 48). It is a simple rhetorical construction but full of meanings. The sentence uses a repetitive structure, called anaphora, of the verb “I am”, thus leading to a personalization of the speech, but, at the same time, universalizing it. Meloni's strategy, showing herself as a symbol of a community that shares the same values, is aimed at making her supporters identify with her in the fight against immigration and the weakening of the traditional family. However, it is important to note that each key word carries with it symbolic and cultural meanings. Woman, a symbol of a traditional model that contrasts with feminist narratives. Mother, a symbol of Italian culture in which the maternal figure is central, resonates the idea of sacrifice and security, thus creating an emotional bond with the audience, especially with women. Christian, being a Catholic Christian is the foundation of the Italian community, underlining both a religious affiliation but above all a cultural identity. Meloni's words resonate together with the more general slogan - “God, homeland and family” (Dio, patria e famiglia) - adopted by radical right parties in history (De Giorgi et al. 2023, 108).

Furthermore, the reference to “Parent 1” and “Parent 2” represents a veiled criticism of gender-neutral language - recently introduced by many countries to achieve greater gender inclusiveness - framed as a depersonalizing and dehumanizing language (“we are not codes”).

3. Viral spread of the speech on digital platforms

To better understand the influence of social media on the evolution and political positioning of *Fratelli d'Italia*, this section will examine how the viral diffusion of the speech “*Io sono Giorgia*” was crucial for the public visibility of Giorgia Meloni and her party. The analysis will highlight how digital platforms, through mechanisms of diffusion and memetic engagement, amplified the reach and resonance of Meloni's message, transforming a moment of political rally into a national cultural phenomenon.

As Colombini (2023) explains: “The process of ‘memetization’ is an extrapolation of the leader's words from their original context and reinterpreted with irony, using caricatural techniques and parodic juxtapositions typical of pop culture” (Colombini 2023, 51). The first phase was started by Tommaso Zorzi, a digital influencer, who published stories on Instagram in which he ironically repeated the phrase “I am Giorgia,” simulating a dialogue with Meloni. The comic montage generated a wave of reactions and led Zorzi to launch the #IoSonoGiorgiaChallenge: an initiative that invited the public to record themselves while shouting “I am Giorgia,” sharing the videos with the dedicated hashtag. Users, finding it a funny idea, multiplied and reshared Zorzi's videos, making them viral (Colombini 2023, 51). The second phase began on October 26 when two Milanese DJs MEM & J published an ironic video on YouTube “Io Sono Giorgia (Giorgia Meloni Remix)” which immediately went viral (over 13 million views). DJs criticize the Prime Minister's speech by transforming it into an EDM (Electronic Dance Music) track in which they support themes opposite to those expressed in Meloni's speech (Colombini 2023, 52).

However, the viral phenomenon of “I am Giorgia” was not an isolated case; another cue that emerged from the Prime Minister's speech was used as a basis for new memes. During her speech, Meloni declared: “We need Parent 1, Parent 2, LGBT gender, Citizen X, codes” (Meloni 2020). Her profound criticism of all those who do not represent the classic traditional couple composed of husband and wife was at the center of discussions. Therefore, the media extrapolated the theme of parenthood by recreating ironic themes on “Parent 1” and “Parent 2.” A significant example, reported by Colombini (2023), is the meme that links the famous Forrester family from the American soap opera *Beautiful* to the concept of numbering of parental figures. In this context, the complex and multifaceted dynamics of family relationships in the series are reinterpreted in a parodic way: the numbering of parents goes far beyond the traditional couple, creating a comic effect that ironizes and, at the same time, questions the conventional models defined as “traditional” (Colombini, 2023, 53).

Although the videos were conceived as a criticism of Giorgia Meloni's politics, their effect turned out to be partly counterproductive, contributing to strengthening her visibility and notoriety. The cause is in part due to the excessive duration of the contents produced by MEM&J, which makes them difficult to listen in their entirety and leads viewers to linger on the catchiest fragments, namely the refrains “*Io sono Giorgia*” and “*Genitore 1*” e “*Genitore 2.*” Meloni herself was surprised and enthusiastic about the viral success of her remix speech, to the point of jokingly declaring the possibility of publishing a music album (Colombini 2023, 56). Furthermore, she took advantage of this success by writing and titling her first autobiography, reaching an even wider audience that would not otherwise have been exposed to her message.

Quantitatively, the phenomenon generated 4,257 posts and involved over 3,200 unique users. Notably, 480 posts featured both the hashtags #iosonogiorgia and #iosonogiorgiachallenge, indicating the extent of user participation (Colombini 2023, 59). Furthermore, on November 11, the Prime Minister herself, with a post on her Instagram channel, shared a selfie with a t-shirt with the writing #iosonogiorgia, contributing to collecting a total of 6202 comments, equivalent to 15% of the comments of the entire dataset, confirming her role as the main driver of the conversation in this context. (Colombini 2023,61). Moreover, the meme's impact was also extended beyond social media: mainstream television shows like *Striscia la Notizia* and *Che Tempo Che Fa* featured parodies and remixes of the speech, reaching millions of viewers and further embedding the phrase into public discourse (Colombini 2023, 53).

Therefore, it is possible to notice that by embracing the viral phenomenon with irony and strategic communication, Meloni effectively rebranded herself as a relatable, digitally-savvy leader, capable of turning online parody into political capital.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to explore the broad topic of populism in relation to new digital platforms, focusing in particular on *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI) and its charismatic leader, Giorgia Meloni.

Starting from the theoretical foundations, it was analyzed how digital presence has influenced the electoral strategies and the public image of FdL. Social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok have allowed Meloni to combine traditional nationalism with a new contemporary and dynamic digital style, giving the opportunity to her party to place itself at the center of Italian politics. These new digital platforms have also, through direct communication that reaches the hearts of voters, allowed the party to amplify its reach by bypassing traditional controls. The case study of the "I am Giorgia" speech was an example of how, thanks to the new digital culture, populists have the possibility to reposition their image in a charismatic and powerful way, demonstrating how humor and parody can paradoxically strengthen populist authority.

Therefore, by critically analyzing FdI's media strategy and rhetorical style, the thesis answers the fundamental research questions: social media have not only been used as a communication channel, but have been strategic tools to consolidate support, mobilize identities and bridge generational gaps. In the Italian context, this digital shift has allowed FdI both to modernize their party and to preserve core nationalist messages, revealing the dual role of digital platforms in the continuity and transformation of populist discourse.

However, the thesis also reveals that further research needs to be done. Although this work has mainly focused on how social media have shaped the development and political position of FdI, future research could focus on, for example, how different demographic or regional groups interpret and interact with populist content online. Furthermore, it could also be interesting to assess a comparison of the role of social media in the success of FdI compared to other populist movements outside Europe, such as in Latin America or Asia, providing the opportunity to discover how digital populism adapts to distinct national cultures and political systems.

In conclusion, the case of *Fratelli d'Italia* and Giorgia Meloni has illustrated how digital platforms have become fundamental to contemporary populism: not only as communication tools, but as spaces where populist actors have the possibility to create their own image. This dynamic landscape requires continued study, as it reconfigures the nature of democracy and political participation in the 21st century.

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