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To cite this article: Alessia Donà (2022) The rise of the Radical Right in Italy: the case of Fratelli d'Italia, Journal of Modern Italian Studies, 27:5, 775-794, DOI: [10.1080/1354571X.2022.2113216](https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2022.2113216)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2022.2113216>



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Published online: 31 Aug 2022.



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# The rise of the Radical Right in Italy: the case of Fratelli d'Italia

Alessia Donà 

University of Trento, Italy

## ABSTRACT

The emergence of the Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia [F.d.I.] in Italian politics has raised debate on the party's core ideologies. This article addresses these questions on the basis of a qualitative content analysis of its party manifestos and discourses since its foundation in 2012. The development of the F.d.I.'s party ideology is analysed through the categories derived from the literature on the European radical right phenomenon. The findings confirm that F.d.I.'s ideology is based on a combination of nationalism, sovereignty, authoritarianism and Euro-scepticism. The article demonstrates that the party's ideology turned to radical right positions after 2017 and explains this shift in light of the instability affecting the Italian party system and the recurring European Union's (E.U.) crises during the last decade.

## RIASSUNTO

L'ascesa di Fratelli d'Italia (F.d.I.) all'interno della politica italiana ha aperto un dibattito circa l'esatta natura ideologica di questo partito, la cui fondazione risale al 2012. Il presente articolo affronta questo tema attraverso l'analisi qualitativa del contenuto dei programmi e dei manifesti elettorali che sono stati prodotti nel periodo 2012–2019. Lo sviluppo ideologico di F.d.I. è esaminato attraverso le categorie analitiche derivate dalla letteratura accademica circa le caratteristiche della destra radicale in Europa. I risultati confermano che l'ideologia di F.d.I. è basata su una combinazione di nativismo, sovranismo, autoritarismo e Euroscetticismo. L'articolo sostiene che le posizioni di destra radicale sono state abbracciate da F.d.I. a partire dal 2017 e dimostra quanto questo cambiamento sia riconducibile all'instabilità politica italiana e alle molteplici crisi dell'Unione Europea che insieme hanno caratterizzato l'ultimo decennio.

**KEYWORDS** radical right; Italian politics; Brothers of Italy (F.d.I.); nationalism; Euro-scepticism

**PAROLE CHIAVE** destra radicale; politica italiana; Fratelli d'Italia (F.d.I.); nazionalismo; euroscetticismo

## Introduction

Over the last decade Italy experiences a period of political turmoil. The 2013 general elections (De Sio et al. 2013) registered the electoral decline of the left-wing and right-wing mainstream parties (the Partito Democratico/ Democratic Party and Forza Italia [F.I.] /Go Italy) while the anti-system Five Star Movement (Movimento Cinque Stelle [M.5.S.]) gained consensus. The

turbulent legislature was characterized by a (series of) grand coalition governments, but this solution only postponed the timing of the anti-system and populist success. The next general elections in 2018 registered the victory of the populist forces (Chiaromonte et al. 2018), first and foremost the M.5.S. and the Lega (former Lega Nord). The two parties managed to form the Conte I government (June 2018–Sept 2019). One year later, it was substituted by the collaboration of M.5.S., the Democratic Party (P.D.) and other minor left-wing parties, giving birth to the Conte II government (Sept 2019–Feb 2021). The instability of the majority forced the decision of the President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella to invite Mario Draghi – the former President of the European Central Bank (E.C.B.) – to form a new government in February 2021. The ongoing pandemic crisis, the organization of the mass vaccination and the elaboration of the National Plan for Recovery and Resilience were the main issues around which the government of national unity led by Draghi (Feb 2021–July 2022<sup>1</sup>) was formed, with the support of all political parties, except the right-wing Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia [F.d.I.]) and the small leftist party Sinistra Italiana (Democratic Left).

From its inception in 2012 to the present the F.d.I. has been the main opposition party in the Italian Parliament. So far the academic literature on the instability of the Italian party system has focused its attention mainly on the two populist parties considered as the main winners of the party system reshuffle, namely the Lega and the M.5.S., whose ideology, political culture, policy agenda and organization have been widely studied (for the Lega, see, for example, Passarelli and Tuorto 2018; for M.5.S., see Tronconi 2015). On the contrary, very little academic attention has been paid to F.d.I. despite its increasing electoral appeal. Under the leadership of Giorgia Meloni, the F.d.I. made significant gains from the 2013 general elections to the 2019 European Parliament (E.P.) elections, rising from 1.96 per cent to 6.44 per cent. Moreover, the party acquired European visibility when in 2019 F.d.I. was admitted to the European Conservatives and Reformists (E.C.R.) group, now under the presidency of its leader. Since Summer 2021 F.d.I. maintained 20 per cent support (You trend, 10 February 2022); in addition, in 2021 Giorgia Meloni became one of the most highly ranked Italian leaders, after the current prime minister, Draghi and the new leader of M.5.S. Giuseppe Conte (Demos, December 20, 2021<sup>2</sup>).

Against this backdrop, the F.d.I. can no longer be considered the marginal party within the centre-right coalition and the Italian party system as it was perceived when it was founded. Its increasing political relevance and potential role in the upcoming general elections, mean that the F.d.I. requires an in-depth investigation that moves beyond the labelling of F.d.I. as a 'post-fascist party' (De Giorgi and Tronconi 2018; Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2019) or as a 'heir to the old fascist party' (Caiani, Carlotti, and Padoan 2021); and beyond

the simple assumption of F.d.I. qualified as a ‘*new radical right party*’ (emphasis added) to distinguish it from the old Lega party (Carrieri and Vittori 2021).

The aim of this article is therefore to contribute to a better understanding of the neglected Italian right-wing party, namely F.d.I. Specifically, it provides a study of F.d.I. as a political party on its own, whose ideological nature would be better explored and understood in light of the classification of F.d.I. as a radical right party (R.R.P.) (Zulianello 2020; Griffini 2021, 2022) with elements of populism and Euro-scepticism (Rooduijn et al. 2019). The research is based on a diachronic analysis of the F.d.I.’s platform for the 2013–2019 period. This article asks two main research questions: first, since when and how far the F.d.I.’s ideology displays the key elements of R.R.P.; and second, which are the explaining factors behind F.d.I.’s ideological development? The results demonstrate that the F.d.I. experienced an ideological transformation which brought the party towards R.R.P. family and show that this radical right turn was affected by the instability of the Italian party system and by the multiple E.U.-level crises – namely the financial-economic crisis, the refugee and asylum seekers crisis, and the results of the Brexit referendum. Hence, the findings of the article contribute to the scholarly literature on the varieties of R.R.P. across and within E.U. member states and on the transformations of the Italian party system.

The article is structured in four sections. The first section reviews the main concepts in studying R.R.P. and provides an overview of the methodology adopted in this study. The second section provides a brief historical account of F.d.I. since its inception in 2012. The third section presents the empirical analysis of the party ideology development over time. The conclusion summarizes the main findings and suggest some lines for future research.

### **Studying the European Radical Right: concepts and methodology**

Since the 1990s, scholars have been examining the emergence of a new group of right-wing parties in Western Europe (Betz 1994; Ignazi 2003), which differed significantly from the mainstream parties of the right. The scholarly literature grouped these new parties under the family of the radical right. In analysing the F.d.I. this study refers to the literature on R.R.P., whose definition is based on the classification that Mudde (2007) provided in his comprehensive study of this party family. Ideologically, these parties are primarily committed to a xenophobic-type of nationalism and central to their policy programmes is an ‘anti-immigration’ position. Ethnic nationalism (also called nativism) and authoritarianism are the main features of their ideological programmes. Despite being under the same party family of the far right, the extreme right is associated with anti-system and anti-democratic stances (Ignazi 2003), while the radical right contests only some elements of the democratic system (for example, majority rule or minority rights).

Studies have evidenced some specific aspects of the R.R.P.s. Firstly, they promote a social policy agenda dominated by hostility against immigrants and other minorities not belonging to the national community they appeal to (Chueri 2020). In countries where R.R.P.s are in power, we have seen the emergence of what is called 'welfare chauvinism', meaning the distribution of social policies to 'native us' and the exclusion of those others depicted as not belonging to the homogeneous people of the nation (Akkerman 2012). Secondly, R.R.P.s are committed to traditional values expressed by issue claims such as the defence of the heterosexual family; hence when they are in power R.R.P.s pursue policies aimed at restoring traditional gender roles and opposing L.G.B.T. + rights (Dancygier 2020). The conservatism expressed by R.R.P.s counteracts progressive and liberal values and 'seeks to prevent the sort of abrupt and disruptive change sought by forces perceived to be of the left and destructive of what conservatives at the time want to preserve. It does this typically by insisting on the presence of forces – for example, nature, God, biology, history – deemed beyond human control, and which impose severe limitations on the perfectibility of the human condition' (Drolet and Williams 2021, 276).

Thirdly, R.R.P.s display some forms of Euro-scepticism which vary according to the degree of opposition to the European Union (E.U.). Over the years, European R.R.P.s have been more likely to initiate and mobilize a new conflict over the European integration (Vasilopoulou 2011) and the organization of the E.U., especially in times of E.U. crisis (Ivaldi 2018). The R.R.P.'s anti-E. U. stances are framed as a mode of defending the national state and the national identity. Therefore, R.R.P.s present themselves as the opponents of the decline of the nation by claiming the return of the sovereign national state and sovereign people, namely sovereignty. According to Mazzoleni and Ivaldi (2022, 306):

While nationalism focuses on the 'nation' in a more general sense, including belonging to a community based on common values and traditions, sovereignty, more specifically, claims to re-empower both the people and the 'nation-state' as political subjects, as a means to defend the interests of the people and those of the nation against global threats.

Finally, R.R.P.s might be associated with populism, which refers to an ideology based on the Manichean division between the good people vs the bad elite and threatening others (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). However, the main trait of R.R.P.s remains their ethnic-nationalism (Rydgren 2017), being populism a thin ideology, which might be associated with various political parties across the political spectrum according to their practices and programmes.

In a nutshell, the core of the R.R.P.s is firstly an emphasis on nativism, which means the strengthening of the nation based on an ethnically homogeneous

community ('the natives'). All non-natives elements are considered a threat, hence R.R.P.'s anti-immigration stances, xenophobic positions (racism) and welfare chauvinism (national preference). Secondly, R.R.P.s are associated with an aggressive form of national pride (or patriotism) expressed through the defence of national sovereignty and the prevalence of national interest, hence sovereignty. Thirdly, authoritarianism is usually expressed by law-and-order positions to ensure the return to a safe and secure society, where the traditional values are restored and the infringements of authority are sanctioned (Mudde 2007, 23). Fourthly, Euro-scepticism is expressed by R.R.P.s in various ways, ranging from criticizing the workings of the E.U. system, to opposing specific E.U. policy or rejecting the E.U. as a whole.

Against such a backdrop, how do the elements of nativism, sovereignty, authoritarianism and Euro-scepticism express themselves in F.d.I. ideology? Namely, how are these elements represented in the party discourse and since when? And finally, why so? To address these questions, the case study of F.d.I. is conducted through a qualitative analysis of party manifestos, which represent reliable source of information on party positions and on policy emphasis (Marks 2007). The main data in this article are drawn from electoral platforms over the 2013–2019 period and the political documents and leader's speech delivered during the party congresses (see table 1); the analysis also includes press interviews of F.d.I. leader. Additional information is drawn from two pamphlet books (Boezi 2020; Giubilei 2020) and the party leader self-biography titled *Io sono Giorgia* (My name is Giorgia; Meloni 2021). All translations are the author's own.

The source material is examined through a qualitative content analysis in order to identify the main frames of the F.d.I.'s platforms and assess them with the key features of the radical right described above. The policy frame refers to a mode of defining problems and providing solutions. The first round of analysis consisted of highlighting the passages where the party refers to R.R.P.'s elements of nativism, sovereignty, authoritarianism and Euro-scepticism. This was assisted by a keyword search of terms related to those elements (e.g. sovereign, borders, police, immigration, identity, immigration,

**Table 1.** List of Fdl political documents considered in the analysis (2013–2019).

Year	2013	2014	2014	2017	2018	2019
Title	Le sfide per l'Italia, national manifesto	Speech by the party leader, Fiuggi congress	EP (non) manifesto	Thesis of Trieste, party congress document	Il voto che unisce l'Italia, national manifesto	EP manifesto
Reference	Fdl 2013	Meloni 2014	Fdl 2014	Fdl 2017	Fdl 2018	Fdl 2019

Source: Documents were retrieved from the party website <https://www.fratelli-italia.it/> (last accessed 11 February 2022) and from the leader's social account <https://www.giorgiameloni.it>.

patriotism, nation, state, identity, family). Then, a close reading of the relevant sections was conducted in order to deconstruct the rhetorical strategies used by F.d.I. to frame issues. Following Schreurs (2021) and building on the relevant works by Wodak (2001) on historical discourse analysis and by Verloo and Lombardo (2007) on critical frame analysis, I used a range of questions to identify the different dimensions within a specific policy frame, namely: (a) diagnosis: what is identified as a problem? How is it described? And what caused the problem?; (b) prognosis: what should be done to ensure the problem's solution?; and (c) voice: who are portrayed as protagonists and antagonists? Who's to blame? By doing so, the study specifies the nature and substance of F.d.I.'s radical rightness.

### The making of Brothers of Italy

The F.d.I. was founded in 2012 resulting from a split from the mainstream centre-right party, People of Freedom (P.d.L.). The P.d.L. was the creation of Silvio Berlusconi, leader of F.I. who invited all the forces of the centre-right to merge into an unified party in November 2007. The conservative right-wing party of Alleanza Nazionale (A.N.),<sup>3</sup> headed by Gianfranco Fini, approved its dissolution and merge with P.d.L. during the congress in Rome on 21–22 March 2009. But political disagreements soon emerged between Fini and Berlusconi with regard to the leadership issue and the differences between the two leaders increased dramatically on Summer 2010, when a group of ex-A.N. parliamentarians headed by Fini himself decided to leave the P.d.L. and form a new parliamentary group called Futuro e Libertà per l'Italia (Future and Freedom for Italy [F.L.I.]) (Hine and Vampa 2011). On December 2010 after the F.L.I. unsuccessfully sought a vote of no confidence against Berlusconi, it moved to opposition. Eventually, on November 2011 Berlusconi resigned, his government being unable to face the ongoing euro-zone crisis. He was replaced by Monti's cabinet tasked with imposing dramatic economic reforms (Culpepper 2014). The P.d.L. and F.L.I. both supported the Monti government (2011–2013), together with the left-wing PD; only the Lega Nord (L.N.) refused to endorse it.

In this context, a group of ex-A.N. parliamentarians within P.d.L. increasingly voiced their opposition to the technocratic Monti government and Berlusconi's leadership of the P.d.L. The opposition became a split when in December 2012 Berlusconi announced that he would lead the P.d.L. again, without organizing the competitive primaries to select the prime minister candidate as he promised some months before. Giorgia Meloni, one of the primary candidates and other ex-A.N. members decided to leave the P.d.L. and formed a new party on 21 December 2012 in the run-up to February 2013 general elections. Hence, Meloni became the leader of the Fratelli d'Italia-Centrodestra nazionale (F.d.I.-C.n.), given her long history in

radical right politics. In 1992 she had joined the youth wing (Fronte della Gioventù) of M.S.I. and in 1998 she was elected as councillor in the provincial administration of Rome and then in 2006 as an M.P.; she served as the Minister of Youth during Berlusconi IV government (2008–11), while she was also president of the Giovane Italia (the youth organization of the A.N.).

Due to the electoral system rules which favored the party coalition, the new party with the other (then) minor party of the L.N. decided to continue the partnership with the P.d.L., promoting Berlusconi's premiership. F.d.I. adopted an electoral platform which was crafted in less than two months and it was merely a list of policy proposals. The 2013 general elections signed the success of the M.5.S. and the deadlock of the Italian political system. While F.L.I. running alone did not reach the 3 per cent national threshold, F.d.I. registered 1.96 per cent with eight deputies elected. During the grand-coalition governments F.d.I. – together with the coalition partner of the L.N. and the newcomer in Parliament M.5.S. – decided to stay in opposition. In this period, F.d.I. launched an internal process towards a more structured and organized party. For example, in the summer of 2013, the *Officina per l'Italia* (Laboratory for Italy) was launched, a think tank aimed at unifying the dispersed and fragmented Right in a shared cultural and political platform. According to Meloni, Fini's decision to merge A.N. with P.d.L. was not only a big mistake but also a betrayal of the Right's values and history for reasons of personal success. She defined Fini's plan of building a mainstream conservative right-wing party a failure and claimed the necessity to return to the early days of identity politics and nationalist ideology and to give F.d.I. a distinct political platform (Meloni 2021). Therefore, two party congresses were held over four years.

On 8–9 March 2014, the first congress of the F.d.I. was organized in Fiuggi (this being, not by chance, the town where the first congress of the A.N. was held in 1996) under the title 'In the name of the sovereign people.' In this occasion Meloni was officially elected as president of the party, whose new logo resembles elements of both A.N. and F.d.I.-C.n.. At the upcoming E. P. elections held in May 2014 F.d.I. increased the electoral consensus (3.65 per cent) but it did not reach the threshold of 4 per cent. The second party congress was held in Trieste on 2 and 3 December 2017 under the title 'The Patriots.' In this context the political document titled 'The Thesis of Trieste for the movement of the Patriots' was approved and the new party symbol was also decided: the name A.N. was removed, while the M.S.I.'s flame remained. As Meloni explained in an interview 'This is a symbol that moves forward and it moves beyond the previous A.N. party. The flame remains to recall our genesis but with an eye on the future.'<sup>4</sup> Since then F.d.I. maintained ambiguous stances towards its fascist heritage leaving unresolved the issue whether F.d.I. should be defined as neo-fascist (as opponents do) or post-fascist (as F.d.I. party self-identifies).



**Table 2.** Electoral results period 2013–2019, main political parties (percentages).

Year	Election	Fdl	Forza Italia	Lega (Nord)	M5S	PD
2013	General	1.96	21.56	4.09	25.56	25.43
2014	European	3.67	16.83	6.16	21.16	40.81
2018	General	4.35	14.00	17.35	32.68	18.76
2019	European	6.44	8.78	34.26	17.06	22.74

Source: <https://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it>

In the face of the 2018 general elections, the centre-right coalition presented a united front again but this time leaving unresolved the issue of leadership (De Giorgi and Tronconi 2018). The results registered the decline of the tycoon's party (14.1 per cent) and the rise of both the F.d.I. (4.35 per cent) and in particular Lega, with the highest turnout in its history (over 17 per cent). Since none of the parties and of the two opposing coalitions obtained the parliamentary majority, Lega joined M.5.S. to form the Conte I government (2018–2019), while right wing coalition partners of F.d.I. and F. I. were in opposition. One year later the 2019 E.P. elections confirmed the success of both Italian R.R.P.s in comparison with the more moderate F.I. Lega – at that time in power – reached 34 per cent, while the F.d.I. – which was in opposition, gained the best result in its electoral history with 6.44 per cent; F. I. fell to 8.78 per cent (table 2). It was then clear that in the near future the emerging contenders of the centre-right coalition leadership would have been Lega's and F.d.I.'s leaders.

The end of the Conte I government placed the Lega in opposition with the old centre-right coalition partners, while M.5.S. and P.D. allied to form the Conte II government in September 2019. A month later, the demonstration held in Rome organized by Lega, F.I. and the F.d.I. against the Conte II government under the label 'Italian Pride' increased Meloni's popularity, even more so when segments of her speech were assembled in a musical video titled 'Io sono Giorgia. Sono una donna, sono una madre, sono cristiana' (My name is Giorgia. I am a woman, I am a mother, I am a Christian), which went viral. The aim of its creators had been to mock the F.d.I. leader but it turned to be an effective positive electoral advert for her.

The outbreak of the pandemic in early 2020 and its management affected the policy agenda for an entire year and beyond, with different responses from the centre-right parties in opposition (Albertazzi 2021). F.I. maintained a moderate role, while Lega and the F.d.I. criticized the Conte II government for stringent lockdowns and ineffective recovery policies and blamed the E.U. for lack of solidarity during the first year of pandemic (Caiani et al. 2021). It is well known that R.R.P.s take generally advantage of crisis situations, to exaggerate and dramatize them for reasons of electoral performance (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). However by the end of 2020 popular ratings for the F.d.I. rose above 10 per cent, while Lega declined well below

30 per cent in a few months (You trend, 7 December 2021<sup>5</sup><https://www.youtrend.it/2010/03/11/supermedia-2020/>). Due to disagreements in the inner parliamentary majority Conte resigned and it was replaced by Draghi government in February 2021. While the F.d.I. maintained its opposition role, F.I. and Lega joined the technocratic government, evidencing an ongoing process of reconfiguration within the centre-right coalition, as confirmed later in January 2022 during the election of President of the Republic.<sup>6</sup>

## The analysis of F.d.I. ideology

This section uses the findings of the content analysis of F.d.I. party manifestos and the leader's key speeches to reconstruct the ideological trajectory of F.d.I. during the last decade or so on. The findings of the diachronic analysis are organized around the two major party events, namely the 2014 and 2017 congresses. The analysis is placed in the context of the E.U. multiple crisis and the transformations of the Italian political system.

### *The 2013 conservative electoral programme and the 2014 Fiuggi congress*

The 2013 programme titled 'The challenges ahead for Italy' (*Le sfide per l'Italia*, F.d.I. 2013) was organized around sixteen topics selected through a deliberative process open to the militants and voters a few months before. The resulting electoral platform identified a set of problems with the proposed party's solutions. The program was elaborated in the context of the enduring economic crisis and subsequent E.U. austerity policies and after the experience of the technocratic Monti government and its criticized policy reforms.

Against this background it is understandable why the first issue mentioned in the programme refers to the necessity of reforming both Italian and E. U. political system. F.d.I. clearly states its opposition to the experience of technocratic government defined as undemocratic because not elected by the citizens and in contrast with the popular sovereignty (F.d.I. 2013, 2). To restore the democratic process, F.d.I. claims the necessity of constitutional reforms, including the direct election of the President of the Republic and the end of Italy's perfect bicameralism (F.d.I. 2013, 3). F.d.I. calls for a Europe of the peoples to contrast the Europe of the banks and proposes the direct election of the president of the Commission and the reform of the ECB (F.d.I. 2013, 3). In 2013 platform F.d.I. does not express negative attitude towards E.U., nor proposals aiming to the return to the Europe of the Nations or to leave the eurozone, hence there are no signs of Euro-scepticism.

Other policy issues mentioned in the 2013 manifesto include the fight against political corruption and the wasting of public resources (F.d.I. 2013, 3–

4); the reduction of the public debt (F.d.I. 2013, 5); the support of the entrepreneur activities (F.d.I. 2013, 6); a more efficient and effective welfare system (F.d.I. 2013, 11); policies aimed to promote natality and female occupation (F.d.I. 2013, 16) and measures to contrast illegal immigration to guarantee integration and solidarity to legal migrants (F.d.I. 2013, 21). Again, no elements of nativism, nationalism or authoritarianism can be detected in the document; nor anti-immigration or xenophobic stances. Therefore, at that time F.d.I. shows a profile close to the conservative right-wing party one.

Some R.R.P. elements gradually emerged one year later, on 9 March 2014 when the leader Giorgia Meloni gave her closure speech of the first party congress 'In the name of the sovereign people' held in Fiuggi, a few months before the E.P. elections. In this occasion the F.d.I.'s ideological platform turned significantly to nationalism and to authoritarianism, together with signs of Euro-scepticism. To understand this development of the F.d.I. ideology it is necessary to address the features of the domestic political system at that time. While Matteo Renzi (then secretary of P.D.) was prime minister (February 2014–December 2016) F.d.I. maintained a fierce opposition, contesting Renzi's main policy reforms (among which was the 'jobs act', a pocket of measures for the flexibilization of the labour market). During the Fiuggi congress in 2014, the leader expressed her disappointment and openly criticized Renzi government for being a puppet (*governo fantoccio*) in the hands of the then German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the E.C.B., hence betraying the interests of the Italians (Meloni 2014, 3). Meloni's speech was built around the congress's slogan 'in the name of the sovereign people' and it addressed the following issues: the need to defend the national cultural identity and heritage and to promote the national historical memory (Meloni 2014, 4); the defence of the Italian economy ('the made in Italy'); the defence of the shared cultural and religious roots of Europe; the fight against the illegal immigration; the return of the national economic sovereignty; the defence of the traditional values, including the life sacrality and the 'natural family based on the marriage' (Meloni 2014, 5–6). The speech concluded with a call to vote for what she defined as the party of the Nation (Meloni 2014, 8). It is quite evident that at that time the party was still in a process of ideological definition and in light of the subsequent events the speech delivered by Meloni can be described as a turning point towards radicalization. Her emphasis on the issues of the national sovereignty and identity suggests that the party is moving towards the radical right-wing pole, seeking to exploit the opportunities offered by the crisis of the mainstream left-wing and right-wing parties. However, in the text there is no single definition of who or what F.d.I. is supposed to defend the sovereign people from. As a result, for the 2014 E.P. elections F.d.I. presented to the press a vague list

of issues rather than a programmatic manifesto, without signs of questioning or contesting the process of European integration or the E.U. itself.

### *The radical right turn of the 2017 Thesis of Trieste*

The second party convention held in Trieste in 2017 formalized the radical right shift of F.d.I. On this occasion, the articulated document 'Thesis of Trieste for the movement of the Patriots' (F.d.I. 2017) was approved and it represented the ideological platform upon which were later elaborated the 2018 national and 2019 E.P. electoral programmes – and again for the upcoming snap elections.

As has already been noted, nativism, nationalism and authoritarianism are the key characteristic features of the R.R.P. Consistently, the 2017 F.d.I.'s political document emphasizes the centrality of the national identity, conceived as the expression of a single and homogeneous community sharing a common history, cultural heritage and traditional values. F.d.I. claims the 'rediscovery of the identity, the return to the traditional values and the renewal of the belonging to a single national community' (F.d.I. 2017, 4) to contrast the damages of the progressive culture. Hence, it is proclaimed the role of F.d.I. as protector of national interests and of the national identity. In the first section titled 'A philosophy of the identity' (F.d.I. 2017, 1), patriotism and national identity are the key concepts upon which is built the ideological populist framework which opposes the 'patriots' against untrue patriots and threatening others and especially against the European project.

Acting as defenders of the national identity, R.R.P. are the drivers behind the contestation of the E.U. as mentioned in the concept section. While in 2013 F.d.I. expressed ambivalent stances regarding E.U., in 2017 the party openly adopted Euro-sceptic positions. By recalling the restoration of the Italian sovereignty, F.d.I. emphasizes the necessity of reforming the treaties towards a confederal Europe 'made of free and sovereign states which cooperate in some strategic issues, namely security, immigration, common defence and foreign policy' and proposes that Italy should hold a referendum on E.U. membership and on other international treaties (F.d.I. 2017, 4). The E. U. is attacked also in its core economic project, namely the eurozone which is depicted as the successful design of Germany favouring its own national banking system (F.d.I. 2017, 6). Economic Euro-scepticism is expressed by the claim to leave the Euro (section on monetary sovereignty, F.d.I. 2017, 6), previously mentioned in 2013 program albeit with more vague tone.

Cultural Euro-scepticism is also evident when the E.U. is described as a 'bureaucratic and technocratic system' dismissing its Christian roots in the name of the globalism and multiculturalism, which in turn favoured an unruly immigration process (F.d.I. 2017, 2). Here, nativist arguments are central to the F.d.I. framing of the E.U. immigrant and refugee crisis. F.d.

I. accuses E.U. of a plan aimed to what is called ‘ethnic replacement’, meaning the substitution of the national community by another as a consequence of the massive migration in a country of low natality such as Italy (F.d.I. 2017, 1). To support this conspiratorial claim, the dystopian book *The Camp of the Saints* by French author Jean Raspail is mentioned (F.d.I. 2017, 1). The book has been translated in Italian and published by A.R. edition, a publisher closely related with far right and fascist groups and whose catalogue includes authors such as Joseph Goebbels and Julius Evola.

The core aim of F.d.I. is the defence of national borders and community by restoring the sense of national belonging and of national pride (patriotism) among Italians. Feeling and acting as a patriot represents – according to the party – the only antidote against the two threats of culture homologation and the Islamification process (F.d.I. 2017, 2). The first refers to the process of internationalization and globalization, which promoted the standardization and homogenization of people’s values, standard of living, lifestyles, ideas and the weakening of the national cultural identity (F.d.I. 2017, 3). The hostility towards Islam and Islamic immigration is justified on the basis of the defence of Christianity identity (associated with the symbols of the crucifix and the nativity scene), and on the basis of the alleged association between radical Islam and terrorism – as sustained in the section titled ‘Patriots to defend our identity from the process of Islamification’ (F.d.I. 2017, 10). F.d.I. displays Islamophobia and the explicit racist tone against Muslim immigrants, which represents a common feature of radical right parties across Europe, especially after 9/11 (Kallis 2018). The F.d.I.’s xenophobic rhetoric is expressed in a specific section on immigration, in which it is affirmed that ‘immigration is not a right, nor migrant’s access to citizenship’, rather ‘immigration should be a concession of the State according to its necessity’ (F.d.I. 2017, 8). This stance obviously contrasts with basic international human right norms on immigration. However, the F.d.I. claims that Italy has the right to defend its national borders and stop illegal immigration in any case and with all the necessary diplomatic and military actions (F.d.I. 2017, 7). In addition, F.d.I. argues that the domestic immigration system should be reformed and citizenship rights should be recognized only for those who accept and respect the Italian legislation, culture, tradition and religion (F.d.I. 2017, 8). F.d.I. gives priority to Italian citizens for jobs, housing and social benefits (F.d.I. 2017, 8) according to ‘Prima gli italiani’ (Italians first) as the guiding principle for the access to social provisions (including housing, unemployment support, childcare facilities). Hence, F.d.I. promotes the ‘national preference’, that is giving ‘natives’ priority over newcomers through a mechanism of welfare chauvinism, which represents another key distinctive feature of R.R.P.

R.R.P. authoritarian stances are reflected in the defence of traditional values, the promotion of law-and-order policies and other security issues

(Mudde 2019). F.d.I. addresses each of the three aspects in the 2017 platform. First, to strengthen the sense of national belonging and the national identity among Italians, F.d.I. claims that the traditional values should be (re)discovered, learnt and transmitted (F.d.I. 2017, 1). In the party manifesto (sections on the family and the natality, F.d.I. 2017, 15), traditional values include the role of the natural family as the basis of society. The F.d.I. emphasizes the declining Italian birth rate and the urgency of what is called a 'revolutionary welfare reform' that places the family at its heart (F.d.I. 2017, 15). The F.d.I. positions itself against the so-called gender ideology – a rhetorical device used to contrast gender equality and L.G.B.T.+ rights whose aim, according to its detractors, is the destruction of the natural family and traditional gender roles (Garbagnoli 2014) – and against the same sex couples' parenting rights (F.d.I. 2017, 16). Here, the populist framework is adopted in opposing the people of the heterosexual family against the threatening sexual minority, namely L.G.B.T.+ community. The F.d.I. radicalized its anti-gender position after the approval of Cirinnà law on same-sex civil unions in 2016 (Donà 2021) in the attempt to gain support from the constellation of Catholic and conservative groups which oppose equality and diversity policies (Lavizzari and Prearo 2019). R.R.P.s are the main parties seeking to win the electoral support of these social groups (Verloo and Paternotte 2018; Köttig, Bitzan, and Petö 2017). As Meloni herself claimed (2021), 'God, homeland and family are the cornerstone of the F.d.I. agenda.' Second, law-and-order policies are aimed at strengthening the police and military forces in their role of guarantors of the citizens' security. The F.d.I. calls for more police in the streets and opposes the Italian law against torture and requires its abrogation because the law is considered an instrument which constrains police activities (F.d.I. 2017, 9). The F.d.I. also endorses the principle of the legitimate defence in case of private property violation (F.d.I. 2017, 9), when the state fails to protect its citizens. Other authoritarian traits of the F.d.I. are the stances concerning the correct individual lifestyles (for young people; F.d.I. 2017, 14), stances in favour of direct election and stronger powers for the executive (F.d.I. 2017, 11).

In sum, in 2017 F.d.I. displays all the main traits of the radical right, namely nativism/ethnonationalism, sovereigntism, authoritarianism and Euroscepticism – including some elements of populism. The two electoral programmes of the 2018 national and 2019 E.P. elections represented a selection of policy issues and positions taken from the congress's manifesto. The 2018 electoral programme 'Il voto per unire l'Italia' (The vote uniting Italy, F.d.I. 2018) defined fifteen priorities, mentioning R.R.P.'s key claims such as 'defence of the natural family' (point 1), 'defence of the national sovereignty' against the E.U. (point 2), 'law and order priority' (point 3), 'fight against illegal immigration' and 'Italians first in accessing to social provisions' (point 4), and 'identity defence from Islamization' (point 5). The 2019 E.P. programme,

which described the F.d.I. party as sovranist and conservative, contained fifteen points which confirms the negative stances F.d.I. adopted towards the E.U. It is sustained that the E.U. is a supranational organization governed by an unelected and technocratic elite imposing its decisions on the people (point 1). In turn, F.d.I. proposes the establishment of a confederal Europe based on free and independent states and the return of the supremacy of the national law over communitarian law (namely the reversal of E.U. supremacy principle) (point 2); the end of E.U. imposed austerity policies (point 3); the defence of the Christian identity against the Islamic threat (point 15); the support of the natural family and the opposition to abortion (point 8); the defence and control of the European borders through military forces (point 12); the adoption of national preference in providing social benefits (point 13) and of police measures to contrast criminality (point 14).

## Conclusion

Although literature on Italian party politics has flourished over the last two decades given the country's recurring political turmoil and its implication for the entire European context's stability, despite the growing academic interest and research the majority of scholars have focused their attention on the 'usual suspects'. On the one hand, the studies privileged the two long-established parties of F.I. and Lega (Nord), leaving uncovered F.d.I. because it has been considered as the minor and young party of the right-wing coalition. On the other hand, the scholarly attention has focused on the new party of M.5.S. which – after a period of local-level protest and anti-establishment mobilization- entered into the Italian Parliament for the first time in 2013 and since then it reached government position opening a process of reorganizational reform. Despite its constant electoral rise since 2013 until becoming a serious competitor in the upcoming elections, the F.d.I. has remained largely understudied.

To start filling the research gap, the article has examined the F.d.I.'s ideological trajectory since its founding in 2012 and over the last decade. The party ideology was analysed through the categories derived from the literature on the European radical right phenomenon. The research result showed a significant transformation from a conservative to a fully R.R.P. ideology (see [table 3](#)) after the second party congress held in 2017 in a context of domestic political instability and of E.U. crisis.

Since 2017 F.d.I. platforms introduced R.R.P.'s elements of nationalism, nativism and authoritarianism with the adoption of anti-E.U. stances to exploit the electoral opportunities resulting from the ongoing Italian political instability and the misconducting of the European economic and immigration crises. Those findings confirm the relationship between crisis situation

**Table 3.** RRP issues in Fdl political manifestos (2013–2019).

Year	2013	2014	2017	2018	2019
<b>Nativism</b>					
● nationalism	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
● National preference/welfare chauvinism	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
● Xenophobic stances/anti-Muslim positions	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Sovereignism</b>					
● Empower national people (patriotism)	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
● Reform state institutional system	Yes		Yes	Yes	
<b>Authoritarianism</b>					
● Security /immigration issues	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
● Law and order policies		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
● Traditional values/Punitive moralism			Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Euro-scepticism</b>					
● Revise the European treaties	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
● Leave the eurozone	Yes		Yes	No	No
● Reform the EU political system	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: Author's elaboration from Fdl party manifestos and leader's speech.

and R.R.P.s rise, given their capacity to use the crisis as a window of opportunity to gain electoral visibility and political influence.

The analysis shows that the rise of the F.d.I. was contingent on the changing features of the Italian party system during the last decade. The 2013 electoral success of the populist anti-establishment of M.5.S. delegitimized the traditional ruling political class. At that time, inside the centre-right coalition the key role of F.I. and its leader Berlusconi began declining. Following his conviction in 2013, the F.I. leader was banned from holding public office until 2019 so he could not stand as a candidate in the 2018 parliamentary elections, nor aspiring to the role of prime minister. In the meantime, under the leadership of Salvini the Lega experienced radical changes of the party's political line and it succeeded in bridging the gap with F.I. The results of 2018 elections confirmed the redefinition of the power relations between the two parties. The Lega's success brought under discussion the role of Berlusconi as leader of F.I. Anyway, F.I. being a personal party, Berlusconi managed to maintain his role as father of centre-right coalition and started presenting himself as the wise and moderate party leader acting as the bastion against the advances of the populists and sovereignists. Eventually the two leaders Berlusconi and Salvini strengthened their alliance and agreed on crucial political decisions, among which the approval of the Draghi's national unity government. In attempting to maintain its electoral consensus, F.I. slowly shifted from its moderation towards the radical positions of Lega and Berlusconi launched the proposal of a merger between the two parties also in view of resisting the rise of the F.d.I. within the centre-right area. In this context, the decision of the F.d.I. leader not to enter into Draghi government was the winning one. While Lega and F.I. were forced to collaborate with the prime minister and negotiate with the other government partners, the only party in opposition



was able to maintain its own radical right political agenda. Hence, during the Draghi government electoral support for the F.d.I. increased while Lega and F.I. declined, opening the possibility of making party leader Meloni the favourite to become Italy's next prime minister.

However, the success of F.d.I. depends on the capacity of its leader to expand their political audience and find an electorally winning formula. Will Giorgia Meloni reach this stage of party development? The recent launch of her biography (Meloni 2021) may well represent an instrument to widen her electoral consensus by providing a self-portrait of a young and competent female leader able to emerge in a male-dominated political arena as in the case of Italy. Further research is therefore necessary for a deeper understanding of the radical right politics in Italy and its implications for the development of the Italian party system and the continuity of the European integration process. What follows are a few research questions for future avenues of investigation. What are the implications of the rise of Brothers of Italy for the centre-right coalition's future? Specifically, are the F.d.I. and Lega parties two sides of the same coin called radical right populism? How far do the two parties ideologically differentiate or converge? Hence, are the two parties becoming foes in competing for the same right-wing electorate and leadership? Or are they friends instead, given their shared attempts of building a common European group uniting R.R.P.s in Europe? In this scenario, will F.I. persist or give up on its efforts to build a moderate and liberal image, as opposed to the populist and sovereignist image of its two allies? Focusing on the F.d.I. and given its transnational collaborations within E.C.R. group, is the party growing hostility towards the E.U. the mirror of an emerging coordinated Euro-sceptic discourse among European R.R.P.s? On the domestic side, what are the connections between F.d.I. and Italian neo-fascist groups and movements? And finally, how do the Italian Catholic Church and conservative societal actors position themselves in dealing with R.R.P.s promoting the defence of Christianity? Addressing the above questions would surely contribute to our better knowledge of F.d.I., of the variety of R.R.P.s and of the troubled Italian political dynamics.

## Notes

- 1 At the time of writing – July 2022- Draghi resigned as prime minister due to the collapse of the coalition that supported him. Italy will hold snap election on 25 September.
- 2 <http://www.demos.it/a01933.php>.
- 3 A.N. is the heir of M.S.I. Due to its close connection with the fascist past and its anti-system stances, when M.S.I. was founded in 1946 it was labelled as extreme right party and despite its electoral consensus it failed to gain democratic legitimacy. The party moved away from right extremism towards democratic legitimacy when the M.S.I. entered firstly into power during the Berlusconi

I government (1994–1996). The tycoon with his party F.I. launched the formation of a right with coalition together with Lega Nord (L.N.) and M.S.I., which eventually won and almost interruptedly governed for two decades. Since 1994, under the leadership of Gianfranco Fini the party renamed in A.N. during the Fiuggi Congress in 1995 and distanced itself with more conviction from its fascist past and nostalgia (Tarchi 2003), shifting from right extremism to conservative moderatism (Ignazi 2005) until becoming a mainstream right-wing party. For a detailed reconstruction see the works of Ignazi (1994), Baldoni (2009) and Tarchi (1995a, 1995b, 1997).

- 4 Huffington Post, 3 December 2017 [https://www.huffingtonpost.it/2017/12/03/daniela-santanche-cambia-ancora-casacca-sono-tornata-a-casa-nella-famiglia-di-fratelli-ditalia\\_a\\_23295435/](https://www.huffingtonpost.it/2017/12/03/daniela-santanche-cambia-ancora-casacca-sono-tornata-a-casa-nella-famiglia-di-fratelli-ditalia_a_23295435/);
- 5 <https://www.youtrend.it/2010/03/11/supermedia-2020/>
- 6 While F.I. and Lega voted for the re-election of Sergio Mattarella as President of the Republic, F.d.I. decided to pursue a different path evidencing the collapse of the centre-right coalition.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

**Alessia Donà** is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Trento, Italy. Her main areas of research are gender politics and policy making; Italian radical right parties and gender issues, human rights and L.G.B.T.+ issues.

## ORCID

Alessia Donà  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0192-3267>

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