

'Centre right? What centre right?'

Italy's right-wing coalition: Forza Italia's political 'heritage' and the mainstreaming of the far right

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Abstract The coalition between Fratelli d'Italia, Lega, Forza Italia and some minor allies is expected to win the Italian general election on 25 September 2022 by a considerable margin, at least according to all the opinion polls. Rather surprisingly, much of the public debate in Italy, including the media, politicians and polling institutes, still refers to the right-wing bloc as a centre-right coalition despite the presence of two fully-fledged far-right parties. In this chapter, we will a) introduce the main political players competing in the September 2022 general election, i.e. the right-wing coalition, the centre-left coalition, the M5S and the 'third pole' (*terzo polo*) composed of Azione and Italia Viva; we will then b) consider the ways in which Fratelli d'Italia and Lega are competing on the same far-right platform and which characteristics may give FdI a competitive edge over Lega; and lastly we will c) reflect on the factors that may have enabled Italy's far-right coalition to be considered moderate centre-right, a label used since 1994 to describe coalitions led by Berlusconi and which no longer seem fit-

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ting given the presence of the two far-right parties. In conclusion, we will identify at least two elements, in fact two sides of the same coin, supporting the persistence of the centre-right definition: a) the ambiguous and controversial role within the coalition of Forza Italia, whose alleged moderation has been cleverly sold to grant a sort of continuity to the use of the *centrodestra* label as opposed to 'right wing' or 'far right'; and b) the skilful way in which the Italian far-right has managed to normalize itself and enter the mainstream over the last decade.

Keywords: 2022 Italian general election; centre-right coalition; far right; Fratelli d'Italia; Lega; Forza Italia; mainstreaming.

Introduction

In the last chapter of this book, we provide an example of the mainstreaming of the far right in Europe. The focus will be on Italy's right-wing coalition and most likely winner of the Italian general election on 25th September 2022. In particular, following the reasoning already explored in several chapters of the book on the mainstreaming of the far-right, the Italian right-wing coalition, which includes two fully-fledged far-right parties, namely Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia or FdI (Brothers of Italy) and Matteo Salvini's Lega (League), is a perfect example of the gradual normalizing and, to some extent, institutionalizing of radical-right and extreme-right trends. Indeed, we could go as far as to say that this far-right coalition has been normalized and mainstreamed to such an extent that it barely seems recognizable as such, at least to a significant proportion of Italy's public opinion, including the media, politicians, opinion-makers, analysts and even polling institutes.

The chapter is organized as follows: we will first (i) provide a general overview of the competitors in the next general

election taking place on 25th September 2022, i.e. the right-wing coalition, the centre-left coalition, the M5S and the third pole (Azione and Italia Viva); we will then (ii) compare the two players in the right-wing coalition, FdI and Lega, against the backdrop of the fully-fledged far-right platform they share and including an assessment of which party may have a competitive advantage on the same ideological and political platform; next we will (iii) try to identify the factors at play in Italy that have enabled a far-right coalition to be regarded as moderate centre-right. The chapter will focus especially on the mainstreaming of the far-right in Italy.

1. Italy's general political election and its key players

After the controversial resignation of Italy's PM Mario Draghi in July 2022, the *Belpaese* will go to the polls on 25th September, approximately half a year before the natural conclusion of the legislature². All recent polls point to a very significant

² The current Italian electoral law, known as *Rosatellum* after Ettore Rosato, was introduced in 2017. It provides for a mixed electoral system, partly majority and partly proportional. Thirty-seven per cent of the seats in the two chambers of parliament (147 in the lower house and 74 in the senate) are allocated on the basis of a single-round majority system, in as many single-member constituencies. In practice, the candidate with the most votes is elected in each constituency. The other two-thirds (245 seats in the Chamber and 122 in the Senate) are instead distributed according to a proportional system, i.e. divided among the parties according to the respective percentages of the vote obtained at the ballot box. In practice, the seats are divided proportionally between coalitions and individual actors that have passed the national thresholds: 3% for individual actors, 10% for coalitions. The latter do not receive the votes of allied parties that do not reach 1%, but those of actors between 1% and 3% do (the remaining 2% of the seats, eight deputies and four senators, are finally reserved for the vote of Italians

lead for the coalition led by Fratelli d'Italia³. With about a month to go before the vote and an extremely short window for the political campaigns, this is a four horse race⁴:

- the centre-left coalition, led by the Partito Democratico or PD (Democratic Party) also includes the Verdi/Sinistra Italiana (Green/Italian Left), +Europa (More Europe) and Impegno Civico (Civic Commitment);
- Movimento Cinque Stelle or M5S (Five-Star Movement);
- the so called '*terzo polo*' (third pole) composed of the parties Azione (Action) and Italia Viva (IV);

living abroad, under a proportional system that provides for preference voting). The majority of seats are attributed by the proportional system, according to the principle of 'one head, one vote', and the political weight of the law is shifted mainly to the majority part: it is therefore the result in the uninominal constituencies that will determine the victory of a coalition which is unique throughout the country, but does not have a symbol, a manifesto or a leader but only common uninominal candidates, while each of the allied parties presents its own distinct manifesto and declares who its political leader is. See also https://www.adnkronos.com/elezioni-2022-al-voto-con-il-rosatellum-ecco-come-funziona_4Er2QIYkb1cAdxHvYEC6Cs.

³ In this chapter, we will refer to the Supermedia YouTrend/AGI polls (2 September 2022) available at: <https://www.youtrend.it/2022/09/02/supermedia-youtrend-agi-dei-sondaggi-centrodestra-a-183-sul-centrosinistra/>. The opinion polls used by YouTrend were the following: Demopolis (24 August), EMG (31 August), Euromedia (31 August), Ipsos (1 September), Noto (19, 24 and 31 August), Piepoli (25 August), Quorum (29 August), SWG (29 August) and Tecnè (25 August).

⁴ In addition to these four political actors, we have (according to the polls) the following below the 3% threshold: *ItalExit*, *Unione Popolare* led by De Magistris, a newly born radical-left movement led by the former mayor of Naples, and *Alternativa per l'Italia*. See: <https://tg24.sky.it/politica/2022/09/02/elezioni-sondaggi-politici>.

- the right-wing coalition, composed of FdI, Lega, Forza Italia and the centrists Noi Moderati (We Moderates)

(i) The centre-left coalition

The centre-left coalition is polling at around 28-30%, with the PD led by Enrico Letta at 21-23%, the Verdi and Sinistra Italiana at 3.5%, +Europa 2% and Impegno Civico at 1.1%. This coalition had originally attempted an agreement with the centrist party Azione, led by Carlo Calenda; however, within a few days the agreement collapsed⁵ as Letta, according to Calenda, wanted to include radical left-wing parties in the coalition and, for the leader of Azione, these were parties that would not be able to carry out what had been called the 'Draghi agenda', i.e. the points of the political manifesto implemented by Mario Draghi until a few weeks ago⁶. Following these controversies, the party +Europa preferred to split from Azione to remain in the coalition led by the PD⁷, while Verdi/Sinistra Italiana and Impegno Civico (recently founded by Luigi Di Maio⁸ formerly of the M5S), were incorporated. In particular, with the inclusion of the Verdi and Sinistra Ital-

⁵ See: <https://www.rainews.it/maratona/2022/08/conto-alla-rovescia-verso-il-voto-il-diario-del-7-agosto-05960a1d-c6da-4339-aec4-f4ebb3d14015.html>.

⁶ Including key reforms on policy areas such as energy, competition, procurement, renewal of the administration, justice, support for Ukraine and NATO, and of course, the implementation of the PNRR or National Recovery and Resilience Plan.

⁷ See: <https://www.dire.it/08-08-2022/773381-piu-europa-rompe-azione-calenda-incoerente-patto-pd/>.

⁸ See: https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/politica/2022/08/01/di-maio-lasciamo-i-veti-agli-estremisti-noi-per-lunita_b9236b04-ae8b-442c-802f-89ee2c678b48.html.

iana, the coalition led by Letta has likely shifted its political centre of gravity towards the left of the political spectrum, particularly compared to its positioning had the alliance with Azione remained in place.

(ii) Movimento Cinque Stelle

The M5S will run alone, with the latest polls estimating around 10-13% of the vote. Until the resignation of Mario Draghi in July 2022, the party led by former PM Giuseppe Conte had, since September 2019, been in an alliance with the PD that saw the two parties form a government (Conte cabinet II), govern together in some regions and provinces, and later support the Draghi executive. In this period, the ideological stance of the M5S had seemingly shifted from ideologically ambiguous populist positions to pro-EU, moderate and liberal positioning (Bruno and Cozzolino, 2022). In particular, this shift, strongly supported by foreign minister Luigi Di Maio, seemed to hold firm until the debate on arming Ukraine following Russia's invasion in late February 2022. In fact, the political willingness of the executive branch to arm Ukraine inflamed discussions over defence investments and increases to the country's defence budget. On 21 June, Di Maio quit the M5S: the *casus belli* was indeed the supply of arms to Ukraine and, more generally, Italy's international positioning, namely its support for NATO and recent EU decisions which had, according to Di Maio, been insufficiently supported by the M5S, currently led by Giuseppe Conte (Fazio and Bruno, 2022). Earlier this spring a heated debate among the political forces supporting the technocratic government led by Draghi took place. Draghi appeared rather appalled (going as far as to inform Italian President Sergio Mattarella) by the remarks made by Conte, who argued against increasing the Italian defence budget at a point

when the country was still grappling with the COVID-19 health crisis and its socio-economic fall-out⁹. Subsequently, for various reasons, related both to local situations and Italy's international positioning, a government crisis was triggered, first by the M5S' hesitations and then by Lega and Forza Italia's lack of confidence in the Draghi executive (Bruno and Parsi, 2022).

(iii) *Azione and Italia Viva (the third pole)*

The newly formed 'third pole' is made up of two parties, *Azione* and *Italia Viva*, led by former PD members Carlo Calenda and Matteo Renzi respectively. Most polls estimate their combined share of the vote at 5-7%. Alongside Enrico Letta and Luigi Di Maio, Calenda and Renzi were among the most enthusiastic supporters of Mario Draghi's government and its political action, particularly but not exclusively at the level of

⁹ More precisely, on July 14th, Italy's prime minister, Mario Draghi, tendered his resignation after the populist Five Star Movement (M5S) abstained in the Senate from a vote of confidence on a decree containing, among other things, a regulation on the construction of a much-debated waste-to-energy plant in Rome. According to Draghi, an executive such as the one in place since February 2021, if no longer supported by a broad coalition of parties – as things stood, all except the far-right Fratelli d'Italia – would make little sense and lose its momentum. The decree, ostensibly the bone of contention, was passed, even with the abstention of the movement founded by the comic Beppe Grillo, currently led by the former prime minister, Giuseppe Conte. The former president of the European Central Bank nevertheless offered his resignation to the president, Sergio Mattarella. Mattarella however rejected Draghi's bid as a desperate attempt to exit the crisis when the Italian parliament convened the day after. Eventually, when the M5S opened up to the possibility of continuing to support the government, Lega and Forza Italia required Draghi to choose between them and the M5S or dissolve the coalition (see Bruno and Parsi, 2022; Ignazi 2022).

foreign policy (strong alignment with the EU and NATO vis-à-vis the Russian invasion of Ukraine). In this sense, the ‘Draghi agenda’ would allegedly represent the core of the third pole, with Azione not only absorbing ministers of the Draghi executive into its ranks, such as Mariastella Gelmini (currently serving as minister of Regional Affairs and Autonomies) and Mara Carfagna (current Minister for the South and Territorial Cohesion), who no longer felt comfortable with Forza Italia, but even aiming to see Draghi reinstated as Italy’s Prime Minister. In a recent press interview, Calenda said that he was confident that, as a Meloni government would not last long, the return of Draghi to Palazzo Chigi would be the best possible outcome¹⁰.

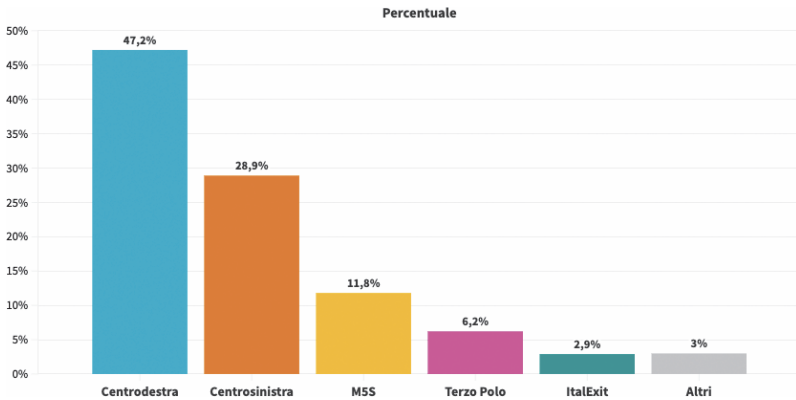
(iv) The right-wing coalition

The right-wing coalition is composed of Fratelli d’Italia, currently polling at around 24-25%, Lega (12-13%), Forza Italia (7-8%) and some small centrist parties, Noi Moderati (1-2%). The coalition as a whole is thus polling at around 46-48% (depending on the poll), with an impressive lead on the other three contenders and up to +18% over the centre left. Even if Berlusconi’s Forza Italia loses some public favour and ground to Azione-Italia Viva and draws less than 10% of the vote, as predicted, the coalition will still win comfortably. It is also important to note that, unlike the centre-left coalition and notwithstanding different preferences, the right-wing coalition drafted and adopted a single, rather vague and concise pro-

¹⁰ <https://www.iltempo.it/politica/2022/08/31/news/carlo-calenda-azione-profezia-mario-draghi-torna-governo-controcorrente-veronica-gentili-32901027/>.

gramma politico, the most important points of which one might consider to be those relating to Italy's international stance (pro-EU, strongly supportive of NATO), certain economic measures (a much-debated flat tax and support for Italy's small and medium-sized enterprises), support for the family (including policies to tackle population decline), and the removal of the *reddito di cittadinanza* ('citizenship income', a minimum income guaranteed by the state)¹¹. In conclusion, table 1 visually represents the gulf currently separating the right-wing coalition from the other three political actors, which make up 46.9% combined.

Table 1 – Vote percentages that may be won by the coalitions that will present joint candidates in the uninominal constituencies under the Rosatellum (Source Supermedia YouTrend/Agi)¹²



¹¹ <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/centrodestra-c-e-programma-dall-aumento-tetto-contante-conferma-bonus-edilizi-AEU8PlsB>.

¹² The table used can be found at the following link: <https://www.youtrend.it/2022/09/02/supermedia-youtrend-agi-dei-sondaggi-centrodestra-a-183-sul-centrosinistra/>.

2. Fratelli d'Italia and Lega: two players, same platform?

As we have already seen, the debate is ongoing on the exact nature of the Italian right-wing coalition that looks likely to win the 2022 general election. Before we examine this in the next paragraph, let us focus more closely on two parties in the coalition, FdI and Lega. The literature covering the two parties mostly defines them as populist radical-right parties (PRRPs) (Albertazzi et al. 2021; Donà, 2022) and/or far-right parties, with both definitions in wide use. In this regard, Pirro (2022) has recently argued that the term ‘far right’ could be used to signify an umbrella concept covering both the populist radical-right parties and the extreme-right parties/movements, which share a nativist and authoritarian leaning and are differentiated mainly by their stance on democracy (with the PRRPs most frequently holding illiberal views and the extreme right harbouring anti-democratic beliefs). An extremely important point raised by Pirro is that the boundaries between the populist radical right and the extreme right are shifting and becoming more blurred, and that ‘the complexity of far-right politics questions the long-standing conceptual distinctions internally defining it’ (Pirro, 2022). According to Pirro, both FdI and Lega could be labelled as far-right parties, with some distinctions¹³. Yet,

¹³ As argued by Bruno and Downes (2023), four key features define Salvini’s Lega: (i) firstly, a feature embodied by the ‘historical’ Lega, the ideological core includes deeply entrenched roots in Northern Italy, which was for many years the key bastion of support for both Umberto Bossi and Roberto Maroni. This component, although currently latent, should not be underestimated; (ii) a second feature that can be considered part of the contemporary Lega is the party’s support for the current executive/technocratic populist government led by Mario Draghi. Ironically, this component is

FdI could qualify more closely as a quintessential 'far-right' party. In fact, unlike Salvini's Lega, who in 2013 created a brand new nationalist party from a formerly federalist party (see figure 1) anchored to Northern Italy (Albertazzi et al. 2018)¹⁴, FdI has completely different ideological and histori-

perfectly embodied by the current Italian minister for economic development Giancarlo Giorgetti, who represents the most pro-European and business-friendly part of Lega. This is exemplified by the support of important European funds, around €220 billion, that Italy is currently using under the name of the PNRR or Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza (National Recovery and Resilience Plan) or by the fact that Giorgetti has suggested the possibility of a 'de facto Semi-Presidentialism' under Mario Draghi (*Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 2021). This political shift is even more ironic, considering that the populist radical-right party, Lega, has historically adopted a 'hard' Eurosceptic stance (i.e., outright rejection of the EU) and now bears much more ideological resemblance to that of a 'soft' Eurosceptic party (i.e., seeking to reform the EU from within or via the mechanisms of the European Parliament); (iii) a third feature of Lega relates to the extreme right-wing element of the party. In essence, this ideological element consists of creating structured links with the extreme right, not only neo-fascist, but also neo-Nazi style links and connections. This dynamic has been discussed in a very interesting investigation by the online newspaper *Fanpage* (YouTube/Fanpage 2021), as well as in the investigations by Paolo Berizzi (2021) which emphasize, for example, the fundamental role of the extreme right-wing group founded in 2010 in Lombardy, Lealtà Azione, in supporting Lega with thousands of votes in return for the promise of party jobs for its members; (iv) finally, the fourth feature is a certain ideological complexity, with the more properly pragmatic and populist core represented by the leader Salvini himself, who although has on several occasions de jure or de facto disavowed the above-mentioned components, has struck a delicate balance that enables these ideologically disparate groups to coexist.

¹⁴ As Salvini's Lega is a relatively recent project/party, deriving from the Lega Nord, which was a party with very different characteristics, deeply rooted in Northern Italy (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2005, 2009, 2010).

cal roots which place it in the somewhat grey area between the populist radical right and the extreme right.

Figure 2 – On the left, the old logo of the Lega Nord used from 1991 to 2017. On the right, the logo of Lega per Salvini Premier, introduced in December 2017. As we can see, the words ‘Lega Nord’ and the reference to ‘Padania’ have been completely removed



FdI, unlike Lega per Salvini Premier, has a much older and deeper historical and ideological tradition (MSI, AN). The MSI or Movimento Sociale Italiano (Italian Social Movement) was the Italian neo-fascist party *par excellence*, a movement founded in 1946 by veterans of the Italian Social Republic, including Giorgio Almirante (1914-1988) and Pino Rauti (1926-2012), at least up to the ‘*svolta di Fiuggi*’ of 1995¹⁵, when the

¹⁵ Strictly speaking, neo-fascism refers to the fascist-inspired ideology that developed in Italy after the end of the Second World War when fascism was defeated. Under the Italian constitution, particularly the Scelba and Mancino laws, any such movement or organisation is liable to prosecution for the crime of ‘*Apologia del fascismo*’ (‘defending fascism’). However, sentences often tend to be ‘soft’ in implementing these laws and only prosecute fascism/neo-fascism when movements and groups intend to revive a fully-

MSI allegedly found its way under the *'arco costituzionale'* (constitutional arch), i.e. it became a political actor fully accepted and operating within the Italian rule of law and Constitution. A brand new name was subsequently chosen: Alleanza Nazionale or AN (National Alliance)¹⁶. However, the symbol of the tricolour flame migrated to AN's logo, until Gianfranco Fini in March 2008 accepted federation into Berlusconi's Popolo della Libertà or PDL (People of Freedom)¹⁷. In 2014 the flame reappeared in the FdI logo after a six-year absence (figure 1).

fledged fascist party. According to a widespread narrative, the event that has gone down in history as the *svolta di Fiuggi* ('Fiuggi turning point') of 1995 is said to have sanctioned the definitive transition of a certain right-wing party from neo-fascism to post-fascism. On that occasion, the Movimento Sociale Italiano had finally found its place under the so-called 'constitutional arch', i.e. it had become a political party fully acceptable to the rule of law and the Italian Constitution, with a new name: Alleanza Nazionale ('National Alliance').

¹⁶ In particular, three manifesto points emerged from Fiuggi: (a) Abandonment of corporatism and revolutionary tones in opposition to liberal capitalism; (b) Rejection of anti-Americanism with the consequent definitive acceptance of pro-EU and pro-NATO positions; (c) Promotion of a democratic and modern right wing committed to the preservation of Italy's cultural and religious roots.

¹⁷ On the complex dynamic that suddenly brought AN into the PDL federation under Silvio Berlusconi, see the account provided by Giorgia Meloni (Meloni 2021, 86-87).

Figure 3 – MSI logo, the *fiamma tricolore* or tricolour flame (top). The logo of the Alleanza Nazionale party, and the logos of Fratelli d'Italia over the years up to the present (down, from left to right). It is interesting to note that between 2012 and 2014, the MSI/AN tricolour flame disappeared, only to reappear later, first inside the old AN logo and then standing alone



The question of post-fascism, and conversely of neo-fascism in Italian politics, is controversial and still subject to debate. An important number of scholars consider FdI to be a post-fascist party, with largely direct roots in the right-wing alliance tradition of the '*seconda repubblica*' (see, among others, Albertazzi et al. 2021). Yet, the question of FdI's own ideology remains open (Bruno et al. 2021) and is likely to be debated for a very long time, especially if the party obtains the results currently indicated by the polls and Giorgia Meloni becomes President of the Council of Ministers, a step which, incidentally, would

not be automatic and is highly delicate¹⁸. In her recent autobiography, Meloni, while not speaking openly of fascism or neo-fascism, refers on almost every page to her militancy in the MSI and to what that experience meant for her, being ideologically opposed to what she defines as a '*destra moderna*' ('modern right wing'), that is a right wing lacking in tradition and which accepts compromises (2021:192). Once again, we can say that (a) the question of neo-fascism and post-fascism in the recent development of Italian politics remains open; (b) given the complexity of the topic, it cannot be examined solely from a symbolic point of view but should be considered in light of policies, statements and manifestos. Yet, why would FdI keep a symbol such as the *fiamma tricolore*, so strongly associated with the MSI and fascism/neofascism, in its logo if the party no longer wants to be associated with fascism? (*The Economist*, 2022)?¹⁹. After all, the *fiamma tricolore* has already been omitted once from the party's logo, between 2012 and 2014 (see figure 2), a move that could easily be repeated in future. Again, while it would not make much sense to focus discourse exclusively on the value of a symbol, it is equally true that a good deal of ambiguity at the level of the party and its ideology persists, facilitating the emergence of doubt regarding whether such ideological ambiguity may suit a party

¹⁸ The passage involves not only the allies of the right-wing coalition but also the President of the Italian Republic, who is in charge of forming the new government.

¹⁹ Mattia Zulianello has recently expressed an interesting position in relation to FdI and the thorny question of fascism and neo-fascism. Zulianello stated in an interview that he considers Fratelli d'Italia to be a populist radical-right party taking advantage of the vague nostalgia for fascism allegedly shared by a proportion of Italian citizens. See the interview in the article available at the link: https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20220826_97737281.

which, on the one hand credits itself as being institutional and ‘normal’, while on the other maintaining important ties with a certain ideological tradition and political heritage.

Regarding the political programme for the general election of 25 September 2022 (Fratelli d’Italia, 2022)²⁰, we can now focus briefly on some key points²¹. The first point of the manifesto concerns ‘support for birth and family’, with the introduction, among other things, of ‘communication and information campaigns of a medical nature on the subject of fertility’. The entire first point of the manifesto deals with the theme of family, starting with the birth rate (Fratelli d’Italia, 2022, pp. 5-6). Subsequent points (2, 3, 4 and 5) speak respectively of allocating PNRR funds differently in light of ‘new circumstances’, ‘a new relationship between the tax authorities and taxpayers’ and ‘support for the Italian entrepreneurial system’, with point five entitled ‘Made in Italy and Italian Pride’. Point 9 mentions the abolition of the *reddito di cittadinanza* state-guaranteed minimum income and an extraordinary public-private housing plan, while point 12 mentions that ‘the laws on civil unions will be maintained’ while ‘the ban on same-sex adoptions and the fight against surrogate motherhood, in the supreme interest of the child, is reiterated’. Point 13 (p. 22) is very interesting, referring to the ‘creation of a new Italian consciousness by promoting, particularly in schools, the history of Italy’s greats and historical reenactments’ and ‘countering cancel culture and the iconoclasm that threaten the symbols of our identity’. Points 14, 15 and 16 deal respectively with the value of tourism and the

²⁰ <https://www.fratelli-italia.it/programma/>.

²¹ For a comparison with Lega’s political manifesto, see: https://static.legaonline.it/files/Programma_Lega_2022.pdf.

agri-food sector, and the protection of the environment and nature²². Points 17, 18 and 19 deal with investments in affordable clean energy, and in infrastructure and transport. Point 21, on the other hand, speaks of 'stopping illegal immigration' and of 'an increasingly insecure Italy', with the consequent need for 'the defence of national and European borders, as envisaged by the Schengen Treaty and the EU, with border control and a blockade of landings to stop, in agreement with the North African authorities, the trafficking of human beings; the creation of hot-spots in non-European territories, managed by the EU, to assess asylum requests, and the fair distribution only of those with rights in the 27 member countries (naval blockade)'. The last two points are also of particular interest, referring to the reform (the dynamics are not well specified) in a presidential sense of the State (point 24) to achieve greater stability of government and greater economic growth, and a new leading role for Italy in Europe and the world (point 25), with full respect for international alliances, 'including by adapting the appropriations for Defence to the parameters agreed in the Atlantic Alliance'.

Having considered all these arguments, we can finally move on to our original point, i.e. comparing FdI and Lega, against the backdrop of their similar platform and 'political offering', and the reasons we believe Meloni's party to have a competitive advantage over Lega on the same populist radical-right and/or far-right platform. FdI is a relatively young party, founded in December 2012, however it has a long ideological and historical tradition, unlike Lega which has distanced itself from its former manifestation, the Lega Nord.

²² On this, see the chapter in this book by Lubarda and Forchtner.

The question is this: which of these two parties, FdI or Lega, which are competing on a very similar political platform (as we have seen from the political manifesto of FdI), will an electorate which is seemingly sympathetic to far-right ideologies or, as has recently been said (Standard, 2022), harbouring a vague nostalgia for fascism, choose to vote for? We believe most will favour FdI over Lega. After all, to put it very bluntly, why would a certain type of voter vote for a ‘copy’ when they can have the ‘original’?

A second point that could give FdI the upper hand in the race for the right-wing coalition’s leadership concerns narratives. FdI remained in opposition throughout the entire legislature (2018-2022), particularly against the yellow-green government (M5S and Lega in 2018-2019) and during Mario Draghi’s executive (2021-2022), two executives that included Lega. It should not be underestimated that, albeit more moderately than its coalition ally, FdI has presented this narrative (*Il Giornale*, 2018, 2020; *La Repubblica*, 2018) to Italian citizens as an example of its consistency and coherence with its own principles and history (Bruno, 2021)²³. On a different but closely related point, the leadership of Giorgia Meloni, particularly her tenacity, consistency, and to some extent her *sui generis* idealism, may be good ingredients for building a narrative to help differentiate her from the much more chamele-

²³ We recognize that this second point is controversial. Indeed, it could be argued that votes for Salvini’s Lega would have been transferred to Fratelli d’Italia in any case, as per point one, mentioned above. However, we believe that the party led by Giorgia Meloni, having remained in opposition to the government throughout the legislature, and in particular to the Conte I and Draghi governments, can more easily use the narrative of a party that is consistent in terms of values, transparent and makes no compromises, as it is in fact doing during the election campaign.

onic and pragmatic attitude of her colleague, Matteo Salvini (Bruno and Parsi, 2021). We can now move to the last argument of this chapter, i.e. offer some tentative preliminary considerations on the factors which may have enabled Italy's far-right coalition to still be regarded as moderate centre-right.

3. *Why is the Italian right-wing coalition still being referred to as centre right?*

In the past few months, a video appeared on various social media platforms (Twitter, 2022)²⁴ of Giorgia Meloni, a few years ago, accusing the Italian state of deliberately pursuing a policy of 'ethnic substitution' (*disegno di sostituzione etnica*), forcing '100,000 Italians to flee abroad in one year, while bringing in 500,000 asylum seekers over three years'. The fact that Meloni was referring to the great replacement theory, defined by Obaidi, Kunst, Ozer and Kimel as '[...] one of the most potent conspiracy theories evoked by right-wing extremists, politicians, and commentators [...] the 'Great Replacement' – the conspiracy arguing that there is an attempt to replace the White autochthonous population with non-Western immigrants. [...] an apocalyptic discourse of 'White genocide' and invasion of Europe by non-Western immigrants has far-reaching policy implications. When faulty or distorted beliefs about immigrants replacing the majority population are taken as fact, they become the basis for generating hostile public opinion towards immigrants. This may result in threat per-

²⁴ The video is available on Twitter at: <https://twitter.com/AlekosPrete/status/1542808648921092098>.

ception and fear of immigrants, which in turn can result in discriminatory public policies and actions leading to greater polarization and intergroup conflict.’ (Obaidi et al. 2021). Yet, in Italy, this kind of speech and rhetoric, by far-right parties, often echoed on the front pages of newspapers, on television or in social media, continues to be tolerated with no problem whatsoever; it is justified and normalised or, at most, framed as having slightly excessive patriotic overtones.

The very fact that parties such as Lega and FdI continue to be referred to as ‘centre-right’ parties in Italy is a case in point. As we have seen, both FdI and Lega are considered to fall into the category of populist radical-right parties (PRRPs), which, following the suggestions advanced by Pirro (2022), we can consider sitting under the far-right umbrella together with the extreme right. In fact, the boundaries between the (populist) radical right and the extreme right have become increasingly blurred (Leidig 2020; Mondon and Winter, 2020, 2020b; Mudde, 2019; Pirro, 2022). Accordingly, nowadays the Italian ‘mainstream’ right has become radicalized to the point that it is extremely difficult to even define what ‘radical right’ means or identify which parties belong in that family.

Let’s now try to analyse the weight of these parties within the coalition since 1994. Albertazzi, Bonansinga and Zulianello (2021) have remarked on the strong thread of continuity running through the right-wing alliance, within which the only change has been the party occupying the pre-eminent role: ‘Amidst the many changes affecting Italian politics from the mid-1990s onwards, one thing always remained the same, as voters got used to the existence of a right-wing electoral alliance fielding candidates at successive general elections. A break in 1996 notwithstanding, the alliance comprised: the Lega Nord; a radical right party rooted in the ‘post-fascist’ tradition (for a while: Alleanza Nazionale, AN); and one of

Berlusconi's parties. Voters were also clear as to where the centre of the right-wing galaxy was to be found: to adopt an astronomical metaphor, it was occupied by 'the Berlusconi sun'. (Albertazzi et al., 2021, p. 181). Castelli Gattinara and Froio (2021) offer a slightly different analysis which stresses more the dynamic of radicalization of the mainstream: 'following the failure of the PDL and the 2011 dramatic change of government, the political right has increasingly turned towards electorates sympathizing with authoritarian and nativist ideals associated with the silent counter-revolution' (2021, p. 22), with the '[...] predominance of radical parties over the Italian mainstream right posing some serious challenges over the fundamentals of liberal democracy in Italy' (2021, p. 23).

As we can see in table 2, over the past few years the centrality and weight of Forza Italia in the centre-right alliance has been waning. In particular, in the last general election of 2018 Forza Italia was overtaken by Salvini's Lega (14% and 17.4% respectively, in the Chamber of Deputies), with FdI at 4.4%. It is very interesting to observe that the MSI (AN from 1995 onwards), the political 'ancestor' of FdI, achieved significant electoral results between 1994 and 2006, winning 12 – 15.7% of the vote, before being absorbed into the PDL under Silvio Berlusconi. We do not know whether in the election to come, on 25 September 2022, the right-wing coalition will reach the levels of 1994 or, even more so, those of 2001 and 2006, or even exceed them. However, while it is unlikely to think that Italy is voting more and more for the right than in the (recent) past, it is plausible to say that the right is increasingly moving towards the extreme end of the political spectrum.

Table 2 – Electoral results of the centre-right coalition (main parties) between 1994 and 2018, general elections (% vote), with added opinion polls for the 2022 general election (2 September 2022)*. Camera dei Deputati (The Chamber of Deputies). The opinion polls considered for the 2022 general election are available at this link: <https://www.youtrend.it/2022/09/02/supermedia-youtrend-agi-dei-sondaggi-centrodestra-a-183-sul-centrosinistra/>

Year	Forza Italia	MSI – AN – FdI	Lega Nord/Lega	Centre-right coalition (combined)
1994	21	MSI 13.5	8.4	42.9
1996	20.6	AN 15.7	10.7 <i>not part of the coalition</i>	42.1
2001	29.4	AN 12	3.9	49.6
2006	23.7	AN 12.3	4.6	49.7
2008	PDL 37.4		8.3	46.8
2013	PDL 21.6	FdI 1.9	4.1	29.2
2018	14	FdI 4.4	Lega 17.4	37
2022*	[8.1]	[24.1]	[13.2]	[47.2% including NCI/IC]

Could the presence of Forza Italia within the coalition justify or at least provide a possible justification for the application of the label ‘*centrodestra*’ (centre right) to the current coalition? The issue undoubtedly has to do with the perception of a political party and its leader who wants to appear more and more as moderate and liberal when in reality this was never the case. The fact that the term has always been associated with Forza Italia led coalitions, from 1994 to 2013 (and be-

yond), by Berlusconi, who has increasingly portrayed himself as liberal, moderate and pro-EU over the years, could be a contributing factor to the tendency across almost the entire media spectrum to perceive and refer to the coalition as centre right²⁵. Being unprecedented, the fact that Forza Italia included the words 'Partito Popolare Europeo' (European Popular Party, EPP) in its logo in 2022 says a great deal (figure 2)²⁶. On this, Forza Italia MP Mauro D'Attis said, 'Forza Italia is a genuinely pro-European party and the reference to the European People's Party in its election campaign logo underlines our firm commitment to the values of the largest political family in the EU. This is our home, that of the moderates, of which in Italy, thanks to the leadership of President Berlusconi, we are an authoritative and inimitable expression. Be wary of imitations' [author's translation]²⁷.

²⁵ Literature on the political figure of Berlusconi, the nature of his party and his personal and populist leadership is endless, and the topic is clearly beyond the scope of this article.

²⁶ On Forza Italia's newest logo, see: <https://www.rainews.it/articoli/2022/08/forza-italia-presenta-il-simbolo-con-berlusconi-presidente-e-riferimento-al-ppe-0327f693-ffad-4f8f-b041-a0a0784aa887.html>.

²⁷ D'Attis original statement can be found at the link: <https://www.istituzioni24.it/2022/08/09/elezioni-dattis-fi-ppe-in-simbolo-rimarca-nostro-ancoraggio-a-valori-prima-famiglia-politica-in-unione-europea/>.

Figure 3 – On the left, the Forza Italia logo in the 2018 general election. On the right, the new Forza Italia logo (2022) including the words ‘Partito Popolare Europeo’ at the top



Interestingly, definition of the coalition as centre right almost only applies within Italy. Abroad, major press and media outlets use the expression ‘right wing’ to define the coalition (‘far right’ in some cases), and, in most cases, ‘far right’ to define the two main parties, FdI and Lega (examples include: *The Economist*, 2022; *The Daily Telegraph*, 2022; *L’Humanité*, 2022; *Folha de S. Paulo*, 2022). In Italy, however, as we have said, newspapers, TV news, polling institutes and, tellingly, Italian politicians and MPs themselves, including those outside the right wing arena, continue to use the term *centrodestra*.

On one hand, the skilful use of the ‘heritage’ of past alliances led by Forza Italia (increasingly sold as moderate and liberal), together with the fact that the Italian far right has very masterfully managed to go so completely mainstream, may partially explain the failure to switch from one definition to another. In particular, the process of ‘normalization’ of the Italian far right has become so established that it is difficult to identify. As we have seen, in Italy it is currently difficult to dis-

tinguish between centre right and radical right. The problem, which on the surface might seem trivial or merely academic, is also linguistic. The Italian far right is identified in several ways: (i) '*la Destra*' (the Right)²⁸ can be used, which is in some ways misleading or, (ii) increasingly frequently, '*destra sovranista/sovraniisti*' (sovereignist right)²⁹, or, (iii) less successfully, '*conservatori*' (conservative), while '*destra radicale*' (radical right) is not common at all and '*estrema-destra*' (extreme right) is reserved for movements such as Forza Nuova and CasaPound. It is understandable that far-right political subjects are comfortable with and enjoy the label *centrodestra*³⁰.

Conclusions

In this chapter, we showed the ways in which two Italian far-right parties, FdI and Lega, belonging to the same coalition, are sharing the same populist radical-right/far-right platform. Leaving aside the thorny question of post-fascism and neofascism in FdI and Italian politics, and having recognized that the issue needs to be addressed not only as a debate over symbols (such as the *fiamma tricolore*) but also in regard to policies, statements and party manifestos, there is little doubt that FdI has a strong competitive advantage over Lega in rela-

²⁸ It is also more common than one might think to come across the expression '*destra-destra*' (right-right) applied to FdI and Lega.

²⁹ In particular, '*sovraniista*' (sovereignist) is used by Lega to self-describe. Curiously, CasaPound's newspaper, *Il Primato Nazionale*, also uses the word to define itself: '*Il Primato Nazionale* is the only independent Italian sovereignist newspaper'. On the other hand, FdI prefers '*conservatore*' (conservative) to self-describe. On this, see *L'Humanité* (26 July 2022).

³⁰ The linguistic debate goes hand in hand with the debate on the wide band of the political spectrum between *centrodestra* and *estrema destra*.

tion to appealing to the radical-right electorate, in light of its deep-rooted historical and ideological tradition traced back to the MSI and AN; conversely, Lega per Salvini Premier is a relatively young populist radical-right party with different characteristics from the original Lega Nord party founded in 1991. For its part, the third party in the coalition, Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, very eloquently wasted no time in including 'Partito Popolare Europeo' (EPP) in its logo for the September 2022 elections in order to increasingly establish itself as moderate, pro-EU, and liberal and court certain voters who may be tempted by Calenda and Renzi's 'third pole', and to reassure domestic and international interlocutors. In terms of explaining why the label 'center right' continues to be applied to the coalition, we can in conclusion say (a) the controversial 'heritage' of Silvio Berlusconi's party, which is perceived as maintaining some sense of reassuring continuity with the past and (b) the Italian far right's skilful handling of the 'normalization' process are two sides of the same coin.

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This book contains important contributions alongside original research that took place during vibrant debates that was held between February-May 2022 at the international research seminars hosted by the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. The primary goal of the book and its authors is to offer a lens through which to interpret a complex set of interrelated contemporary political phenomena, sometimes with distant origins that relate to both populism and the far-right in contemporary European Politics. What emerges is the disturbing observation that the European far-right, although in a rich variety of forms, has been capable of increasingly going “mainstream”, in effect normalizing and increasingly integrating into both public debates and political systems alike. This is part of a broader trend that is not just taking place in Europe, but refers to a much broader and worrying picture at the global level. In this important book volume readers will find the online generation of “truths” by media organizations, the pervasive use of social media to mobilize electorates, the association with environmentalist causes alongside the ideological flexibility and opportunism of populist political leaders. Most significantly, all of these elements have contributed to the normalization of features once solely associated with the extreme-right fringes of the political spectrum. This pattern is particularly striking in modern Italian politics at the 2022 Italian General Election, with the increasingly blurred ideological lines between the far-right and the extreme-right playing out in real time, allowing a rightwing coalition bloc, composed by two fully-fledged far-right parties, to be labeled as *centrodestra*.

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Populism and Far-Right

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