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***Migrants, COVID-19, and Italy: A
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Abstract

Migration has historically been a controversial issue around the world and one that has often been harnessed by people in power (or people hoping to gain power) for their own political agendas. In times of a global pandemic, the scapegoating of migrants has only increased, often rooted in nationalist ideologies which lead to policies and practices that harm migrants and the larger society. The present paper employs multimodal critical discourse analysis to explore how nationalist ideologies supported by right-wing populism are constructed visually and verbally during COVID-19 on Italian social media in regard to migration. We analyze Giorgia Meloni's (leader of the nationalist party "Fratelli D'Italia") Twitter thread discussing the arrival and detention of migrants in Italy in July-August 2020 as a representative sample of the discourse. Findings show one example of how nationalist discourses scapegoat migrants visually and verbally, but also how this discourse can be countered by the public via social media. Additionally, subtle details revealed in the visual analysis show the importance of multimodal research in un-packing ideologies that are easy to deny and hence more dangerous because of social media's capacity to spread (mis)information.

Key words: *Italy, migrants, COVID-19, Twitter, multimodal critical discourse analysis*

1. Introduction

1.1 Covid-19, Nationalism, and Anti-Immigration Discourses

Worldwide, there has been a political shift in which anti-migrant/refugee discourses have become normalized, leading to stricter border policies and increased othering of migrants (Wodak, 2021). These discourses (and the policies they lead to) have only worsened since the outbreak of COVID-19. Italy, which has been studied less than nations such as the UK or the US in terms of right-wing populist discourses, is no exception (Barometro dell'Odio, 2021; Padovani, 2020). Fueled by fear and anger produced by the pandemic as well as pre-existing xenophobia and racism, negative representations of migrants in the Italian media persist and continue to exacerbate difficult conditions for migrants in Italy (Frattini & Sartori, 2021).

The present case study examines a small sample of Italian social media discourse in order to understand the way in which nationalist discourses are functionalized visually and verbally to represent migrants and their relation to COVID-19. In addition, we aim to understand how Italian netizens¹ respond to these discourses. Our goal is to learn more about exactly how nationalism is mobilized on social media to Other² migrants (e.g., differentiate 'us' from 'them' by showing how 'they' are different through negative traits) so that organizations/governments/individuals can counter these discourses in the future. In the process, we hope to shed more light on how multimodal threads can be analyzed for stance in political discourse analysis through a fine-grained analysis of the texts. In order to provide a close reading of the data that does justice to our analysis, we chose to focus on one Twitter thread published on July 27, 2020 during a moment of increased migration in the Mediterranean in which migrants were transferred from Sicily to other areas of Italy. The initial comments in the thread were published by the right-wing populist leader of the Fratelli D'Italia (Brothers of Italy) party, Giorgia Meloni, who we describe in the next section. We then review far-right (aka right-wing) populism, nationalism, and how they relate to COVID-19 and migration. Next, we describe our theoretical framework which explains how nationalist ideologies work, as well as how to de-construct them. We then explain our methodology and report our findings which concentrate on the representation of migrants in this Twitter thread as well as how this representation was contested by Italian netizens.

1.2 Context: Giorgia Meloni and Fratelli D'Italia

During the time period of July 27-August 3, 2020 there was a flurry of reports and resulting panic concerning migrants that had arrived in Sicily, violated quarantine, and fled a detention center there (and elsewhere in Italy) most likely in the hope of not being returned to their point of departure (Dellanna, 2020). Coverage of these events led to nationwide hysteria and fear of migrants coming to Italy with COVID-19 and infecting Italians (Caliandro et al., 2020; Pollice & Miggianno, 2020). This fear was so widespread, the first and second author of this paper (both residing in the US but with family in Italy) became aware of the situation through conversation with family in Italy and decided it would be worth investigating. We looked for social media discussions of the events and immediately found that many of the discussions of the events

seemed to refer to Twitter posts by Giorgia Meloni, leader of the right-wing populist/neo-fascist and nationalist conservative party Fratelli D'Italia (whose very name comes from the Italian national anthem). Hence, because so much of the discourse around these events related back to Meloni's thread, we decided to analyze this thread for our paper as a representative sample of the type of discourse surrounding these events and the reporting of these events from July 27-August 3, 2020.

In order to understand why Fratelli D'Italia (FdI) and Giorgia Meloni are worth examining in depth, we need to know more about their history. According to Downes et al. (2020, p. 1), FdI has experienced an electoral rise which could have 'far-reaching implications for the future of Italian politics'. The center-right coalition in Italy is increasingly moving towards a 'full-fledged radical-right coalition,' which means right-wing populists are influential at both the regional and national level (Downes et al., 2020, p. 4). Even before the COVID-19 outbreak, FdI's popularity was on the rise, but the pandemic accelerated its popularity (De Maio, 2020).

Giorgia Meloni is a mother, a former journalist, and the leader of FdI. At the time we wrote this article, Meloni was not yet Italy's prime minister, but she was Italy's second-most popular politician, with an approval rating of 46 percent, which put her behind (former) Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte but ahead of the Lega's Salvini (Roberts, 2020). Since the birth of her daughter in 2017, she has become more popular among ordinary Italian women, particularly through social media clips of her with her cat and daughter which have helped to position her into more mainstream circles (Roberts, 2020). After the emergence of the coronavirus pandemic, Meloni became an increasingly prominent voice. Heir to the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), Meloni's party features Mussolini's great-grandson, Caio Giulio Cesare Mussolini, as a member and its logo even includes the MSI's three color flame which was used to represent the Italian Social Movement in political elections since its birth in 1946 and has fascist roots (Enciclopedia Treccani, n.d.; Momigliano, 2019).

She clearly benefited from COVID-19 to gain more power and influence, and we believe she (and her party) are important to study because of the way they capitalized on COVID-19. Since the virus hit Italy in February 2020, she became more active on social media, with more than one million followers on both her Facebook and Twitter accounts. During the time of our analysis, Meloni had begun criticizing the government's actions regarding COVID-19 and connecting the arrival of migrants to the spread of COVID-19 in Italy (De Maio, 2020). Even before COVID-19 in June 2019 she advocated for her anti-immigration policy which claimed it would be better to sink migrant rescue boats than let migrants enter as opposed to following rules of international law which call for passengers to be disembarked first (Stella, 2019). Furthermore, she persistently called for the closing of Italy's borders, following a trend of increasing border security which has worsened worldwide since the pandemic began (Wodak, 2020).

2. Far-Right (aka Right-Wing) Populism, Nationalism, and Migration in Italy

Populism can be defined as a political ideology that focuses on division rather than solutions. It is a way of thinking (and speaking) about the world that is

neither right nor left wing, and it functions by juxtaposing an (allegedly corrupt) political class or establishment, and ‘the people’, and favors instruments of direct democracy (Greven, 2017, p.1). Right-wing populism (RWP) (also referred to more recently as far-right populism³) is a type of populism and ‘hybrid political ideology that rejects the post-war political consensus and usually, though not always, combines laissez-faire liberalism and anti-elitism with other, often profoundly different and contradictory ideologies’ (Krzyżanowski & Wodak, 2017, p. 475). RWP grows out of ‘public pessimism, anxiety, and disaffection’ of ‘the people’ (Betz, 1994, p. 41) and far-right/RW populist discourse typically attempts to simplify social and economic structures by opposing ‘the true people’ to a corrupt ‘elite’ and drawing on established stereotypes of the Other (Wodak, 2021). Just who are ‘the people’ and who are ‘the elites’ in this dichotomy are what RWP discourses aim to define and construct (Wodak, 2020). Far-right parties have traditionally functionalized national identity and nationalism in order to construct who the ‘real/true/pure’ ingroup members are (in the case of our study, Italians) and to exclude those who are considered as not belonging to this group (Wodak, 2020, p. 100). Nationalism is in fact, an important tool for establishing this group membership because belonging to a nation is ‘frequently defined through ethnic and even racist categories’ which exclude those who do not possess these characteristics and result in marginalizing them as outsiders (Wodak, 2021, p. 99). There are many studies of right-wing populist discourse in Italy (and elsewhere) and their use of nationalist discourses to Other migrants (Fielder & Catalano, 2017). We concentrate our literature review on studies about Italy, but also those that take place in other countries that are relevant to our analytical focus.

Bruno and Downes (2020) present the case that the real threat of the radical-right is not so much in their victories in elections but in their ability to mainstream their ideologies at a global level (para. 11). They claim that FdI (led by Giorgia Meloni) and Lega Nord (led by Matteo Salvini) parties base their discourses on (1) immigrants and refugees seen as security/crime and ‘welfare chauvinism’ issue and (2) ‘sovranismo’ a very specific form of nationalism. As Agnew (2019) points out, ‘sovranismo’ in Italian is a neologism which combines two words: the Italian word ‘sovrano’ (sovereign) and the French ‘souverainisme’ (‘sovereignty’). The use of the term in the Italian political sphere advocates for the preservation or re-acquisition of national sovereignty by a people or a state, as opposed to the demands and policies of international and supranational organizations. Mainly, these parties have concentrated their narratives on anti-immigrant discourses connecting the arrival of immigrants to an increase in the pandemic spread across the country (De Rosa & Mannarini, 2020). This rhetoric and discourses have produced a mainstreaming effect that influences populist, radical right parties in a number of countries (Elias et al., 2021).

Wodak et al.’s (2009) analysis of the construction of national identity is a landmark study in this area. In their research on Austrian national identity construction, they identified five macro-strategies used in discourse: (1) constructive; (2) justification; (3) perpetuation; (4) transformation; and (5) destructive (p. 199). The authors found that in the political speeches they analyzed, constructive strategies were most prominent, compared to the other contexts (i.e., focus groups, interviews). They note specifically that politicians in their data set utilized constructive strategies to link audiences to a ‘shared

political past and a collective political present and future' (Wodak et al., 2009, p. 200). We believe that such constructive strategies can, in the hands of neo-nationalists, exclude individuals from the national imagining as much as they on the surface appear to include them.

Different scholars (e.g., Downes et al., 2020; Elias et al., 2021; Geddes & Pettrachin, 2020; Woods et al., 2020) have dealt with the impact that COVID-19 has on the rise of nationalist populism across the globe. According to Woods et al. (2020) nationalism expresses a political ideology which 'holds that territorial communities called nations are necessary for human flourishing and that each nation should therefore be accorded a degree of autonomy in determining its own affairs' (p. 2). The pandemic amplified the power and autonomy of nation-states due to the negative effects on citizens' privacy, security, and democracy. However, in some places like the United States or in Italy, the pandemic caused a surge in xenophobic, anti-immigrant, anti-Asian and antisemitic sentiments because those groups were seen as the Others who brought the infection into the nation (Woods et al., 2020). As a result, both the US administration at that time and the Italian far-right political leaders (imitating the current US president, cf. Reny & Barreto, 2020) started using the term 'Wuhan virus' or 'Chinese virus.' In Italy, far-right political leaders (e.g., Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini) began broadcasting a video showing a conspiracy theory in which Chinese lab experiments on other types of coronaviruses were used as proof that the novel virus had originated in the same lab (Adnkronos, 2021).

Woods et al. (2020) note that xenophobic expressions of nationalism are part of a pre-COVID-19 rise in far-right discourse and one important way in which White supremacy has been legitimized. The urge to defend the nation has 'found a home in the circulation of memes and social media commentary that scapegoat entire populations as being responsible for the virus and its spread' (p. 817). In this context, dehumanization as a psychological process is useful to make the enemy, or the Other, look less human. Dehumanization is an important factor that helps the reader not to feel guilty about xenophobic feelings since they are not perceived anymore as people in need.

Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018) point out different social media strategies applied by some Italian leaders. One of these strategies they found to be used by Salvini and Meloni is appealing directly to the 'people' while granting them sovereignty and pointing out how they are often betrayed by governments and political elites. As they note, the 'people's will is a fundamental principle for political actors that depict themselves as advocates of the people's rights' (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018, p. 5). Thus, the people have an 'underprivileged' status as citizens compared to the political elite and often in their comments those leaders incite them to rise up and make themselves heard with the help of their vote. In this case people are addressed as a national community or ethnic group pointing out the dichotomy 'us' versus 'them' in order to discriminate against those who do not belong to this group. This observation brings us to the next strategy pointed out in this study: 'Ostracizing the others' (p. 6). According to Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018), ostracizing others 'involves a narrative based on the 'dangerous others' concept that targets a common enemy within groups of the population that are stigmatized and excluded from 'the people' (p. 6). In this way, the Others are seen as a dangerous threat for the homogenous 'us' group and addressed by those leaders as scapegoats (see also Wodak et al., 2009).

Prior to COVID-19, the issue of immigration had tended to focus on migrants' arrival to Italian ports by boats. Scholars have found that after COVID-19, FdI has gained momentum, while Lega has lost it (Albertazzi et al., 2021; Basile & Borri, 2022; Sanguinetti, 2021). In fact, in the September 2020 regional elections, FdI increased their popularity across the board. Downes, Bruno and Scopelliti (2020) also found that there is a 'rally around the flag effect' that has occurred after COVID-19, which has helped nationalist parties gain momentum. Hence, our literature review has shown that radical-right parties such as FdI have incorporated COVID-19 into their nationalist narratives and fear of the virus to push their nationalist agendas. What we do not know is how this has been accomplished on social media through visual and verbal means, nor how the public has reacted to RWP discourse on COVID-19.

3. Multimodal Critical Discourse Studies

The main objective of Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) is to 'examine critically the relationship between language, ideology, power and social structure, for example, social inequality as it is constructed, re-produced, legitimized, and resisted in language and other modes of communication' (Catalano & Waugh, 2020). As CDS scholars, we take the stance that we are not neutral, following van Dijk's view that the point of critical discourse analysis is to take a position on the side of those 'who suffer most from dominance and inequality' (van Dijk, 1993, p. 252). We agree with Fairclough (1996, p. 53) that no one is neutral, since we all write based on our own discursive practices, backgrounds, and interests but CDA is 'better placed to recognize its own partiality'.

In the case of our paper, we were inspired by Ruth Wodak's work on nationalism (2015, 2021) which models how nationalist discourse can be unpacked using CDS (or CDA, if we refer specifically to the analysis). We draw on the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016) which attends to the social/historical context of the texts of study and analyzes the 'macro-structure of discursive strategies, argumentation schemes and other means of linguistic or semiotic realization' (Wodak, 2021, p. 73). Specifically, we adopt DHA's model (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016, p. 32) which includes the following three dimensions: (1) identify 'the specific content or topic(s) of a specific discourse', (2) investigate the 'discursive strategies', and (3) examine 'the linguistic means (as types) and context-dependent linguistic realizations (as tokens)'.

We use Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) to help us deconstruct non-verbal data found in the twitter thread we examine, such as memes, figures, images, and emojis. Multimodality, which originated from social semiotics in the 1990s, highlights the way that different modes work together (e.g., written text, typeface, images, memes, music, font, etc.) to create a message (Jewitt et al., 2016). Since this paper examines social media and the way it is used by Italian netizens (including right-wing politicians) to construct and resist discourses of nationalism, we paid attention to the way that people, actions, and events were recontextualized semiotically (van Leeuwen, 2008) in memes/cartoons/figures, etc. attending to elements such as (multimodal) metaphor and metonymy. By multimodal metaphor we mean metaphors (comparisons of two things that are similar in one important way) that work

across multiple modes. This means in order to understand them, you need to access more than one mode, e.g., image and written text (Forceville & Urios-Aparisi, 2009). Metonymy is a type of figurative language that lets us say things with less words than we would normally need by using one well understood aspect of something to stand for the whole, or something related to it (Gibbs, 1994; Littlemore, 2018). Because a few words are chosen to represent a larger issue, metonymies can highlight or hide things we want readers to know or not know. Metonymies are important in building the foundation for metaphors such as IMMIGRANTS ARE DISEASE, a historically common metaphor in immigration discourse which draws on the NATION AS BODY metaphor (Musolff, 2016). We also utilized MCDA to explore whether social actors were categorized as individuals or part of a cultural/racial/ethnic group, what was included or excluded in the data, how subjects were represented in relation to the viewer (e.g., camera distance, angle, and gaze), intertextuality (what other events do you need to know about to understand the image/meme), and what actions social actors are seen as doing (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996/2006; Machin & Mayr, 2012; van Leeuwen, 2008). We will explain these in more detail in the next section.

In addition to utilizing MCDA to examine nationalist discourse, we drew on theories of counter-discourse to examine how Italian Twitter users resisted this discourse. Counter-discourse can be defined as ‘knowledge, theories, and histories that emerge as a direct challenge to commonly held deficit-oriented beliefs about racial groups and social phenomenon’ (Brown & Brown, 2012, p. 11). Counter-discourse opposes dominant narratives, but it also negates claims by those in power and provides alternative ways of viewing the issue (Terdiman, 1985, p. 149). People engage in counter-discourse in order to understand how the dominant discourse naturalizes how we understand the world around us (Terdiman, 1985, p. 149) in order to challenge these discourses (Moussa & Scapp, 1996, p. 88).

Although the study of counter-discourse is fairly new, several scholars have done work in this area which has influenced our own work (e.g., Gu, 2014; Macgilchrist, 2007; Wu, 2018). Macgilchrist (2007) studied news items of the Russian-Chechen conflict and determined five major counter-discourse strategies used: 1) Invert the dominant view by negating it; 2) Provide a parody of the discourse in which the style of the dominant discourse is imitated and exaggerated for comic effect; 3) Complicate and provide nuance for the issue by breaking down simplified narratives; 4) Reframe the issue by ‘reconstruing it within a different set of knowledges’; 5) Radically reframe the issue by negating the original perspective and blending dialog with other perspectives with inversion of the mainstream perspective (Macgilchrist, 2007, pp. 76-82). Wu (2018, p. 64) studied Chinese Weibo (aka Chinese Twitter) users and the way they used Weibo as an indirect form of resistance to the Chinese government. They found the most common strategies to be quoting cross-platform accounts by witnesses and resisting through the creation of rumors and satire/ridicule. Gu (2014, p. 80) also found that creativity and humor were used by Weibo users to work collectively to ‘raise concerns, express disagreements, and request explanations on policies’. Although our study is informed by this work on counter-discourse, more studies are needed that detail successful strategies of resistance in order to provide people with the tools to fight back during current times in which far-right discourse is normalized (Wodak, 2020). Consequently,

our paper will not only deconstruct nationalist discourses, it will also analyze resistance to it, using the tools and theories mentioned above.

4. Method

4.1 Data Collection

As previously mentioned, our interest in this topic grew from Giorgia Meloni's influence as a female politician (and her party's increasing popularity) on social media, but also because her social media posts provided a good example of the way that COVID-19 has been weaponized by far-right parties. After reading through multiple threads of social media discourse during the time period of July 27-July 30 regarding the arrival of migrants and COVID-19 and tracing much of the Twitter and Facebook conversations back to Meloni through her own posts and re-posting/sharing of her posts, we decided to concentrate our analysis on one thread that she started regarding COVID-19 and the arrival of immigrants to the Italian coasts in July 2020.

We decided that Twitter better suited our purpose to narrow more detailed and targeted comments since a maximum tweet has a 280-character length while Facebook comments can be up to 8,000 characters. We then defined our research criteria through the Twitter feature 'Advanced search'. Our research criteria were: 1) Period: July 27th, 2020 until July 30th, 2020; 2) All of these words: Migranti e Covid-19 (Migrants and Covid-19), co-occurring and as separate lexemes; 3) From these accounts: @GiorgiaMeloni. We narrowed our focus to this particular thread (retrieved on September 21, 2020) based on the following factors: 1) the number of comments and 2) the presence of visual content in the comments. The thread chosen included 59 tweets, with 3,300 likes and 721 retweets among which some were repeated and not considered. After retrieving the thread with comments and beginning the analysis, we noticed that some of the comments were deleted and more were added. In the end, we limited our analysis to those comments found in our initial retrieval on September 21st.

4.2 Data Analysis

For each of the comments and associated images we analyzed, all authors individually coded them as AGREE (concurring with Meloni's tweet which positions migrants as a threat, particularly because of COVID-19) or DISAGREE. We then met to discuss our categorizations and for each of the comments, we referred back to the literature (in particular Wodak et al, 2009; Wodak, 2015, 2021) in order to determine the underlying rhetorical strategies used as well as topoi or strategies of argumentation. We then created Tables 1-3 (to be presented in the Findings section) which organize the strategies from most commonly found to least commonly found in our data. Because our data is only one representative sample of the types of discourses circulating about these events on Italian-language Twitter threads at the time, we do not attempt to make general statements about patterns of discourse, rather, our goal is to show one way in which this was accomplished and how it was received in real time by Italian Twitter users. As such, we divided the data to show first, overall, how many commenters agreed with Meloni's discourse and how many did not

(Table 1, presented in the Findings section). We then created Tables 2 and 3 to show how those who agreed with Meloni's position on the events constructed their nationalist discourse as well as those who opposed it provided counter-discourses that gave alternative ways of framing. Through several discussions involving all three authors, final categories were determined and Tables 2-3 were created. We then took salient verbal and visual examples of the most common strategies and analyzed them in detail referring to our MCDA tools and literature on nationalist and counter-discourses. These examples are presented in the next section.

5. Findings

Table 1 depicts the overall pattern of the thread of analysis in terms of how many commenters agreed or disagreed with Meloni's original post and the ideologies that go along with it. The first column depicts their position on her rhetoric; the second column provides an example of a follower's comment that reflects that position; the third column accounts for the number of comments for that position; while the last column expresses the percentage of total comments in support of that position. In translating the thread from Italian to English, we decided to replicate the punctuation and capitalization as well as the abbreviations in the original.

Attitude	Example (Translated from Italian)	Tokens	%
Agree	"What the news journalists and regime magazines do not say and do not show is how many migrants are positive for Covid-19". Lamorgese is filling the emergency centers...	34	51
Disagree	But Covid-19 does not exist anyway, right? That is, it exists only and exclusively among migrants. It is a racist virus. The 35 thousand deaths from the cold do not count.	30	45
Neutral	The minister of the interior has migrants with Covid-19 transferred to The center-right regions. No immigrants transferred to Emilia, Puglia or Tuscany. Almost all of them are in Sicily, Abruzzo and Calabria.	3	4
TOTAL		67	100%

Table 1. Positions of Giorgia Meloni Twitter Followers on the Relationship between COVID-19 and Migrants (Accessed on September 21st,2020) *Repeated tweets were not considered

Table 1 shows that there were only slightly more commenters that agree with Meloni's anti-immigrant stance and its connection to COVID-19 than those who disagree. This was surprising, given that one would assume that discourse on Meloni's Twitter feed would attract more viewers with the same opinion as her because users tend to 'select sources based on ideological proximity, shielding them from different opinions and reducing their exposure to opposing views' (Rivero, 2019, p. 66). However, it is clear from our analysis that for almost every commenter that agrees with this rhetoric, there is the voice of someone that

opposes it. We now turn to the way in which nationalism was weaponized to represent migrants and delegitimize the current government in our data.

5.1 The Construction of Nationalist Discourses

Table 2 presents the preferred strategies used by Meloni or her followers to AGREE with FdI's (and Meloni's) position on migrants and COVID-19 as presented in her Twitter thread. The tweets chosen as representative of the strategies analyzed in this table are all from followers. As mentioned earlier, our sample is small, and hence our focus is not on generalizing these findings to all nationalist discourse on social media but rather to show how Twitter threads can be analyzed for stance in political discourse analysis such as this. We modeled Tables 2 and 3 after Wodak et al., (2009) (including the origin and selection criteria of the categories) and we discuss the argumentation schemes and linguistic means of realization as part of our analysis and apart from the table.

Strategy	Example (Translated from Italian)	Tokens	%
Delegitimation of Current government	What is worse? A few denier idiots or a WHOLE government that lets illegal immigrants that test positive for COVID escape right under their noses in reception centers? And they let them escape while they send the military with machine guns leveled at bathers on the beaches that are sunbathing. Poor Italy.	7	29
Othering	The video of their disembarking from the patrol boat of the coast guard at Lampedusa of the 11 Tunisian "poor migrants" with straw hats, set of suitcases, sunglasses and fashionable clothes. They will be supported by Italian taxpayers.	6	25
Directly addressing Meloni	It's useless to give the news- I repeat that there are all the elements for a complaint of an epidemic but none of YOU do it, your honor (talking to Giorgia) please give me an answer thanks.	3	13
Casting doubt	What the news (TG) and the regime don't tell you is that they don't let you see...how many migrants are testing positive for Covid-19. Lamorgese fills up the emergency centers.	2	9
North vs. South	Take them in the North!!!	1	4
Discrediting opponents	How these PD-idiots make me laugh with their comments - spreading lies - they have poison in the body...	1	4
Warning of loss of national autonomy/ independence	But what solidarity! We need to get some balls. Stupid Italians!	1	4
Cultural racism	It was during Ramadan and he hadn't had an adequate dinner...	1	4
Perpetuation/ Defense	Mess of a government- Movimento 5 stelle-PD - IV are the cause of the bewildering/disconcerting invasion of migrants and to bring pandemic to Italy to US Italians- to make restrictive laws for COVID-19 and who invades us to go around Italy - contagion and pandemic. Italy has become the den of African migrants, let's stop them.	1	4
Intertextuality (reporting news)	Very serious the two cases of the Civic Hospital and Ingrassia, healthcare workers and patients are at risk of personal safety.	1	4
TOTAL		34	100%

Table 2. Strategies from Twitter Thread (AGREE)

For Meloni and commenters that agreed with her --that migrants bring COVID-19 and therefore the government must put into action stricter immigration policies -- the most common strategies in our small sample used to construct this discourse were *delegitimation* of the current government and *othering* of migrants (e.g., creating a national Other, not like ‘Us’ Italians). We will now analyze in detail several examples of each of these strategies (which often overlap with other strategies) found in the data.

The first example (a tweet by Giorgia Meloni) illustrates *delegitimation* and was the lead thread analyzed in this paper. It is addressed to the Italian region of Basilicata (and its inhabitants called Lucani) in opposition to the decision of the Italian government to move ‘Covid-19 positive immigrants’ to their region:

(1) **Solidarity:**

Solidarietà ai lucani. La Basilicata è stata la prima Regione Covid free ma dove il virus non è arrivato da solo il virus ci ha pensato il Ministero dell'Interno, trasferendo a Potenza e Matera decine di immigrati positivi al Covid sbarcati a Lampedusa. Un governo di ingenui incompetenti
[Solidarity with the Lucanians. Basilicata was the first Covid-free Region but where the virus did not arrive alone, the Ministry of the Interior took care of it, transferring dozens of Covid positive immigrants who had landed in Lampedusa to Potenza and Matera. A government of incompetent fools].

In this tweet, Meloni discusses the decision of Interior Minister Luciana Lamorgese to direct immigrants that had travelled to Lampedusa, Sicily to the Basilicata cities of Potenza and Matera. Example (1) illustrates how Meloni used her political position and media influence to delegitimize the Italian government and its inefficiency in controlling and securing Italians, particularly through the derogatory expression incompetent fools [*sprovveduti incompetenti*]. Using the strategy of delegitimation held together by the argumentation scheme (or topos) of incompetence and threat, she places those who do not want COVID-19 in their region as diametrically opposed to the current government. At the same time, she incorporates a strategy of unifying her party’s complaints about the government with the people of Basilicata (and hence, attempting to widen her party’s support to Southern regions) through expressions such as solidarity with the *Lucanians* [*solidarietà ai lucani*]. This expression appears to be an attempt to unify regional identity with a national identity, combating what Pollice and Miggiano (2020) refer to as a regional ‘we’ which ‘bears its own integrity to defend and searches for its own distinctive representation’ (p.179).

In expressing solidarity with Lucanians, she is drawing Southern voters into her realm by taking advantage of local characteristics (Gattinara, 2016). Namely, it is the perception that migrants who reportedly tested positive with COVID-19 were transferred to this region. In addition, she spreads the false idea that immigrants carry COVID-19 more than Italian citizens do (e.g., *transferring dozens of COVID POSITIVE IMMIGRANTS*). The nomination strategy seen in the expression *Covid positive immigrants* [immigrati positive al Covid] is particularly effective because this DEFINING PROPERTY FOR PERSON metonymy immediately binds the virus to the Other, and reinforces this idea that migrants carry the disease. Later we discuss how similar tweets in the thread adopt this same metonymy (or similar ones) using repetition as a rhetorical device to linguistically foreground the idea and make it persuasive even though there is no evidence for the claim (Johnstone, 1987). This topos of

threat is nothing new in anti-immigrant discourse. It carries an inherent threat of personal violence towards others because, as an argumentation scheme, it implies that if someone is a threat (e.g., migrants with COVID), something must be done about it (e.g., stricter immigration policies that will end up harming migrants/refugees). What she does not provide in her tweet are specific facts regarding how many actually tested positive (e.g., dozens) and whether or not they became infected before or after landing on Italian soil. She also incorporates sarcasm (e.g., The Ministry of the Interior *took care of it*) to mock and convey contempt for Lamorgese's transfer of migrants to Basilicata.

As a follow-up, Giorgia Meloni retweeted a picture of one of her previous tweets (from a different thread), to reinforce and instigate more of the same followers' comments. In our data set she never answers tweets addressed directly to her but instead reposts new timelines or her own tweets that reinforce her first tweet (Example 1). As Rogers (2019) states, one of the main functions of this type of discourse is to maintain or redirect attention to specific issues, thus managing to influence the agenda of online public discourse.

(2) Georgia Meloni's retweet:

Questo Governo non subisce L'ondata migratoria, ma ha contribuito ad essa. Mentre multava i commercianti che manifestavano e rincorreva gli italiani con i droni, ora fa scappare gli immigrati clandestini che se ne vanno in giro per L'Italia dopo aver violato la quarantena. Non siamo rimasti 2 mesi chiusi dentro casa per poi far scoppiare nuovi contagi perché non sappiamo controllare chi entra illegalmente in Italia. [This government is not undergoing the migration wave, but it has contributed to it. While it was fining vendors who demonstrated and chasing after Italians with drones, now it lets illegal immigrants roam around Italy after violating their quarantine. We haven't been locked up indoors for 2 months to now spark new infections because we don't know how to control those who enter Italy illegally].

This tweet refers to government virus control measures such as fining people without masks or who violate quarantine and compares it (sarcastically) to their control of immigration. Using the strategy of *delegitimation* (of the governments' actions vs. Italians and migrants) and employing the topos of comparison which juxtaposes the treatment of 'us' Italians vs. 'them' (e.g., migrants), she reproduces a national identity in which Italians are the 'we' that are being unfairly treated while migrants (e.g., 'they' - NOT Italians) are treated better. She also employs the strategy of othering in several ways. First, she refers to migration as an *ondata migratoria* [migration wave], which compares migrants metaphorically to a dangerous tide that invades Italy (and hence must be stopped). Moreover, using the metonymy *immigrati clandestini* [clandestine immigrants = illegal] in which the literal meaning highlights the hidden nature of their migration, but also by referring to their immigration status as illicit, she puts migrants in the frame of crime, (and disease) leading to metaphors of MIGRANTS ARE CRIMINALS. The juxtaposition of negative things happening to Italians (e.g., fines and drones) vs. positive things for migrants (being free to roam around Italy) helps to strengthen national identity since Italian citizens are viewed as prisoners (e.g., locked up indoors for 2 months) in their own country, constantly monitored even by drones, while the *illegal immigrants* are free to go around and infect the citizens. *Fining vendors who demonstrated and chasing after Italians with drones* are also good

examples of what Wodak refers to as perpetrator/victimizer reversal (Wodak, 2015, p. 19) in which the real victims (migrants who are denied human rights and equality and the government who is doing their duty to protect the weak) are seen as the perpetrators while Italians who benefit in many ways from migrant workers in Italy are the ones we should feel sorry for.

Continuing this same topos of comparison in which the treatment of *Italians* is juxtaposed with the treatment of migrants, there were several tweets that included visual communication such as memes or cartoons that also use the strategy of delegitimation. The cartoon in Example (3) (below) is also a good illustration of multimodality on Twitter and how it works in subtle ways to produce nationalist ideologies combining the strategies of delegitimation of the current government with othering of migrants.

(3) **Delegitimation and Othering.**

ALT! LEI STA METTENDO IN SERIO PERICOLO LA SICUREZZA NAZIONALE! [Stop! You are putting national security in danger!] © 2020, Ghisberto (Reprinted with the author's permission.)



This example was accompanied by the following comment:

‘Cerchiamo di MANDARE IN GALERA quei delinquenti di politici che permettono a clandestini anche infetti di entrare in Italia illegalmente e che vengono poi spalmati diligentemente e capillarmente sul territorio mettendo a rischio la vita, la sicurezza e la salute dei cittadini!’ [Let's try to PUT IN PRISON the delinquent politicians that permit illegals who are also infected to enter Italy and then spread diligently and widely throughout the territory putting at risk the lives, security and health of citizens!].

Above, Ghisberto, a well known Italian author of satirical cartoons, portrays the arrival of immigrants by German boat (suggested by the German flag in the picture) in an Italian port during the pandemic. The German NGO (non-governmental organization) boat Sea-Watch has conducted search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean since 2015. On 12 June 2019, the boat Sea-Watch 3 rescued 53 migrants off the Libyan coast and - without the Italian authorities' approval- decided to dock in the Sicilian port of Lampedusa (Geddes & Pettrachin, 2020) causing a political and public debate. The military here is drawn as securing the beaches recalling the previous examples. The cartoon says *STOP. Sir, you are seriously endangering national security*, while behind them migrants are landing in the port not wearing a mask. It is not clear if the White Italian man stopped by the military is actually wearing a mask, but he is walking his dog. This is a sarcastic reference (which would be easily recognized by most Italians) to the government rules that permitted citizens to leave their homes to walk their pets accompanied by a self-certification, while all others could not leave their homes during the lockdown. All around the military small words are scattered such as *untore* [infector], *autocertificazione* [self-certification], *mascherina?* [mask?], *delinquente* [criminal], *torna a casa* [go back home!], *favorisca i documenti!* [please show me your documents], which are sarcastically addressed to the only Italian citizen on the beach instead of the newcomers. Here again, there are military forces on the beach similar to (3) in which the military strictly controls Italian citizens but allows immigrants to go wherever they want.

Attending to the images in the cartoon, it is important to notice how migrants are represented. For example, the immigrants portrayed have dark skin (implying they are racialized Others) and are sometimes shown wearing clothing that indexes Muslim countries (e.g., hijab or burqa) as seen in Example (4).

(4) **Indexing African Muslim Dress** (enlargement from Example 3)



Migrants in this cartoon are also portrayed as having financial means since most of them are well dressed, own cell phones and selfie sticks to take selfies as if they are on vacation like a wealthy tourist (see Example 5 below). This illustrates the topos of entitlement, which was a common theme in the comments that accompanied the strategy of legitimation in that we can justify not taking in these migrants because (we are putting forth the claim) they are wealthy and hence do not need to come to Italy. Intertextuality in this cartoon references another episode that caused uproar during this period in Italy, in which a boat with immigrants landed in a small port and the people in the boats were photographed wearing straw hats, carrying suitcases and a poodle on a leash, making the media portray them as well-off vacationers, rather than refugees seeking asylum (Marceca, 2020).

(5) Immigrants with cell phones and selfie sticks (Enlargement from Example 3)



Example (5) illustrates the delegitimation of the government which allegedly limits the freedom of its own citizens who are constantly under strict supervision and fined if they transgress, when instead migrants are free to do what they want and are housed in elegant 4/5 star hotels (mentioned in several of the comments in this thread) and viewed as vacationers. The cartoon, the words in it, and the comment of the person who posted it reinforce the concept of 'us' citizens versus 'them' immigrants. The comment gives voice to the substantial portion of Italians who felt vulnerable to what (for them) appeared to be a threat to their health, well-being, and to the cultural integrity of the country. Even the tweet from Example 3), *Let's try to put in prison the delinquent politicians that permit infected illegals to enter Italy and then spread diligently and widely in the territory putting at risk the lives, security and health of citizens*, reinforces the view of Italians who do not feel that the government is fulfilling their requests for protection from the threat of an Otherness that invades, contaminates, and dilutes the sense of 'we' and 'us.'

As White (2020) points out, infectious diseases have been associated with othering throughout history. Pandemic outbreaks create fears, and fear generates xenophobia and racism. The comment specifically calls immigrants infected and states they *spread* the infection among Italian citizens while official data shows minimal effect from new arrivals. Immigrants are *spread* like a disease (hence the metaphor IMMIGRANTS ARE DISEASE), which gives the reader a sense that both are the same thing. However, according to the bulletin 'Covid-19 epidemic' (Task force COVID, 2020), '75 percent of the positives are Italian, infected by other Italians.'

It is also significant that most of the migrants depicted in the cartoon have dark skin. This is not just because many migrants arriving are from African countries (e.g., Nigeria, Tunisia) and Pakistan (Varrella, 2021). In fact, White migrants that arrive by plane or other entry points do not receive the same media attention, a point made by Geddes and Pettrachin (2020). They note that the immigration issue has tended to narrowly focus on boat arrivals. But also, dark-skinned migrants do not fit the contemporary notion of 'Italianness' (Armillei, 2016), and the exclusion of Black migrants in the imagined nation of who is Italian is often predicated on a racialized narrative of 'cultural incommensurability' (Holmes, 2000) in addition to supposed 'biological inferiority' (Perrino & Jereza, 2020, p. 816). This 'cultural incommensurability' is embodied by images such as (4) and (5) which index the Muslim religion (i.e., in opposition to Christianity). Furthermore, the darker skin color as opposed to the very white (almost pink) Italian man with the dog and the Italian military who under their masks have light skin juxtapose who is Italian and who is not in the imagined community. Images such as this categorize migrants as part of a cultural and ethnic group through their attributes (skin color, dress) and even exaggeration of features (e.g., large lips) which recall the minstrel images of the stereotyped physiognomy of Black people in the US (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 146). This exaggeration of physical features adds to the overall strategy of negative racial stereotyping which occurs also through attributes and homogenizes migrants as the Other. Having shown a variety of argumentation strategies for constructing nationalist discourses regarding migrants and COVID-19, we now turn to the way a significant number of commenters resisted this discourse.

5.2 Resisting Nationalist Discourses

As mentioned earlier, nearly half of our data consisted of counter-discourses, which negated untruths presented in Meloni's (and her followers') tweets, but also presented alternative ways of viewing migrants and migration in its relation to COVID-19. Table 3 presents the most common strategies to resist nationalist discourse that tied COVID-19 to migrants in Italy, again, adapted from Wodak et al. (2009). Due to the scope of this paper, we will discuss in detail just a few salient examples from the table.

Strategy	Example (Translated from Italian)	Tokens	%
Satire/ridicule/ irony	Salvini is tragicomic in his wanting to argue that Covid-19 no longer exists but that migrants are infected.	18	47
Delegitimation	An obsession!! They are more controlled than you in the square eating for free ... you are the worst!	6	16
Labeling government strategies	And we put sick migrants in hospital and asymptomatic positives in prepared foster homes, not on ghost ships! Enough of this racist government.	4	10
Invert the dominant view by negating it/ complicate and provide nuance	Anyway this #right with zero IQ has really pissed me off. I would like to respond to such ignorance that the landings of #migrants have always increased in the summer period with calm sea .. from Oct. to March no one ever arrives...and enough with the bullshit # Covid-19.	4	10
Radical reframing	It is false that black migrants bring Covid-19 into our home, that is, In Italy. IF ANYTHING THE CONTRARY HAS BEEN PROVEN: They fall ill with Covid-19 after arriving on Italian soil!	3	8
Control the narrative through social media sharing	The national network for combating hate speech and other phenomena asks the region of Calabria and any other public institutions to avoid associating Covid-19 with migrants.	2	5
Intertextuality (aligning with Trump)	fascist, racist, homophobic! Ah fake news even, fake news!	1	3
TOTAL		38	100%

Table 3. Strategies from Twitter Thread (DISAGREE)

As Table 3 shows, (similar to what Wu 2018 and others have found), satire/ridicule/irony was the most common strategy in our data to show disagreement with and resistance to nationalist discourses of othering. Our first example shows how ridicule and delegitimation was used as a tool of resistance to RWP discourses on Twitter.

(6) Ridicule and delegitimation:

Li hanno rilasciato tipo allo stato brado? Dovevano lasciarli morire in mare? Dovevano portarli in altre regioni? Sai elencare i problemi ma mai una soluzione reale. Lamentona. [They released them like in the wild? Should they let them die at sea? Did they have to take them to other regions? You know how to list the problems but never a real solution. Big complainer].

Example (6) is one of several tweets which directly addressed Meloni's initial thread, accusing her of complaining about immigrants but never providing a real solution to problems and ending the comment by calling her a *lamentona* [big complainer]. According to Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999), delegitimation is realized through four main strategies and here it is achieved by the moral discursive strategy of the comment itself. The question 'Should they let them

die at the sea?’ triggers a moral concept and invites a moral-based interpretation. In this case, delegitimation is a way to show the negative ethical values in the social context and why it is not morally correct to follow them. The topos of decency is also evident in this comment which invites us to think of immigrants as people and not animals that can be released in the wild or things that can sink in the sea. Immigrants are people in need of help and decent human solutions should be sought. There are several possible explanations for why the use of satire/irony/ridicule was so popular as a form of counter-discourse. First, humor can be one way to get a point across without crossing boundaries of civility that might cause comments to be deleted, as found by Gu (2014). Second, Macgilchrist (2007) observes that humor is an important strategy on social media. Funny or ironic/sarcastic tweets tend to be shared more often, and hence they have more influence. Example (7) illustrates the strategy of radical reframing, which is used to negate and invert the mainstream view of the issue.

(7) Radical reframing:

I migranti portano il covid-19? Ovviamente no. Una serie di notizie false o manipolate smentite e spiegate. (Internazionale, 29 July 2020)[Do migrants carry covid-19? Obviously not. A series of false or manipulated news items/stories denied and explained.]

Radical reframing (Macgilchrist, 2007) was one of the less common counter-discourse strategies found in the thread analyzed, but we chose to discuss this example to show how intertextuality was used on social media to resist far-right/RWP discourse. In this case, the tweet strongly negates the proposition that immigrants bring COVID-19 and provides a linked news article with its cover image as proof of the assertion (*Internazionale*, 2020). In the tweet *Do migrants carry covid-19? Obviously not. A series of false or manipulated news denied and explained*, there is no space for doubt that the news that immigrants bring COVID-19 is false and the article which accompanies the tweet explains this, providing a good example of how intertextuality is used in counter-discourse. As Macgilchrist (2007, p. 89) states, radical reframing would appear to have the most effect when marginal discourses are reproduced in dominant media, and the news article that accompanied the tweet should have the answers we are seeking. However, the title does not confirm the statement of the comment above, but instead, it is a series of unanswered questions enticing the reader’s curiosity and commanding the reader (using the imperative) to ‘Read’ as such:

I migranti portano Covid-19? C’è stato un aumento degli arrivi via mare? Perché arrivano direttamente a Lampedusa? Quanti migranti positivi al Covid-19 sono arrivati in Italia? Perché lasciano la Tunisia? Leggi. [Do migrants carry Covid-19? Has there been an increase in arrivals by sea? How many Covid-19 positive migrants have arrived in Italy? Why do they leave Tunisia? Read.]

In the article, the picture caption states, *A migrant got off the Moby Zazà ship where he went through quarantine* (I migranti portano il Covid-19?, 2020). The reader can only trust the caption since the place where the potential migrant comes from does not have a name on it and it is only possible to see a nurse/doctor at the door and two policemen outside ready to direct the migrant’s next destination. One of the most important answers addressed in the

article is that only 1.5% of migrants test positive upon arrival to Italy, a low percentage that could easily be contained. Additionally, in the same article, the epidemiologist confirms that ‘irregular migrants’ are currently the most controlled people, adding that instead, intercontinental travelers should be better controlled since they arrive from areas where the pandemic is high. This assertion is reinforced by the tweet we chose as representative of the reframing category in Table 3 (*It is false that black migrants bring Covid-19 into our home, that is, in Italy. IF ANYTHING THE CONTRARY HAS BEEN PROVEN: They fall ill with Covid-19 after arriving on Italian soil!*) This comment negates the false idea that migrants (and Black migrants in particular) bring COVID-19. But it also provides an alternative view by pointing out that migrants are more likely to contract COVID-19 from Italians. Unlike the comment analyzed before, this does not contain data or any kind of information confirming what it states.

In this case, as in several of our examples, typography itself creates meaning (Ledin & Machin, 2018). When Macgilchrist (2007, pp. 83-89) writes about radical reframing, she suggests four levels of explanation for the success of this strategy and one of these is visible here: lexicogrammar and the specifics of the language used. In this case, uppercase letters are used (e.g., *IF ANYTHING THE CONTRARY HAS BEEN PROVEN*) to express exasperation about the fact that the issue even needs to be discussed, and to emphasize the point the commenter wants to make. To this individual, the truth is obvious, and they are frustrated that it continues to be questioned.

6. Conclusion

Using Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) to explore a case study of one Twitter thread, we were able to shed light on the intersection of human migration, right-wing populism (RWP) and COVID-19 in the specific context of Italian social media discourse. Consistent with the established wisdom on RWP (e.g., Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018; Woods et al., 2020), our analysis provides a window into how the global health crisis has delivered discursive opportunities for populist right-wing parties to elaborate on entrenched narratives of anti-elitism and xeno-racism. In our data set, participants in the discourse expressing agreement with Meloni’s statement most frequently used the strategies of delegitimation and othering in their contributions. The use of delegitimation in this thread perpetuates the RWP narrative of anti-elitism (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018), the notion that right-wing audiences are the overlooked who are subjected to the state policies of a disconnected (i.e., illegitimate) elitist class. Likewise, the use of othering carries forward RWP strategies to dehumanize the individual, also noted in Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018). As the discursive strategies we identified are tied to existing RWP narrative structures, we interpret them as functioning to elaborate and reinforce RWP influence over present and potential audiences. Party campaigns to influence the national imagination in discourse are ongoing. As useful events present themselves, right-wing parties can weave the event particulars into existing narratives that are familiar to their audiences, thus helping to maintain (and possibly expand) their influence. The global health crisis is one such event. Our careful analysis of one Twitter thread presents one illustrative case of how RWP allows individuals to strategically link ongoing, emerging events into established narratives.

The contribution of our analysis is in the use of a multimodal lens which in turn made it possible to delineate multimodal relationships found in specific texts to convey subtle ideologically-laden messages to audiences in the know. Thus, our position is that MCDA holds an important role in supporting empirically-based models of how ideologies are circulated in public discourse.

Where we found agreement with Meloni's right-wing positions in the data set, we also identified participants expressing disagreement with or disapproval of Meloni's tweet. That is, our analysis examined in detail the examples of counter-discourses that appeared in the data set and which in total nearly matched statements of agreement in frequency (i.e., 51% to 45%). For those resisting Meloni's positions, discourse participants used the strategy of *satire/irony/ridicule* with the most frequency. This finding is consistent with similar studies of counter-discourse (e.g., Wu, 2018). A strategy we specifically highlighted was *radical reframing* (Macgilchrist, 2007) in order to illustrate examples of intertextuality. The prevalence of counter-discourse intertwined in the Twitter thread under analysis clearly shows that social media platforms preclude political positions from standing in isolation as if in a vacuum. Instead, social media allows for a dialogue and reveals its power to influence positions that individuals express to one another in public and private settings. It also indicates to us that some Italian netizens are savvy to RWP discourses and continue to resist them in some public spaces. Continued study of RWP discourse is needed, especially with a focus on how RWP views are becoming mainstreamed globally and how they can be resisted.

Notes

1. We use the term 'netizens' to indicate people who spend a lot of time on the web as noted by Achmad (2021).
2. We follow CDS scholars Ivić and Petrović (2020) in capitalizing 'the Other' and the verb 'to Other' to distinguish it from the adjective 'other' as in 'other person' and not capitalize 'othering' as a process since its meaning as a verb is clear due to the 'ing' ending.
3. Far-right populism as a term, has recently begun to replace right-wing populism (RWP) by scholars in the field in order to account for a shift to the extreme or radical right by populist parties (Wodak 2021). We use the two terms interchangeably, and because many of the scholars we cite here use RWP, we will adopt this term especially when referring to their work.

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