

RESEARCH ARTICLE



# Enemies and friends. The instrumental social construction of populist identity through twitter in Italy at the time of COVID-19

Enzo Loner 

Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Trento, Trento, Italy

## ABSTRACT

Based on 2020 Twitter data, this article studies the social construction of populist identity in Italy. Starting from Tajfel's social identity theory (1978), the research aims at dissecting the elements at the basis of the populist identity construction process. The analysis focuses on both quantitative analysis and qualitative inspection of the tweets of four populist leaders, namely Salvini (LN), Meloni (FDI), Berlusconi (FI), and Di Maio (M5S). Results highlight the outgroup's position and its functional role in strengthening relative deprivation to facilitate ingroup identification. In addition, the populist social identity is built on group membership and the biased comparison between the ingroup and one or more outgroups. Results demonstrate how leaders' strategies change based on being in government or not and according to their position on the left-right axis. In this context, the pandemic offered a further political opportunity, especially to those who have found themselves in government.

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## Introduction

This work studies the social construction of the 'enemies' that leaders of Italian populist parties stigmatised in their communication through Twitter in 2020. In particular, it focuses on the instrumental use of the outgroup and the ingroup for the social construction of populist identity (Hameleers et al., 2019). Communication is a critical element of populists' success, especially when messages convey a strong emotional impact, often accentuated by the use of an aggressive or vulgar tones (Bracciale et al., 2021). However, with a few exceptions (Mazzoleni, 2003; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Loner, 2022), the communicative

**CONTACT** Enzo Loner  [enzo.loner@unitn.it](mailto:enzo.loner@unitn.it)

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aspects and the definition of the outgroups have only in recent years come to the fore in the study of populism (Aalberg & de Vreese, 2016).

Although the concept of populism can hardly be summed up with a straightforward definition, many scholars agree that it is ‘an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’ (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). This definition highlights the division of the world between ‘us’ versus ‘them’. At the same time, it identifies populism as a thin-centred ideology which follows different political projects depending on the moment or convenience (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018). Taggart (2004) underlined this last aspect by speaking of a ‘chameleonic’ ideology to depict a flexible vision that cannot simply be described in terms of left and right (March, 2017).

Right-wing populist communication frequently focuses on immigration and security. For example, Trump, Orbán, Salvini, and Le Pen often used these issues during their electoral campaign. Noury and Roland (2020) point out that these topics mark the transition from traditional left-right cleavages to the new conflicts exacerbated by the 2008 economic crisis. In Europe, populist communication has cast doubt on the EU’s role, as illustrated by the Brexit and sovereigntist campaigns. In Italy, Pirro and van Kessel (2018) identified four central themes of populist communication: Euroscepticism, the economic crisis, migratory flows, and Brexit. In populist rhetoric, each issue represents an imminent threat. When the individuals feel threatened by the outgroup, activation leads to identifying with the ingroup. Therefore, communication can act as a trigger for this mechanism and produces a collective identity. Accordingly, the role of the outgroup is functional to the process of building populist identity, and, in the simplified communication of social media, it becomes the scapegoat of the ingroup’s stigmatisation (Sahyegh et al., 2021).

This paper examines the construction of social identity as a consequence of political communication, given the goal of strengthening consensus. In line with the premises of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), messages that emphasise ingroup threats and external causes should promote attachment to parties and leaders who claim to defend the interests of the ingroup. This strategy is so effective that recent research shows even non-populist leaders ‘do not disdain the adoption of typical populist rhetoric’ (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018).

However, there is little systematic research aimed at identifying how the ‘them’ and ‘us’ are socially constructed by populist parties adhering to different ideologies. The present work aims to contribute to research by studying the leaders of the four main Italian populist parties in 2020.<sup>1</sup> The selected leaders are: Matteo Salvini of Lega Nord (LN), the mainstream populist right-wing party; Giorgia Meloni of Fratelli d’Italia (FDI), the second largest populist right-wing party; Silvio Berlusconi of Forza Italia (FI), a centre-right party; and Luigi Di Maio of the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S). It should be noted that M5S is hardly classifiable using the left-right schema due to its ‘flexible’ ideology and eclectic strategies (Manucci & Amsler, 2018; Mosca & Tronconi, 2019).<sup>2</sup> Italy is a relevant case of study in that not all mainstream populist parties are right-wing, and some were in government and others in opposition during this research.

### ***Theoretical framework***

This paper builds on Tejfel’s social identity theory (1978), which offers a useful framework for studying intergroup relations and understanding mechanisms such as ingroup bias, intragroup homogeneity, and stereotyping (Brown, 2000). According to this model, the distinction between interpersonal and group position is relevant (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Individuals process information in a biased way based on their group membership. The social identity of individuals is built based on group membership and the comparison between the ingroup and one or more outgroups. Evaluating these different positions also affects self-esteem. Finally, the ingroup compares its condition with the outgroup. At the same time, the comparison is simplified and parametrised according to belonging to predefined categories, thus favouring the birth of stereotypes. To summarise this theory: identity results from a collective process where the ingroup’s identity is defined by who is not part of this ingroup. Positive qualities are attributed to the ingroup and negative ones to the outgroup. Hence, the relative deprivation perceived by the ingroup through relationships with others is what matters.

The construction of populist identity can also be understood in terms of this process. Effective communication in this sense becomes the main factor for leaders to increase their consensus. Populists propose a simplified view by stating that they speak in the name of the silent majority – made up of honest and uncorrupted people – whose interests are trampled on by elites or corrupt minorities (Canovan, 1999; or Erisen

et al., 2021 for recent empirical research). Simplified interpretations of reality are influential because they offer a less complex situation and are, therefore, immediately understandable and trigger political activation. This Manichean view represents politics as a clear dichotomy between the ‘pure people’ and the ‘evil elite’ (De la Torre, 2017), or by ‘us’ versus ‘them’. Disintermediated communication can emphasise differences, and the search for a visible scapegoat – connected in some way to a real problem of the ingroup – becomes prevalent (Hameleers et al., 2018). Wodak (2019) describes this process by studying the narrative of far-right populists. She observes how the trajectory of identity construction follows three steps. The first is the spread of fear. The second step adds the search for specific scapegoats. Finally, the last one foresees the advent of the saviour: the populist leader who solves the problem, for example, by closing ports in the case of immigration. The feeling of being part of a group oppressed by a corrupt elite that does not represent the people (but instead seeks to pursue its own interests) could fit these steps well for right-wing and left-wing populism (Kramer, 2014). For example, in the case of Italy, the LN campaigned against the immigrants (‘them’) accused of disinheriting the natives (Padovani, 2018; Ruzza, 2018; Berti, 2021). Another example is the battle of the M5S to defend citizens (‘us’) against strong powers, such as the European Central Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the EU, and the privileges of national parliamentarians (Font et al., 2021).

Populism, however, can hardly be classified exclusively following a simple left-right division. For example, Norris (2019) identifies two additional cleavages. The first stems from the authoritarian-libertarian space, which concerns compliance with social norms, social security, and fidelity to the leader in the authoritarian case, and attention to personal freedoms and pluralism in the libertarian. The second cleavage, populism-pluralism, divides the idea of power to the people against corrupt elites on the one hand and the idea that elected institutions can legitimately rule on the other. Nevertheless, the division between right and left can be helpful to better frame the ideology used to define outgroups.

Regarding Euroscepticism, right-wing populists formulate their speeches in an exclusionary manner, highlighting the loss of sovereignty (of the ingroup) due to the outgroup, i.e. the EU (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2020). Left populists present discourses in a more inclusive key, where they blame austerity policies promoted by the EU Parliament and highlight inequalities between countries or segments of the population (Roch, 2021), a result in line with the Laclauvian discursive

construction of leftists' identity (Mouffe, 2018). In the case of the Spanish left-wing populist party Podemos, however, Sanders et al. (2017) find an exclusionary and stigmatising narrative of people identified as the caste.

Although descriptive, Rooduijn et al. (2019) offer a valuable tool for our analysis. They classify the main parties according to a few but fundamental parameters (populism, far-left, far-right, and Euroscepticism), which certainly have the advantage of favouring empirical research. On the other hand, Canovan (1982) observes that many attempts to define a populist theory have failed because they are too broad and therefore imprecise or, on the contrary, too restrictive. It is, therefore, necessary to specify the context. For example, in a study conducted in Greece, Tzatsanis et al. (2018) observed how the placement on the left-right axis mediates populist anti-immigration attitudes. In his analysis of the English populist parties, March (2017) finds that left-wing populists are more socio-economically and inclusionary-centred, focusing their campaigns on unemployment, women, the disabled, LGBT groups, immigrants, and religious minorities. Caiani and Graziano (2016) analyse the populist parties of the right and centre-right in Italy, concluding that their campaigns focus mainly on the economic and financial crisis and its management. In Belgium, Elchardus and Spruyt (2016) found that feelings of belonging to an unfairly treated social group as well as the impression that society is taking a turn for the worse foster populism more than a precarious economic situation. Erisen et al. (2021) note a constant relationship between conspiracy beliefs and populism, while the effect of other psychological dimensions varies with context.

Gerbaudo (2018) highlights the role of social media in populist communication by speaking of an elective affinity based on two elements. The first identifies social media as a channel through which people can express their needs. The second is the possibility that social networks become spaces for gathering people (or crowds) 'produced by the hyper-individualism of neoliberal society could coalesce into a new online crowd of partisan supporters'. The media and the process of the mediation of politics, in general, might pose challenges for democracy (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999) but can also facilitate the diffusion of ideologies both by placing them at the centre of agenda-setting and by amplifying the leader's voice (Brown & Mondon, 2021). Social media has gained more and more space compared to traditional channels, thus offering new opportunities for political communication. Twitter and Facebook have been studied mainly for their disintermediated character and because they have led to a significant increase in the flow of

information (Chadwick, 2007). This aspect has potentially democratised the communication process but introduced new biases, moderated by different levels of media skill (Sánchez Medero, 2021). Populist leaders have demonstrated a remarkable ability to communicate with new digital media. Social media fits well with a strategy of direct communication with the people and is in line with the anti-elite position of populism. These characteristics make populist politicians ‘hyperleaders’ because ‘they have in common specific attitudes and forms of adaptation to the social media logic. These attitudes include a much greater capacity to engage with the wide public, the strategic use of key issues and emotional frame management’ that they use to address the ingroup and the outgroups (Cepernich & Bracciale, 2019). For example, Breeze (2020) highlights three elements of Nigel Farage’s communication style over Brexit: the ability to evoke negative emotions, questions to provoke reactions, and the skilful appeal to common sense. Consequently, social media represents the ideal communication channel for the style adopted by populists when speaking to the public.

Furthermore, the frequent use of informal language gives the idea of speaking directly and sincerely (Bracciale & Martella, 2017). The adoption of this style at the social media level aims to foster an ingroup whilst simultaneously creating hostility towards elites (or representatives of power or other outgroups), appealing to common sense and moral sentiments. Therefore, the communication focuses on the sovereignty and the will of the people (the ingroup), which is continuously and directly triggered through appeals to common sense: words such as the people, the public, citizens, voters, people who pay taxes, residents, consumers, the population are just a few examples of this style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

Another perspective that can be useful to frame the construction of populist identity stems from the structure of opportunities. Populists can grasp and exploit structural and political factors to their advantage. These factors include the increasing distrust toward institutions and parties alongside other events, among which the migration crisis, the EU’s instability, and the pandemic might be counted (for a conceptualisation in the field of protest movements, see Meyer & Minkoff, 2004). Ferrari (2021) notes that low- and middle-income individuals are more vulnerable to economic crises. This sense of vulnerability fosters resentment towards immigrants perceived as an economic and cultural threat, increasing the likelihood of voting for right-wing populist parties. For example, Halla et al. (2017) studied the effect of immigration on votes

for the Freedom Party of Austria (a right-wing populist party). They found a significant relationship between immigrant inflow and the voting share for the party. In a sense, the increase of immigrants provides a political opportunity for the right-wing populists since they are visible in society. Therefore, these factors and the citizens' discontent are 'windows of opportunity' that populists can capitalise on and which offer fertile ground for the consolidation of the populist identity, thus becoming the target of their communication (Caiani & Graziano, 2019). Koopmans and Olzak (2004), studying the link between violence and public discourse in Germany, expand the possibilities of the political opportunity structure concerning the public discourses in mass media by introducing the concept of discursive opportunities. This term includes 'the aspects of public discourse that determine a message's chances of diffusion in the public sphere'. Three other elements are relevant, namely: visibility, which depends on the number of channels via which a message is carried and the requirement for such a message to influence public speeches; resonance, which concerns the ability to provoke reactions in public; and finally, legitimacy, which is 'the degree to which, on average, reactions by third actors in the public sphere support an actor's claims more than they reject them'. Interestingly, resonance can bring both positive and critical support, but what matters is that messages with more resonance become more relevant and increase the chances of having more space or attention from the public (Koopmans & Olzak, 2004). Hameleers (2019) notes that, in the Netherlands, Facebook offers a 'framework of discursive opportunity for Dutch citizens to vent their populist discontent and interact with like-minded others'.

After outlining the theoretical perspectives that contribute to the social construction of populist identity, we can summarise the theoretical expectations of the present work in these three questions.

The first question concerns the construction of the ingroup. There is an appeal to the 'people' in its various forms of citizens, public, voters, and taxpayers (e.g. Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). However, we might also expect to find references to inclusive dynamics that reflect each leader's different ideologies. In other words, is there an attempt to appeal to specific groups of citizens to build a populist identity? Or, on the contrary, does each leader aim to involve as many people as possible?

The second question concerns the instrumental identification of the outgroups. Since we are analysing leaders from the populist right and different political orientations, we can expect the outgroups to



differentiate according to their placement on the left-right axis. For example, right-wing parties should make more use of immigration rhetoric. Furthermore, the outgroup could also change according to the position in the government. Therefore, opposition leaders should focus more on demonising the corrupt elite against the silent majority. The question here is: are there differences due to the party's position on the left-right axis and whether it is in government or not?

The third question focuses on the role of the pandemic in the social construction of populist identity. This role can be framed in terms of political opportunity based on the leaders' position in government or opposition. Only Di Maio was part of the governing coalition, while the other three leaders were in opposition. Therefore, we might expect the opposition to make ingroup appeals against the government, speaking to those who have seen their ability to move limited by the lockdown and other restrictive measures. Conversely, Di Maio might try to strengthen the ingroup by leveraging the need to remain united to fight the pandemic.

### ***Methods & data***

This work applies a quantitative analysis of the tweets from these four populist leaders (Ignatow & Mihalcea, 2017). The goal is to identify recurring themes and patterns in populist rhetoric related to the definition of the outgroups and ingroups used to construct populist identity. The analysis focuses on the co-occurrences between words to identify word networks (Xu & Croft, 1998). Word co-occurrence measures how a pair of words occur close to each other within a text corpus (Chaudhari et al., 2011; Martinez, 2012). As co-occurrences are related to meanings (Lancia, 2007), the inspection of these networks can reveal the dynamics of communication in the context of the leaders' discourses. In particular, it identifies clusters of words without breaking the links with semantic analysis (Bourgeois et al., 2015). Consequently, it can highlight the underlying structure of these narratives. This examination focuses on the dynamics between the actors in the public arena and the collective construction of populist identity resulting from the leader's communication.

In addition, a qualitative inspection of the most-liked tweets for each leader was performed. The application of this mixed-methods approach does not overlap with the quantitative analysis. On the contrary, it complements the qualitative analysis, obtaining confirmation of the results



and a more precise vision of the communication strategies and mechanisms used to define the ingroup and the outgroup (Schneiker et al., 2019).

Although this paper does not apply the perspective of critical discourse analysis (Wodak & Meyer, 2001), it draws from this way of studying society. Certain points can be useful in dissecting the elements at the basis of the populist identity construction process. In the first place, the possibility of analysing political discourses whilst trying to understand what conflictual dimensions they evoke (Wodak, 2001). Secondly, considering social practices (including political communication) as part of a process where different social actors represent them differently based on their position within the practice (Fairclough, 2001). At the same time, discourses are relational and dialectical, as they involve interactions between actors and represent social life based on the different positions of the actors.

As we aim at unveiling the instrumental use of communication, it is necessary to identify which different discourses and styles prevail and which themes each leader appropriates to achieve their goals. Finally, it is helpful to contextualise each tweet in its broader sociopolitical and historical context (Reisigl, 2017).

The data for this analysis consists of tweets posted by the selected leaders between 1st January and 31st December 2020. Social media is widely used in Italy and offers an ideal basis for studying the communication of populists. Twitter is an ideal source (Cepernich & Bracciale, 2019), as it is widespread, counting over 11 million users in 2021 and a 34% share among all social media users aged 16 and over.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, it allows the deepening of real-time communicative rhetoric and lends itself to comparative analysis between leaders and parties across time. As stated by Flores (2017, p. 344), social media offers an 'up-to-date, spontaneous, bottom-up wealth of information on a growing number of people'.

The messages that pass through social media channels allow leaders to communicate in real-time with the public and fit both the disintermediated communication of populists as well as their direct and informal style (Bracciale & Martella, 2017). Moreover, given that populist political communication reduces complex issues to an all-encompassing binary divide in society (Hameleers et al., 2018), this simplification lends itself very well to the quantitative analysis of texts.

Tweets used in this work were downloaded through the open-source R programming language using the Twitter API throughout 2020, excluding retweets. The total number of tweets collected included 2546 tweets

for Salvini, 1368 for Meloni, 952 for Berlusconi and 760 for Di Maio, summing to 5625. Therefore, each leader used Twitter to communicate with the public multiple times a day. Salvini was the leader who tweeted the most frequently (almost seven tweets a day on average). On the contrary, Di Maio used this communication channel less often but posted two tweets a day on average.

The preparation of the corpus also included removing the Italian stop-words and stemming. The aim of stemming is to reduce variant word forms from common roots. After the data cleaning phase, the number of words in the data term matrix used for analysis was 78377. More precisely, the number of words analysed was 32040 for Salvini, 21300 for Meloni, 14362 for Berlusconi, and 10675 for Di Maio.

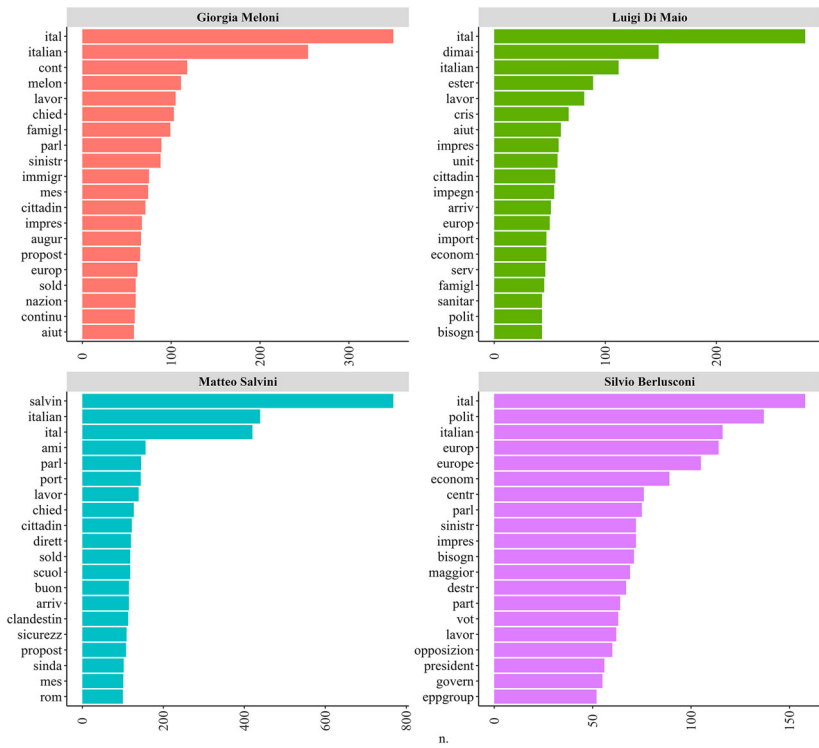
The following workflow was used to create the networks of word occurrences. 1) The bi-grams, i.e. the sequences of two words occurring one after the other, were identified through the R package *tidytext*. 2) Subsequently, only the bi-grams that occurred most frequently were selected (by inserting a minimum threshold value for each politician as indicated in the graphs with the networks below in this article). 3) Finally, the networks were created with the packages *igraph* and *ggraph*.

### **Matteo Salvini**

Matteo Salvini is the Italian leader who most often uses social media to communicate (Cepernich & Bracciale, 2019). According to the analysis of the most used words, it is possible to identify the subjects employed in his construction of populist identity (Figure 1).

In the first place, we find the subjects of the ingroup: the Italians ('Italian') and Italy ('Ital'), often called friends ('ami') or citizens ('cittadi'), and those who work ('lavor') or attend school ('scuol'). This result can be related to the rest of Salvini's communication that highlights the definition of the outgroup as the primary trigger point for his strategy. Indeed, previous research found that communication rhetoric was aimed primarily at stigmatising particular outgroups, like immigrants, Europe, or left-wing parties (Ruzza & Fella, 2011; Ruzza, 2018), including personal attacks aimed at damaging the reputation of his counterparts (Berti & Loner, 2021).

The tweet that received the most likes (8289) and retweets (2197) is dated 4 March 2000, and contains a video of a man lowering the European flag. The text sums up the process of identity building well: 'If Europe does not wake up, these scenes will multiply. Good morning,



**Figure 1.** Most used words.

friends, always forward and never give up, with the pride of being a great People’. Here we can observe the reinforcements aimed at building the identity of the ingroup: ‘the great People’. It is interesting to note that this reference is preceded by the word ‘pride’ and emphasised by the first capital letter (while in the Italian language, the term ‘people’ should not be written capitalised) and ‘Friends’ (again with the first capital letter). The outgroup, in this case, Europe, is also clearly defined. It is essential to add that ingroup and outgroup are defined not in isolation but in relation with one another.

This mechanism of identity construction appears in the tweet of 4 October 2020, which is the second most popular in terms of the number of likes (7041) and retweets (1504). The text is about the European Stability Mechanism (ESM, in Italian MES)<sup>4</sup> and says: ‘No MES, we are Italian! No confidence in the government, are you there? #NoMes’. Interesting is the presence of an Italian flag in the background. The text ‘We are Italian’ is used to construct the group’s identity, which is reinforced by comparing the outgroup (the government). Considering

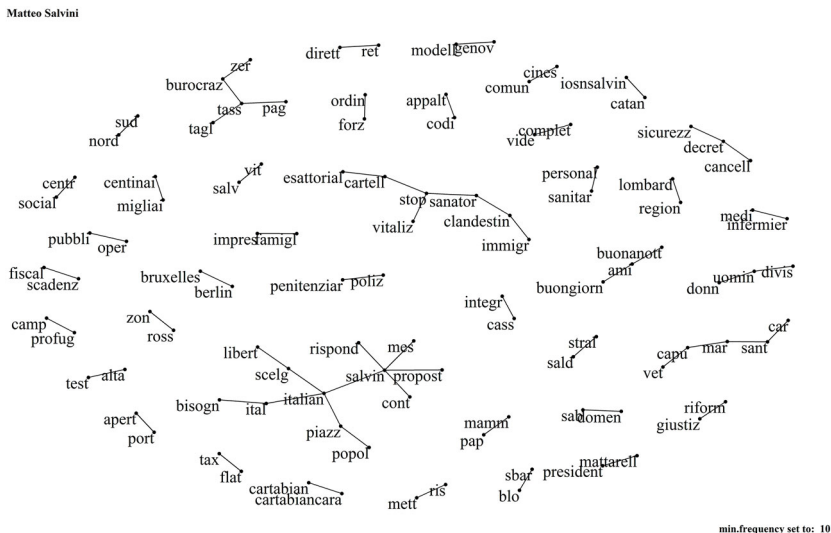
that LN was born as a regional movement, this message needs to be framed in the transition to a party with national ambitions. The definition of ‘them’ is also clear: the government. For this purpose, it is helpful to remember that the LN had been in government with M5S since June 2018 and then left in September 2019.

The network of co-occurrences between the words used in the tweets allows disentangling the identity’s construction rhetoric. Also, this analysis reveals a constant attempt to define both the ingroup and the outgroup (Figure 2). For example, as far as the ingroup is concerned, we find three citations regarding the armed bodies: the police (‘forz’, ‘ordin’), the women and men in uniform (‘donn’, ‘uomin’, ‘divis’, Figure 2, to the right), and the prison police (‘poliz’, ‘penitenziar’, Figure 2, centre). A fragment taken from a tweet from 14 June 2020 well represents Salvini’s effort to evoke the police:

‘Italy must also start afresh from order, security, the certainty of punishment and valorisation of women and men in uniform [...]’

This theme can also be linked to the will to accredit oneself as the leader who offers protection to the ingroup and connects with the theory of social identity and the right-wing vision of the strong man (McClosky & Chong 1985).

We then find much more inclusive calls, which reveal the attempt to activate extensive dynamics of identification: from ‘moms’ and ‘dads’ (‘mamm’, ‘pap’) to families and businesses (‘famigl’, ‘impres’, Figure 2,



**Figure 2.** Salvini. Network of words co-occurrences.

centre), and also friends ('ami') to whom he often wishes a good morning and good night ('buongiorno', 'buonanotte'). Then there is the President of the Republic, Mattarella ('president', 'Mattarell'), who is very popular in Italy and a reference to the geographical dimensions of the country, north and south. Finally, to those who fought the pandemic, namely doctors, nurses ('medi', 'infermier') and health workers ('personal', 'sanitar').

The outgroups – the 'them' represented as the threat that endangers the ingroup and evoked as 'evil' (De la Torre, 2017) – are substantively three. The first outgroup includes immigrants, cited several times and in various contexts: illegal immigrants ('immigr', 'clandestin'), refugee camps ('camp', 'profug'), but there is also an attempt to increase the emotional impact of the issue by giving it an exaggerated representation, speaking of hundreds of thousands ('centinai', 'migliai').

There is also a reference to stopping the landings of migrants ('blo', 'sbar') by closing the ports ('port', 'aper'). Salvini spent most of his activity dealing with this topic when he was part of the government. An example of how Salvini constructs populist identity by framing the outgroup represented by immigrants and the ingroup that includes mothers, fathers, children, and police in the same narrative is this tweet:

'I will return to #Mondragone soon, and I will do it to listen to mothers, fathers, children, farmers, and law enforcement agents who want to talk about this splendid land for its beauty, not for the Camorra or the exploitation of illegal immigration.' [...]. (30 June 2020).

The second threat is Europe. In the tweets, we often find mention of Brussels and Berlin, seen as the entities that would decide for the Italians. Here we find a precise call to mobilisation that can be summarised with the following cluster of words: 'respond to the proposal of Salvini' ('rispond', 'propost', 'salvin', Figure 2 bottom) and 'it is necessary that Italy' (also called the Italians and the people) 'take to the streets to choose freedom' ('bisogn', 'ital', 'Italian', 'scelg', 'piaz', 'libert', 'popol'). The request to activate the mobilisation process is direct. This group of words is an example of where Salvini addresses the public explicitly to ask them to do something. At the same time, he often uses the identification mechanisms – as for the tweets with more likes mentioned above – where the possibility of mobilisation is mentioned but not directly evoked.

Finally, the third outgroup consists of social centres ('centr', 'social', Figure 2, left). Social centres are simultaneously 'liberated spaces', empty and unused large buildings squatted by groups of radical left/antagonist activists to self-manage social and countercultural activities,

and 'political contentious places (Piazza, 2018). In Italy mainly developed within the extra-parliamentary left, calling for bottom-up participation. Their actions involved running the physical squatted space as a liberated and participative public place (Casaglia, 2018). However, in the 1990s, there was also a growth in extreme right-wing social centres (Di Tullio, 2006). Salvini has frequently had harsh clashes with left-wing voices on social media. Therefore, it is not surprising that he has tweeted several times on this topic. An example of this comes from two tweets, posted in succession, both dated 2 July 2020:

'After the aggression of the social centres, the head of the civil protection of Mondragone resigned, accused of having incited the violent protest against the League. A short time ago, threatening writings appeared against the League in Santa Maria Capua Vetere'. (901 like).

'Crazy stuff. I am not intimidated: we cannot wait to govern Campania to bring common sense, legality and respect. As promised, I will return very soon to meet the many respectable people of Mondragone'. (577 like).

The identification process in this case explicitly relies on threats against the League. In his speeches, Salvini repeatedly describes social centres as violent and threatening. He also connects the Civil Protection head to the outgroup for being accused of 'inciting violent protest against the LN'. There is a partial change of strategy in the second tweet, perhaps because the inhabitants of Mondragone may not have liked the first. He specifies, in fact: 'I will soon meet the many respectable people of Mondragone'.

Salvini shows finesse in using contextual elements to reframe his communication and to build a shared feeling of populist identification. On the one hand, there are an abundance of references to unitary identification and inclusionary objects. On the other hand, there is a clear representation of the 'them' as the danger from which it is necessary to defend. In the communicative rhetoric of Salvini, the outgroup, more than the centre of communication aimed at promoting identification, appears to be functional to the construction (by contrast and comparison) of the ingroup.

### **Giorgia Meloni**

The communication of the FDI is very concerned with appealing to group identity. Meloni mentions Italy and the Italians more often than Salvini does (Figure 1). Her communication also focuses on the citizens ('citizen'). Meloni uses the nation ('nazion') to emphasise the national-

conservative ideology of her party. These social identification subjects can help to make sense of the pillars on which FDI communication rests. The others are the family ('famigl') and those who work ('lavor'). These individuals are the subjects of populist identification. Therefore this process can be summarised with the three dimensions consisting of country, work, and family.

The tweet that received the most likes (9538) and retweets (2263) was posted on 16 August 2020, saying: 'If the government considers closing the #discotheques, it must also close the ports to illegal landings. We cannot ignore the link between increased infection and illegal immigration. Our productive sectors and companies are on their knees: Italy does not deserve this criminal government'.

This message well represents the elements of Meloni's communication strategy. There is always a biting reference to examples from everyday life. We find, however, concentrated in a few characters, the 'us' and 'them' on which the social identity of FDI is built. Most of the time, the subjects of social construction superimpose those of the LN. For example, the Italians ('us'), it is said, do not deserve to have this criminal government ('them'). Meloni attacks the government because, on the one hand, it decided not to close the ports and stop immigration ('them') accused of increasing the pandemic. On the other hand, the government wouldn't help companies and productive sectors ('us'), which, it is said, are on their knees. Overall, the identification mechanism focuses on the false news that immigrants are a source of contagion.<sup>5</sup>

In the second tweet with more likes (9373), dated 13 May 2020, Meloni again skilfully deploys this tactic by comparing the ingroup and the outgroup. 'Hundreds, perhaps thousands of Italians in recent weeks have cried for the despair of having lost everything or for fear of losing it and waiting for help that did not arrive. Tonight Minister #Bellanova was moved. But for the regularisation of immigrants. I am stunned'.

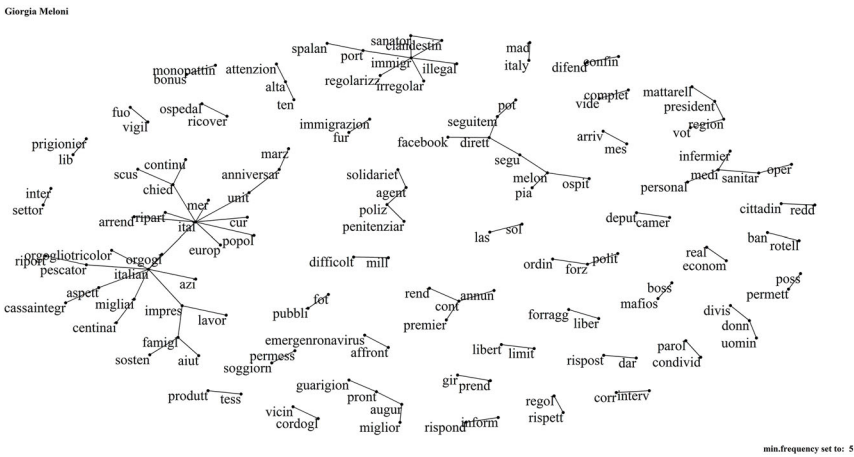
Here the comparison is between the minister of agriculture, Bellanova ('them'), who was accused of being moved by the regularisation of immigrants ('them') and the Italians who have lost everything ('us'). As for Salvini, mobilisation, in this case, is not directly evoked but is only implicitly suggested, as can be deduced from the final comments in both tweets: 'Italy does not deserve this government' in the first, and 'I am stunned' in the second. As opposed to the government and its component parts, the identity construction is constant, as confirmed by observing that the prime minister's name (Conte) appears to be the third most used word (Figure 1).



The network of co-occurrences between the words reveals other elements that make the style of Meloni and Salvini very similar. We find, in fact, the subjects on which she tries to build the identity of the ingroup are almost the same: the Italian people ('popol', 'ital', [Figure 3](#), centre left), families ('famigl') that must be helped and supported ('aiut', 'sosten'), as well as companies ('impres') and workers ('lavor'). There is also a reference to the President of the Republic.

Other similarities also concern references to: the armed forces, the police ('forz', 'ordin', [Figure 3](#) centre right), prison officers ('agent', 'poliz', 'penitenziar', [Figure 3](#) centre), the men and women in uniform ('uomin', 'donn', 'divis', about at the bottom right of [Figure 3](#)), and even firefighters ('vigil', 'fuo', top left), as well as the personnel involved in the fight against Covid-19, i.e. health workers, doctors and nurses ('operator', 'sanitar', 'medi', 'infermier', on the right). Therefore, there is an overlap and potential competition between the two right-wing leaders; they create a populist social identity that addresses the same ingroup.

Another close resemblance is the identification of the enemies against which one must defend. The immigrants – who are called irregular, clandestine, and illegal – are associated with the terms 'open the ports' ('spalan', 'port', [Figure 3](#) top) and with the pandemic. This pattern is another example – interpretable in terms of political opportunity – of how immigration can be exploited to facilitate the mobilisation and the construction of populist identity.



**Figure 3.** Meloni. Network of words co-occurrences.

The other enemies are identifiable in the government, personified by Prime Minister Conte and, as has already been seen for the leader of the LN, by Europe, particularly with the campaign against the European Stability Mechanism (MES).

### ***Silvio Berlusconi***

Berlusconi has always tried to place his party in the centre-right. The present analysis confirms this effort, as we find both centre ('centr') and right ('destr') among the words most often used (Figure 1). Compared to Salvini and Meloni, despite the frequent reference to Italy and Italians, we also find a call to Europe ('europ') and the Europeans ('Europe'). This element indicates the pro-European propensity that distinguishes FI from the populist parties of the Italian right that have, on the contrary, a strong sovereigntist ideology. Therefore, Berlusconi's populist identity construction follows a path that diverges from the other leaders because Europe is not stigmatised. Instead, the list of outgroups includes the left ('sinistr') and the government ('govern'). The communicative style does not tend towards mimicking the 'man of the street', characterised by a use of everyday language. On the contrary, it is more intimate and aimed instrumentalising Berlusconi's private life and activities.

Examples of Berlusconi's style can be seen in his most popular tweets. The first from 17 March 2020, got over 14000 likes and 2018 retweets, saying:

'I decided to make available to the Lombardy Region, through a donation of 10 million euros, necessary for constructing the 400-seat intensive care unit at the Milan fair or other emergencies'.

In this tweet, the enemy, Covid-19, is not the outgroup and is different and more general than was observed for other leaders.

The second example, posted on 25 December 2020, received 5888 likes and was retweeted 352 times:

'To all Italians, the most affectionate wishes for a merry Christmas.'

The text includes a photo showing the elderly leader in his house with his dog in his arms and in front of a Christmas tree. This message aims at promoting the construction of the ingroup's social identity on the occasion of one of the most beloved holidays in Italy. The context (the leader's house, the little dog, the Christmas tree) makes the leader appear closer to those he is addressing.

The network of co-occurrences (Figure 4) reveals again the attempt to build a populist identity as open as possible to the entire Italian population. Berlusconi makes much less use of the opposition with the outgroup

to reach this goal and the outgroup, when it is named, is the left ('sinistr'). There are references to Europe, the European people, President von der Leyen, and the recovery fund. However, they are seen more as an opportunity than enemies. He talks about Meloni and Salvini and the importance of joining forces. So, it is a wide ingroup from which the project of uniting all the right-wing and centre-right parties in a single party transpires. The project to legitimate his personhood and his party as the indispensable cement of the centre-right pole has always been visible in Berlusconi's communication (Fella and Ruzza, 2009), and the ability to build winning coalitions is a critical element of his success (Körösenyi & Patkós, 2017). An example of this ability is provided by the 2008 general election when he was able to unite his party with the then main conservative party, Alleanza Nazionale (from which Meloni's party would later be born) into a single coalition called the People of Freedom. (People of Freedom, PDL). The PDL was the winning party, obtaining over 37% of the votes. The subsequent government also included the Northern League. Over the years, Berlusconi has always pursued the dream of leading a united coalition of right-wing and centre-right parties.

We also find references to the general ingroup based on families (children, 'figl', and grandchildren, 'nipot', Figure 4, bottom right) and to sections of the population that might be closer to FI: merchants and artisans ('commer', 'artigian', Figure 4, centre, bottom). Finally, Berlusconi also cites law enforcement, doctors and nurses ('forz', 'ordin', Figure 4 middle left, 'medi', 'infermier', Figure 4 middle left).

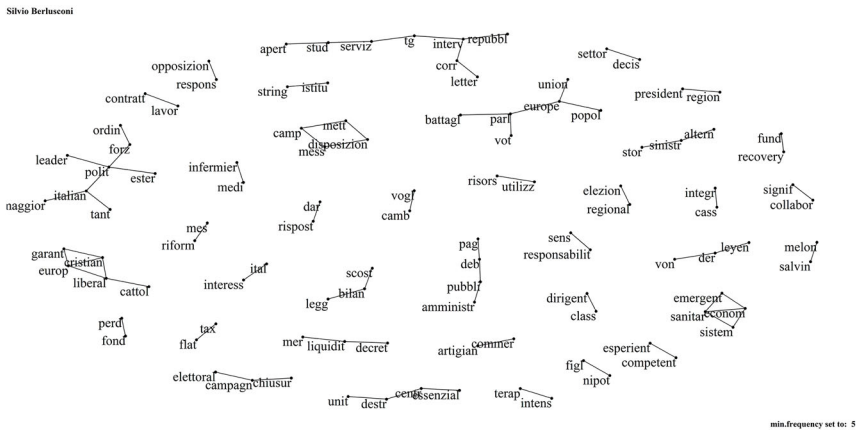


Figure 4. Berlusconi. Network of words co-occurrences.

What emerges, however, is an attempt to build a populist identity distinct from LN and FDI. The tone is less polemic and in so doing adopts a style which is more universal, calling for inclusion rather than exclusion.

### **Luigi Di Maio**

Di Maio's construction of the populist identity differs from the other leaders for at least three reasons. First, because M5S is not a right-wing party, the populist identity is built with less concern and opposition to the outgroups. Here the appeal is to Italy, and to Italians, often called citizens ('cittadin') and refers to families (Figure 1). Secondly, the M5S is a party with no single charismatic leader. However, Di Maio played a prominent role because he was the foreign minister in the governments led by Conte and Draghi.

His public messages often combine information related to the activities of the foreign minister with the effect of building a positive identity based on the actors that revolve around this institutional role. An example of this can be found in his reference to Europe and other international partners, especially in his most liked tweet (9690 like, in addition to 1943 retweets), posted 1st April 2020. This tweet shows photos of anti-Covid masks arriving from Turkey and says: 'Today a great gesture of solidarity has arrived from Turkey towards Italy. Solidarity that we are receiving from many countries. We are grateful for this. Our diplomatic activity does not stop. We go forward with the full commitment'. It is interesting that Di Maio also adds an emoji with a Turkish flag to the text. The presence of Di Maio in the photographs, alongside the Turkish staff, on the one hand, indicates this country is a supportive friend of Italians. On the other hand, it also promotes the foreign minister as the central protagonist in this act of solidarity. Therefore, Di Maio uses the pandemic as a political opportunity to construct a populist identity. However, it is linked to the leader's figure rather than the party.

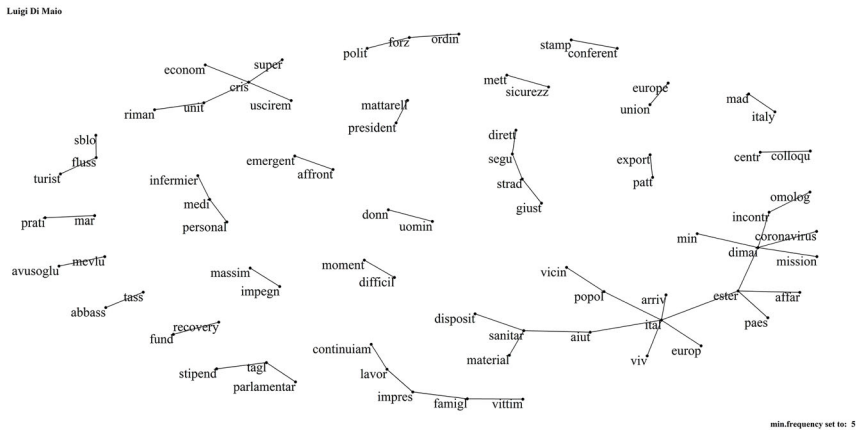
The third reason Di Maio stands out from the other leaders is that his party, in a short time, passed from the opposition to the government, which required changing its identity-building strategies. Di Maio's narrative about the pandemic is also clearly visible in the network of co-occurrences where, for example, health material and devices ('disposit', 'material', 'sanitar', Figure 5, bottom, centre) are cited, but also closeness to the people ('vicin', 'popol').

The second most-liked tweet (4048 and 679 retweets) dates 10 October 2020. The communication style follows, in some ways, that of Meloni and

Salvini. However, he reverses the perspective, as it overturns the ‘enemy’, identifying it in the two right-wing populist parties without mentioning them. The text says: ‘Italians must be helped, supported, reassured. However, I regret to see the opposition committed to generating chaos. Spreading false news, to give life to cynical electoral propaganda at such a delicate time, is an irresponsible attitude’. The definition of the ingroup is clear from the beginning: ‘the Italian people’ who, it is said, must be helped. On the other hand, this image is opposed and related to the oppositions (‘them’), which, it is said, spread false news and behave irresponsibly at such a delicate moment. Here, Di Maio shows that he learned from the two right-wing populist leaders and employs the same strategy to activate populist identification to his advantage, via the narrative process Wodak (2019) described.

Much of Di Maio’s communication is imbued with messages to instil optimism and hope. For example, the group of words that can be read as: ‘if we remain united, we will emerge from this crisis’ (‘riman’, ‘unit’, ‘uscirem’, ‘cris’, Figure 5, top left). Therefore, it is a ‘we’ (‘us’) that aims at activating positive emotions, and the effort is all about inclusion. Furthermore, as has already been pointed out, he presents himself as a friend of the Italian people. This results, for example, from the group of words including Di Maio, missions (‘mission’, Figure 5, large centre right sub-network) and foreign (‘ester’) to which Italy, aid (‘aiut’) and health care (‘sanitar’) are linked.

As for the other leaders, the search to anchor the shared identity construction on a positive vision calls into question men, women, families



**Figure 5.** Di Maio. Network of words co-occurrences.

and businesses, but also the European Union and the recovery fund, the President of the Republic (Mattarella), law enforcement, as well as doctors and nurses engaged in the fight against the virus.

## Conclusion

The first research question of this work concerns the construction of the ingroup. The results obtained show a straightforward process. In the first place, social identity is constructed on the basis of a generalised appeal to the Italian people, in its varying forms, such as the Italians, the citizens, or, simply, mothers, fathers, children, or friends. Further, each leader aims to expand the ingroup. It is possible to see the rationale for expanding the ingroup in two ways. First, the pandemic frame has seen new needs emerge in the communication arena, such as security from the virus, and new social actors, for example, all those committed to fighting it. Second, the attempt to broaden the ingroup is aimed at different categories as leaders must also consider the underlying ideologies of their parties. For example, in the two right-wing parties, there is a frequent appeal to the police forces and to all the military bodies of the state, which is ideally in line with right-wing authoritarian ideology (Norris, 2019), while for Di Maio and Berlusconi, this reference is nuanced. Even general references to the family, evident in Meloni and Salvini's tweets, follow the traditionalist-conservative vision of the right (Ben-Porat et al., 2021).

As for the outgroups mentioned, the leaders refer to different social groups. Immigrants, Europe, and the government are used as scapegoats for the problems of the ingroup by Salvini and Meloni, who are thus in tune with the logic of contrasting 'us' against 'them' (Padovani, 2018; Ruzza, 2018; Berti, 2021; Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2020). Therefore, the narrative aims to make the leader rise to the role of saviour, as described by Wodak (2019). Di Maio does not stigmatise immigrants. In this case, therefore, it is not so much 'being neither right nor left' (as the members of his party often define themselves) but 'not being right-wing' that makes the difference. As an outgroup, the left has instead become a less efficient target for populist communications, so much so that only Berlusconi mentions it. Di Maio's tweets are interesting in that, from his position in the government, he parries the dichotomous vision of Salvini and Meloni. He does it to build a populist identity opposing his ingroup to the two right-wing leaders. Although with different outgroups, Salvini, Meloni and Di Maio compare the outgroup and the

ingroup in the same tweet to build a populist identity. In this case, they apply the same style to different outgroups, and each populist leader demonstrates strong communication skills, also related to the strategic use of emotions as found in the case of Italy by Cepernich and Bracciale (2019) or by Breeze (2020) in the case of Farage in the United Kingdom.

As for the role of the pandemic in building identities, it was relevant, but each leader tried to exploit it differently. For Di Maio, it was an opportunity to strengthen his closeness to the ingroup, portraying himself as a friend of the people. The context of the pandemic was a 'window of opportunity' to spread his identity. The Covid-19 crisis also changed the situation in terms of political agenda-setting for right-wing leaders, pushing issues such as immigration and Europe to the periphery, which had worked well to build a populist identity up until the pandemic's outbreak.

The instrumental use of social communication to construct populist identity has been little studied empirically. This work showed that all four leaders made a great effort to activate the mechanism of social construction of the ingroup. Therefore, it cannot be said that right-wing parties focus exclusively on the demonisation of the other as a subject that endangers or encourages an unfair treatment of ingroup. Instead, the outgroup has a functional role in strengthening feelings of relative deprivation or threat to facilitate ingroup identification. Indeed, all leaders aim at triggering internal cohesion using terms such as Italians, Italy, people, citizens, and friends, leveraging opposition against one or more enemies (the European Union, immigrants, the government).

Considering the LN, the transformation from the regionalist party to a national force also necessitated a strategy change in the definition of the ingroup. In other words, aiming to be a national force meant leveraging nativism and sovereignty rather than the north-south divide to build a shared identity (Albertazzi et al., 2018; Ruzza, 2018). This new position meant moving from an outgroup identified in southern Italians, to an outgroup located outside the state's borders. Coherently with this interpretation, the focus shifted against immigrants and Europe. The change in strategy denotes the ability to exploit the opportunities of the political situation. However, it also confirms what we have seen as one of the constants of populist ideology, namely its flexibility or 'chameleonic' nature (Taggart, 2004).

Interestingly, there is a striking similarity between the strategy implemented by Salvini and Meloni. Salvini's tactical change almost led to overlapping between the communication strategy of the two right-wing



parties regarding the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Therefore, in the future, it will be relevant to investigate whether this strong resemblance will also lead to a confrontation between the two parties since they both fit in the same political space.

Our analysis also reveals the importance of the context and position of the party, which, together with its ideology, guides the communication strategy aimed at constructing identity, adapting it to what is most convenient given the situation. In the case of the M5S leader, for example, being part of a populist non-right-wing party and the government has undoubtedly changed the perspective and led, as we have seen, to build a shared identity by leveraging the emotions aroused by the management of the pandemic.

The effects of the pandemic on Italy go far beyond the high number of deaths. The research highlighted a negative impact on education, income, gender equality, and disparities between geographical areas, which worsened the situation of social groups that were already disadvantaged (Bonaccorsi et al., 2021; Cordini & De Angelis, 2021; Profeta, 2021). Furthermore, the virus – and the non-pharmaceutical interventions adopted by the government – also had repercussions on young people, families, and the entire population, forced to socially distance. Many activities, including sports, entertainment, catering, tourism, and travel were curtailed, with the corresponding economic and social consequences. The persistence of the emergency has created new categories of subjects to whom direct communication can be aimed with a view to building a shared populist identity. These categories are visible in Salvini’s messages to families and businesses; Meloni invoking for opening discos or help for ‘those who have lost everything due to the pandemic’, or, finally, in Di Maio’s tweets when he tries to reassure the population.

The contribution of this analysis to the study of populist identity construction can better be understood by citing Hameleers et al. (2019). Their research summarises previous research findings on the processes activated by populist communication. This multidimensional mechanism involves opinions, emotions, and behaviours: communication uses messages in which two processes that produce a binary and simplified vision of reality strengthen social identity. The first process aims to reinforce the ingroup seen as threatened and unfairly treated. The second assigns the responsibility for the unfair situation to the outgroup. On an individual psychological level, three mechanisms arise from this communication: the cognitive priming of the ingroup (or outgroup); stereotyping, which will be positive for the ingroup and negative for the outgroup;

and the blame attribution to the outgroup. These processes translate into three types of responses: emotions, for example, anxiety about the situation of deprivation or anger towards the outgroup; cognitions, such as a sense of threat or blame; and positive attitudes towards the ingroup and hostility towards the outgroup. Finally, the outcomes include political engagement, collective action, and support during elections. The present research adds to this model by examining the communicators and their social identity message framing, showing that not all leaders construct populist identity in the same way. The leader instrumentally uses the outgroups related to his position on the left-right axis and adapts the communication to the situation and to those he wants to address. For example, the two right-wing leaders (Meloni and Salvini) focus on immigrants and the government.

On the other hand, only Berlusconi used the left as an outgroup. Finally, Di Maio reverses the perspective by contrasting the Italians trying to survive the virus with the two right-wing populists. Therefore, the context, the target audience, and the position in which they find themselves ensure that the communication activates multiple social identity message framings, where the ultimate purpose is to construct the most appropriate identity for promoting pro-populist behaviour.

A further reflection concerns the change and adaptation of strategies to build a populist identity. Noury and Roland (2020) review the new cleavages that have led in recent decades, from the division between left and right to the growing importance of economic and cultural dimensions. The economic category includes the effects of globalisation and the tremendous financial crisis with the recession that has upset the world economy since 2007, creating new poverty and inequalities. Among the cultural dimensions, especially as regards the growth of right-wing populism, it is helpful to include the idea of ‘cultural backlash’ in a strict sense as a response to cultural changes – the ‘silent revolution’ – which have transformed post-industrial societies since the 1960s (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Noury & Roland conclude that the boundaries used to define the ingroups and outgroups have rapidly changed. New actors have appeared on the scene and are perceived as allies or as a threat. However, it is social media’s speed which is truly novel. The advent of new media allows leaders to engage their constituents without intermediation. Adapting to various situations, like a mirror of what is happening in the world, the leaders aim to strengthen feelings of solidarity, doing so by activating inclusionary and exclusionary mechanisms instrumental to forming a populist identity. It will be relevant for future research to study which

outgroups and strategies are used for the construction of social identity in other countries. Finally, it will be helpful to examine which outgroups become targeted once the pandemic ends.

## Notes

1. The parties were chosen based on the work of Rooduijn et al. (2019).
2. In the words of Mouffe (2018), the difficulty of classifying M5S also derives from the different way – outside the right versus left frontier – around which the speeches about people are built.
3. See Agcom (2021). Osservatorio sulle comunicazioni. n. 2/2021, and <https://www.agcom.it/https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-italy>, accessed December 2021.
4. MES (in English ESM) is “an intergovernmental organisation established by (EU) member states in 2012. Its mission is to enable the countries of the euro area to avoid and overcome financial crises and to maintain long-term financial stability and prosperity.” ([https://www.esm.europa.eu/about-us#headline-who\\_we\\_are](https://www.esm.europa.eu/about-us#headline-who_we_are)).
5. See [https://www.corriere.it/cronache/20\\_agosto\\_16/locatelli-cts-la-scuola-riap-rira-tutti-costi-l-epidemia-si-puo-contenere-6fab0e60-dfe6-11ea-b249-6fba5975045.shtml](https://www.corriere.it/cronache/20_agosto_16/locatelli-cts-la-scuola-riap-rira-tutti-costi-l-epidemia-si-puo-contenere-6fab0e60-dfe6-11ea-b249-6fba5975045.shtml).

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## ORCID

Enzo Loner  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5195-3376>

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