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Walking on the tightrope between moderation and radicalisation: the first 100 days of the Meloni government

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Abstract. As the fatal grip of the Covid-19 pandemic started to ease, in summer 2022 Italy underwent seismic political developments, which saw the establishment of the first totally populist radical right government in Italian history. On 25 September 2022, the general elections shook up the Italian political scene, with Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) scoring a resounding victory that earned the party the seat of the Prime Minister. Despite fears of a radicalisation of FdI resulting in a neofascist government, evidence points in a different direction. Therefore, the aim of this article is to investigate whether, in the first 100 days in government, FdI moderated, radicalised, or displayed continuity with its trademark ideology and manifesto pledges. While acknowledging the copious amount of bills, decrees, and laws proposed by the governing coalition, as well as a plethora of speeches they released, in the interest of space, the scope of this article is circumscribed to the analysis of the new executive, with a special emphasis on FdI, in the timeframe between the election results and the first 100 days of the new government. Considering this evidence, this article argues that FdI is definitely acting as a populist radical right party, tilted towards moderation, and, mostly, continuity with the 2022 electoral pledges, albeit with some oscillations to radicalisation.

Keywords: populist radical right, gender, immigration, Fratelli d'Italia.

INTRODUCTION

As for the new government born on 22 October 2022, it will face a number of immediate and serious challenges (...) leaving aside the need for PM Meloni and her party to reassure Europe that they have distanced themselves from their beginnings and also from the very radical anti-European positions. (Chiaramonte et al. 2023, p. 25).

This quote well encapsulates the conundrum this article tackles: in the first 100 days of Meloni's government, did Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) moderate? In July 2022, after the collapse of the technocratic government headed by former European Central Bank President Mario Draghi, international media and pundits expressed concerns for the outcome of the 25 September 2022 Italian national elections, which saw the populist radical right party FdI

score a resounding victory. The *Washington Post* published an article titled “Italy is on its way to being run by ‘post-fascists’” (Tharoor, 2022), which captured the fear about the reappearance in government of a party featuring a fascist lineage, and neofascist politicians and ideological remnants (Mammone, 2018). However, FdI’s leader Giorgia Meloni, as Italy’s first female Prime Minister, steered a more moderate course than expected, despite swift oscillations to radicalisation. Therefore, the aim of this article is to contribute to the budding literature on the recently installed Meloni government, by assessing the behaviour of FdI in public office. Although Italy represents a unique case study (as it is the first wholly populist radical right government in Western Europe), this article yields interesting results regarding the behaviour of wholly populist radical right governments that are not an unlikely prospective in Western Europe.

Methodologically, this article is explorative: it acknowledges that the first 100 days of Meloni’s government are not representative of Meloni’s government behaviour. Nevertheless, the first 100 days of government are a significant indicator of the government agenda and prioritised policies. This article applies qualitative text analysis to a variegated body of policy documents (bills, law decrees, and laws), the 2022 FdI manifesto, and speeches by members of the executive relayed through different media channels and delivered at critical junctures, such as on election night after the announcement of results, at the swearing-in ceremony and opening of the new Parliament (when the Meloni agenda was laid out), as well as in the social vlog series Meloni launched on her Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok accounts. This communication choice reflects recent trends with politicians reaching out to an audience cutting across different ages and levels of education through Twitter (see, for instance, Albertazzi, Bonansinga, Zulianello, 2021), and TikTok (see, for instance, Albertazzi, Bonansinga, 2023).

Political speeches and policy documents embody the outward image of the party in power, both in institutional and in less formal social media settings and allow to gauge the extent of its moderation vis-à-vis its attachment to radical roots, or continuity with the electoral pledges. The outward portrayal of a party has the drawback of conveying a homogeneous image of it, thus hiding the heterogeneity of voices animating parliamentary debates.

In this article, FdI speeches and policies are given historical depth by comparing them with the 2022 FdI manifesto pledges. The focal areas examined here are law and order, through the analysis of the so-called Anti-rave Decree; immigration policy, through the analysis of the NGO conduct decree; and economic policy,

through the analysis of the *Manovra*, i.e., the Annual Budget and the economic and financial directions laid out for the next three years. These three policy areas do not constitute the entirety of the Meloni agenda but are indicative of the priorities of the government. In order to enhance the breadth of analysis of the Meloni agenda, this article also probes policy stances in two additional pivotal areas: foreign policy and gender policy.

Theoretically, this article contributes to the literature on populist party behaviour and aims at shedding light on the FdI’s trajectory once in government. In so doing, it builds on the scholarly debates on the populist radical right ideology, policies, and behaviour when in government. The entry into government of populist radical right parties results in a host of different behaviours of which moderation is only one (Akkerman *et al.*, 2016).

In line with the focus of this special issue on Meloni’s government, this article demonstrates that Meloni’s government presents us with a curious mix-bag of elements of moderation, of continuity, and the occasional brief swings to radicalisation. Moderation is evident in the FdI’s further blunting of anti-EU attitudes, which was already present in the 2022 manifesto pledge of continuity with the Draghi agenda centred on international respectability and economic stability. Meloni, through strategic ambivalence, blends elements of moderation/continuity with the 2022 FdI manifesto pledges, such as supposedly pro-women’s rights, and an emphasis on security and on the fight of irregular immigration, with hints of radicalisation, such as a tough stance on law and order, reactionary views on gender, and nativism.

This article unfolds in the following way. A brief overview of the historical trajectory and the ideological makeup of FdI is provided, within the context of the 2022 snap elections called after the Draghi government’s shutdown. Afterwards, the article examines the mainstreaming efforts by FdI evident in the new government composition, which is juxtaposed to the ministries’ nomenclature portending potentials swings to radicalism. Then, the article unpacks the new government agenda, focusing on a selection of the most significant policies marking the first 100 days of Meloni’s government. In the conclusion, the article restates the protean entanglement of radical strands into a pattern largely marked by continuity and moderation.

AN UNCOMFORTABLE LINEAGE AND AN UNCOMFORTABLE MARRIAGE

Since its formation in 2012 until 2022, FdI had been consistently a bulwark of opposition in the Italian Par-

liament. FdI arose in 2012 from the ashes of the defunct Alleanza Nazionale (AN) as a nativist party calling for a strong state and putting forward an anti-elite and pro-people narrative. Following Mudde's seminal work (2007), this article recognises in FdI the core ideological attributes of the populist radical right: nativism, a strong state, and populism (which this article breaks down into people-centrism and anti-elitism)¹. FdI's trademark ideology developed since 2014 (Vampa, 2023) is undoubtedly marked by the call for the state to act tough against the perceived decline plaguing crisis-ridden Italy, by enforcing compliance with law and order and with socially reactionary values (Vampa, 2023); appeals to the ordinary people set against the negligent political elites (chiefly embodied by the EU and competing political parties) and against the out-group that allegedly menaces the national in-group composed of native Italians (Griffini, 2021; Puleo, Piccolino, 2022).

The categorisation of FdI within the populist radical right is not uncontested. Bruno (2023) defines FdI as 'far-right', which has moderated and mainstreamed. Jones (2023) concurs with this opinion, adding that, despite the FdI's backward-facing attitude looking at the past to protect the Italian nation from contemporary changes, the party has now been undergoing a transformation from the radical right towards the mainstream. While agreeing with the point about FdI's current trajectory from the right end of the political spectrum towards the centre, this article posits that FdI's ideology is better captured by the label 'populist radical right', which is one of the two strands of the far-right umbrella category, together with extreme right parties. What sets the populist radical right apart from the extreme right is the lack of the use of violence and neofascist symbolism in the former (Pirro, 2022). In fact, extremism broadly and neofascism specifically are not a hallmark of FdI, even if its descentance from AN carries a heavy legacy. AN was the post-fascist metamorphosis of the first Italian neofascist party, the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), although the extent of AN's allegedly complete distancing from the neofascist legacy of the MSI is debatable (Newell, 2000). What is undebatable is that FdI is rooted in the post-fascist tradition, but it estranged itself from its neofascist ancestors, and successfully inserted itself into the Italian democratic arena (Vampa, 2023), exponentially increasing its electoral gains. At the general elections in 2013 it polled at 1.94% (Greco, 2013); in 2018, it polled at 4.3% (Diamanti, 2018); in 2022, it gathered an extortionate share of votes with 26% (Ministero dell'Interno,

2022). Already in 2021, Albertazzi and Vampa had predicted the high probability of a populist radical right coalition running Italy, although the balance of power significantly tilted in favour of FdI at the expense of the Lega was hard to foresee.

The watershed was the summer 2022 government crisis, which provided a golden opportunity for FdI to cut a credible and well-reputed figure and make inroads into government. On 21 July 2022, then Prime Minister Draghi, a highly esteemed and trusted character at international level, lost parliamentary majority. Once the precarious compromise between ideologically disparate political forces underlying the political equilibrium had faltered, Draghi tendered his resignations. Italy's epochal political change was just around the corner and materialised as a result of the snap elections held on 25 September 2022. The populist radical right FdI joined forces with the populist radical right Lega and the populist right Forza Italia (FI) in the so-called 'centre-right' coalition (Bruno, 2023). Both the Lega and FI share an emphasis on conservative values, the protection of the national in-group, law and order, people-centrism and anti-elitism. These ideological features are, however, toned down in FI and more accentuated in the Lega, which promotes a strong state, nativism, and sharper populism, here articulated around the axes of people-centrism and anti-elitism.

FdI's coalition partners have a longer historical trajectory, starting with the opportunity, offered by the corruption scandal of *Tangentopoli*² in 1993, of arising as alleged defenders of the 'people' vis-à-vis the corrupt political system (Albertazzi, Vampa, 2021b). The Lega is also different from FdI in its initial essence: it started out as a regionalist party defending and demanding the autonomy of the so-called *Padania* (i.e., an imagined territory and community located in the North of the Italian peninsula), vis-à-vis the national government (Albertazzi, Vampa, 2021b). When the Lega founder Umberto Bossi fell into disregard and Matteo Salvini took on party leadership in 2013, the Lega underwent a nationalist shift away from regionalism and towards fully-fledged nationalism (Albertazzi, Giovannini, Seddone, 2018). Furthermore, both Silvio Berlusconi and Matteo Salvini boast a career at the helm of government, with Berlusconi heading three governments (1994; 2011-2006; 2008-2011), and Salvini co-heading the 2018-2019 Conte I government.

Given the different histories, leadership experiences, and ideological nuances characterising the centre-right coalition, internal squabbles are unsurprising. Berlusco-

¹ Following March's (2017) distinction of populism into people-centrism, anti-elitism, and popular sovereignty claims.

² Literally, *bribe city*.

ni's antics outlasted his electoral success, with Berlusconi being caught on camera in Parliament with a handwritten list of degrading adjectives branding Meloni as "opinionated, domineering, arrogant and offensive" (Kazmin, 2022). This was the result of frustration at Meloni's refusal to give Berlusconi's pupil Licia Ronzulli a key ministry. The scribbled note came under the lime-light when Berlusconi had an altercation with the Speaker of the Senate Ignazio La Russa (FdI), apparently over Berlusconi's order to FI senators not to vote for La Russa as Speaker of the Senate. While avoiding explicit fights with Meloni, Salvini still resists being side-lined by her. In his speech given on 26 September 2022, in the wake of the Lega's electoral defeat and the FdI's victory, Salvini sternly recognised Meloni's achievements, but cleverly concealed his party's defeat under a mantle of glorification for the Lega's achievements and its important task of being part of the winning centre-right coalition: "We shoulder a huge burden. (...) The Lega is the second party in government", Salvini boisterously claimed. Berlusconi's and Salvini's resistance to Meloni's leadership goes beyond anecdotal value, since it captures well their fear of being eclipsed by the undisputable winner of the elections.

FROM THE RIGHT...TO THE CENTRE?

The undeniable victory of FdI over its coalition partners raised apprehension among scholars and pundits, due to the neofascist lineage that sets FdI apart from FI and the Lega. While in the section above this article already set out its categorisation of FdI within the populist radical right, the move of FdI into power has implied moderating shifts towards the centre, and continuity with manifesto pledges, alternated with radicalising shifts towards the farther right end of the political spectrum. Indeed, the entry into government of the populist radical right does not unequivocally portend utter moderation or utter radicalisation across the board. In certain cases, participation in government has become a proxy for moderation, but taking up government positions is not the only condition for moderation, which may be driven by other factors, such as the need to broaden the electorate by co-opting ideological elements of mainstream parties. Moreover, entering government does not necessarily result in moderation. Instead, three possible scenarios open up when a party takes up governmental seats: moderation, radicalisation, or continuity. According to the inclusion-moderation hypothesis (Berman, 2008), some parties may moderate when entering public office, in order to appeal to

the median voter, develop policies, attend to day-to-day business, and reach compromises with coalition partners (Akkerman *et al.*, 2016; Berman, 2008). First, following the Downsian logic, parties entering democratic institutions strive to appeal to voters positioned at the middle of the political spectrum to enlarge their electorate and maintain their office (Akkerman *et al.*, 2016). Plus, parties in public office are committed to policymaking and implementation, in addition to running day-to-day administration (according to the so-called pothole logic) (Berman, 2008).

In the Italian milieu, FdI's need to attract the median voter and project themselves as responsible and responsive administrators tending to daily business and to the design and implementation of policies seems to be a plausible scenario supporting the inclusion-moderation theory. Even if FdI is the majority party in the centre-right coalition, they still need to keep the majority to stay in their leading position, by securing broad electoral consent. Digging deeper into the past behaviour of the Italian populist radical right when in power, one finds no scholarly consensus around the applicability of the inclusion-moderation thesis. Cavalieri and Froio (2021), using the analysis of parliamentary questions from 1996 to 2019 in Italy, demonstrate that populist parties in office do not behave radically, given institutional constraints and the desire to present themselves as responsible. Heinisch (2003) shows that the Lega in the 1994 centre-right coalition government did not deliver on its radical promises. However, institutionalisation does not always have a taming effect. Zulianello (2019) theorises that, through negative integration, populist parties in government retain their ideology challenging liberal democratic values of checks and balances and of pluralism. Minkenberg (2001) demonstrates that populists in government radicalised their positions on immigration, and Albertazzi and McDonnell (2005) argue that the Lega in centre-right government coalitions steered a middle course and kept "one foot in, and one foot out" of government. More recently, Schwörer (2021), based on the analysis of political communication on Facebook, shows that the Lega did not moderate its nativist messages when in the Conte I government with the Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S) (2018-2019).

FdI's leading role in government is itself a sign of the mainstreaming of this political party that, after building its reputation as an opposition party, was catapulted into public office. The Meloni government was quickly formed, compared to past governments that entailed a much longer negotiation period (Vampa, 2023), thus signalling responsiveness to and responsibility towards the 'people'. Despite vetoes on portfolio

allocation and intra-coalition disagreements, the resulting government composition reflects the FdI's trajectory into mainstream political power. Due to the compromise necessary to alleviate intra-coalition tensions, the number of ministries allocated to each party corresponds to the weight of said parties within the winning coalition. Out of 25 ministries, FdI gained 10 key ministries, twice as many as the Lega and FI pooled together (Openpolis, 2022). The presence of 5 so-called technical ministries is a testament of the intentions of FdI not to create a radical government, but to rely on experts allegedly without political affiliation. Nevertheless, most of the technical ministers are considered close to Italian right-wing parties, including Ministry of the Interior Matteo Piantedosi (former chief-of-staff of Salvini when he was Minister of the Interior), Minister of Culture Gennaro Sangiuliano, and Minister of Sports and Youth Andrea Abodi, whose political histories intersect with that of the MSI.

In the first few months of its life, Meloni's government combined moderate "reasonable and accommodating" measures and discourse, with a "frightening rhetoric" (Jones 2023, pp. 21-22), complemented with occasional slippages into more radical undertones. This clever combination has been boosted by a very well-thought-out marketing and communication strategy, led by the FdI's spin-doctor Tommaso Longobardi, who has carefully optimised messages and tailored them to a vast array of social media channels, including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok (Pregliasco, 2022), acting as echo chambers to amplify Meloni's messages. When officially presenting herself in her new role as Prime Minister, Meloni projected a soft-spoken and sugar-coated image of herself as a politician, a mother, and a woman, through an appeal to her ordinariness, and her phenomenal rise to prominence from humble origins (Meloni Discorso alle Elezioni, 2022). Meloni's self-representation as an underdog (Meloni Discorso in Camera, 2022), fighting her way from a marginalised neighbourhood in Rome to the Prime Minister role, is in line with the appeal to the people as the ordinary women and men struggling with their daily lives. In such a way, the FdI's appeal extends beyond the hardliners and involves a broader electorate: Meloni captures not necessarily radical voters, but also those seeking change and fresh air, disenchanted at the management of security, immigration, the economy, foreign relations, and the gender question by previous governing parties. FdI is now very satisfactorily polling at 29.7% (Quorum/YouTrend, 2023), and the first 100 days of Meloni's government have been judged as positive or fairly positive by 46% of survey respondents (Quorum/YouTrend, 2023). Moreover, the Global Leaders Approval Ratings produced for

the last week of January 2023 by The Morning Consult ranked Meloni sixth among the leaders of 22 countries (Morning Consult, 2023). Despite the sample being very limited and the geographical scope for comparison restricted, the mere fact that Meloni garnered 52% of approval from Italians is revealing of her unwaning popularity (Morning Consult, 2023).

MELONI'S MAKEOVER

Meloni's elision of her own political persona with the figure of an ordinary woman and an underdog has a twofold significance for the conundrum over the continuity, moderation or radicalisation of the party in power. First, Meloni signals her "closeness to the people", which is a key feature of populist parties (Albertazzi, van Kessel, 2021, p. 366). This does not imply any radical swing, and links back to Meloni's anti-elitist and people-centric stance that has been on display since the FdI's inception. It is a case in point that the 2022 FdI manifesto mentioned the terms "popular sovereignty" and "people sovereignty". Second, an aura of "civicness" as opposed to radicalism (Griffini, 2021) permeates all of Meloni's speeches through an emphasis on civic values, such as the respect for the EU, the rule of law, national security, and women's rights. These claims to ordinariness and civicness erect a façade that invisibilises more radical authoritarian, nativist, and reactionary ideological aspects of the new government led by FdI's Meloni. The strategy of building a civic façade has been observed in populist radical right parties across Europe (Halikio-poulou, Mock, Vasilopoulou, 2013), as an effort towards moderation of ideology and policies, and mainstreaming into leading positions of power.

Meloni's makeover as a moderate politician takes place not just in the domestic, but also in the international sphere, in the EU and beyond. This choice aligns with the FdI 2022 manifesto pledge to relaunch the EU as evidenced by the strategic selection of the EU as the destination of Meloni's first foreign trip, including a meeting with President of the EU Commission Ursula von der Leyen (who had previously expressed scepticism about Meloni's ability to rule), and with President of the EU Parliament Charles Michel (Roberts, Ross, 2022). The destination choice is a powerful statement of respect for the EU and of Meloni's commitment to the EU to ensure Italian economic stability. Clearly, Meloni backtracked on her fervent Euroscepticism (Puleo, Piccolino, 2022), despite being President of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) EU parliamentary group since 2021, which is located further to the right compared to

the more established European Popular Party (EPP) parliamentary group. Von der Leyen's visit to Meloni in Rome in January 2023 has been perceived as part of the attempt made by the EPP (to which von der Leyen belongs) to start a cooperation with the ECR led by Meloni (Vinocur, Barigazzi, 2023). FdI, indeed, before the 2022 elections enacted a moderating shift away from radical conflictual stances against the EU, towards the centre, with a pondered acceptance of the EU. This shift is aimed at gaining a respectable reputation abroad, thus ensuring beneficial and profitable international agreements on matters ranging from energy security to border security and economic funding. A well-respected international standing, in turn, enhances domestic popularity among the electorate. A moderate stance in the international arena could be already made out during the electoral campaign, in which FdI pledged its respect for the EU as an institution, but aimed at renegotiating with the EU the terms of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (known in Italy as with the acronym PNRR) (Garzia, 2022),³ on the grounds of their alleged unfairness to Italy (FdI 2022 manifesto).

Furthermore, Meloni has so far boosted her moderation and acceptance within a mainstream electorate, by remaining faithful to her electoral pledges of Atlanticism and support for Ukraine against the Russian invader (Chiaramonte *et al.*, 2023; FdI manifesto, 2022). The close diplomatic ties with Ukraine and with the EU are confirmed by Meloni's notable meeting in Kiev with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyi (Giufrida, 2023). In the run-up to the 2022 elections, the foreign policy positions on Russia's invasion of Ukraine distinguished Meloni from Salvini, who failed to unequivocally condemn Putin's invasion of Ukraine, and displayed erratic behaviour. First, in March 2022, he clumsily visited Przemyśl, a Polish town on the border with Ukraine, which resulted in him being ridiculed by the town mayor owing to Salvini's past friendship records with Putin (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2022). Then, in June 2022, he unsuccessfully attempted a visit to Moscow (Posaner, 2022). Meloni's and Salvini's diverging positions on the war in Ukraine created a fissure within the government coalition, and underlined Meloni's moderate stance with regards to the matter.

³ In Italian, *Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza*. It refers to the funds granted by the EU to Italy, upon approval of Draghi's demands, as part of Next Generation EU, to facilitate economic recovery after the Covid-19 pandemic. The amount of funds is divided into different instalments, whose disbursement is contingent upon meeting the criteria established jointly by the EU member state and the EU. The PNRR main pillars are green transition, digital transition, and social inclusion (Albanese, Simoni, 2022).

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Meloni's domestic and international self-representation is at odds with the modest oscillation to radicalism visible in the naming of certain ministries and in the choice of the highest parliamentary officeholders.⁴ FdI's founder Ignazio La Russa was elected Speaker of the Senate, after thunderous contestation, because of his vaunted neofascist roots evidently belied by the fascist memorabilia on display in his home (Castaldo, 2018). La Russa's counterpart in the Chamber of Deputies is Lorenzo Fontana, former Lega MEP, Eurosceptic and ultra-reactionary, amongst the founders of the World Congress of Families, an ultra-Christian association opposing LGBTQ+ rights and abortion (Migliaccio, 2022). Although the Speakers of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies are elected by the parliament, they represent the second and third highest offices of the state, they moderate and steer parliamentary activities, and represent the PM in her absence. Their election, therefore, symbolises the parliamentary majority's slight swing away from the centre.

The nomenclature of newly created or rebranded ministries is a further sign of centrifugal forces, although it reflects principles already enunciated in the FdI 2022 manifesto. The renaming of the Ministry of Economic Development into Ministry of Business and *Made in Italy*, and the rebranding of the Ministry of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Policies Agriculture with the addition of the term *sovereignty* reveal continuity with the FdI 2022 manifesto pledge to valorise "Italian excellence in the cultural, gastronomic, architectural, luxury, and entrepreneurial fields", and to bolster the agricultural sector, "one of the pillars of our Nation". The promise has also resulted in the creation of a fund for the Made in Italy, worth €5 million in 2023 and €95 million in 2024, and the allocation of a fund worth €25 million in the period 2023-26 for matters related to food sovereignty (Legge n.129, 29/12/22). The rebranding of these two ministries is in line with the Lega's and FdI's call for "taking back control" of the Italian economy that has been affected by processes of globalisation (Basile, Borri, 2022, pp. 366-367). Hence, the populist radical right aims at restoring sovereignty over national economic policy, which is blended with anti-globalism and a tenuous Euroscepticism (Mazzoleni, Ruzza, 2018). In doing so, populist radical right parties defend the national interest of the state vis-à-vis external threats, embodied, in this case, by the EU regulations on trade and agriculture, and by the global commodity chain that

⁴ For the full list of ministries and minister, see the Decreto-Legge 11 November 2022, n. 173.

sees Italian products as niche ones, and outcompeted by cheaper products manufactured in countries where the cost of labour and of means of production is cheaper.

The centrifugal force that sometimes entraps FdI is obvious in the rebranding of the Ministry for Family and Equal Opportunities with the insertion of the term *natality* as the centre-piece of the Ministry. The latter is headed by Eugenia Maria Roccella, whose appointment indicates a possible drift towards radical threats to abortion and LGBTQ+ rights. Although Meloni and Roccella swore they would protect the right of abortion, they epitomise the ambivalent gender policies of the populist radical right. On one hand, they allegedly protect women's rights; on the other hand, they are bound to a reactionary view of abortion rights, of women as intrinsically tied to motherhood, and of the sceptically-defined "gender theory", i.e. awareness of LGBTQ+ rights (see FdI representatives' declaration in Alliva, 2022).

Let's unravel the government's duplicity on gender matters more in depth. Meloni portrays herself as the embodiment of the emancipation of women, since she managed to break the glass ceiling of male-dominated politics. In her maiden speech in Parliament, she proudly affirmed: "I am the first woman to become Italy's Prime Minister. I have an enormous responsibility towards women who are victims of difficulties and injustice preventing them to affirm their talent or have their daily sacrifices recognised. (...) I owe a debt of gratitude to the women who enabled me to rise up the ladder and break the glass ceiling" (TG la7, 2022). Aligning with the FdI 2022 manifesto pledge of facilitating women's juggling of professional lives and motherhood, Meloni forcefully represents herself as a protector of women's rights and their affirmation inside and outside of the domestic sphere, thus alleviating "women's double-burden".⁵ Fiscal relief for families depending on the number of children, which is included in the end-of-year Budget Law (discussed below), can be interpreted as a non-radical measure geared towards the protection of women's rights.

However, undisputable evidence shows a shift of the new government away from moderation. Meloni's enduring alliance with the Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán and Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki (Jones, 2023), infamously known for their anti-abortion and anti-LGBTQ+ rights, casts a shadow over Meloni's claim of supporting women's rights. On the prickly issue of abortion, lack of specificity in the FdI 2022 manifesto regarding the "prevention" of abor-

tion allowed FdI to defuse criticism about a potential threat to abortion rights, while nodding at reactionary hostility to abortion. Roccella publicly stated that abortion is, "unfortunately", a women's right (La Stampa, 2023), and in the first 100 days of government, already four parliamentarians from FdI and their coalitional allies Lega and FI proposed bills insisting on the rights of the foetus. This hesitant stance on abortion rights risks infringing on women's reproductive rights and turning women's rights protection into a battle for the survival of the nation through the increase in natality rates (Colella, 2022). The 2022 FdI manifesto implies that abortion may be averted through financial aid to single mothers-to-be or pregnant women in financial hardships. This abortion prevention policy is meant to increase natality rates, which have been constantly dwindling. Indeed, benefits have been introduced for families with children, which would in turn increase natality. Other reactionary and radical gender-related principles guiding the new government are the protection of the supposedly 'traditional family' and of women's motherhood. Judging by the ministerial picks, the government is leaning towards a harsh rejection of the so-called "womb for rent", i.e., surrogacy, and of the right of adoption for civil partnerships (which in Italy lack legal equivalence to civil or religious marriage) as anticipated in the FdI 2022 manifesto.

FIRST THINGS FIRST: DOMESTIC SECURITY AND THE ANTI-RAVE DECREE

Not only boosting natality, but another government recipe to protect the nation is to boost security, in accordance with the FdI 2022 manifesto pledge of combating "degradation, drugs, and illegal activities". The protection of security and legality is not a guiding principle exclusive to the populist radical right. However, the scale of the emphasis put on law and order in the new government stands out. The very first bill proposed was, indeed, a decree-law against rave parties. Amidst the energy crisis, the cost-of-living crisis, the Ukrainian conflict, and the transition out of the pandemic, it sounds odd that the fixation of FdI was on raves, which are public gatherings held illegally on public or private soil, featuring loud techno music and drugs. Following the event of a banal rave party being held in Modena, the newly-sworn-in Minister of the Interior Piantedosi issued the so-called Anti-Rave Decree, which, at a closer reading, does not mention raves, but gatherings characterised by "the arbitrary invasion of public or private property, carried out by a group of more than 50 peo-

⁵ The double-burden, or 'double-shift', refers to the dual involvement of women in paid work outside their household, and in the unpaid care work inside their household (Hochschild, Machung, 2012).

ple [...] which *may* be a danger for public order or public health and safety” (Decreto-Legge n.162, 2022). In constitutional terms public gatherings may be banned only if they show evidence of menacing public order (Pini, 2022). However, in the Anti-Rave Decree the *evidence* of threat to public order as grounds for banning gatherings is replaced by the *possibility* of a threat to public order, as Partito Democratico (PD) representative Giuditta Pini (2022) criticises. Despite the criticism, the Anti-Rave Decree was turned into law at the eleventh-hour before the expiration of its validity, albeit with some modifications. In fact, the vagueness of the characterisation of “public gatherings” in the decree-law was overcome through a more precise definition of the banned public gatherings: the scope of such definition has been limited to “musical gatherings”, thus excluding the spectre of an authoritarian state precluding the right of assembly criminalising strikes or any other public gatherings of more than 50 people; moreover, forbidden gatherings have to pose a “concrete danger for public health and safety”, due to drug-smuggling and non-compliance with health and safety measures (Legge n. 199, 2022).⁶

Raves, therefore, became a flashpoint for the securitisation of society, through the introduction of a new crime type, which gives power to arrest, detain from 3 to 6 years, and give a fine between €1,000 and €10,000 to the event organisers (Decreto-Legge n.162, 2022). The Anti-Rave Decree is symptomatic of the construction of an emergency over unauthorised public events. “For a long time there have been people from all over Europe flocking to Italy to organise illegal gatherings plagued with violence and drugs, for the sake of having fun. Why are they choosing Italy as their destination, and they do not choose to go to France or Spain? Because we allow them [to hold these parties]”, claimed Meloni (Appunti di Giorgia, 3/12/2022). Also the Lega Chair of the Parliamentary Group on Justice Erika Stefani joined in the construction of a rave emergency, by affirming that raves bring insecurity, danger and critical consequences (ANSA, 2022). National security is heavy on the government’s mind: Meloni said goodbye to 2022 with the promise of defending the rule of law, because Italy is not a “banana republic” (Appunti di Giorgia, 30/12/22), and she welcomed 2023 by proudly announcing that in 9 days, the government operation *stazioni sicure* (literally, *safe stations*) had yielded satisfactory results: 1.5 kg of drugs were confiscated and 93 illegal migrants had been expelled (Appunti di Giorgia, 29/01/23).

The perception of emergency, though, is often subjective and may be subject to instrumentalisation by

populist radical right parties pandering to the fear of the ordinary people, in order to make shows of strength and bypass the regular parliamentary route of law-making. Indeed, decree laws (which need to be approved by Parliament within 60 days in order to become laws) are used to push for the government agenda by avoiding the ordinary lengthier and more contentious parliamentary route (Giannetti *et al.*, 2020). The Anti-Rave Decree was turned into law last-minute on 30 December 2022 (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2022). Despite its authoritarian tendencies, in her maiden speech in Parliament, Meloni relentlessly proclaimed FdI’s pledge to liberty and democracy (2022), thus putting an accent on the FdI’s trajectory towards the centre. Moreover, on the same occasion, Meloni made a major statement and denied any sympathy for anti-democratic regimes, including fascism; she denounced the 1938 racial laws as shameful, and vowed to combat racism and anti-Semitism (2022). This ingenious mix of moderate statements with more radical ones results in strategic ambivalence (Wodak, 2015), which is a discursive strategy deployed both to appeal to the core radical electorate and to extend the appeal to the median voter.

THE IMMIGRATION QUESTION AND DIPLOMATIC SKIRMISHES

National security is fostered also through the management of the immigration question. The FdI 2022 manifesto clearly proposed to control illegal immigration by stopping migrant arrivals, enacting a naval blockade, and establishing hot-spots in North Africa jointly with EU member states working together for an even distribution of regular migrants. Incidentally, the puzzles magazine handed out by FdI in the latest electoral campaign, contained a quiz asking what FdI’s proposal for irregular immigration was. The correct reply was “naval blockade”, among the unlikely options “open ports” and “money to people-smugglers” (Enigmistica dei patrioti, 2022). Apart from anecdotal evidence of the FdI’s tough stance on immigration proving its strong state and nativist hues, the occasion to test the manifesto pledge arose early and triggered a diplomatic incident with France. In October 2022, the vessel *Ocean Viking*, belonging to the NGO *SOS Méditerranée*, was redirected by Minister of the Interior Piantedosi from Italian ports to the French Port of Toulon. France Minister of the Interior Gerald Darmanin deemed the Italian decision as incomprehensible and, in revenge, encouraged all EU member states to follow France in suspending the reception of refugees now transiting in Italy. The government’s insistence on the reception of migrants on the part of France is con-

⁶ For the full text, see Legge 30 December 2022, n. 199.

sistent with Meloni's emphasis on the need for a concerted effort, likened to the Marshall Plan, on the part of European states to share the burden of migrant reception (Meloni Discorso alla Camera, 2022). Minister of Foreign Affairs Antonio Tajani saw France retaliations as "disproportionate measures", and Minister of the Interior Piantedosi labelled them as "incomprehensible" (ANSA 2022). When faced with France's firm response, the government's audaciousness died out as Meloni tried to quell the controversy (Jones, 2023).

This dispute between Italy and France on migration matters had wider resonances in terms of migration policy and nativism. The very first decree that the government passed in 2023 was the Decree-Law n. 1, 2 January 2023, labelled by pundits as "code of conduct for NGOs", which further limits the cases that qualify for a waiver of the government's right to ban migrant boats from docking in Italian ports. This suggests continuity with the FdI 2022 manifesto pledge to "contrast NGO's facilitating irregular immigration", and also with the FdI's core nativist ideology, which perceives immigrants as dangerous Others not belonging to the national in-group and possibly menacing the security, wealth, culture, public health of the Italian nation (Griffini, 2021). According to Meloni's argument put forward in her vlog series *Appunti di Giorgia* two days before the decree-law on NGOs was passed, Italy must rescue only the migrants fortuitously found at sea or the migrants risking their lives (Appunti di Giorgia, 30/12/22). In keeping with the civic mantle cloaking less civic core values, and with strategic ambiguity, the populist radical right has stressed its respect for international migrant rights, with the caveat that Italy cannot provide "taxies for people smugglers" and that the government must have "the courage to look straight without looking at anyone in their eyes" (Appunti di Giorgia, 30/12/23). While, at the time of writing, whether the decree will be converted into law and with which amendments is unknown, it is certain that this decree-law contravenes the international right of being rescued when stranded at sea, despite Meloni forcefully arguing that "if somebody risks their life, they must be saved; they must not be exploited by human smugglers" (Appunti di Giorgia, 30/12/22). The "necessity and urgency to adopt rules on search and rescue operations" is a clear nod at the logics of emergency discussed in the previous section on the Anti-Rave Decree (Decreto-Legge n. 1, 2023), tightly knit with the populist radical right's call for a strong state.

The diplomatic skirmish and the consequent decree-law point in two oddly conjoined positions: continuity and radicalisation. Meloni's securitisation of borders is in line with her manifesto pledges and with her trademark nativism.

Securitisation of borders hinges on the perception of immigrant' disembarking as a threat to national security, thus resulting in their criminalisation (Berti, 2021; Rosina, 2022), and on the differentiation of immigration between allegedly deserving refugees and allegedly undeserving economic migrants, which goes hand-in-hand with the criminalisation of irregular migrants (Griffini, 2022). The 2022 FdI manifesto even declared that irregular immigration should be fought with the deployment of a naval blockade. Overall, a naval blockade has not been implemented (yet), but the blocking of NGOs from rescuing migrants stranded at sea is a step beyond the contrast to NGO's aid to irregular immigration enunciated in the FdI 2022 manifesto. Indeed, it is a sign of a move towards the farther right end of the political spectrum.

More broadly on the nativist front, Meloni is more solidly anchored to the right end than to the centre of the political spectrum: the championing of the nation above any partisan interest, as declared in her maiden speech in Parliament (2022), transmutes into a veneer for the championing of the so-called Western civilisation, grounded in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and allegedly based on the principles of liberty, equality, and democracy. Even if Meloni explicitly eschews racism, the identification of the West as the cradle of liberal democracy acts as a civic mantle to hide otherwise racist implications inherent to the representation of non-Western immigrant as alien to democracy and Western values. The Othering of the immigrant as cast in neat opposition to the Italian nation transpires from Meloni's maiden speech in Parliament, when she addressed the black activist and trade unionist Aboubakaré Soumahoro,⁷ the only elected Black MP, using the Italian informal way, i.e. "tu" (Corriere della Sera, 2022). While this may have gone unnoticed to many, some more critical listeners spotted the colonial echoes intrinsic to addressing the Other with the informal "tu". MP Soumahoro himself denounced Meloni's reproduction of colonial rhetoric that seeks to belittle and patronise the Other by addressing them in an informal manner, as stated in a Twitter post.

AN ELEVENTH-HOUR BUDGET, ECONOMIC, AND FINANCIAL LAW

The FdI government has embarked on the complicated path of conjuring up an image of political and

⁷ Soumahoro became later entangled in a scandal charging his in-laws of fraud and migrant exploitation in Italian cooperatives employing immigrant workers. Soumahoro, who himself had gone through the toiling on Italian fields and the struggle against gangmasters, was accused of being aware of his in-laws' wrongdoings (Broder, 2023).

economic stability. Meloni was tasked with filling in big shoes after Draghi's responsible and moderate economic trajectory. So far, in this field, Meloni has steered a moderate course. In one episode of her series "Gli Appunti di Giorgia", Meloni proudly praised the government efficiency in passing the *Manovra*, which, she stresses, is in line with the FdI 2022 manifesto pledges about increasing employment and natality rates, helping new mothers and mothers-to-be as well as small and medium-sized enterprises (Appunti di Giorgia, 30/12/22). The goal is to comply with EU recommendations on fiscal matters (Jones, 2023). The *Manovra* entailed a €10 billion budget; while an analysis of the ideological influences on the *Manovra* deserves a whole separate article, this article will limit its scope to the main measures introduced, which may signal the party's moderation or radicalisation.

First of all, the *Manovra* (Legge n. 129, 29/12/22) fulfilled the 2022 FdI manifesto pledge of keeping fiscal reliefs for buildings renovations and ameliorations, in order to fuel economic development. The so-called *bonus mobili*⁸ consisting of tax reductions on the purchase of environmental-friendly new furniture and home appliances was extended, and its scope broadened to cover expenses up to €8,000; the so-called *superbonus* applying to building renovations and ameliorations in the interest of improving energy efficiency was extended, even if the average amount of tax reductions was brought down from 110% to 90% for most interventions. These measures appeased the coalition, but also the M5S, which had pressed the Draghi government to extend and enhance the *superbonus*. They also clearly align with the government's goal to ease the economic crisis, and benefit homeowners, as well as small and medium enterprises involved in the renovations. This goal is not entailing any shift of the government on the moderation v. radicalisation axis.

The activity and financial sustainability of small and medium-sized enterprises are also facilitated by tax credits (Legge n. 129, 29/12/22). While the *superbonus* and *bonus mobili* involved the whole population, fiscal incentives to hire on a permanent contract those holding a fixed-term contract is meant to spur employment, which converges with the 2022 FdI manifesto pledges. What is interesting is that incentives to firms to hire new personnel on permanent contracts are especially aimed at under-36 women and at those receiving the universal basic income. This is not an insignificant detail. First, it is the incarnation of the 2022 FdI manifesto promise to enhance women's employment and to eliminate the universal basic income, which is to be phased out for those able to work by 2024. Clearly, this

move has been passed to the dismay of the M5S, who backstabbed the Draghi government because of Draghi's lack of support for the universal basic income introduced by the Lega-M5S government (2018-2019). Second, in keeping with Meloni's slogan "I am a woman, I am a mother", it is predictable that families play a protagonist role within the *Manovra*. Indeed, financial aid disbursed to families with three or more children has been increased by 100%, while for families with less than three children the increase would be by 50% (Legge n. 129, 29/12/22). Pro-natality measures include also a better paid parental leave (Legge n. 129, 29/12/22).

Indicative of Italy's reliance on cash and hesitancy in using card payments, as well as Italy's scourge of rampant tax evasion, the focal point of public and political debate around the *Manovra* became the question of the threshold of the amount of cash that could be withdrawn monthly from banks, which rose from €1,000 to €5,000 (Legge n. 129, 29/12/22). This measure was dubiously justified as helping small enterprises. Another issue of contention was the removal of the excise duty relief measures introduced by Draghi. This decision was corroborated by detailed statistical evidence about the null if not minimal impact of this policy on fuel prices, showing Meloni's close attention to ordinary people's apprehension over fuel prices (Gli Appunti di Giorgia, 11/1/23). Indeed, the funds saved from excise duty relief were channelled into other priority areas: healthcare; families, depending on the number of children they had; small and medium-sized enterprises. The goal of the whole *Manovra*, was, therefore, the moderate one of helping those in need, families with children, the ordinary people, and small and medium-sized enterprises, with the overall aim to "increase social justice" (Gli Appunti di Giorgia, 11/1/23).

Although no policy contained by the *Manovra* went undebated, the pivotal point of and the main tug-of-war between the Lega and FdI during the electoral campaign was the definition of the scope of the flat tax (FdI Comizio, 2022). In the realm of fiscal policy, Meloni blunted the edges of Salvini's overly ambitious proposal of a flat tax fixed at 15% for the self-employed and the employees. Instead, the new government increased the self-employed income ceiling (to which the 15% flat tax is applied) from €65,000 to €85,000 (Legge n. 129, 29/12/22). Moreover, the flat tax set at 15% is paid on incremental income calculated on the basis of the income gained in the previous three years (Legge n. 129, 29/12/22). The flat tax has been hailed by FdI frontman La Russa and frontwoman Santanché as the fair measure to reward those who generate employment, as "it is the wealthy who create jobs" (FdI Comizio, 2022). Unsur-

⁸ Literally, *furniture bonus*.

prisingly, the flat tax has been criticised by experts as an “indication that [the Meloni government] is wedded to neo-liberal orthodoxy and trickle-down economics” (Newell, 2023, 2). It is a case in point that Meloni claimed that the *Manovra* mirrors the 2022 FdI manifesto promise to provide incentives to “those who want to produce wealth” and “those who roll up their sleeves” (Appunti di Giorgia, 30/12/2022). Overall, apart from the flat tax bowing to the interests of the wealthy, the entrepreneurs, and the self-employed, the *Manovra* cannot be rigidly encased within a neoliberal ideology, as, in a statist and welfarist way, it demonstrates the closeness of the government to the ordinary people, especially the unemployed, small and medium entrepreneurs, mothers, and families. Therefore, it is definitely not a radical measure. Instead, Meloni, in her first 100 days of government, cultivated an image of continuity with the Draghi moderate economic agenda. This is an offshoot of the shift enacted by the populist radical right towards moderate economic positions (De Lange, 2007).

CONCLUSION

In 2022 Italy experienced a particularly heated political summer, after Draghi’s resignation as Prime Minister triggered a political crisis and a feverish political campaign. Draghi’s technocratic government left the political stage to the first wholly populist radical right government in Italy where the populist radical right is not a junior party.⁹ FdI emerged as the major political force in the ‘centre-right coalition’ and whether FdI would moderate or radicalise once in power became a puzzle for many commentators. Despite being set up in the relatively short period of one month, the composition of the new government spearheaded by Meloni entailed complex negotiations between FdI, and its government coalition partners FI and Lega. The rebranding and renaming of ministries, and the appointment of posts ranging from ministers, to Speakers of the Chamber of Deputies and of the Senate portended seismic political changes. However, once the government was sworn in, the Meloni agenda was framed in a moderate way, to deflect possible criticisms of being imbued with neofascist legacies and radical elements. Meloni seems to have been successful at wooing the public. In January 2023, a poll gauging Italian’s trust in Meloni’s first 100 days of government revealed that close to 40% of Ital-

ians believe the government’s debut has been positive or fairly positive, with foreign policy (20%), energy policy (20%), economic policy (20%), immigration policy (14%), and security policy (13%) ranking in the first five places in the areas Meloni’s government is garnering most of the Italians’ appreciation (Quorum/YouTrend, 2023).

Seeking to enrich the burgeoning debate in the literature on the behaviour of Meloni’s FdI when in government, the central argument framed by this article is that Meloni’s government is walking on the tightrope between moderate and radical ideological elements, as well as elements of continuity with the FdI 2022 manifesto. The balance is skewed in favour of the moderation and continuity. This is not to ignore that the ghost of the neofascist roots of FdI are sometimes embarrassingly resurfacing in the problematic presence of neofascist loose cannons within the party¹⁰, and in the appointment to high office positions within the state of figures toying with radical reactionary ideology, such as the Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies Fontana, and figures with an unquestionable neofascist lineage, such as the Speaker of the Senate La Russa. In addition to ministers who have been raised in the ranks of AN and the MSI. The government composition as well as rebranding and renaming of ministries championing economic and agricultural sovereignty, as well as reactionary pronatality measures, capture a snapshot of radical remnants within the government. Oscillations towards the right end of the spectrum and away from the centre are also perceivable in the government’s stance on gender policy, immigration policy, and law and order. However, now these fluctuations have not determined a neat radicalisation of the government. Indeed, they are counterbalanced by oscillations towards the centre, suggestive of an underlying moderation. Such moderation is palpable in Meloni’s self-portrayal as ordinary and legitimate, in her (ambiguous) protection of women’s rights, in the government’s respect for the EU, its condemnation of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, and in the government’s budget, fiscal and labour policy. Time will tell whether the predominant stance of moderation and continuity taken by the Meloni government is genuine, or if it is merely a strategic and cosmetic change to boost popularity in polls, bolster international credibility, and please the EU, which is due to disburse €21 billion as the second tranche of the PNRR.

⁹ FdI always clung to opposition (Garzia, Karremans, 2021). The populist radical right Lega participated in three Berlusconi-led coalition governments, where it was one of the junior parties, while FI held the majority.

¹⁰ See, for instance, FdI MEP Carlo Fidanza, at the centre of the scandal of the so-called *Lobby Nera* (i.e. Black Lobby) (Fanpage, 2021) uncovering antisemitic and fascist discourse and actions; and Romano La Russa, Ignazio’s brother, who was caught on camera making the fascist salute at a funeral the week before the elections, to Meloni’s and Ignazio’s shame (Berizzi, 2022).

Overall, this article offers a significant contribution to the literature on the behaviour of populist radical right upon entering office, and uncovers interesting new avenues for research. First, a precise and complete assessment of the behaviour of Meloni's government can be delivered only when her term in office expires; second, the literature on populist parties in government would benefit from the comparison between the first Western European wholly populist radical right government and its counterparts in Central and Eastern Europe (e.g. Orbán in Hungary and Morawiecki in Poland), in order to construct a comprehensive typology of populist parties' behaviour when in government based on their coalition partners, if any, and on the country-specific political history and institutional setup.

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