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The Far Right Out of Its Comfort Zone? Framing Opposition to Immigration during COVID-19 in Italy

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Abstract

While we know that the far right thrives when migration is salient in public agendas, what happens when this issue is no longer under the spotlight? Building on 25 face-to-face interviews with activists mobilized against migration during COVID-19 in Italy, this article explores far-right framing of migration as a non-salient issue. We find that far-right groups indeed reframe their messages vis-à-vis a less favourable political setting; yet they are also able to seize fresh opportunities to reactivate opposition to migration, notably via prognostic frames delivering ostensibly depoliticized views that hijack solidarity principles and emphasize pragmatic and technocratic approaches to border control and migration management. In uncovering the discursive strategies used by far-right actors to bolster their credibility and appeal when out of their comfort zone, this article contributes to the scholarly understanding of politicization and highlights the mechanisms by which far-right ideas are becoming normalized in the public sphere.

Keywords: far right; immigration; social movements; COVID-19; politicization

What happens to far-right collective action when its core issue loses the spotlight? Historically, the success of the far right in Europe has been closely tied to the public salience of the immigration issue (Hadj Abdou et al. 2022).¹ Since the late 1970s, migrants' arrival and settlement across the continent have drawn immense public attention and discussions on regulating their entry, on their status and rights and on the consequences of their integration for so-called host societies. This has been regarded as both a cause for the breakthrough of far-right movements in Western societies in the 1980s and 1990s, and a consequence of strenuous nativist campaigning by these actors, including in regions that faced very little immigration

(Castelli Gattinara et al. 2022). Either way, the far right has generally been studied at times of high public salience of migration in Europe. Whether and how mobilization against migration changes when their core issues are temporarily overshadowed, however, remains uncertain.

This article examines opposition to immigration at times in which this issue is ‘dormant’ and suddenly loses prominence in the public agenda. The 2010s asylum crisis marked a crucial juncture for far-right politics (Mudde 2019: 4). It channelled migration and asylum into the core of public debates; it offered far-right actors unprecedented opportunities to mobilize on their preferred subject matter (Mudde 1999); and, in turn, it provided further resonance to their exclusionary discourse (Arzheimer and Carter 2006). In the following years, the far right became the driving force of the politicization of migration (Hutter and Kriesi 2022; Weisskircher and Berntzen 2019), which contributed to its normalization, not only in terms of issues dominating public discussions, but also the stances adopted by mainstream media, established parties and even governments (de Jonge and Gaufman 2022; Mondon and Winter 2020; Wodak 2021). In 2020, however, COVID-19 marked a sea change for this scenario. The pandemic turned the order of public priorities upside down, bringing health and related economic concerns to the fore (Dennison et al. 2022).

In this article, we examine this transformative shift. Given the inherently divisive nature of migration, it is crucial to understand how collective actors change their narratives in response to fluctuating levels of public attention to this issue. Specifically, we explore the following questions: What occurred among far-right actors when migration ceased to be in the spotlight? How did they strategically (re)frame their campaigns and mobilization against migration?

To answer, we bring together prior research on the politicization of migration, social movements and the far right (Castelli Gattinara and Pirro 2018; Snow et al. 2018). Building on these efforts, we expect that far-right actors will renegotiate their collective action frames to increase the ‘apparent fit between the framing and events in the world’ (Benford and Snow 2000: 620), thereby renewing their public image in line with the changed political landscape. This, however, does not imply moderation, but a (re)casting of prior frames, most likely in preparation for future mobilizations. We understand these framing discontinuities as the building blocks of the broader dynamics of normalization of far-right ideas, namely the processes through which far-right stances have become socially acceptable (Bichay 2023; de Jonge and Gaufman 2022; Mudde 2019).

This argument is exemplified through the case of Italy, where COVID-19 had distinct impacts on politics (Pirro 2022), and showcases the progressive integration of mainstream and far-right actors (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015). We draw on new data from 25 semi-structured interviews with anti-immigration activists conducted between 2020 and 2022. Through qualitative frame analysis, we unpack far-right actors’ diagnostic and prognostic strategies that identify social problems and propose solutions (Snow et al. 2018).

Our findings illustrate continuity as well as discontinuity in far-right narratives. While diagnostic frames build on deep-rooted perceptions of migrants and their supporters as a security threat, prognostic frames insist on the non-ideological nature of opposition to immigration: notably, these frames appropriate and subvert

basic solidarity principles (*reverse humanitarianism*); advocate for a common-sense approach to border control (*pragmatism*); and emphasize efficiency, rationality and expertise in migration policymaking (*technocracy*). Overall, in facing a challenging discursive context amid the COVID-19 pandemic, far-right collective actors reframed their political messages, blending pre-existing narratives with new ones that better aligned with the emerging political landscape. Ultimately, our findings illustrate the mechanisms driving the enduring normalization of anti-immigration views in Italian politics and beyond.

In the next sections, we first present the theoretical framework of the study, the research design and data, and then move to the empirical analysis and discussion of the main findings and avenues for future research.

Far-right politics, salient problems and ‘dormant’ issues

The politicization of migration and the normalization of far-right politics

If the notion of politicization highlights the interdependence between political actors and public issues (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988), the study of the politicization of migration is closely intertwined with the emergence, breakthrough and normalization of the far right in Europe (van der Brug et al. 2015). Numerous studies have stressed the increasing salience of migration issues in public debates during the 1990s and 2000s, following the involvement of governments, political parties, civil society actors and grassroots social movements (Hadj Abdou et al. 2022). It was the asylum crisis of the 2010s, however, that transformed immigration into a distinctive political battleground (Campomori and Ambrosini 2020). Since then, election campaigns have seen extremely high levels of politicization of immigration, with far-right actors propagating their anti-immigration narratives, triggering the reaction of established parties and creating ‘salience contagion’ (Hutter and Kriesi 2022). Political contention has escalated also among civil society actors motivated by contrasting political beliefs (della Porta 2018), including pro-migrant solidarity groups (Bazurli 2019; Zamponi 2017) and xenophobic, anti-migrant ones (Castelli Gattinara et al. 2022; Weisskircher and Berntzen 2019).

By addressing immigration as a crisis of multiculturalism (Ozzano and Giorgi 2015), the far right bridged the protest initiatives of local administrators, citizen assemblies and organized political actors, presenting their action as a widely popular uprising against ruling elites (Bazurli et al. 2022; Pettrachin and Paxton 2022). The progressive interpenetration of grassroots citizen initiatives and electoral mobilization further contributed to the normalization of far-right ideas and beliefs, as mainstream actors increasingly adopted restrictive positions, while not openly endorsing ethno-nationalist understandings of the political community (Mudde 2019: 163–170). Nativist ideas have, in fact, changed little over the decades: the normalization of the far right is mostly due to a radicalization of mainstream actors, rather than a moderation of far-right ones (Mudde 2019). On the one hand, fringe far-right ideas have progressively shed stigma, becoming widely accepted as common sense among established political elites seeking to neutralize their far-right challengers, and mass media outlets platforming radical ideas to enhance their revenues (Bichay 2023; de Jonge and Gaufman 2022; Mondon and Winter 2020). Meanwhile, far-right actors strategically navigated this process, seeking to appeal

to a wider audience while maintaining a distinct ideological profile to energize their base (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015; Muis et al. 2022).

In this respect, normalization also provided a strategic edge, allowing far-right actors to operate and maintain their influence even when the immediate context may shift or divert attention away from issues linked to migration and security. Put differently, momentary setbacks do not erase the political gains obtained beforehand. Although the core issues of the far right might be eclipsed by emerging social changes or short-term attention cycles, normalization processes are likely to persist over time. This confirms the significance of studying the dynamics of politicization around issues that have lost prominence in the public agenda.

Mobilizing on ‘dormant’ issues: insights from social movement studies

Mobilizing on issues that are not at the top of the agenda constitutes a strategic challenge for collective actors. During periods of low salience, they have lower chances of getting media attention, have a more limited set of potential addressees and must expect a lower ‘response rate’ to their claims (Hutter and Vliegthart 2016). Low salience also implies that other actors in the system are less compelled to respond or take up the issue. In this regard, the demise of protest cycles can trigger radicalization into more violent movements, the development of new networks and the reconfiguration of prior tactics of contention (Tarrow 2015). Groups addressing dormant issues are likely to renegotiate their pre-existing meanings, which may no longer be effective in sustaining collective action.

Migration is especially important for the emergence and breakthrough of actors on the far right (Mendes and Dennison 2021), which can no longer be characterized as a single-issue movement (Mudde 1999). Hence, the question of how the far right behaves when the public debate is dominated by issues falling outside its comfort zone is still largely unaddressed (Froio 2022). Social movement research, and notably the study of framing, might help us understand how far-right actors behave under unfavourable circumstances, emphasizing the significance of the cultural toolkits they employ to develop compelling narratives and construct or redefine the meaning of public problems (Benford and Snow 2000).

In recognizing that meanings are not inherently attached to objects, events or experiences but are constructed through interactive-interpretive processes (Snow et al. 2018), a social-movement approach may prove helpful to interpret how far-right actors have reconfigured their migration-related narratives within a less receptive political setting amid the pandemic. As ‘signifying agents’ (Snow et al. 2018: 399) actively engaged in shaping meaning through claims-making and framing, (far-right) actors have wiggle room to redefine their frames vis-à-vis new circumstances: the low salience of migration might lead them to avoid engaging on this issue altogether; or it may serve as an opportunity to reframe their pre-existing nativist narratives – with the goal of bolstering their credibility beyond traditional support bases (Froio 2022; Zanotti and Turnbull-Dugarte 2022). In this respect, reframing strategies might serve as groundwork for subsequent waves of mobilization in more conducive environments.

Case study and data

The study focuses on Italy, a paradigmatic case to study public debates on migration and the rise and normalization of the far right (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015). The structural unpreparedness of Italian authorities in managing migrant reception and transit has systematically triggered heated debates about compliance with the Dublin Regulation and the cost and impact of search-and-rescue operations in the Mediterranean. Political actors often describe Italy as one of the countries most directly impacted by migration to Europe, with recurrent discussions about the effectiveness and financial sustainability of reception and integration policies, as well as the linkages between migration and insecurity. These debates have had profound effects on domestic politics, reinforcing Italy's rather unique symbiosis between the far right and the political mainstream (Castelli Gattinara 2016, 2017).

Normalization of the far right in Italy began in the mid-1990s, when Silvio Berlusconi first granted post-fascist parties access to government. In subsequent decades, right-wing parties have bargained on the migration issue to cement the centre-right alliance that dominated Italian politics until the late 2000s and included sizable far-right minor partners: Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance), Lega Nord (Northern League, now rebranded as Lega, League) and later Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy). With the outbreak of the asylum crisis, this process expanded to the political system as a whole, with centrist and mainstream left parties often echoing the vociferous campaigns of the far right, notably by endorsing their criticism of pro-migrant NGOs, the proposals to 'help them at home' through financial aid, and to impose heavier sanctions for crimes committed by refugees (Campomori and Ambrosini 2020).

The asylum crisis thus accelerated a process that had already been under way for decades, while, however, confirming Italy's role as a 'pioneer' in the normalization of the far right. Yet this surge in the salience of immigration was relatively short-lived as, shortly after, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic would radically change the scenario. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate that the politicization of migration in Italy was already underway in the mid-2000s. The salience of the issue skyrocketed during the asylum crisis in the 2010s, reaching a peak when the leader of the anti-immigration League, Matteo Salvini, became interior minister in 2018. Then, however, the salience of migration declined swiftly, as the coronavirus crisis trumped all issues on the public and media agendas (Kaltwasser and Taggart 2022).

To capture the ways in which the Italian far right coped with this contextual change, we conducted 25 semi-structured interviews with activists engaged in anti-immigration initiatives at the national and local level (see the Appendix in the Supplementary Material for the list of interviews). Interviews were carried out from December 2020 to March 2022. The timeframe of the fieldwork thus coincides with the period in which the public salience of migration was minimal. Furthermore, we did not cover the early months of the pandemic, which were characterized by a high degree of uncertainty. During our timeframe, the extensive consequences of COVID-19 on politics and society were already evident, which implies that respondents could have already internalized its impact and anticipated possible

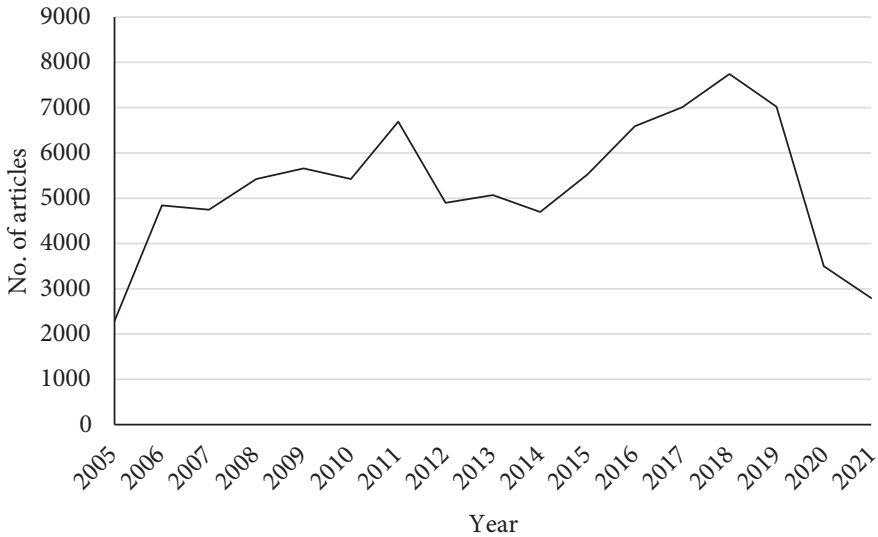


Figure 1. *La Repubblica* Articles Focusing on Migration, 2005–2021

Source: *La Repubblica*, all sources.

Note: Keywords: ‘migra* or immigra*’.

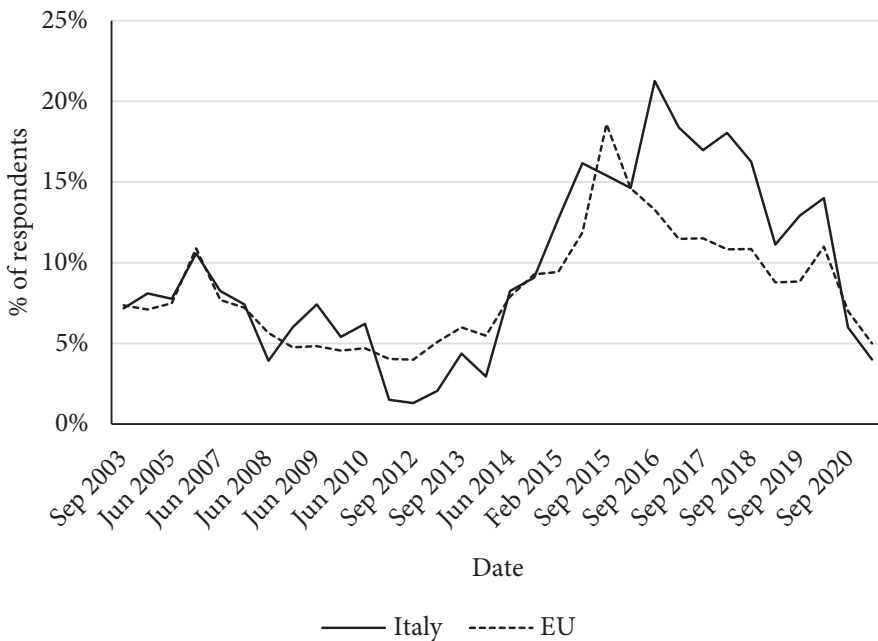


Figure 2. Share of People Considering Migration the Most Important Problem, 2000–2021

Source: Eurobarometer.

Note: Q: What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment?

future scenarios (including the prospects for far-right success at the 2022 general elections; see Vampa 2023).

The choice to carry out face-to-face interviews arose from our aim to delve into how activists interpret reality and understand how they enact, appropriate and construct meanings during mobilization (Blee and Taylor 2002; Ellinas 2023). The interviews (which lasted on average 1 hour and 18 minutes, with a minimum of 38 minutes and a maximum of 2 hours and 35 minutes) therefore focused on: (1) respondents' political, professional and personal biography; (2) their views of migration, including associated problems, and possible solutions; (3) their political activities, notably in respect of migration and COVID-19; and (4) perceptions of the effectiveness of their activism.

Interviewees were recruited through a purposive sampling procedure (Ritchie et al. 2003). This sampling strategy allowed us to represent multiple perspectives, milieus and channels of mobilization within Italy's far right. We used a snowball technique to make sure that the most relevant voices were included in our study; each interviewee was asked to provide the names of actors who, in their perspective, played a decisive role in anti-immigration mobilization. The interviewing process was interrupted at the point of theoretical saturation, thus 'when additional data failed to uncover any new ideas' (Bowen 2006: 17). Initial contacts were taken after conducting in-depth desk research on episodes of anti-immigrant mobilization, which allowed identification of potential interviewees. This research entailed the collection and analysis of material available online, including newspaper articles, television and social media content, interviewees' curricula vitae and publications, policy documents and other secondary sources. Ahead of interviews, this preliminary research allowed us to build accurate profiles for each respondent (political career, notable actions or declarations) and their context of mobilization (migration phenomena and related debates in the locations where respondents operate), and to curb the interview guide accordingly.

The final set of 25 interviews included two broad sets of respondents: 16 activists engaged in formal political parties such as Fratelli d'Italia, Lega, Forza Italia and Italexit; and 9 activists involved in extra-institutional or protest politics, either as independent activists or via more formally organized grassroots groups (Azione Frontale, Centro Studi Polaris and citizen-sponsored anti-immigration committees at the local level). Our sampling strategy, moreover, allowed us to cover the variegated geographies of anti-immigration activism in Italy (Zamponi 2017). Besides actors mobilized in national-level arenas, we included those in places of first arrival in the south (Crotone, Palermo, Siracusa); border localities in the north (Gorizia, Trieste, Ventimiglia); cities, towns and villages with migrant reception or detention facilities across the country (Cassibile, Macerata, Piacenza, Terni); and one major city that is home to large immigrant communities and a crucial transit point for migrants headed to northern Europe (Rome).

Empirical results

Diagnostic frames: immigrants and their supporters as a security threat

In terms of diagnostic frames, far-right activists bemoaned immigration as a fundamental security threat. The arrival and settlement of foreign populations was

conflated with law-and-order issues to weave emergency narratives of an impending invasion, which would disrupt social order and democracy. Security is thus the overarching frame keeping together distinct themes pertaining to individuals' (1) physical, (2) cultural and (3) economic status. These diagnostic frames are in continuity with those adopted during the asylum crisis (Pettrachin and Paxton 2022). Interviewees explicitly highlighted the continuity of their own political messages as a mark of ideological coherence, irrespective of fluctuations in public opinion and media salience:

COVID-19 is a big challenge for our political action. But we don't adapt our party programme based on the trend topics of the day. ... Our principles, values and proposals remain unchanging, regardless of any shifts in the historical context. (Interview 1)

Above all, anti-immigration activists believed that migration poses a threat to the physical security of the national community. Hence, Italian cities and towns were described as ever more afflicted by criminality and turmoil,² with migrants seen as the primary cause for drug dealing, sexual harassment, theft and violence, as well as breaches of unwritten social norms of the native community, such as a sense of decorum and public decency. The security threat was also articulated by linking smugglers who organize and profit from irregular routes to jihadist fundamentalism³ (thereby suggesting that illegal migration ultimately funds and breeds terrorist networks globally) and by stigmatizing migrants as uncivilized plague spreaders who pose a major threat to public health amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Bazurli and Campomori 2022).⁴ Through such fear-mongering rhetoric, the uncontrolled movement of migrants towards and across the country was juxtaposed to victimized representations of Italians, instead forced to immobility at home during lockdowns:

Italy and the whole of the West have lost their fundamental values. One of these is the defence of borders. For years ... we have incentivized illegal immigration. We have let people in countries of origin think that anyone can come to Italy and do whatever they like. In this way we have undermined the security and sovereignty of the nation, making ourselves vulnerable to criminal activities. (Interview 9)

The second dominant diagnostic frame views migration as a threat to cultural security. This was shaped by two connected concerns: Islam and the progressive erosion of rural traditions, norms and habits. Our interviewees considered the norms and ethos of Muslim communities as 'irremediably incompatible' with Western history, identity and the rule of law.⁵ Islamophobic claims were rooted and justified in three main ways: first, through references to renowned international authors – such as Samuel P. Huntington, Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci and Pope Benedict XVI – whose writings were seen as confirming that 'a certain degree of cultural homogeneity' among citizens is necessary to ensure popular sovereignty within the nation state;⁶ second, by referring to highly mediatized criminal stories, such as the case of Saman Abbas, a Pakistani teenager murdered by family

members because of her nonconformist lifestyle, believed to exemplify ‘the failure and hypocrisy of integration policies’;⁷ and third, through examples from various northern European cities, notably Paris and Brussels, reputed to be plagued by ‘no-go areas’ where criminal networks and sharia law replaced national legislation (Bazurli and Delclós 2022).⁸ In their view, these examples should serve as a ‘severe warning’ for Italy, too.⁹ Central and Eastern European countries were instead praised as beacons of hope and as the ultimate bulwarks in the defence of national identities and Christian values.¹⁰

[In] France and other northern-European countries, the ideology of multiculturalism has produced completely separated communities – actual ghettos, if you wish. This is a source of major social problems. If there are fractures within a national community, then democratic life will collapse. (Interview 3)

Chaotic multicultural metropolises in northern Europe were then used as a contrast to the tranquillity of small rural towns in Italy.¹¹ These were romanticized for their cohesiveness, order, simplicity, hard-working attitudes and even hospitality, as opposed to the sophisticated, but dangerous and atomistic, lifestyle of big cities. Immigration and the integration policies that drove it in the first place were seen as disruptors of this rural idyll (Nicholls et al. 2021). When discussing the anti-immigration attitudes of local residents, one interviewee commented, ‘They are just people who want to live a quiet life at home, without changing their habits – and we need to protect them from their own fears’,¹² whereas another added that it was only thanks to the ‘kindness, tolerance and welcoming attitudes’ of fellow citizens that ‘uncontrolled immigration has not led to racist violence’.¹³ These narratives sometimes had a more explicitly racist undertone. In commenting on ‘the consequences of savage, sudden immigration’ that his city ‘had been forced to experience’, one elected official explained:

This is truly a small and orderly city. Even a white-skinned Italian walking with flip flops in winter would be noticed. How could you imagine that a dark-skinned [foreigner] doing the same, maybe wearing rags, would not be noticed and, conceivably, criticized? (Interview 12)

Finally, diagnostic frames depicted migration as a threat to economic prosperity, or as a source of economic insecurity.¹⁴ A case in point is that of migrants’ inclusion or exclusion from the labour market. Supposedly a socioeconomic issue, this was often reframed in terms of security, making the case that migrants experiencing unemployment would be eager to join criminal organizations, if only to secure their own livelihood.¹⁵ As one activist put it, ‘If you settle in a country that can’t offer a job even to natives, then it’s obvious that you’ll start to break the law.’¹⁶ Interestingly, only one interviewee referred to the classic argument that immigration would induce race-to-the-bottom competition in the labour market.¹⁷ Several activists instead rebuked the overly generous welfare policies that ‘seek to integrate non-integrable migrants’, claiming that Italy’s government should put ‘lazy youngsters lying on the sofa’ to work, rather than importing manpower from abroad.¹⁸ In a similar fashion, anti-immigration activists used welfare

chauvinism to portray natives and migrants in competition for the same limited resources. The scarcity of resources due to Italy's decades-long austerity measures was used to spearhead the anti-immigration agenda, pushing for restricted access to public service provision in domains such as education, healthcare and housing:

This is a poor province. Unemployment is skyrocketing. In a moment of crisis like this, indiscriminate reception is an even greater mistake. We boast a history of openness and hospitality. But if you go too far, then you create an unjust conflict over resources. (Interview 15)

These findings are consistent with prior scholarship suggesting that far-right ideas on social policies are polyvalent, combining welfare chauvinism, workfare-ism and populism based on hierarchical criteria of (un)deservingness (Careja and Harris 2022).

In establishing an inextricable nexus between migration and (in)security, anti-immigration actors also identified those responsible for the current state of affairs: the political left, NGOs, parts of the Catholic Church, intellectuals, judges, lawyers and other powerful political or economic elites. While they recognized that these actors have different (humanitarian, religious, economic) motivations, they saw them as a united front championing a worldview derogatorily described as *immigrationism*, that is, 'an ideology that conceives migrants in positive terms, regardless of the economic, social and security consequences of their presence in the [host] society'.¹⁹ This attribution of responsibilities was articulated along three distinct levels of intensity: at the mildest level, opponents were accused of pietism, third-worldism, and other naive principles that prioritize abstract ideas of solidarity over the interest of the people; at an intermediate level, they were accused of orchestrating a so-called migrant business, so that solidarity would actually conceal the pursuit of special interests by greedy, powerful elites; at the most extreme level, opponents were addressed through ethno-nationalist and white supremacist conspiracy theories in which global elites are deliberately planning the extinction of European populations via mass immigration from Muslim countries:

The national establishment is completely detached from the citizens they govern. ... They impose mass immigration ideologically, as a matter of principle, because they don't live it themselves and don't pay the price of that. (Interview 18)

We must stop this business that allows someone to make money on both sides of the Mediterranean. Immigration is a business that has fattened up left-wing and church-based associations – that's why those [political] areas are so favourable to immigrationism. (Interview 9)

In Italy there's a hegemonic culture, made by the Church and the Pope, newspapers, and other 'big powers'. ... There is a plot. It's a deliberate and funded strategy. ... While here birth rates are collapsing, the demography of Muslim countries that 'export' immigration is booming, and they will end up replacing and colonizing us. (Interview 6)

Overall, the cognitive frameworks adopted by far-right actors to address immigration as a public problem focus on the overarching notion of (in)security, understood as a bundle of economic, cultural and physical threats. While these interpretations varied in the degree of extremism and conspiratorial thinking – thereby reflecting the different identities and inclinations existing within the anti-immigration camp – they also exhibited a significant degree of continuity in pointing to a common underlying explanation: the idea that Europe’s most influential economic, cultural and political actors are imbued with an unwavering immigrationist ideology, whether motivated by idealistic principles, self-interest or conspiracy. As we shall see, this perspective will become particularly relevant when examining prognostic framing in the next section.

Prognostic frames: reverse humanitarianism, pragmatism and technocracy

To regain control over borders, anti-immigration actors proposed three main prognostic frames: (1) reverse humanitarianism; (2) pragmatism; and (3) technocracy. While distinct, these three frames are inherently intertwined, and deliver the attempt of far-right actors to present solutions grounded in expertise, as opposed to the ostensibly ideological, dysfunctional stances of their opponents. This discursive strategy represents the greatest element of *dis*-continuity with prior waves of mobilization resting on more classic nativist arguments (Pettrachin and Paxton 2022; van der Brug et al. 2015), which signals, in our view, the progressive interconnectedness between mainstream and far-right politics.

Far-right activists do not explicitly admit changing framing strategies, but they acknowledge that COVID-19 had a significant impact on their activism. The pandemic not only made collective action more challenging due to the temporary suspension of the right to assembly,²⁰ but also eroded cohesion within the movement.²¹ One activist commented that ‘some opportunistic groups are riding the wave of COVID-19 to rebrand their organization and gain some cheap visibility’,²² privileging campaigns against health protection measures to trademark nativist issues. With the pandemic dominating public debate, activists thus had to reckon with a radically different political context:

In 2017, controversy over immigration dominated national politics, with important consequences at the local level. And this was crucial for our victory [at municipal elections]. But today nobody cares about immigration and security. You can’t get people’s attention on these topics any more. Why? Because COVID-19 is what dominates our lives nowadays. (Interview 13)

COVID-19 has totally undermined the debates around immigration. It has overshadowed everything else. It has impacted on every possible aspect of our lives. Immigration is now a secondary concern, at best. (Interview 25)

The most prominent prognostic frame, *reverse humanitarianism*,²³ refers to the appropriation and overturning by far-right actors of the humanitarian ideal of universal solidarity with migrants advocated by their opponents. Contrary to past mobilization (Zamponi and Castelli Gattinara 2020), far-right activists reject allegations of hostility towards migrants. Instead, they argue that implementing

immigration restrictions is the most effective means to protect migrants and their rights. Solidarity, in fact, should not be principled or ideological, but attuned with material considerations, such as newcomers' fit with Italy's labour market and cultural values, as well as the capacity of welfare infrastructures to cope with increased demand. Put differently, solidarity with migrants is desirable but can only be achieved by preserving social order and well-being in destination countries. This conditional humanitarianism (or a non-universalistic view of solidarity, which is conceived as subordinated to criteria of deservingness established by host societies) is in stark contrast with the universal humanitarianism of political opponents; these latter were criticized for cherishing their own altruism without taking its consequences into account, ultimately harming both natives and migrants:

In a context of socioeconomic crisis, immigration is simply unjustifiable, not even from a humanitarian perspective, because the conditions for integration itself are lacking. States have an obligation, first and foremost, towards their own citizens. They may have an aspiration to help all humanity. But this is impossible to realize in the real world. (Interview 3)

Specifically, interviewees made the case that search-and-rescue operations work as a pull factor, incentivizing irregular sea crossings and, in turn, shipwrecks and the overcrowding of ports of first arrival.²⁴ Although repeatedly proved false, this argument served as an expedient to accuse humanitarians of encouraging, rather than preventing, deaths at sea and human trafficking:

Our fight is *for* these people, who live in inhumane conditions – not *against* them. ... The propaganda for open borders ... is done at the price of the lives of migrants themselves. ... People die while crossing the sea, while the international community stays idle. Who are the true racists, then? (Interview 23)

Reverse humanitarianism was thus seen as a genuine reaction against political and economic actors profiting from immigration. 'I respect migrants', one activist explained, 'but not the extremists who want to welcome them even at migrants' own expense.'²⁵ Likewise, interviewees frequently expressed empathy with migrants living in reception centres that lack even the most basic provisions, but contempt for those who 'uphold principles of welcome and solidarity', because migrants' plight is 'the result of wrong ideologies and values'.²⁶

Reception is a business in migrants' lives. The first victims are precisely those migrants who, at first, are welcomed in facilities with every kind of privilege, and then are abandoned out on the street, ending up exploited as manpower for organized crime. ... Since when has the pursuit of special interests become a form of solidarity? (Interview 18)

By reversing humanitarianism, anti-immigration actors could then rebrand their restrictive policy proposals as pro-migrant measures, including push-backs,²⁷ naval blockades to prevent departures²⁸ and the banning of rescue ships from Italian harbours.²⁹ Similarly, humanitarian arguments justify the gradual dismantling of the

national asylum system, and notably the narrowing, by Italian authorities, of the criteria for obtaining refugee status and other services. In contrast, restrictive government measures would ensure the safeguard of migrants' fundamental rights:

My party is defined as 'anti-immigration'. But we simply demand what almost every European country already does: to control immigration. Only in this way can we give an opportunity to those coming to our country, instead of abandoning them as soon as they arrive. (Interview 19)

The second, recurrent prognostic frame is *pragmatism*,³⁰ or the idea that the management of migration should be based on common sense and the everyday experience of ordinary people, rather than on abstract ideological principles and values. This framing strategy ultimately sought to depoliticize nativist anti-immigration stances through intuitive arguments presented as non-ideological. This was quite explicitly stated by activists describing their activities as 'pragmatism at the service of the nation, which avoids useless ideological inspirations':

You don't have to be right-wing to demand respect for the rules and a reasonable influx of migrants, to be selected according to the needs of the country that hosts them, rather than those of the smugglers who manage them. (Interview 9)

Rampant immigration is ... a reality with concrete impacts on the daily lives of Italians. [What] we are doing is simply to offer concrete proposals that respond to concrete problems. ... This explains why we're doing so well in electoral polls. (Interview 1)

Again, the practical wisdom of ordinary people was viewed as the logical alternative to the ideological positions held by immigrationists, who instead respond to the interest of elites and are therefore out of touch with society. The goal here was to normalize anti-immigration ideas by presenting far-right supporters as ordinary people. According to interviewees, this also explains why the working classes have abandoned left-wing parties in favour of far-right ones.³¹ Today's progressives, the argument goes, represent affluent urbanites living a secure and thriving life, with no knowledge of the actual struggles of those left behind. 'If the left spoke to citizens', one interviewee commented, 'then it would soon realize that law and order are simply common sense, widespread demands'.³² Other interviewees similarly claimed to have 'a real heart-to-heart with citizens, listening to them and proposing our solutions in every neighbourhood', whereas left-wing politicians are instead 'closed in their ivory tower', embracing pro-migrant stances merely for 'electoral demagoguery' and 'economic interests'.³³ One activist went as far as praising a former interior minister from the centre-left Partito Democratico, Marco Minniti, for his strict agenda on immigration:

He is attached to a genuine and traditional idea of the left [and] is one the few leftists who understands that it is the working class that is the most severely impacted by out-of-control immigration; ... Today the right represents the

working class better than the others, and immigration was crucial for this change. It has nothing to do with racism. It has to do with the representation of the working class, defending it from the threats of uncontrolled immigration. (Interview 1)

In a similar fashion, interviewees celebrated the Danish social-democratic government and its crackdown on asylum-seekers as an example of pragmatic, non-ideological policymaking that supports true refugees while taking the preferences of ordinary people into account, in a way that restores the legitimacy of representative democracy.³⁴ Hence, rather than a blatant, all-out rejection of immigration per se, interviewees advanced highly selective logics of migration management, which should be informed by cultural, economic or other strict criteria of deservingness (Svraka 2023). In contrast to a politics that supposedly opens the doors to anyone wishing to reach Italy, freedom of movement and basic rights must be granted only to those migrants more likely to fit into the host society while keeping out, punishing and deporting unwelcome intruders. Building on existing policies and real-world examples, far-right actors tried to elaborate their genuine intention to find viable solutions for truly deserving migrants:

Unfortunately, rationality clashes with sentimentalism ... An objective and constructive point of view on immigration should not be labelled as racist or xenophobic. Because principles of solidarity should confront reality, leading to something useful and concrete. ... Sentimentalism is often a mask for partisan, special, economic, or illegal interests. (Interview 16)

These narratives linked directly to the third category of prognostic frames, which we describe as *technocratic*, and whose underlying idea is that immigration-related problems should be solved through the rational, effective management of security issues. By establishing an allegedly evidence-based and data-driven discourse against migration, far-right actors tried to acquire a position as credible policymakers. Once again, therefore, the preservation of the social order was presented as non-political – in stark contrast with immigrationist ideology. Notably, these positions were supported by emphasizing the technical knowledge of self-proclaimed experts of migration politics, for instance through the use of ‘statistics, government files, and other hard data’ to develop grassroots investigative reports on NGOs and rescue operations in the Mediterranean.³⁵ To bolster the legitimacy of their arguments, activists played with the overlap of the different roles they perform within the anti-immigration camp, or the multipositionality (Tordjman 2023) of ordinary citizens working as citizen-journalists and social-media influencers, to deconstruct dominant narratives about migration and asylum.

Interviewees therefore stressed the importance of independent reporting against the ideological views promoted by mainstream and elite media,³⁶ but also highlighted the professional credentials of journalists and researchers providing first-hand evidence on issues such as the international value chain of the so-called migrant business and the relationships between smugglers and jihadism.³⁷ By producing alternative, expert knowledge on migration affairs, far-right activists projected themselves as reliable players in policy debates, thus responding to public

discussions that would otherwise simply reiterate multiculturalist views and disregard social and security threats (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010).

On the one hand, interviewees insisted that authorities must reinforce routine services, to cope with a situation that had gone out of control.³⁸ This includes taking care of parks, streets and public lighting to deter criminal activities, but also increasing the powers and resources of local police forces and the adoption of state-of-the-art surveillance technologies. Notably, anti-immigration activists capitalized on their experience within local administrations to emphasize the achievements of far-right city officials in domains pertaining to law-and-order and security, and to showcase their competence and proficiency with public administration and migration management:

Trimming hedges outside a school can prevent the creation of a refuge for criminals. It's a little thing, but makes a huge difference in everyday life; it's a little step towards bigger things, such as challenging the power of European postcolonial countries in Africa. (Interview 16)

On the other, technocratic frames were used to describe the defence policy that Italy should adopt, especially in such domains as the patrolling of borders, anti-terrorism and international cooperation.³⁹ The prevention of migrants' departures was thus presented through the language of diplomacy and *realpolitik*: 'the naval blockade', one activist explained, 'is a mere response to the fact that a sovereign state [Libya] cannot fully govern its coastguard, making Italy vulnerable to illicit activities'.⁴⁰ This, in turn, must induce Italy to prioritize its national interest against those of other powerful countries in the global arena, notably France, Germany and the United States:

I'm an interventionist. We must get back to political involvement in Africa. Okay, the colonial era is over. But no more unconditional financial aid. We must be assertive in our conditionality. We must pursue the externalization of frontiers without any ambiguity. If we keep on welcoming [migrants], then Libyans will keep on sending them. We must pursue a zero-tolerance policy. People wouldn't depart, and possibly lose their life, if they knew that there is no chance of entrance. (Interview 9)

Overall, prognostic anti-immigration frames are evidence of far-right activists' struggle to polarize the debate between, on the one hand, humane, pragmatic, expert-backed solutions and, on the other, the allegedly ideological, self-interested and delusional views of their opponents. As we shall discuss in the conclusion, this discursive strategy draws upon some traditional far-right tropes about migration but also marks a significant departure from prior waves of mobilization, consolidating the connection between mainstream and far-right politics.

Discussion and conclusion

The salience of migration in public debates has driven the success of far-right parties across Europe since well before the asylum crisis. At the onset of the COVID-19

pandemic, however, the scenario changed abruptly, with socioeconomic issues and healthcare turning into top priorities, and migration becoming a marginal concern in the public agenda. Drawing on evidence from Italy, this article has delved into the narratives of anti-immigration activists when their core issue is no longer in the spotlight and explored whether this shift transformed far-right strategies.

Our analysis has shown that far-right activists' framing strategies during COVID-19 deliver both continuity and discontinuity with prior waves of mobilization. On the one hand, a substantial continuity could be observed with regard to diagnostic frames. Just like previous campaigns (Pettrachin and Paxton 2022), anti-immigration narratives point at the overarching concept of (in)security. While varying in degrees of anti-immigration radicalism, both institutionalized actors and more grassroots groups converge in demonizing elites for allegedly imposing their pro-immigration agenda. On the other hand, prognostic frames exhibit significant discontinuities when compared to earlier mobilization waves (van der Brug et al. 2015; Zamponi and Castelli Gattinara 2020). This is primarily due to their ostensibly non-politicized nature, which rests on: (1) the manipulation of solidarity principles to depict the far right as a defender of migrant rights (reverse humanitarianism); (2) the systematic reliance on practical wisdom of ordinary people (pragmatism); and (3) the posture as experts possessing grounded knowledge of immigration (technocracy). In doing so, far-right activists try to polarize the dichotomy between the practical, effective solutions advanced by the far right, and the ineffective, ideological stances of their opponents.

In our view, these findings support the overarching expectation about the impact of COVID-19; that is, it prompted anti-immigration activists to reconsider their framing strategies in the wake of a transformed and less favourable political context. More precisely, the discontinuities we observed do not seem to indicate a process of moderation whereby far-right actors have attempted to dismiss narratives crafted in previous campaigns. Rather, they suggest a process of preparation, laying the groundwork for subsequent waves of mobilization in a more conducive environment. In this regard, the present study could only reconstruct the transformation in far-right framing retrospectively, refraining from making inferences about the motivations behind this change. Nonetheless, there are solid grounds to hypothesize a deliberate adaptation to the new scenario. This would indeed be consistent with prior scholarship stressing how activists tend to embrace strategies of abeyance to get through unfavourable circumstances without excessive losses (Taylor and Crossley 2022). Building on the growing literature connecting the study of the far right to that of contentious politics (Froio et al. 2020; Minkenberg 2019; Pirro 2023), future research might test this hypothesis more thoroughly and comparatively.

Furthermore, our study illustrates the blending of conspiracist views with supposedly non-ideological, pragmatic appeals. In doing so, the far right can craft a polyvalent, highly resonant discursive platform, which appeals to a broad public even at times in which migration ranks low in the public agenda. Ambiguity is thus used strategically to sidestep allegations of racism and assert the credibility of anti-immigration positions, all while preserving a distinct and radical ideological profile. Prior research suggests a blurring of positions to attract greater support (Rovny 2012), and we illustrate this also works for ideological issues.

While our findings are focused on Italy, they likely have broader applicability, as the trajectory of the Italian far right since the early 1990s has often prefigured European politics at large. The recent attempts by Italian governments to curtail asylum laws on humanitarian or technical grounds,⁴¹ in fact, resonate with the view of rescue ships in the Mediterranean as pull factors⁴² and with plans to deport asylum-seekers to third countries to stop irregular sea crossings.⁴³ Similarly, our findings regarding Italian activists' pursuit of expertise and credibility in migration debates align with the inclusion of high-profile Frontex personnel in the 2024 European election lists of France's far-right *Rassemblement National*.⁴⁴ These examples show that anti-immigration actors not only managed to withstand a challenging juncture during COVID-19, but also leveraged it to create new opportunities for mobilization. Moreover, the pandemic did not shift support away from the far right, but rather provided ground to further entrench its ideas in the political mainstream (Kaltwasser and Taggart 2022). In this respect, the present study paves the way to understand the blurring of the boundaries of the socially acceptable, and notably the normalization of far-right ideas in contemporary society as a self-reinforcing process unfolding through strong waves and minor undertows.

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Notes

1 The notion of far right includes both its 'radical' and 'extreme' right variants, which resonates with research indicating that different types of far-right groups are increasingly converging across domains and adopt shared repertoires of action (Pirro 2023).

2 All interviews, except 3, 5, 14, 15, 19.

3 Interviews 9, 10, 21.

4 Interviews 2, 4, 9, 10, 12.

5 Interview 12.

6 Interview 3.

7 Interview 9.

8 Interviews 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 12, 17, 24.

9 Interviews 4 and 9.

10 Interviews 6, 12, 24.

- 11 Interviews 2, 11, 16, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23.
 12 Interview 11.
 13 Interview 23.
 14 Interviews 3, 6, 7, 11, 12, 13, 15, 21, 23, 24, 25.
 15 Interviews 2, 10, 12.
 16 Interview 10.
 17 Interview 3.
 18 Interview 9.
 19 Interview 6.
 20 Interviews 1, 25, 2, 4, 13, 16, 25.
 21 Interviews 4, 9, 10, 16, 19, 25.
 22 Interview 25.
 23 Interviews 3, 4, 9, 10, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 25.
 24 Interviewees 4, 5, 9, 10, 21.
 25 Interview 10.
 26 Interview 16.
 27 Interviews 3, 10, 19.
 28 Interviews 1, 2, 3, 6, 9, 22, 24.
 29 Interviews 9 and 21.
 30 Interviews 1, 7, 9, 10, 12, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23.
 31 Interviews 3, 7, 17.
 32 Interview 19.
 33 Interviews 18, 20, 22.
 34 Interviews 3 and 9.
 35 Interview 4.
 36 Interviews 2, 4, 7, 10.
 37 Interviews 9 and 10.
 38 Interviews 16, 18, 20, 22.
 39 Interviews 1, 9, 10, 19.
 40 Interview 1.
 41 See <https://bit.ly/3QrX7Z9>.
 42 See <https://bit.ly/48WUUFa>.
 43 See <https://bit.ly/3Q04FAU>.
 44 See <https://bit.ly/3Xn5SWS>.

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