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Memory, post-fascism and the far-right

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Abstract
After 78 years of democracy, Italy continues to grapple with its recent past in the political, social, and cultural spheres. Its experience of fascism under Mussolini, its dual participation in the Second World War, and the continuous and still existent connections between the ideological factions of the 1930s–1940s and now render the country a rich case for the study of public history and memory. The specificity of these characteristics has often made Italian history and memory look like an outlier, shaped by circumstances difficult to compare with those of other countries'. This paper argues that contemporary Italian memory politics are in reality a valuable source of information about the kind of mnemonic discourses that may arise in other (Western) European countries, given the increasingly polarised and populist European landscape. Our study of discourses put forwarded by the post-fascist party Fratelli d'Italia reveals a set of mnemonic tools with which they successfully banalise fascism and chip at Italian public discourse slowly but surely. The comparison between this discourse and that of VOX and AfD in Spain and Germany, respectively, shows that these tools, ranging from nativism to policy (de)legitimation linked to fascist imagery, has started to transfer to other countries' political strategies.

Introduction

When several schools in Italy showed students the documentary 'Marcia Su Roma' by the Irish director Marc Cousin, the Italian far-right party Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) demanded during a parliamentary enquiry that 'the film shall not be shown any more in Italian schools during school lessons' (Riccio, 2023). The film closes with a provocative comparison of the style of modern politicians with that of Benito Mussolini in the 1920s. Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's face appears in the images. For Fratelli d'Italia this is 'a dangerous and inappropriate comparison with Mussolini and fascism' (Riccio, 2023). While previous research on the Italian political landscape has shown the extent to which older well-known ideologies reappear in many of the 'new' right-wing discourses (Mammone, 2009), Italy's new ruling party has made a huge effort to avoid any direct comparisons with the fascist regime. Ever since FdI came to power, its political exponents have stressed the need for a break with the past. While declaring their opposition to fascism, they simultaneously launched a crusade against anti-fascism, positioning themselves right at the epicentre of Italy's troubled relationship with its national past (Mammone, 2018; Albertazzi and Vampa, 2021).

The increasing success of far-right parties in Italy has attracted attention both in academia and in the media. Their rise started in the Italian Second Republic (1992–2011) with the appearance of Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia. Since 1994, the far-right has acquired the status of acceptable coalition partner after the post-fascist party Alleanza Nazionale (AN) became part of the first

Berlusconi's government. In an effort to re-legitimise the fascist regime and rehabilitate those who had fought alongside the Germans in the Repubblica Sociale Italiana, established by Mussolini after the 1943 armistice, Berlusconi launched his version of a politics of memory. The reframing of the memory of the Resistance and the civil war of 1943–45 aimed at legitimising his post-fascist coalition partner and, as a result, incorporating them fully into society (Bull, 2016: 224–226). AN's strict lineage from neo-fascism was thus dislodged in the eyes of the public, de-polluting the term 'right' from fascism and contributing to the wider acceptance of parties based on this political philosophy (Ignazi, 2005: 334).

The success of this strategy can be seen in the growth and electoral reach of far-right parties in the following years: in 2018–2019, the Italian government was a far-right coalition led by La Lega (formerly Lega Nord), an overtly racist party whose leader Matteo Salvini does not shy away from openly courting Casapound[1] or from using variations of famous quotes by Mussolini (*Il Messaggero,* 2018). In the European Parliament elections of 2019, two members of the Mussolini family were on the electoral lists. In 2020, Fratelli d'Italia, a far-right party that emerged from the ashes of the defunct Alleanza Nazionale in 2012, made an electoral breakthrough in the regional elections before becoming the strongest political force in the 2022 general elections.

To what extent are those developments emblematic for Italy? How do they fit within global trends such as the increased dominance of far-right thinking and the use of mnemonic rhetoric and revisionism of the past? In this article, we address the potentiality of the Italian memory landscape as a tool for understanding other countries' memory politics. We do so by analysing Italian post-fascist political discourse in the period 2018–2023. This timeframe allows us to consider the exponential growth of multiple post-fascist platforms of relevance, both in Italy and in other Western European countries (specifically, Spain and Germany).

We conducted a thorough analysis of the political communication put forward through official channels by Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) between 2018 and 2023, focusing on their mnemonic claims and unravelling the memory frameworks, both explicit and underlying, promoted by the party. The result was a set of mnemonic tools, which we then cross-studied with the discourse of two other far-right Western European parties: VOX in Spain, and AfD in Germany. As such, the article builds a comprehensive framework of mnemonic rhetoric tools used, to differing degrees, by these increasingly successful far-right parties. Given that far-right actors and leaders tend to behave similarly with regards to communication across various regions of the World (Gerstlè and Nai, 2019), it opens the conversation about how these discourses may be contributing (and to some extent also re-shaping) the crisis of Western European liberal democracy.

State of the art

Despite the fact that the far-right[2] has been examined from a wide range of standpoints, disciplines and approaches using different methodologies (Koposov, 2022; Manucci, 2022: 2), the question of how far-right parties use mnemonic discourses has been largely overlooked so far. Some scholars mention the fascist legacy as a factor linked to the success of far-right parties (Betz, 1988; Kitschelt and McGann, 1995; Mudde, 2007; Meijen and Vermeersch, 2023). However, most comparative research focuses exclusively on socio-economic (demand side) and political-institutional (supply side) structures, leaving out cultural opportunity structures. The extensive research on collective memory, on the other hand, does not draw a connection to party politics and instead focuses on case studies or binary comparisons that tend to be country-specific (Rousso, 1990; Berger, 2002; Art, 2006; Östling, 2011; Couperus and Tortola, 2019).

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[1]A social movement openly inspired by fascist ideology.

[2]There is considerable debate about the terms 'populist,' 'extreme-right,' 'neo-/post-fascist,' and 'far-right.' We have decided to stick to the terms 'post-fascist' and 'far-right' to describe FdI, VOX and AfD, given their ideological roots and nationalistic, transgressive political strategies (Couperus *et al.*, 2023).

Research dealing with the Italian case in particular has concentrated on the country's political developments of the past three decades, tracing an ever-growing revisionist tendency in Italian society (Focardi, 2005, 2016). Scholars have investigated its effect on well-defined commemoration practices such as the calendar of national holidays (e.g., Focardi, 2005, 2020b; Cossu, 2009, 2010; Foot, 2011) or the establishment and funding of museums (Storchi, 2019). They have looked into the way key political figures have favoured different understandings of the past (Thomassen and Forlenza, 2011; Griffini, 2023) and have analysed to what effect regional and local memories (particularly regarding the Foibe massacres) have been raised to the national level (Ballinger, 2004; Zamparutti, 2017; Vallerin, 2018; Focardi, 2020a).

With the arrival of one of the most far-right governments in Western Europe, our understanding of how Italian post-fascist political actors shape the nation's memory narratives requires continued attention. The institutionalisation of a far-right discourse at the government level, first with Lega's inclusion in the 2018 coalition, and currently under the Fratelli d'Italia-led government, is arguably contributing to a previously unknown level of mnemonic societal contestation. In other domains, such as anti-migration and xenophobic discourses, we already see a link between extremist political discourse and its presence in society at large (Campo *et al.*, 2021). The effect of the use and abuse of mnemonic rhetoric on the presence, success and social acceptability of the far-right still merits systematic attention.

'Myths and memories define the scope and nature of action, reorder reality and legitimate power holders' (Barahona de Brito and Sznajder, 2010: 500). In other words, the legitimacy of far-right actors is partly determined by collective memories. In addition, the moment those actors have executive roles, this effect is exacerbated. This is because it gives an indication of the degree to which they are considered legitimate by other parties (Caiani and Graziano, 2021: 29). On top of that, governing far-right parties find themselves at a unique vantage point given the opportunity to cement a revised national memory in celebrations and official procedures that, once established, may have lasting power.

While the rise of far-right parties is not solely an Italian phenomenon, the systematic study of mnemonic rhetoric of post-fascist actors holding office will be a valuable source of information about the kind of mnemonic discourses that may arise in other (Western) European countries, given the increasingly polarised and populist European landscape. In this way, this article contributes to the further understanding of far-right extremist discourse by unearthing the mnemonic tools with which post-fascist parties in Italy and beyond are able to shape public discourse.

Theory and analytical guidelines: far-right mnemonic rhetoric

One of the most powerful tools far-right parties have at their disposal is the use of a specific type of rhetoric. Previous research has demonstrated that historical revisionism and myth-making by far-right, populist or fascist actors is frequently employed to draw legitimacy, sustain electoral success and maintain power (Couperus *et al.*, 2023; Meijen and Vermeersch, 2023). What is nevertheless missing so far is a fine-grained understanding of discursive strategies and the specific role that mnemonic work plays within them. Ruth Wodak (2015, 2021) has analysed right-wing rhetoric in great depth. She focuses on the key characteristics of this discourse, both regarding the way in which it is shaped and the kind of content at its core. For the purpose of this article, we adapted and re-organised Wodak's framework to focus on the use of memory narratives by post-fascist parties. The aim was to build a comprehensive theoretical framework of specifically far-right *mnemonic* rhetoric used by parties with fascist roots, which can be applied to other case studies. By 'framework,' we mean a set of categories of possible rhetorical devices, one that can be used to classify discourse and identify which categories dominate. The generalisability of our framework will further understandings of both memory politics and far-right growth across the European landscape.

Wodak (2015, 2021) lists nine features that are characteristic for the rhetoric used by right-wing parties. Five of them are particularly relevant to mnemonic discourse. The first is

related to tendencies of renationalisation and nativism, tightly linked to the second characteristic, the consolidation of specific identity narratives through which different nationalist pasts are evoked. The nation-state is in these cases linked to nativist ideas of the 'Volk' or 'Volkskörper,' drawing clear borders between an In- and an Out-Group. The demarcation between the two groups tends to happen via identity narratives based on political imaginaries and nationalist pasts, since defining a 'people' requires the construction of 'powerful myths that draw on a collective memory of an imagined past in order to define who belongs to 'the people'" (Bull, 2016: 217). Memory in this context serves as the cornerstone of a racial and national identity based on a particular understanding of a supposedly shared history (Bull, 2016).

The third feature is the legitimisation of politics and policies through the evaluative power of specific (supposedly shared) moral values, as well as through (re)narrated historical myths (mythopoesis). Complex historical processes are reduced to snapshots, which allow constructing and triggering Manichean dichotomies. In contemporary (Western) European societies, part of this is often a flaunting and ambivalent relationship with the continent's fascist and Nazi past, as well as a revisionist view of history that is habitually reduced to specific moral stances and exemplary reformulated historical narratives.

The fourth element is the articulation of politics of fear. It revolves around threat scenarios aimed at constructing fear related to real or imagined dangers and crises. In the search for those to blame, scapegoats are proposed and accused of threatening or damaging society. Victim-perpetrator reversal and the pronunciation of conspiracy theories are also recurrent features of politics of fear. Whereas this type of rhetorical articulations is often linked to present or even hypothetical future concerns, we argue that they are often reliant on particular conceptualisations of the past (Forchtner, 2016). In this sense, the past provides the speaker with 'old enemies' or long-past tragedies or dangers from which to learn (and fear) in the present context.

Finally, right-wing rhetoric plays with so-called politics of denial – forcing the speakers' desired matters onto the public agenda as a way to obscure and sideline other topics. Media scandals are provoked that then dominate the news agenda and push other important (or perhaps unflattering for the right-wing actors) topics into the background. Soon after, those elements of the original conversation that prove to cause most contestation are publicly denied.

Method and sources

To effectively analyse the mnemonic tools and narratives that Italian post-fascist politicians have put forward in the past years, we considered a variety of parliamentary and legislative documents, motions and debates, speeches, electoral materials and public interventions by FdI key actors. While diverse in nature, all these sources share a key characteristic: they are structured interventions, prepared in advance with an intended discursive goal in mind. In this way, we capture the main narratives whilst minimising the variability that other platforms, such as interviews or social media interventions, could bring regarding tone and targeted audience (Wodak and Rheindorf, 2022). Documents have been obtained through the online databases of the Italian Parliament (*Camera dei Deputati*[3]) and the Italian Government (*Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri*[4]), as well as through the official website of Fratelli d'Italia, pertaining to the 18th and 19th legislatures of the Italian Republic.

Documents have been filtered and categorised according to speakers and thematic keywords. The selection was done according to a combination of keywords related to Italian mnemonic discourses[5]. This keyword selection is not exhaustive – there is always a chance that additional

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[3]https://banchedati.camera.it

[4]https://www.governo.it/it

[5]Keywords used were: memoria [memory], passato [past], guerra [war], guerra mondiale [World War], 194*, commemor*, fascis*, foib*, ricord* [remember*] (or the equivalent in Spanish and German). The asterisk (*) indicates truncation of the roots of these words to allow for greater flexibility in the search.

interventions discuss the Italian fascist past without using any of these words. We are, however, confident that this risk is minimal. By analysing a broad scope of keywords, including generic terms like 'past,' 'remembering' or 'commemoration,' we over-sampled and then filtered down by only keeping FdI interventions that alluded to the inter-war or Second World War (WWII) era. This meant, for example, excluding referrals to the commemoration of terrorist or mafia attacks, which, whilst relevant to the study of far-right mnemonic rhetoric in general, do not fit this paper's focus on (post-)fascist narratives. To ensure that we did not miss any relevant sources, we paid special attention to all FdI interventions on or around pertinent dates of the Italian remembrance calendar (Cossu, 2010), such as the annual commemorations of the Holocaust (27 January), the Foibe massacres (10 February), Liberation Day (25 April), Republic Day (2 June), or Day of the Armed Forces and National Unity (4 November). Similar attention was also paid to periods marked by increased memory activism, such as September–December 2019 when the European Parliament approved the 2019 European Remembrance Resolution.

For the German and Spanish part of the analysis, we concentrated on party manifestos, speeches by party leaders, and explicit reactions to, and collaborations with, the Italian far-right party. Our analyses focused on the cases of VOX in Spain (founded in 2013) and Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany (also established in 2013). Both parties are closely linked to post-fascist positions and have often clashed with other mainstream parties regarding their vision and remembrance of, respectively, the Spanish Civil War and Germany's role and responsibility for WWII. The recent foundation and exponential growth of these parties make them interesting axes of comparison with the Italian case, and the analysis of their overall mnemonic techniques provides a wide Western and Southern European comprehensive picture.

Collected data includes over 100 documents. All documents were analysed thematically and reflexively (Braun and Clarke, 2022), with an emphasis on explicit claims that put forward a concrete image of the Italian/Spanish/German past. We first familiarised ourselves with the texts, inductively finding argumentative and narrative patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2022) and broadly noting the (political) context in which the interventions were made, to better understand if speakers were making connections to each other, across platforms or to specific events (Rheindorf and Wodak, 2018). Second, we re-approached the materials with Wodak's (2015, 2021) rhetorical framework in mind. We paid special attention to legitimation strategies, ranging from arguments of authority to mythopoesis (Wodak and Rheindorf, 2022), as well as claims regarding lessons from the past (Forchtner, 2016).

Findings 1.0: memory politics in Italy

Applying our framework to FdI discourse between 2018 and 2023, we discuss the use of mnemonic tools in order of salience.

Nativism

Although nativism and identity politics (see below) are closely related (Wodak, 2015), we make here a distinction regarding their use of memory. Nativist mnemonic tools are specifically targeted towards the *construction* of who the 'Italian people' are. FdI politicians thus use the past to exemplify and justify the features and values which according to them are intrinsically Italian and worth maintaining. Since the emphasis is on the protection of these elements, there is a heavy undertone of defensiveness and perceived danger, but nonetheless the discourse is a proactive, 'positive' one, producing a 'pure' idea of Italianness that, as other studies of right-wing rhetoric have demonstrated, never really existed (De Cesari *et al.*, 2020). The main tool is the articulation of dates, figures and events worth remembering as they embody 'Italianness.' They are systematically and explicitly linked to identity, and revolve around elements commonly found in traditional right-wing discourse: Catholicism, national symbols such as the

anthem or the tricolour flag, and traditional values such as a family-oriented mindset or hard work (see Foti, 2018; Mollicone, 2019).

Christian references are arguably the most pervasive but also the most subtle. The connection between Christianity and Italianness is not only present in the explicit praise and remembrance of important Catholic figures, like the last Italian Pope John Paul I, or in the defence of the Judaeo-Christian roots of the country and continent, but also in the use of Catholic expressions to explain Italy's value trajectory. Meloni, for example, often refers to messages from Pope John Paul II, and how they marked her personally, to explain Italian/European understandings such as 'freedom' or her own identity as a woman (Meloni, 2022c). With her famous outcry 'I am Giorgia, I am a woman, mother, Italian, Christian, and all of this you cannot take from me,'[6] voiced for the first time in 2018 in Rome and then again at a VOX rally in Madrid in 2021, she mobilises a retro-feminist rhetoric that recuperates a traditionalist fascist image of the woman and the family, and denies all other forms of gender fluidity or family (re)configurations. Frequent in this context is also the FdI use of Catholic dogmas such as 'love for one's neighbour' or fascist values such as 'order, discipline, hierarchy' to justify FdI policy proposals (Bellucci, 2019).

Identity politics

This tool is tightly linked to nativism, insofar as the identity narratives evoked imply the existence of an in-group of 'core Italians.' The difference is that active identity politics are pre-emptively framed as contestation; they go directly (although not always explicitly) against established national narratives, and they highlight the existence of 'forgotten' or 'misunderstood' Italians that deserve to be visible and recognised.

There are two main narratives that FdI politicians put forward. They are, (a) narratives of 'righting a wrong': namely the recognition of the (Italian) victims of Communism, and (b) the existence of a sort of 'black legend' about Italy's colonial past. The first narrative about communist repression is the most pervasive and systematic, and is usually referred to in highly emotional terms of shared suffering and even transgenerational trauma. Rescuing this sub-set of Italian citizens from 'oblivion' thus becomes a priority. An open point of contention is that, according to FdI, governments and MPs from the Partito Democratico and the Partito Comunista Italiano have not recognised those victims to the same extent as the victims of Nazism (Meloni, 2019; Delmastro delle Vedove, 2020). In order to bolster their claim, FdI refers to the 2019 European Parliament Resolution on the Importance of Remembrance for the Future of Europe, in which Stalinism is recognised as a totalitarian regime on par with Nazism (Meloni, 2019; Trancassini, 2019). This reification of Italians as a people with claims to historical suffering, abandoned by their (previous) leaders, is a common right-wing discourse (Meijen and Vermeersch, 2023) that here adopts a distinct (post-)fascist angle, and which contributes to a 'rhetoric of judging' (Forchtner, 2016).

Within this narrative of making victims of Communism more visible, furthermore, there is a particular emphasis on the Foibe massacres. This focus corresponds to the past two decades of mnemonic activism of the Italian Right both in national (Ballinger, 2004; Cossu, 2010) and European political venues (Sierp and Ortiz Cabrero, 2021). Nevertheless, this topic (and strategy) is not as common as it may have been in years past. In the 2018–2022 legislature, direct references to this topic are mostly found around important dates of remembrance, such as the 10th of February (*Giorno del Ricordo*, Day of the Exiles and Foibe) or the 27th of January (*Giorno della Memoria*, Holocaust Remembrance Day). Special mentions appear in the last trimester of 2019, after the European Parliament adopted the European Resolution on Remembrance as an argument against the commemoration of the 'liberation' by communist forces (Meloni, 2019). During these interventions, the goal of FdI speakers is to strip the victims of communist

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[6]All translations from the original Italian, Spanish, or German texts are our own.

repression from any 'perpetrator' status – they are rather framed as regular Italians who found themselves in a complicated historical situation (Meloni, 2019).

When the Foibe massacres are mentioned, the blame is explicitly put on the Left and on past Italian governments for letting these victims be forgotten, as well as on some historians or scholars for their 'provocative' comments about the Foibe victims (e.g. Gardini, 2023). This finger-pointing and blame-reversal is a continuation of a decades-long tendency amongst the Italian radical right (Griffini, 2023). The number of victims, if at all mentioned, is often exaggerated (see Meloni, 2019).

A second, smaller anti-Communist remembrance appropriated by the FdI is the 1943 Battle of Nikolayevka in which Soviet troops overtook the Italian Alpine corps. As of 2022, the 26th of January (day of the battle, one day before Holocaust Remembrance Day) is the *National Day of Remembrance and Sacrifice of the Alpine corps*. Whereas the spirit of this commemoration, shared by Right and Left, is to honour a centuries-old military corps, FdI interventions stand out for their staunch defence of the Nikolayevska battle. FdI speakers mostly strip the battle of its political context, refusing to mention that Italy was at the time an ally of Nazi Germany. In their speeches, they instead engage in blame reversal by describing members of the Alpine corps as 'martyrs' and scapegoats of the post-WWII Italian and European governments, whose bloody sacrifice should be honoured (De Carlo, 2019; Rampelli, 2021).

Finally, a second 'mnemonic mistake' to be righted is, according to FdI, the excessively negative perception of Italy's colonial past by Italians themselves. Unlike in other Western European states, there does not seem to be colonial nostalgia that could permeate the Italian political discourse; no references to the Italian empire, to (past) non-European territories or to colonial partnerships. Instead, Italy romanticises some aspects of its colonial endeavours without actually calling them that. Allegedly positive elements are purportedly amplified in memory yet disconnected from the colonial context, whereas negative aspects are completely eliminated from public discourse (Griffini, 2023: 486). As Meloni (2023a) puts it, 'When we [Italians] go abroad […] we realise at once how much our nation is considered a beacon of civilisation […] synonymous with the beautiful, the precious, the innovative and the genius.' Most FdI actors see both domestic and international discourses about Italy's past as excessively apologetic, full of 'subordination or inferiority complexes,' when in reality Italy can 'stand tall' (Meloni, 2022b) and assert its central role in international politics (Proglio, 2020). This attitude corroborates the far-right tendency to consider apologies to former colonies as inappropriate. It normalises colonial crimes, perpetrated especially under fascism, by categorising them as purely symbolic of the violent practices widespread during the age of colonialism (Griffini, 2023: 486–487).

(De)legitimation of politics

This mnemonic tool is perhaps the most multi-faceted. It entails the (usually highly emotive) remembrance of specific events and figures with a concrete goal: to justify the speaker's support or rejection of a greater policy framework.

As Wodak (2015) explains, one of the main avenues for this (de)legitimation is the re-narration of historical myths that 'unite' the people. In reality, the myths simplify existing (potentially conflicting) memories and provide an easier-to-digest historical narrative from which contemporary events and policies are supposed to derive logically. In the FdI parliamentary context, this mythmaking focuses on 'national' histories, in which the emphasis is on the recent past and, more concretely, on Italy's role during the two World Wars. Special weight is put on Italy's suffering both during and after the wars. The speakers usually employ a personal, emotive tone, in order to criticise contemporary policies and stress the need to take into account the moral lessons of the past.

The use of historical references for policy (de)legitimation is especially visible in the interventions between April–May of 2022, when the Italian parliament was discussing whether to participate in the European provision of weapons to Ukraine. According to Meloni (2022c), for

example, the Italian experience with Communism and totalitarianism in general makes the country sympathetic to the Ukrainian plight and thus in favour of a stronger European policy. Direct comparisons between present-day concerns and the Holocaust are also used to (de)legitimise political choices. For example, MP De Carlo's (2020) claim that the lack of governmental concern about deforestation is 'almost comparable to the Holocaust' demonstrates the key role the Holocaust can play in the FdI's arsenal for the discussion of national policies.

Finally, symbols or historical figures are also used as (de)legitimating tools. The tricolour flag is the most recurrent material element, brought up as a symbol of patriotism and self-defence, either in the context of immigration debates (Foti, 2018) or educational and cultural reforms to ensure, for example, that 'new generations of children of immigrants […] understand our history and love our homeland' (Mollicone, 2019). The FdI MPs use the tricolour flag (or related elements like the national anthem) as representations of a supposedly uncontested historical Italian unity that must be preserved. Key historical figures are used in similar ways. They include 'foundational' figures from the days of Italian unification such as Giuseppe Mazzini (Mollicone, 2019), but also relatively uncontested 20th century figures such as Aldo Moro (Bucalo, 2019), or post-war entrepreneur Enrico Mattei (Mollicone, 2022; Meloni, 2022b). Other interventions, which are usually marked by a much higher emotional charge, bring up rather more controversial personalities such as Giovanni Gentile, Minister of Education during Mussolini's government (Foti, 2018), or Giorgio Almirante, founder of the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano (Deidda, 2018; Foti, 2018). In these occasions, their successes as statesmen are praised, and their fascist affiliation is either ignored (e.g., Foti (2018) only refers to Gentile as 'one of Italy's greatest philosophers') or legitimated by the historical context. Meloni (2019), for example, highlights Almirante's pacification efforts towards the end of his life as something that the Left should recognise.

Politics of fear

Amongst the politicians of FdI, there is a clear articulation of common 'Italian fears.' These claims are often accentuated by the use of emotional language, verging on conspiracy-speak, to 'explain' the incapacity of past governments to protect their people (Donzelli, 2018). Most statements are uttered in the context of (anti-) immigration parliamentary debates, although the identification of 'the Other' remains relatively generic: 'economic immigrants,' 'illegal immigrants,' sometimes specific minorities such as the Roma (Donzelli, 2018; Foti, 2018). On other occasions, the emphasis is rather on the In- group: Italians themselves and the role model they can provide for (and the customs that they need to protect from) others. For this, specific historical periods of Italian history are mentioned, such as the post-war scarcity that drove many Italians to immigrate to other countries. Italian (im)migrants are the 'right' type of foreigner, that kept their ties back home and their traditions whilst respecting those of their host country.

A second type of fear expressed by FdI politicians is the loss of the appreciation for Italy's history. In this regard, the 'threat' does not come from external groups but from within: past governments and/ or the Left, who wish to negate the country's (or even the European continent's) roots. In this context, memory becomes a tool for the expression of moral righteousness, as they argue that Italy's history, with its focus on Christianity, humanism, and even its 'mistakes' during the Second World War, should be a beacon for future policies and attitudes in the international arena. The Italian experiences and lessons learnt (as well as those of other European countries) are at risk of being lost unless there is a change in mediatic and cultural appreciation (Meloni, 2022a, 2023a, 2023b). These politics of fear are at the same time clearly linked to a self-placement as victims; Italians need a brave voice that speaks out against these threats, and the FdI speakers that do so become self-aware 'martyrs' that will fight despite the potential electoral and mediatic attacks and defamations.

Politics of denial

Finally, the mnemonic tool associated with politics of denial is prominently concerned with a public game of 'what if.' For example, FdI representatives claim that if it was not for them,

then certain 'truths' would not come to light (Frassinetti, 2018), and justice would never be restored to Italian martyrs such as those of the Foibe (Donzelli, 2018). They position themselves as mnemonic warriors[7], able to bring up uncomfortable topics and historical truths despite the institutionalised silence (Meijen and Vermeersch, 2023). Other times, accusations of being fascist are pre-emptively voided by repeating generally accepted opinions, such as when Meloni explicitly criticises the Racial Laws (Meloni, 2022b, 2022d) without ever mentioning the word 'fascism' or acknowledging that the totalitarian nature of Italian fascism went beyond these laws. With such blame-avoidant discourses, FdI MPs successfully re-frame the conversation and obscure (past or potentially upcoming) controversial remarks about the original topic.

Findings 2.0: memory politics beyond Italy

The analysis of German and Spanish far-right discourses reveals important similarities to that of FdI.

Nativism and identity politics

As we have seen above, FdI MPs present two interlinked but separate strategies when it comes to identity-related mnemonic claims: a 'positive' construction of Italianness ('who we are'), and a defensive, 'negative' one ('who we are not, despite manipulation from the Left or other agents'). In the Spanish and German discourses, this differentiation is not as present. Instead, the emphasis is on a strong formulation of the 'threats' that the German/Spanish peoples are facing. There are only a few instances of constructive discourse that do not relate explicitly to the Other, such as AfD's (2019) emphasis of the (Judaeo-)Christian roots of Germany, which resembles the FdI's references to Italian Christianity and once again refers to a 'purified' (Christian, white) European identity that never existed (De Cesari *et al.*, 2020). As a 'threatened' identity, however, the Spanish and German Self is very clearly articulated. VOX (and Meloni herself, in a guest speech at a VOX rally; see Meloni, 2023b) singles out 'immigrants'. The AfD considers Germany incompatible with Islam (AfD, 2019) and praises Meloni explicitly for her swift anti-immigration policies as soon as she formed her 2022 government (*Lausitzer Rundschau*, 2023).

Specific identitarian narratives with an element of contestation have also a strong presence within Spanish and German post-fascist parties. Just as in FdI's discourse, these parties make repeated references to two 'wrongs' that need to be fixed: a country-specific divide (communist repression in Italy; Civil War in Spain; Germany's responsibility for WWII) and a colonial heritage that receives excessive bad press. VOX and AfD are particularly active in this regard. They also assign much blame to the past Spanish and German governments for contributing to the 'black legend' of each country, positioning themselves as mnemonic warriors that oppose the actions of previous political leaders, just as FdI do. VOX, for example, considers the Spanish state commemorations of those repressed during Franco's regime as a 'totalitarian attack' (VOX, 2023) on regular Spaniards, who are now 'excluded [from their past]' (VOX, 2019). They also defend the value of (colonial) Spain's 'civilising labour in America' (VOX, 2023). AfD, on the other hand, provocatively claims that democratic Germany is stuck in a 'culture of guilt,' and instead proposes a 'forward-looking culture of remembrance' (Bethke, 2023). According to them, contemporary yearly commemorations of Germany's defeat in WWII obscure the historical importance of the nation, for which the Nazi period is only 'a speck of bird droppings in over 1000 years of successful German history' (*Die Welt* 2018). Once again, the greater levels of executive power that FdI have enjoyed in the recent years, including the possibility of converting some of their staunch nativist views into anti-immigration or heritage

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[7]A term coined by Jan Kubik and Michael Bernhard in 'A theory of the politics of memory', in Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik (eds), *Twenty Years after Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014).

policies, mean that the far-right Spanish and German discourses remain as such, *discourses* for now. Nonetheless, it is clear that there are very similar strategies at play, and that the Italian counterparts have got the upper hand in terms of depth and frequency of use of these mnemonic tools.

(De)legitimation of politics

In terms of usage of memory and historical events for policy (de)legitimation, Spanish and German MPs follow a comparable strategy to that of Italian FdI politicians. They all systematically bring up 'foundational' stories in relation to certain policy decisions from their country's government, but the main difference with FdI interventions is the tone. In the discourse of VOX and AfD, the tone is always negative; their objective is to *de*legitimise governmental action, as they are in the (minority) opposition. Whereas the Italian Right, particularly FdI, had a hand in the formulation and drafting of some important reforms since 2018, such as the inclusion of civic education with a focus on historical patriotism in the educational curriculum (see Bucalo, 2019; Mollicone, 2019; in the context of the Legge 20 agosto 2019, n. 92), the Spanish and German far-right parties are yet to contribute to decision-making in such a manner at a national level.

In terms of policy coverage, the concerns of the Spanish and German far-right politicians are also much more abstract. VOX, for example, is broadly concerned with anything related to 'historical memory' in Spain, which is a term that originates in a 2007 law but includes all sorts of government action, from the removal of Franco's corpse from the Valley of the Fallen to the re-naming of streets and monuments from the Civil War-era. VOX's de-legitimation strategy is rarely focused on any of these specific actions; it remains rather vague, on the basis that *any* government intervention in history is a mistake (Abascal, 2019; VOX, 2020, 2023). AfD, on the other hand, is generally concerned with immigration and climate change. To prove that contemporary policies are inappropriate, references to undefined historical clashes amongst different cultural communities are brought up (AfD, 2019). AfD's and VOX's policy concerns remain, therefore, at a bird-eye-view level, whereas FdI demonstrate a higher mnemonic activity related to a greater range of policy areas. Whether this difference is opportunity- or platform-driven remains to be seen and offers avenues for future research.

Politics of fear

Within the discourses from VOX and AfD, we also find memory-driven articulations of fear. Similar to the FdI interventions, most of this fear is caused by an identification of (external) groups that threaten the core identity of Spaniards or Germans. In this regard, Germany's AfD politicians are the most explicit, considerably more so than their Italian counterparts. What in Italian discourse are relatively frequent but vague references to 'immigrants,' in AfD interventions we can find a much more direct singling out of Muslim communities, Turkish communities, refugees, etc. (AfD, 2019). They also shame more aggressively past governments for not implementing enough deterrents (e.g., *Meininger Tageblatt,* 2023; *Süddeutsche Zeitung,* 2018). The remembrance of past conflicts embodying a 'clash of civilisations' between 'native' Europeans and these 'Other' communities is therefore also more explicit.

This emphasis on the specific danger that certain communities entail (and have historically entailed for Europe) is also linked to the fear of loss of identity that we saw in Italian interventions. FdI speakers highlighted foundational events such as WWII to explain which moral values are inherently Italian and are at risk of being lost. VOX and AfD also use this strategy, often referring to the 'real' Spanish, German or European culture that is under-valued and under-protected, and which can be observed in key past successes, from the Spanish role in 'civilising' the world to the European development of concepts such as freedom, rule of law or democracy (e.g., AfD, 2019; Abascal, 2022; VOX, 2023). In German discourse, this articulation of the In-group sometimes derives into accusations of having turned German citizens into a 'minority' within their own country, with the implications of a lack of power and potential persecution that this entails

(AfD, 2019). With these arguments, VOX and AfD speakers frame themselves as the cultural-mnemonic warriors that FdI politicians also perceive themselves to be; they all claim to feel the pressure of traditional political elites, and sometimes also the media, working against them (e.g., Meloni, 2022a, at a VOX electoral event; *Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2018*). The main difference lies in their forward-looking tone: whereas FdI possesses executive power and thus orients its discourse towards the culture- and heritage-related changes that they would like to implement in the (near) future, the Spanish and German parties continue to frame themselves as small and relatively weak actors, who will nonetheless continue to fight for their fellow countrymen's protection.

Politics of denial

Last but not least, the 'what if' game played by FdI, with which they successfully place themselves as mnemonic warriors against powerful elites, is also present in the discourse of VOX and AfD, who articulate explicitly who the victims worth remembering are. VOX, for example, derails conversations about memory by bringing in supposed 'homages to terrorism' in the Spanish state's attitude towards Basque political actors (VOX, 2019, 2023). They refuse to accept any existing laws about historical memory whilst, in the same interventions, demanding a law to institutionalise a different kind of remembrance for the victims of (Basque separatist) terrorism. AfD, meanwhile, highlights the 'atrocities against the German population' that have been forgotten by both German politicians and the world (Schindler, 2023). They bring these atrocities up whilst refraining from acknowledging any crimes committed by Nazi Germany, thus obscuring the historical responsibility of the country. We observe, therefore, similar trends to those of FdI in their conversation shifts towards events and understandings that are more favourable to them, such as revisionist narratives of communist repression or of their own non-fascist affiliations.

Conclusions

For a long time, Italy has been considered not only an outlier due to the specificity of its experiences during WWII, but also as a laggard when it comes to dealing with its fascist past. Paradoxically, it might be this very combination of being both an outlier and a laggard that allowed Italy to become a new frontrunner: Italy was the first country with a previous fascist experience to elect an openly post-fascist party into government. While the electoral success of Fratelli d'Italia has been paved by decades of revisionism and re-shaping of memory narratives leading to the legitimisation of nostalgic politics, FdI's arrival into power marks the peak of an unprecedented banalisation of fascism. Its members' vehement reluctance to condemn Italy's fascist past is defied by their frequent use of mnemonic rhetoric using fascist themes and images. FdI politicians act like mnemonic warriors, in Kubik and Bernhard's (2014) words, constantly adapting their claims about past events to the changing national context and positioning themselves as 'bearers of truth.' This allows them to play the long game, chipping at established Italian memory narratives slowly but surely, changing them too subtly to be called out on it. As a result, Italian post-fascist parties seem to have encountered little resistance. Until relatively recently, neither the media nor the opposition parties successfully questioned this wider borrowing from far-right history, and the post-fascist parties have been able to carry on using fascist terms and dog-whistles without being directly associated with fascist ideology in the public mind. FdI has thus managed to achieve what most far-right parties aspire to (Wodak, 2021): the establishment of a hegemonic narrative and the concomitant normalisation of far-right beliefs and discourses.

Our adaptation of Wodak's (2015) framework for right-wing political discourse proves highly appropriate for the study of post-fascist party discourses. In official interventions, FdI members re-frame Italian history and even 'Italianness' using terminology and arguments that are closely related to fascist narratives, particularly regarding nativist arguments and identity politics. They do so in a bold yet non-specific way, referring to the 'nature' of Italians and highlighting the

historical events that, according to them, have not received sufficient attention. This rhetoric is particularly present in the discussion of specific policies. The past five years of parliamentary activity demonstrate that the FdI has developed a set of core events and personalities, (moral) criticisms and emotional appeals that they use to either discredit or promote contemporary policies in favour of their ideological standpoints.

That this strategy is used also by other post-fascist parties in Europe becomes evident when analysing discourses in Germany and Spain. Both AfD and VOX have started to use very similar rhetoric, harnessing the effect of the use and abuse of mnemonic rhetoric on the presence, success, and social acceptability of their parties. Italy in this context seems to function as a sort of laboratory of ideas, a framework and comparator for other far-right parties that aim to future-proof their policies by using memory. The effect on the erosion of Western liberal democracy is already visible: the moment the stigmatisation brake is loosened, and fascism is presented as respectable, the door is opened for contemporary extremism to be depicted as normal and fully democratic.

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