

ETHNOPOPULISTS' REACTIONS TO CRISES: THE CASE OF FRATELLI D'ITALIA

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ABSTRACT

The expansion of ethnopopulism within Europe at a time of increasingly unstable political and international orders raises questions on how ethnopopulist parties react to crises. This thesis explores the question by investigating ethnopopulist discursive changes as a reaction to recent and current crises, namely the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. The thesis looks at Italy as a case study, focusing on its current governing party – *Fratelli D'Italia* (FDI) – and speeches of its leader – Giorgia Meloni – from the formation of the party in 2012 until its victory in the 2022 general elections. To evaluate the discourse, the thesis employs a qualitative content analysis of the selected documents and speeches along the main conceptual elements of ethnopopulism, namely populism, nationalism, and conservatism. This analysis unveils shifts in FDI's populism and nationalism, but less so in its conservatism, with a change in the party's definition of the '*other*'. In practice, this manifests as a moderation in FDI's Euroscepticism and xenophobia, with an augmentation of its antagonism towards the Italian left and the previous technocratic government elite.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | | |
|------|--|----|
| 1. | Introduction: Crises, Ethnopolitism and Discursive Change | 1 |
| 2. | Framework: Populism, Nationalism, and Crises..... | 3 |
| 2.1. | Populism: the Defence of the Populus | 3 |
| 2.2. | National Populism: Ethnopolitism | 5 |
| 3. | Hypotheses and Methods | 8 |
| 4. | Analysing the Changes in the Ethnopolitist Discourse of Italian Parties..... | 12 |
| 4.1. | Literature Review: Italy's Populisms in the Last 30 Years | 12 |
| 4.2. | Fratelli D'Italia: "God, Homeland and Family" (Meloni 2021) | 14 |
| 4.3. | FDI's Ethnopolitist Discourse in the Opposition | 16 |
| 4.4. | FDI's Ethnopolitist Discourse in the 2022 Campaign and Government..... | 19 |
| 4.5. | Discussion of Findings..... | 22 |
| 5. | Conclusion: the Shifts in the Ethnopolitist Definition of Others | 25 |

LIST OF TABLES

| | |
|--|----|
| Table 1: Coding Scheme for analysis of party documents and Speeches..... | 9 |
| Table 2: Evaluation of FDI discourse from 2012 to 2013, own calculation..... | 22 |
| Table 3: Signifiers for each category of analysis..... | 27 |

1. INTRODUCTION: CRISES, ETHNOPOPULISM AND DISCOURSIIVE CHANGE

As political, economic and cultural crises unfold, populism and nationalism are making a comeback (Jenne 2018). This is best illustrated by the revival of ethnopopulism – a variety of populism which defines its *people* in national and ethnic terms (Varshney 2021) – among right-wing European parties¹, which was caused by the 2008 financial crisis and the 2015 migration crisis (Diamanti and Lazar 2020e). This thesis investigates how ethnopopulists change their stances when crises unfold. This investigation is particularly relevant due to the increasing support for populists throughout Europe (see Vachudova 2021) and the ongoing aggravation of political and international crises.

The thesis examines the case study of Italy, where right-wing populism has made a strong comeback first in opposition and currently in government, with *Fratelli D'Italia*'s (FDI) leader Giorgia Meloni as Prime Minister since October 2022. Notwithstanding the long history of Italian populism, Italian right-wing populists have shifted their stances recently (2018-2022) on topics such as the European Union, migration, and national politics (Alekseenkova 2022). Such a shift became even more pronounced with the unfolding of recent political and international crises – such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the 2022 Italian Government Crisis – which, more or less directly, affected Italy. The findings of the thesis show that Italian parties still exhibit ethnopopulist features, which, however, are more moderate towards migration and European integration and more aggressive against national political opponents.

¹ This is testified by Jenne, Hawkins, and Silva (2021) and Wodak (2015).

The thesis begins with a theoretical discussion conceptually delineating populism and defining ethnopopulism. Next, a framework for a qualitative content analysis of ethnopopulist discourse is presented, which is then utilised to examine Italy's governing party as a case study. This analytical section first presents a literature review illustrating the evolution of Italian populism and then continues by analysing FDI's party documents and Meloni's speeches to test if there has been a change in ethnopopulist discourse as a reaction to recent crises. Finally, the thesis explores the implications and limitations of the conducted analysis in the concluding section.

2. FRAMEWORK: POPULISM, NATIONALISM, AND CRISES

2.1. Populism: the Defence of the *Populus*²

Populism aims at bringing power back to the *people* (or *Populus*), represented by a personalised leader, against antagonistic *others* (Bieber 2020). Due to its wide-ranging nature, the definition of populism is highly debated. Most commonly, populism is defined as a thin-centred ideology through an ideational approach. This is done by authors such as Diamanti and Lazar (2020), Hawkins and Kaltwasser (2017), Mudde (2007, 2017), and Stanley (2008), which claim that populism consists of the Manichean opposition of the pure *people* – perceived as homogenous – against the corrupt *elites*, which have morally and politically betrayed them.

Additionally, the political-strategic approach defines populism as a “top-down” political strategy utilised by party leaders to appeal to a heterogeneous group of *people* (Wayland 2017; Urbinati 2019). Thus, populist rhetoric is considered an instrument to gather political support (Diamanti and Lazar 2020a).

Further, the importance of identity within populism is highlighted through the discursive and socio-cultural approaches. Laclau's (2005) discursive approach highlights the importance of emotional appeals in the creation of the *people*'s and *others*' identities within populist discourse. Such identities are constructed around “empty signifiers” (Dominijanni and Casarino 2014, 175)³, which are filled in by populists according to the voters and crises they appeal to. Laclau describes populism as a political articulation answering to the people's demands and interests (Dominijanni and Casarino 2014). Similarly, discourse is fundamental

² Some of the research present in this section was done for the final papers I wrote of the “Voting Behaviour” and “Critics of democracy: anarchism, elitism, populism” courses offered by CEU.

³ With this citation I refer to the illustration of Laclau's account of populism in Dominijanni and Casarino (2014).

in Ostiguy's socio-cultural approach (2017). Ostiguy describes populism as an “(antagonistic, mobilizing) flaunting of the ‘low’”⁴ (2017, 78). Accordingly, populist discourse culturally captures the identity, sentiments, and manners of the societal and political “low”, displaying them in a transgressive, folksy, direct, and personalised manner⁵ (Ostiguy 2017).

Ultimately, populism establishes itself in the irreducible identity conflict among the in-group majority – the *people* – and the out-group minority – the *others* – (Diamanti and Lazar 2020a). According to the identity given to the *people* and *others*, populism manifests in both political spectrums⁶ (Diamanti and Lazar 2020e). Regardless, all types of populism exhibit recurrent characteristics: personalisation of politics and voters' identification with the populist leader (Diamanti and Lazar 2020e; 2020a), advocacy for “direct representation” (Urbinati 2019, 120) of the *people's* will (Diamanti and Lazar 2020a; 2020c) and unmediated communication between leader and voters (e.g. through social media) (Diamanti and Lazar 2020a).

Further, all types of populism spread easily in contexts of crises and political disaffection (Diamanti and Lazar 2020a). Hawkins, Read, and Pauwels (2017) argue that populism is a normative response to a perceived crisis in democratic legitimacy. The latter can be triggered by political, economic, and cultural hardships (Caiani and Padoan 2021); often caused by the multi-level collision of nation-states⁷ with globalisation. Indeed, with the establishment of supra-national institutions and norms, globalisation restricts the agency of nation-states

⁴ Ostiguy (2007) introduces a high-low spectrum in politics which assesses phenomena according to the display of manners and identity and the level of personalisation they display. Within this spectrum, informal behaviour, national identity, and high personalisation constitute the lower part of the spectrum.

⁵ This is also emphasized by Diamanti and Lazar (2020b).

⁶ Usually right-wing populism concerns national identity, whereas left wing populism considers class identity.

⁷ Nation-states are political entities which establish their sovereignty within the boundaries of a nation and base their legitimacy on shared national sentiments, identity, and consciousness (Mann 2005).

politically (Castles 2005; Held 2005), economically (Mann 2005; Rodrik 2018), and culturally (Held 2005; Mann 2005), thus creating conflicts among national and international institutions and causing feelings of neglect and mistrust among voters. This is considered a driving cause of populism (Diamanti and Lazar 2020e).

Despite being supported within the literature (e.g. Roberts 1995; Taggart 2000), the relationship between populism and crises is not straightforward (Stavrakakis et al. 2018). Indeed, populists are both the “product and creators” of crises (Diamanti and Lazar 2020a, 22). Moffitt denominates this phenomenon as “performing crisis” (2015, 197) and describes it as a procedure in which populists identify a failure, exacerbate it into a crisis, and frame their *others* as its cause and their *people* as its victims. Subsequently, populists present “simple solutions and strong leadership” (Moffitt 2015, 198) to face these crises and gather support. Moffitt also emphasises populists’ attempts to “continue to propagate” (2015, 207) these crises to pursue their supposed protection and representation of the people. This is executed by populist by switching the conception of crisis utilised in their “performing” (Moffitt, 2015).

2.2. National Populism: Ethnopolulism⁸

Ethnopolulism, also referred to as nationalist populism (e.g. Singh 2021) or ethno-nationalist populism (Bonikowski 2017), is frequently presented as a combination of traditional populism and ethnic⁹ or exclusive nationalism (Jenne 2018; Jenne, Hawkins, and Silva 2021; Vachudova 2020; Brubaker 2020; Singh 2021). Indeed, ethnopolulism inherits both populism’s vertical relationship between the *people* and their leader, and nationalism’s

⁸ The concepts utilised in this section are a re-elaboration of my final paper for the “Critics of democracy: anarchism, elitism, populism” course offered at CEU.

⁹ Ethno-nationalism is an exclusionary type of nationalism which prioritises a strict definition of membership to the nation, based on immutable characteristics (e.g. ethnicity) (Bonikowski 2017).

horizontal sovereignty assigned to the national *ethnos* (Jenne, Hawkins, and Silva 2021). As noted by Singh (2021), populism and nationalism unite themselves in ethnopopulism along the stance of the exclusionary “us versus them” identity discourse present in both; which results in a convergence of the *people* with the nation (Diamanti and Lazar 2020b; Jenne, Hawkins, and Silva 2021).

Consequentially, ethnopopulism defines the *others* in a duplicate manner: both elites and non-nationals (Singh 2021). Such *others* are depicted as outsiders and can be either “internal outsiders” (e.g. national socio-political and economic elites, ethnic minorities within the nation) or “external outsiders” (e.g. supranational entities and immigrants) (Brubaker 2020, 57). These dimensions are often mixed within ethnopopulist discourse, where “internal outsiders” are accused of serving the interests of “external outsiders” (Brubaker 2020, 57), thus betraying both the ethnic purity and political interests of the “nation-people” (Jenne, Hawkins, and Silva 2021, 117).

Ethnopopulism manifests as a political phenomenon which employs ethnic identification to mobilise the *people* against the enemies of the nation (Jenne 2018, Oskolkov 2022). Hence, ethnopopulism can be considered a political strategy (Vachudova 2020; 2021) whose core principles are anti-elitism and ethno-cultural homogeneity (Oskolkov 2022). On a policy and discourse level, this translates to a high degree of social conservatism, which brings ethnopopulism to diverge from current liberal representative democracies and confers it an authoritarian disposition (Diamanti and Lazar 2020c; Jenne, Hawkins, and Silva 2021; Vachudova 2020; Varshney 2021). Within the EU, this is found in numerous right-wing parties; which exemplifies why ethnopopulism is oftentimes used as a synonym for radical right-wing populism (Diamanti and Lazar 2020e; Jenne, Hawkins, and Silva 2021; Vachudova 2020;

Varshney 2021)¹⁰. Wodak (2015) reports examples of Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Sweden, and the Netherlands.

As other types of populism, ethnopopulism is crisis-driven. Ethnopopulists thrive on the crises caused by the above-presented collision between nation-states and globalisation. Namely, ethnopopulist “perpetuate [the] sense of crisis” (Moffitt 2015, 195) caused by such collision in a nationalist manner, by claiming to protect the nation’s interests against the disregard of national and foreign elites. Ethnopopulists also claim to protect the nation’s identity and core values, hindered by globalisation-driven multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism. In doing so, they appeal to those that identify as “losers of globalisation” (Hawkins, Read, and Pauwels 2017, 271) and depict them as the *nation-people*.

In sum, populism can be understood as a leader-driven opposition among the pure *people* and the corrupt or corrupting *others*, which can be internal (e.g. national elites) or external (e.g. international or supranational elites, migrants). The political character of populism depends on the definition of the *people*’s and the *others*’ identities, which relies on the crises instrumentalised by populists. When crises affect the nation, such as those caused by the collision of nation-states and globalisation, the definition of the people can take national terms, hence giving rise to ethnopopulism.

¹⁰ The association among right-wing parties and ethnopopulism is famously discussed in Mudde (2007).

3. HYPOTHESES AND METHODS

Having defined ethnopopulism, I examine if and how ethnopopulist discourse has shifted in reaction to current crises. As highlighted by Moffitt (2015), the populist definition of the *people*, the *others*, and the risks they pose changes according to the crises at hand. Hence, as ethnopopulists react to crises, their discourse changes. Particularly, this thesis focuses on the discursive changes triggered by crises that highlight the importance of a unified Europe, such as Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine. In this perspective, I hypothesise that:

- H1: Ethnopopulist parties have decreased their Euroscepticism, compensating this with a higher antagonism towards their national political opponents.
- H2: There has been a slight shift in ethnopopulist stances towards migration, which appear to be more moderate and inclusive compared to their original stances.

To test the accuracy of these hypotheses, I take Italy as a case study and measure the extent of ethnopopulist discourse before and after Covid-19 and the outburst of the war in Ukraine. To execute this, I analyse documents of the governing party – FDI – and speeches of their leader – Giorgia Meloni – from their period in the opposition (2012-2021) and their period in government (2022). This choice is motivated by the increased importance of FDI within Italian politics and, specifically, the Italian right. I first examine the development of FDI's discourse, from its foundation in 2012 to the year before the war (2021), illustrating the progressive radicalisation of the party's stance from its foundation in 2012 to 2019 (Puleo and Piccolino 2022) and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. I then examine the changes in FDI's

ethnopolulist discourse over 2022, illustrating Meloni’s stances throughout the 2022 electoral campaign and her first months as prime minister (2022a; 2022b; 2022c)¹¹.

Following Donà (2022), and drawing upon the works of De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017), Wodak (2015), and Wodak and Krzyżanowski (2008), I use qualitative content analysis, with the aid of critical discourse and frame analyses. This is because the category-based nature of these methods allows me to easily compare current discourse with that before Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine and, thus, grasp any changes.

I outline the foundational elements of populism and the categories of analysis as summarised in Table 1 and explained below:

| Elements of Ethnopolulism | Categories of Analysis: Characters of Ethnopolulism | Ethnopolulist Stances/Frames ¹² |
|---------------------------|---|---|
| Populism | Internal Political Enemy of the People | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Anti-establishment - Anti-national political opponent - Against national elites - Representation of the “will of the people” |
| | External Political Enemy of the People | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sovereignism - Euroscepticism - Against international and global elites |
| Nationalism | Xenophobia, Nativism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Anti-migration - Nativism - Islamophobia - Anti-multiculturalism |
| | Protectionism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Against economic globalisation - Protection of national trademark - Powerful Italy |
| Conservatism | Traditionalism, Exclusionary Patriotism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pro-family - Against “gender ideology”, anti-LGBTQ+ - Religion - Cultural heritage |

Table 1: Coding Scheme for analysis of party documents and speeches

¹¹ All translations from Italian were executed by me.

¹² To identify the presence of each ethnopolulist stance within FDI party documents, I attributed signifiers to each category as listed in the appendix.

- *Populism*: ethnopopulists advocate for the self-government of the *nation-people*, claiming to promote their will against the corrupt rule of the *others*, namely political enemies. Such corrupt rule usually coincides with the indirect representation and excessive bureaucracy associated with both national and supranational elites, which become internal and external political enemies respectively. According to the scope of the political enemy at hand, the scope of the *nation-people* also varies. For instance, ethnopopulists can define the *nation-people* only as their supporters when attacking internal political enemies but also broaden this definition to the whole nation when attacking external political enemies. This manifests as anti-establishment discourse internally and, within the EU, as Eurosceptic discourse externally.
- *Nationalism*: Ethnopopulists discriminate and often dehumanise those different from the ethnos, which allegedly threaten the security and integrity of the *nation-people*. Such discrimination is displayed through strong xenophobic and nativist rhetoric, which takes the form of anti-migration stances. Further, ethnopopulists prioritise the nation and its *people*'s well-being above all. Consequentially, they opt for protectionist economic policy to shield the *nation-people* from the effects of globalisation. In doing so, they frame their *others* as the cause of economic globalisation and the issues that come from it.
- *Conservatism*: Ethnopopulists uphold the absolute preservation of the socio-cultural identity and characters of the ethnos, which are used to distinguish the *nation-people* from the *others*. This is executed via strong traditionalist and patriotic stances, which can manifest as the interdiction of external cultures and the promotion of national tradition and conservative values. An example of this is anti-LGBTQ+ stances, which are justified in the name of tradition and religion, and stances against cultural and moral relativism, which are justified in the name of the *Patria*.

On these grounds, I rate the presence of populism, nationalism, and conservatism in FDI party documents and Meloni's speeches on a scale from 1 to 5 (Table 2), with 1 indicating low presence and 5 indicating high presence¹³. According to my hypotheses, I expect to find changes in the elements of populism and nationalism.

¹³ For instance, in her electoral speeches (2022a; 2022b), Meloni repeatedly critiques the left and the previous establishment, however she mentions illegal migration only a couple of times. Hence, I gave these speeches a 5 in the internal enemy category and a 2 in the xenophobia category.

4. ANALYSING THE CHANGES IN THE ETHNOPOPULIST DISCOURSE OF ITALIAN PARTIES

4.1. Literature Review: Italy's Populisms in the Last 30 Years

Italy is often depicted as an exemplary case for populism (Agnew and Shin 2017; Caiani and Padoan 2021; Dominijanni and Casarino 2014; Maccaferri 2022). From Mussolini's fascism¹⁴ and Giannini's *Qualunquismo* in the first half of the 20th century (Maccaferri 2022; Agnew and Shin 2017; Diamanti and Lazar 2020d) to current forms of populism (Diamanti and Lazar 2020f), Italy's populisms showcase the different meanings that Laclau's (2005) empty signifiers can take (Dominijanni and Casarino 2014). Indeed, Italian populisms manifest as oppositions to the political establishment, influenced by different socio-political and economic transformations affecting Italy (Maccaferri 2022). Thus, it is possible to understand Italy's most prominent manifestations of populism – *Berlusconism*, *Movimento 5 Stelle* (M5S), and LEGA (Agnew and Shin 2017; Diamanti and Lazar 2020f; Dominijanni and Casarino 2014; Pieroni, Roig, and Salmasi 2023) – as reactions to crises that involved Italy.

Firstly, *Berlusconism* can be described as “entrepreneurial populism” (Diamanti and Lazar 2020b, 111). Entering politics in 1993 with the creation of *Forza Italia* (FI)¹⁵, Berlusconi instrumentalised crises, such as the fall of the Berlin wall and the “*mani pulite*”¹⁶ corruption scandal (Agnew and Shin 2017), to present himself as the protector of Italy's honest people,

¹⁴ Although there are some similarities between fascism and populism (e.g. the centrality of the leader), it is necessary to differentiate them as populism, unlike fascism, requires democracy (Maccaferri 2022).

¹⁵ FI is a centre-right party that was founded by Berlusconi in 1993 as an “Association of citizens that recognize themselves in the ideals of the liberal democratic, Catholic-liberal, secular and reformist European traditions” (FI n.d., 2).

¹⁶ Also known as *Tangentopoli*, this corruption scandal affected most of the Italian political elite at the time, especially on the left, and caused the fall of the First Republic (Forti 2022; Puleo and Piccolino 2022).

threatened by “new communists” and betrayed by corrupt political elites (Diamanti and Lazar 2020b, 114). Berlusconi thus became the personification of the libertarian working man distant from political schemes (Dominijanni and Casarino 2014), an image extensively transmitted to Italians via media platforms (e.g. television) (Agnew and Shin 2017, Diamanti and Lazar 2020b).

Similarly, M5S’¹⁷ substantial use of media platforms (e.g. the *Rousseau* platform¹⁸), enables its definition as a post-ideological (Maccaferri 2022) web-populism aimed at establishing a model of direct communication, and thus direct democracy, in alternative to representation (Diamanti and Lazar 2020f). The anti-political and anti-party nature of M5S (Diamanti and Lazar 2020b), represents a response to the increased anti-elitism and Euroscepticism among Italian voters (Gattinara and Froio 2014); sentiments caused by the sense of socio-political and economic breakdown consequent to 2008 Eurozone and 2015 migration crises (Caiani and Padoan 2021; Puleo and Piccolino 2022).

Such anti-elitism and Euroscepticism are also employed by LEGA¹⁹ to advocate for sovereignism (Diamanti and Lazar 2020f). Indeed, LEGA presents the latter as a form of protection of Italians’ interests and as a response to the cultural and economic fears caused by the migration crisis (Caiani and Padoan 2021; Gattinara and Froio 2014). Originally standing for northern federalism, LEGA was “nationalised” by Salvini, which enlarged the party’s

¹⁷ M5S is a political movement launched in 2009 by Grillo and Casareccio characterized by their refusal of political ideologies and establishments. M5S revolves around “common goods, integral ecology, social justice, technological innovation, eco-social market economy” (M5S n.d., 4)

¹⁸ The *Rousseau* platform is a Web platform which involves voters in the organization and decision-making of the party (Maccaferri 2022).

¹⁹ LEGA is a right-wing party founded in 1989 by Bossi and re-branded in 2018 by Salvini. The party claims to be a political movement finalised at “peacefully transforming the Italian State in a modern federal State through democratic and electoral methods” which “promotes and sustains freedom and popular sovereignty at the European Level” (LEGA n.d., 17).

construction of the *people* to all Italians (Diamanti and Lazar 2020b; Dominijanni and Casarino 2014; Agnew and Shin 2017; Forti 2022). This conferred a nationalist and ethnic character to the party, which brings LEGA to be considered a prime example of Italy's ethnopopulism (Forti 2022). In fact, such nationalist and ethnic characters are missing from both FI and M5S, which define their *people* and *others* politically (e.g. the *other* as the establishment and the elite) rather than nationally.

Alongside the three main populist forces described above, a new party has risen within the Italian right: Fratelli D'Italia. This rise is often overlooked by general overviews of Italian populism (Puleo and Piccolino 2022), which mainly focus on FI, M5S, and LEGA, however, my analysis aims to correct this oversight.

4.2. Fratelli D'Italia: “God, Homeland and Family” (Meloni 2021)

According to the literature (Donà 2022; Ferrari 2021; Forti 2022; Pieroni, Roig, and Salmasi 2023; Puleo and Piccolino 2022; Ventura 2022), FDI was founded in 2012 by Corsetto, La Russa, and Meloni (FDI 2013a) as the re-establishment of *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN), heir to *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI) (a neo-fascist party during the First Republic). The three decided to leave the Berlusconi-founded right-wing group *Popolo della Libertà* (PDL) due to disagreements on his leadership and his support for the technocratic Monti government. Meloni herself, party leader since 2014, stated that FDI's aim was to form “a new party from an ancient tradition” (2021, 175) to honour the values of the post-fascist right, supposedly betrayed by PDL. Despite the party's initial shortcomings in both the 2013 and 2018 elections – which symbolize the strengthening of populism in Italy with the victories of M5S and LEGA – FDI managed to become the most supported right-wing party between 2020 and 2021, establishing itself as the lead of the Italian right and securing a win in the September 2022 elections, beating both FI and LEGA.

The literature attributes FDI's success to its heritage, organisation, and political stance, as well as to Berlusconi and Salvini's loss of popularity. FDI's ties to AN, and consequentially to MSI, ascertain the party's ties to the long tradition of the post-fascist Italian right (Forti 2022; Puleo and Piccolino 2022). The party maintained a similar organisation to AN and elected Meloni, former president of AN's youth organisation *Azione Giovani* (Youth Action), as its leader (Puleo and Piccolino 2022). Hence, despite its recent history, FDI appeals to loyal supporters of the post-war Italian right, unlike LEGA and FI (both founded in the early 1990s). Further, FDI's consistent status as the opposition since its creation (Donà 2022; Ferrari 2021; Ventura 2022), especially during technocratic governments, ensured its popularity among newer right-wing supporters. Contrary to LEGA and FI, FDI never supported Draghi's government, thus demonstrating a strong coherence in its anti-elitism (Donà 2022; Ferrari 2021; Puleo and Piccolino 2022; Ventura 2022). Lastly, Berlusconi and Salvini's declines, caused by their failures in government in the early and late 2010s respectively, left space for Meloni to increase her popularity among voters. She executed this through public speeches, media appearances and pop-culture moments (such as the viral remix "io sono Giorgia" (Donà 2022)) (Ventura 2022). Meloni's lead position among the leaders of the Italian right was consolidated with the outburst of Russia's war against Ukraine. Notably, Meloni's prompt support for Ukraine and NATO diverged from Berlusconi and Salvini's ambiguous relationships with Russia (Forti 2022; Ventura 2022), thus further increasing her popularity among voters.

From Berlusconi's entrepreneurial and libertarian populism against political schemes to M5S' anti-political web-populism and LEGA's nationalist populism against migrants, Italy exemplifies how reactions to different crises yield different types of populism. Particularly, the rise of FDI symbolises how populists' reaction to crises, and the consequential change in their

discourse, affects their appeal to voters. The next sections analyse how FDI shaped its ethnopopulist ideology, shifting its definition of the *others* according to the crises at hand.

4.3. FDI's Ethnopopulist Discourse in the Opposition

Scholars (Donà 2022; Puleo and Piccolino 2022) illustrate how the FDI's party programs from 2013 to 2019 exhibit a progressive radicalisation of the party's stances on immigration, European integration, and culturalism; which testifies to FDI's ethnopopulist nature. Alongside the programs, Meloni's speech at the first party congress in Fiuggi (2014) and the "Trieste Theses" (FDI 2017), elaborated for the second party congress, illustrate FDI's populist, nationalist and conservative character.

Firstly, the populist attitudes of FDI are evident in its strong opposition towards its internal political enemies. Since its first appearance in the 2013 elections, FDI denounced the failure of Italian elites and declared to act "in the name of the sovereign people" (title of the 2014 party congress) against undemocratic technocratic governments. This attack towards internal enemies pursued throughout the years, as exemplified by Meloni's (2019) oath to never get in coalition with the "left": "We fight the left, we don't bring it in government".

Such an attitude is also shared towards external political enemies, namely the European elites (FDI 2013b; 2017; 2019) which hinder national sovereignty (Sondel-Cedarmas 2022). Meloni (2014; 2017) argues for a "Europe of the people" in contrast to a Europe of the global elite. This position is defended by the rest of the party, which supports the idea of a "European confederation of free and sovereign nation-states, able to cooperate on important topics [...], but free to self-determinate on anything decisive on the national level." (FDI 2019, point 1).

Secondly, FDI's nationalist tendencies have always been pronounced; as exclusionary nativism, xenophobia, and anti-migration²⁰ are at the core of FDI's political stance. Since the beginning, the party has pledged to its fight against "illegal immigration" (FDI 2013b; 2014; 2018; 2017; 2019), avenging the priority of Italians on immigrants – "first Italy and first Italians" (FDI 2018, point 2) – for government protection and social benefits. Accordingly, FDI employs a culturalist approach to acceptance, where citizenship is possible only for those that conform to Italian norms, laws and identity (Meloni 2019). FDI (2017) also claims that the EU is allowing "the indiscriminate and uncontrolled access of people from other continents in quantities that prefigure a true ethnic substitution" and proposes the establishment of a "philosophy of [European and Italian] identity" to combat this.

FDI's political opposition to Europe extends to the economic sphere. FDI has advocated for protectionist policies aimed at the increase of economic independency and the preservation of the "made in Italy" trademark, both in national and European elections (Meloni 2014; FDI 2014a; 2017; 2018; 2019). The party condemns the Eurozone and European Central Bank's austerity policies, considering these as an obstacle to Italy's economy (FDI 2014a; 2017). This stance was particularly relevant in the context of the Eurozone financial crisis, after which the party described the relationship between Italy and the EU as humiliating and argued for a revision of all EU treaties (FDI 2014a; 2018).

Lastly, FDI is a conservative party as it upholds patriotism and traditionalism. FDI presents "patriotism"²¹ as a way to promote national sentiments and counter multiculturalism (2017; 2019). Building on Meloni's 2014 speech, FDI (2017; 2019) claims to defend Italy and

²⁰ FDI followed other Italian right-wing parties, such as LEGA, in their use of immigration as a topic of rhetoric (Pieroni, Roig, and Salmasi 2023).

²¹ FDI often utilises the word patriotism instead of nationalism in spite of the latter being cardinal to the party.

Europe's identity, traditions and Judeo-Christian values against globalization, universalism, and the Islamic threat.

Meloni (2014; 2017) identifies the “natural” family as the foundation of society and the nation, in alignment with the party's fierce opposition to the “gender ideology”, the LGBTQ+ movement, and abortion (FDI 2017; 2019). This stance is perfectly summarized by Meloni's (2019) renowned quote: “I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother, I am Italian, I am Christian. You will not take this away from me! You will not take this away from me!”.

Despite these principles remaining at the heart of FDI's and Meloni's ideology – as demonstrated by her speech at the National Conservatism conference in Rome in February 2020 (Meloni 2020) – the Covid-19 crisis forced the party to focus their discourse to a main target: the Italian political establishment and its left. Meloni consistently critiqued the Conte II executive – in government at the time – since the beginning of the pandemic, condemning it for not welcoming FDI's “sensible proposals” to support Italians and their freedom (La7 2020). This worsened during the pandemic, as Meloni harshly accused Conte and the left of using “the state of emergency to consolidate [their] power” (FDI 2020b) and avoid elections (FDI 2020a, La Repubblica 2020). Meloni also attacked the recovery plan, accusing it to be overly complex and unhelpful to Italian businesses (FDI 2020a, FDI 2020b). Moreover, she declared the government to be “irresponsible and crazy” (FDI 2020b) for including the possibility of sanatoriums for immigrants in the plan, which she claimed to be a gateway to illegal immigration in Italy (FDI 2020a).

A similar attitude persisted during the shift to Draghi's government in 2021, when Meloni stated: “you will not have our vote of confidence, but you will have our inputs and support for every decision we will deem right, because we are, first and foremost, patriots” (La7 2021). Meloni's harsh critique also extended to the EU, which was accused of leaving Italy behind

during the outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic whilst promoting the interests of some member states at the expense of others (La7 2020). Additionally, Meloni reiterated the ideal of a “confederate Europe”, stating that this did not make her party Eurosceptic but merely a supporter of sovereignty (La7 2021).

4.4. FDI’s Ethnopolulist Discourse in the 2022 Campaign and Government

The 2022 elections further reinforced populism in FDI’s discourse, with rhetoric against internal political enemies being the focus of Meloni’s campaign. The latter exhibited strong anti-establishment and anti-left tendencies, attacking the left’s previous governments when discussing the revindication of direct representation and the sovereignty of the majority. Leveraging on the instability of its previous executives Meloni described the Italian political establishment as incapable (2022a; 2022b). In particular, she targeted the left, accusing it of being undemocratic and allegedly exposing its lies (2022b). In this regard, she stated: “among us, politics is love and not hate, it is truth and not lies, it is a mission for its citizens and not a cruciate towards opponents. This is a fundamental difference between us and the left.” (2022b). FDI’s president further contrasted the left’s supposed intentions of preserving its hegemony with the party’s intentions of building a “political government fully representative of the people’s will” (2022a) capable of “freeing a nation from [the] power system that has been keeping it hostage” (2022b).

FDI’s disposition towards their internal political enemy was opposite to that held towards their external one. During the electoral campaign, Meloni declared the party’s aim of making Italy a protagonist in the international sphere, ensuring its full cooperation with the EU and NATO in facing the war in Ukraine and its consequences (2022b). The president confirmed this in one of her first speeches as prime minister, where she claimed that Italy is “a fully-fledged member of the West and its alliance schemes, [as] a founding member of the EU,

NATO and G7 [...]” (2022a). These claims were paired with explicit defences of her party from accusations of Euroscepticism. To these Meloni responded that FDI’s critiques of the European establishment – mainly consisting of reproaches for how the Covid-19 and current energy crises were handled – were not aimed at “hindering or sabotaging [the] European integration” (2022a), but rather at improving the efficiency of the EU, as well as its relationship with its citizens (2022a, 2022b). In this regard, Meloni advocated again for a “Europe of the people”, saying that the Union should be a “common home of Europe’s people” (2022a).

Unlike populism, nationalism was not reinforced during the 2022 campaign. Indeed, FDI’s intentions to cooperate with the EU have also changed the party’s protectionist attitude. Indeed, there is no mention of exiting the Eurozone or increasing economic sovereignty in FDI’s 2022 discourse. Instead, this has been substituted by the party’s increased inclination to adhere to the EU’s economic policies and recovery plans as confirmed by Meloni in a speech in the Chamber of Deputies after her victory. On this occasion, she stated: “A common European home certainly means shared rules, also in the financial-economic sphere” (Meloni 2022a). Regardless, FDI’s desire to protect and promote the “Made in Italy” trademark remained strong. Meloni accused the left of hindering Italy’s economy with their promotion of “unregulated globalisation” (2022b). Against this, she advocated for the preservation of the quality of the “Made in Italy” trademark and of Italian entrepreneurship, as well as for their promotion within international markets (2022a; 2022b). Likewise, she proposed the promotion of Italy’s natural resources, which, she claimed, can render Italy one of the solutions to the current European energy crisis (2022a; 2022b). Thus, FDI’s protectionism exhibits a slight decrease, provoked by the party’s intent to endorse the EU’s economic policies and recovery plans.

Unlike protectionism, FDI's xenophobia decreased notably, with the topic of migration losing relevance both during and after elections. FDI endorsed legal migration, switching the criteria for the acceptance of migrants from identity-based to cause-based, and their nationalist definition of the nationalist *other* from all migrants to only illegal immigrants. Indeed, Meloni stated that "the themes of refugees and migrants are two completely different things" (2022b) and that "in Italy, as in every other serious State, one cannot enter illegally, but only through decrees for [migratory] flows" (2022a). Accordingly, Meloni once again called for the protection of borders, now extending it to all European territories and not just Italian ones (2022a, 2022b). Meloni's project of cooperation with the EU also extended to this, where she proposed the initiation of negotiations with North African countries to regulate illegal migration. The president suggested the creation of international "hot-spots" in African territories, to evaluate asylum applications and assess who, as a refugee, has the right to be welcomed in Europe (2022a, 2022b).

Lastly, the party's definition of the identity of its *people* remained the same, hence resulting in little change within its conservatism. Similarly to migration, topics such as the family and Italy's Judeo-Christian roots, are rarely mentioned in Meloni's speeches. Nonetheless, the *Patria* and its heritage remain central. Meloni explicitly claims that "FDI is a party of patriots" (2022b) and that for this reason she will always protect Italy's heritage and Italians' interests above all, to restore Italy's pride (2022a). In sum, although nationalism and conservatism appear in Meloni's discourse, their relevance is diminished by the extent of populist tendencies in her speeches.

Meloni maintained these stances during her first months in government, as evident from her "end of year" press conference (2022c). The newly-elected prime minister contrasted her government to previous left ones, reaffirming her aim to act in the interest of Italians and not

of the political establishment and her support for a government representative of people's votes. Nevertheless, this was executed with a more moderate tone in comparison to her electoral campaign. Further, Meloni still displayed the same positions towards the EU, NATO, and migration, as she ratified her firm intentions to adhere to EU recovery plans, cooperate in the support of Ukraine, and ensure an EU-North Africa cooperation to combat illegal immigration. Lastly, Meloni invariably referenced her love for Italy as her main motivation behind her politics.

4.5. Discussion of Findings

My analysis of FDI's party documents and their president's speeches highlights shifts in the party's ethnopopulist discourse; mainly recorded along the elements of populism and nationalism, as summarised in Table 2:

| Time Frame | Analysed Speeches | Rating in Each Frame of Analysis | | | | |
|----------------------------------|---|--|--|-------------|---------------|---|
| | | Populism | | Nationalism | | Conservatism |
| | | Internal Political Enemy of the People | External Political Enemy of the People | Xenophobia | Protectionism | Traditionalism, Exclusionary Patriotism |
| Development of Party (2014-2019) | FDI (2013; 2014a; 2014b; 2017; 2018; 2019), Meloni (2014; 2017; 2019) | 2 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 |
| Covid-19 Pandemic (2020-2021) | La7 (2020; 2021), La Repubblica (2020), FDI (2020a; 2020b) | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| 2022 Italian Government Crisis | Meloni (2022a; 2022b; 2022c) | 5 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 |

Table 2: Evaluation of FDI discourse from 2012 to 2013, own calculation

Starting from populism, the table illustrates an increase (from 2 to 5) in the party's aversion towards their internal political enemy, which corresponds to a decrease (from 4 to 2) in their aversion towards their external political enemy. In practice, this is caused by FDI's consistent

attack on the left and Italy's political establishment since the outburst of the pandemic, coupled with its progressive support for the EU, which was consolidated after the outburst of the war in Ukraine. Following, FDI's nationalism became more moderate, as the party's xenophobia along with its nativism decreased (from 4 to 2). Indeed, the party no longer refers to the "ethnic substitution" theory and is open to accepting refugees. Additionally, the party's protectionism does not show much change, as FDI continues to promote the "Made in Italy" trademark. A novelty in this category, however, is FDI's adherence to European economic policy and recovery plans. Lastly, FDI's conservatism did not exhibit a substantial change, as its patriotic nature persists. Nonetheless, the party no longer refers to "gender ideology", though still displaying a strong will to preserve the traditional family and "Italianity" (FDI 2022, 11), and the conservative values attached to them.

These discursive shifts began during the Covid-19 pandemic when FDI's main focus became its opposition to the government at the time and its recovery plans. Further, the outburst of the war in Ukraine forced all ethnopopulist parties to stir away from Euroscepticism to become part of a united front against Russia. This also meant a toning down of anti-migration rhetoric and an increased acceptance of refugees. Lastly, FDI's intent to acquire and maintain power during the 2022 Italian government crisis, consolidated the shift in their ethnopopulist discourse, as the left, their previous political establishment, and technocratic governments became the main political enemy.

These findings confirm the original hypotheses. On the one hand, H1 is confirmed by the identified discourse trends in the category of internal and external political enemies, which signal a concentration of FDI's opposition within the nation. This corresponds to FDI's decreased Euroscepticism and the party's increased aversion towards the national political establishment. On the other hand, H2 is supported by the decrease in the category of

xenophobia and nativism, which corresponds to FDI's more moderate approach towards migration concerning refugees.

My findings are also in line with what others have argued. Alekseenkova's (2022) analysis of LEGA's and FDI's party programs from 2018 to 2020 finds that the war in Ukraine, as well as the economic and political tensions affecting Italy, have led Italian right-wing populist parties to be more moderate. These parties now refer to legalism – rather than to nativism or culturalism – in their assessment of migration, a topic which is only mentioned once in the latest FDI program (2022). Further, these parties are “redefining the enemy” (Alekseenkova 2022, 669) by substituting sovereignism with patriotism – explicitly used for the first time in a party program (FDI 2022) – and increasing their aversion towards the left (explicitly stated in the premise of their 2022 party program). Lastly, these parties wish Italy to be a strong member of the West and its institutions. This is particularly noticeable as FDI's international projects for Italy are another core element of their 2022 program.

Overall, these findings highlight a significant change in ethnopopulist discourse as a reaction to crises that call for a unified international response. For instance, crises such as Covid-19 or the war in Ukraine, brought ethnopopulists to lower their Euroscepticism and nativism, in order to appear as strong members of a united European front. Concurrently, as they necessitate a political *other*, ethnopopulists raise their attack on national political elites. These crises, however, do not change the essence of ethnopopulist parties, as the protection of the nation and its identity remains central to their political agenda.

5. CONCLUSION: THE SHIFTS IN THE ETHNOPOPULIST

DEFINITION OF *OTHERS*

This thesis examined the changes in ethnopopulist discourse as a reaction to recent crises, finding shifts in the definition of the ethnopopulist *other*. Focusing on Italy with FDI as a case study, I find, in line with other scholars (see Alekseenkova 2022), a redefinition of the party's *other* both in populist and nationalist terms. In populist terms, the *other* is now primarily identified with the party's internal political enemy, rather than their external one, which manifests as an aggressive attitude towards the Italian left and a moderate stance towards the EU. In nationalist terms, the *other* is still identified with migrants. Nonetheless, the party now differentiates between refugees and illegal immigrants, accepting the former and ostracising the latter. Moreover, as the identity of FDI's *people* still coincides with "Italianity" (FDI 2022, 11), the party's conservative discourse did not exhibit strong shifts in the nationalist perception of the *people*. FDI also maintains its conservative stance when it comes to family support over LGBTQ+ rights. In sum, I find that FDI's discourse softens regarding migration and European institutions while it radicalizes against the Italian left. These shifts are traceable to Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine, as ethnopopulist parties had to cooperate with the EU on recovery plans and refugee management. In fact, this newly found acceptance of what used to be the enemy, namely the EU, resulted in a radicalisation of the *othering* of internal political opponents and non-refugee migrants.

These findings confirm the literature linking populist discourse to crises and provide insight into how international crises affect ethnopopulist discourse and its definition of *others*. In particular, international crises that highlight the need for European-level cooperation, such as Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine, bring ethnopopulists to identify their *others* with national

opponents, rather than international ones. Additionally, with its case study, my thesis contributes to filling the gap in the literature on contemporary Italian populism and specifically FDI, which, as highlighted by both Donà (2022) and Puleo and Piccolino (2022), is understudied. Nonetheless, the thesis, comprising only one party in one country during a short period, faces limitations that could be overcome by further research. Indeed, to test the generalisability of my findings, my hypotheses and methodological framework could be applied to other countries and other ethnopopulist parties. Further research could also include policy proposals in their analyses to understand the concrete implications of the shifts in ethnopopulist discourse and, thus, bring forward the unveiling of patterns of right-wing populism in a Europe faced with worsening international crises.

APPENDIX:

| Frames of Analysis: Elements of Ethnopolitism | Categories of Analysis: Characters of Ethnopolitism | Signifiers |
|--|--|--|
| Populism | Internal Political Enemy of the People | Italians/Italian people, political elite/class, left-wing, presidentialism, power system/establishment/hegemony, (sovereign) people, people's will/vote, legitimate, direct relationship, representative/representation, democracy, efficient state/government, freedom, justice, rights |
| | External Political Enemy of the People | National interest, European/EU, confederation, "Europe of the people"/Sovereign Europe, Brussels, NATO, (national) sovereignty, Italy, globalisation (political), people's will, oligarchy, technocracy/bureaucracy |
| Nationalism | Xenophobia, Nativism | Illegal migration, Italians first, security, national boundaries/territories, migrant arrivals, NGOs, Islam, refugees, asylum seekers, North Africa, Ukraine, hot spots, boats/boatloads, traffickers |
| | Protectionism | Eurozone, made in Italy, economic crisis, Italian entrepreneurship/excellence, nationalisation, Italian industry, globalisation (economic), trademark, Italy's role in Europe/recovery |
| Conservatism | Traditionalism, Exclusionary Patriotism | <i>Patria</i> /patriots, nation, cultural identity, heritage, family, Italian language, and symbols, "italianità" (lit: <i>italianity</i>), abortion/life, LGBTQ+, culture, Italian history, religion/Christianity, Judeo-Christian roots, Greece/classical roots, globalisation (cultural), beauty |

Table 3: Signifiers for each category of analysis

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