# POPULISM, SOCIAL MEDIA AND IMMIGRATION: THE USE OF TWITTER AS A PLATFORM FOR ANTI-IMMIGRATION DISCOURSE IN ITALY AND THE U.S.

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### IŞIK UNIVERSITY
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# POPULISM, SOCIAL MEDIA AND IMMIGRATION: THE USE OF TWITTER AS A PLATFORM FOR ANTI-IMMIGRATION DISCOURSE IN ITALY AND THE U.S.

## ABSTRACT

This study takes the tweets shared by 45th president of the United States Donald Trump and Italian populist leader Matteo Salvini throughout 2018, to conduct a manual comparative content analysis in order to identify the main characteristics of their anti-immigration discourse on social media. The analysis aims to answer the following research question:

How did Donald Trump and Matteo Salvini use Twitter as a platform for anti-immigration discourse in 2018?

The ultimate goal is to consider the two leaders' anti-immigration discourse in order to identify the specific textual elements and emotional tone used to mention immigration and refugees in order to recognize the dominant frames and narratives employed. This includes the attempt to also determine the emotional tone, attitudes and opinions used to address immigration and immigrants by both leaders.

The results indicate that the online anti-immigration discourse of the two political leaders included the identification of immigrants as an economic burden, as potential threats and, in general, as scapegoats of different issues.

Few recent studies have addressed the characteristics of online populist communication in relation to a specific topic, especially not through the manual comparative content analysis of two political leaders coming from very different backgrounds. The purpose of this research is to fill this gap by supplying a framework for the analysis of the populist anti-immigration discourse on social media. This work suggests that social media can be used as a tool by populist leaders to construct an anti-immigration discourse that relies on the creation of a hostile narrative, a derogatory language and occasional mockery.

# POPÜLİZM, SOSYAL MEDYA VE GÖÇMENLİK: İTALYA VE ABD' DE TWİTTER'IN GÖÇMENLİK KARŞITI SÖYLEMLER İÇİN BİR PLATFORM OLARAK KULLANILMASI

## ÖZET

Bu çalışma, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nin 45. Başkanı Donald Trump ve İtalyan popülist lider Matteo Salvini'nin 2018 yılı boyunca paylaştığı tweetleri ele alarak sosyal medyadaki göçmenlik karşıtı söylemlerinin temel özelliklerini belirlemek için manuel bir karşılaştırmalı içerik analizi yapmıştır.

Bu tezin dayandığı araştırma sorusu şu şekilde ifade edilebilir:

Donald Trump ve Matteo Salvini, 2018'de göçmenlik karşıtı söylemler için

Twitter'ı bir platform olarak nasıl kullandı?

Araştırmanın amacı, kullanılan dominant çerçeveleri ve anlatıları ortaya çıkarmak, göç ve mültecilerden bahsederken kullanılan spesifik metinsel unsurları ve duygusal tonu belirleyebilmek için iki liderin göçmenlik karşıtı söylemini analiz etmektir. Buna her iki liderin göç ve göçmenlere ilişkin olarak kullandığı dil ve bu dilin duygusal tonu ile, tutumları ve görüşleri belirleme girişimi de dahildir. Araştırma, iki siyasi liderin göçmenlere ilişkin çevrimiçi söyleminin göçmenleri ekonomik bir yük, potansiyel bir güvenlik tehditi ve genel olarak tüm sorunların günah keçisi olarak çerçevelenmesine dayandığını ortaya çıkarmıştır.

Son zamanlarda yapılan az sayıdaki araştırma, spesifik konulardaki popülist iletişim özelliklerine atıfta bulunmuş, ancak bunu özellikle çok farklı sosyal altyapılardan gelen iki siyasi liderin sosyal medya paylaşımlarının kıyaslamalı içerik analizi yöntemini kullanarak yapmamıştır. Bu araştırmanın amacı, sosyal medyadaki popülist göç karşıtı söylemin analizi için bir çerçeve sağlayarak bu boşluğu doldurmaktır.

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ROSA MELISSA VITIELLO

Alla mia mamma, perchè è sempre presente.

Al mio papà, perchè è sempre qui.

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# List of Abbreviations

AfD       Alternative für Deutschland

API       Application Programming Interface

BNP      British National Party

CEP       Centre for Economic Performance

CSA      Confederate States of America

DNA      Digitally Networked Activism

EDL       English Defence League

EP        European Parliament

ERPI     Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative

ESS       European Social Survey

EU        European Union

FI         Forza Italia

FMT      Free Media Thesis

FN        National Front

FOMO   Fear Of Missing Out

GD        Golden Dawn

ICE       Immigration and Customs Enforcement

IOM      United Nations Migration Agency

JHA      Justice and Home Affairs Council

LN        Lega Nord

MyBO    My Barack Obama

M5S       Five Star Movement

NGO     Non-Governmental Organization

OECD    Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

OSIM    Online Social Interactive Media

PD        Democratic Party

PEGIDA Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident

PRR  Populist Radical Right

RAGE  Hate Speech and Populist Othering in Europe Through a Racism, Age, Gender Looking Glass

RN  National Rally

RT  Russia Today

RWP  Right wing populist party

SAR  Search and Rescue

SIS  Schengen Information System

SPLC  Southern Poverty Law Center

UKIP  United Kingdom Independent Party

UNHCR United Nations Refugee Agency

VIS  Visa Information System

# CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Introduction

History and the changes within poitical systems have always been impacted by the rise of new political movements, ideas and sentiments. The last decade in particular has witnessed a significant rise of populism, which has resulted in a great divide between socially conservative and more progressive stances. Both the academic sphere and the popular one have been increasingly interested in the topic, as the number of populist movements and leaders quickly grew around the world.

This study relies on a content analysis in order to answer the following research question:

How did Donald Trump and Matteo Salvini use Twitter as a platform for anti-immigration discourse in 2018?

The two political leaders have been selected and considered as relevant for the purpose of this research because of their generally acknowledged populist ideology and anti-immigration stances, while their tweets have been examined because I see them as part of their populist communication strategy. In the present work, populism is mainly interpreted as an ideology in which discourse, therefore communication, and political strategy are strictly interconnected.

An elite-people division is often identified as the main characteristic of the ideology, which is mainly concerned with national sovereignty, the rejection of economic and cultural globalization, opposition to immigration and the emphasis on the idea of the people as a righteous category. In the present-day understanding,

populism also relies on the presence of a charismatic leader who claims to be the personification of the will of the people.

Populist movements and leaders have also started to rely on a new, useful tool: social media. The main advantages it provides include new forms of communication, which contribute to shape different approaches and attitudes that have influenced the populist context over time. Populist messages and ideals can be distributed and significantly amplificated through the digital platform (Reinemann, Stanyer, Aalberg, Esser, de Vreese, 2019), which allows to reach a bigger portion of potential voters or supporters in a much easier way and in a short period of time.

Chapter 2 will be focused on populism, providing an introduction to what it is, how it has changed in the past few years, what are its main concepts and how close it is to far-right movements. Chapter 3 will follow with an analysis of social media, their potential, limitations, the ties held with populism, ideological polarization and a section dedicated to the effects of disinformation, hate speech and fake news.

Chapter 4 will be dedicated to the exploration of how different countries and politicians condemn acts of solidarity towards migrants and those who help them, in order to highlight the connections between right-wing populism and the criminalization of solidarity towards migrants and refugees. A section will also include an analysis of the securitization of migration and specifically how it is implemented, often politicized, how it has changed after significant events such as 9/11 and what are the consequences we can observe in policies and international governance. The chapter will conclude with a section aimed at highlighting the ties between populism and the immigration discourse.

Chapter 5 and 6 will discuss the methodological approach and data gathering processes to answer the research question. I will be using a manual comparative content analysis methodological approach to examine Donald Trump and Matteo Salvini's Twitter posts published in 2018. This time period is especially significant because it was the year in which the Trump administration signed the family separation policy, presented as a 'zero tolerance' approach aimed at stopping illegal immigration and encouraging harder legislation. It was also the year in which Matteo Salvini's party, the right-wing Lega, obtained its best result in the Italian parliamentary election by scoring 17.4% in the ballots.

The ultimate aim is to consider the two leaders' anti-immigration discourse in order to identify the specific textual elements and emotional tone used to mention

immigration and refugees in order to recognize the dominant frames and narratives employed. This study, carried through a comparative methodology and a manual coding procedure that will be further discussed in Chapter 5, hypothesizes that the results will show that populist leaders use social media as an anti immigration discourse platform by creating a heavily negative narrative, often shaped by the proliferation of misinformation and fake news, a continued framing strategy that identifies immigrants as potential threats and a narrative in which most immigrants, especially if irregular, are referred to as an economic burden.

# CHAPTER 2

# POPULISM

## 2.1 Origins and Main Attributes

The word *populism* came into use during the 19th century and it was associated to different movements. In the U.S., it was linked to the members of the People's Party[1] while in the Russian Empire it was associated to an agrarian socialist movement called *Narodnik*. When it entered the French vocabulary, during the 1920s, the term was utilized to delineate a group of writers who felt particularly close to ordinary people and expressed sympathy towards them.

Examining how the term has been used when it first originated is useful to understand the transformation it went through once it entered not only the political realm but also the academic one. In the 1960s, social sciences scholars and especially sociologists became increasingly interested in the term and the new 'populism studies' field emerged as a result. Agreeing on a single definition had proven to be difficult as each academic had his own interpretation of the concept. However, most analyses were able to focus on the idea that the term should have been considered within a frame that saw an opposition between the people and the elite (Mudde, 2004).

As Pappas[2] reminds us, during the 1970s and 1980s, scholars who were in large part Latin American began to be interested in the field. While European academics were mostly focused on finding an appropriate definition, this group of scholars aimed at exploring the socio-economic contributing factors of mass political movements that

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[1] Left-wing agrarian political party emerged in the U.S. in the early 1890s

[2] Pappas, T. (2016). Modern Populism: Research Advances, Conceptual and Methodological Pitfalls, and the Minimal Definition

evolved and took place simultaneously in their countries. They ended up developing two perspectives: one related to structural Marxism (which identified populism as a multiclass movement able to build coalitions between industrialists, urban labor and the middle class) and a second one associated with the modernization theory (which focused on how populism was the element that helped incorporating the new working and middle classes into the political sphere while countries and societies were shifting towards postwar capitalism and modernity).

The different interpretations given by scholars were fundamental to delineate the multiple characteristics associated with populism. The ideational approach is certainly the one we are most used to in the present time, as it allows us to interpret political communication according to the ideas that underlie it. At the same time, it identifies populism as a thin-centred ideology that sometimes can attach itself to other thick-centred ones, such as liberalism or socialism, that are able to provide more extensive schemes about how to reach effective social transformations. Due to this malleability, populism can present itself in different shapes and therefore be adapted to both the right and the left-wing political spectrum.

The main characteristic of the ideology is the opposition between a dishonest and self-serving elite (which encompasses political, cultural, economic and media establishments that allegedly place their own interests and also the interests of other categories, such as foreign countries, immigrants and multinationals, above the interests of the people) and the morally superior people, whose will is often voiced and represented by dominant or charming leaders who present themselves as nothing more than ordinary men. Their communication style is often very simplistic and direct, as they seek to generate relatability while establishing a close relationship with their followers. The strategies employed by populist leaders, especially the ones aimed at generating emotional responses, are successful in achieving authenticity: citizens appreciate the idea of feeling closer to political leaders who present themselves as everyday men opposing a system that is either suppressing or threatening the will of their people.

Apart from the people being a central element and the anti-elite sentiment, other consequent characteristics related to the populist ideology can be identified. A deep nationalist attitude is perhaps the most common one: populist leaders often base a significant part of their political position on the promotion of the interests of their nation, to both advocate for the idea that other nations' interests should be

overshadowed, and to obtain and/or maintain their nations' self-governance.

Speed and Mannion[3] have identified a category significantly affected by the populist inclination towards nationalist sentiments, one that it is not as discussed as the others: healthcare. In order for health policies to be successful and for a noteworthy amount of people to benefit from them, international cooperation and accordance are fundamental. However, populism advocates for a kind of national protectionism that inevitably ends up excluding certain sections of the population, thus leading to health inequalities. Some examples are given by the proposed legislation that in the United States would limit access to abortion services, or the will to introduce new charging procedures for overseas patients, who are expected to pay in advance for their care.

The concept of national identity can be interpreted in different ways, all easily shaped by personal beliefs and political stances. The idea of belonging to a nation can be a source of great pride if one believes that a citizen's membership to a state is to be considered non-voluntary. This conception can be better explained through the different citizenship traditions that differ from country to country. In Germany, for example, ethnic nationalism prevails over a more civic one. Citizenship is associated with a country in which culture holds great importance, whereas somewhere like Britain has historically kept the concept of *jus soli*[4], ensuring the UK to ultimately be a multi-ethnic nation. Being part of a nation is often regarded as having specific origins, ethnic, religious and cultural ties with the land one is born in. Nationalist sentiments can differ from each other: sometimes, rather than being exclusionist, they can embrace and welcome diversity but they also often coincide with 'awakenings' and 'struggles for independence', which can lead to morally ambiguous political positions.

Another characteristic of populism being the identification of enemies that can endanger the people, in the dichotomy 'us vs. them', the 'them' section is often associated with different dangers. Traditionally, the most common security threat was of military nature but when the Cold War ended, security as a notion has experienced a change and it began to include a wider set of concepts and threats that were no longer only confined to the military field. As previously mentioned, the enemies that populist

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[3] Speed, E., Mannion, R. (2017). The Rise of Post-truth Populism in Pluralist Liberal Democracies: Challenges for Health Policy

[4] Citizenship acquired through birth on the territory of the state or through birth to a citizen parent

leaders continuously oppose include political leaders (but also organizations and parties) that are in contrast with the ideology that they advocate for, ordinary citizens who belong to a specific cultural category (such as intellectuals), immigrants and foreigners (with an addition to an open hostility towards NGOs, associations and volunteers that assist them), the economic elite (consisting in banks, multinationals, and large corporations) and, finally, the traditional media establishment (journalists, newspapers and some television personalities).

While the opposition towards most of those categories is coherent with how populism presents itself, it is interesting to dwell on the conflictual relationship with the media. Populist leaders seek to engage in a as direct as possible form of communication, which means that they do not appreciate having mediators of any kind to convey their message. Their argument usually revolves around the idea that mainstream media is heavily biased against them, so they are in need of new alternatives that allow a direct linkage to the people and that eliminate the filters provided by journalists or different gatekeepers (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018).

That is why a new strategy has been steadily implemented in recent years: the social media usage. Schroeder states that in different cases, the success obtained by the populist ideology could not have been achieved without digital media. Among the most important advantages the system can offer, it is worth underlining the fact that through social media leaders are able to obtain an amount of attention that would be very hard to gain through the mainstream media. In contexts in which state control and the public media are not very strong, populism in its online dimension can appeal in a straightforward way to the public. However, this does not mean that the new media can or has caused populism: it is just to be considered as a tool that has allowed it to become a significantly influential force (Schroeder, 2018).

Before getting into more detail about the ways in which the digital progress has impacted the populist ideology, ultimately contributing to the development of new communication forms and political strategies, it would be useful to focus on how modern populism has been transforming and adapting itself to different social and political backgrounds across Europe and the United States; often intertwining with far-right movements and anti-EU stances.

**2.2 Modern Populism and Different Interpretations**

Over recent years, the presence of the populist movement and its leaders has increased significantly, especially in pluralist liberal democracies. Traditional institutions and established political elites have been challenged by developments like the election of President Trump in the U.S. and the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU after the June 2016 referendum; while at the same time leaders like Marine Le Pen, Nigel Farage, Jair Bolsonaro and Viktor Orbán have started gaining more and more consent.

Populism can be seen and interpreted in a variety of ways and there is a significant literature that explores them. Gidron and Bonikowski (2013) explored the different definitions, theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches used to analyze populism throughout the years. They begin by using three main conceptual approaches to identify it as an ideology, a discursive style and a type of political mobilization. According to the authors, populism is defined as a political strategy by those who highlight the supply side of the ideology, therefore the identity of the political leaders and their connection with other politicians. In this regard, Weyland (2021) has described the political-strategic approach (PSA) to populism. Such approach is said to focus on issues such as how populist leaders govern and how the repercussions of their strategies undermine democracy.

However, there are also those who focus on the message that is communicated by stressing that populism can be described as a style as well. A connection between discourse, therefore communication, and political strategy, can be traced. This is the interpretation of populism that is prevalent in the present work: the ideology is identified mainly as a communication strategy and the ways in which such strategy was employed on social media by two political leaders.

Inglehart and Norris[5] have demonstrated that, throughout Europe, the average share of the vote in national and European parliamentary elections obtained by populist parties has significantly increased since the 1960s, going from around 5.1% to 13.2%, while their share of seats has gone from 3.8% to 12.8%. The authors claim that we can identify two main reasons for the rise in support for populist parties and policies in liberal democracies and, generally, the West. The most broadly held interpretation is that such support is the consequence of growing economic inequality. The West is

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[5] Inglehart, R. & Norris, P. (2016). Trump, Brexit, and the rise of Populism: Economic have-nots and cultural backlash

characterized by a significant wealth disparity and some of the reasons for such inequality are identified with technological mechanization, the fall down of the manufacturing industry and the weakening of organized labor. All of these transformations are said to having had the consequence of a notable popular resentment among different sections of society, especially:

> Low-waged unskilled workers, the long-term unemployed, households dependent on shrinking social benefits, residents of public housing, single-parent families, and poorer white populations living in inner-city areas with concentrations of immigrants—susceptible to the anti-establishment, nativist, and xenophobic scare-mongering exploited of populist movements, parties, and leaders, blaming "Them" for stripping prosperity, job opportunities, and public services from "Us"[6].

The second perspective presented by Inglehart and Norris is the cultural backlash theory (which has found support in 31 European countries through recent empirical work): the main argument is that populism did not rise only as a reaction to economic phenomena but also as a response to a gradual cultural change, which led to different parts of the population, especially the older generation, white men and those who lack academic education, to refuse to accept the shift of their traditional values. This results in the formation of a consistent group of potential voters who are easily attracted to the populist ideology that often insists on the return of national identity and more traditional principles (Inglehart & Norris, 2016).

Ruth Breeze (2018) chose Germany and the United Kingdom as examples to further analyze how right-wing populism models itself to fit in an exclusionary nationalist perspective. She focused on two particular parties: the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and the United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP). In 2017, AfD became the third largest party in Germany and its distinguishing characteristics are a significant sense of national pride, a strong opposition towards European integration and immigration, and an Eurosceptic stance against the euro and the EU. Led by Nigel Farage to win the European Parliament election in 2014, UKIP was heavily influenced by Conservative politicians such as Margaret Thatcher and Enoch Powell. Similarly, it promotes a British nationalist agenda, is critical towards immigration and addresses its supporters by calling them the 'People's Army'. Breeze has highlighted how AfD

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[6] Inglehart, R. & Norris, P. (2016). Trump, Brexit, and the rise of Populism: Economic have-nots and cultural backlash

relies on ethno-nationalist stances by stressing the need to defend German language and culture. Equivalently, UKIP identifies a society in which 'British values' were threatened by other 'imposed' values and elements such as multiculturalism, with a focus on Islam. Both parties share a vision in which the people they are supposed to defend share a specific in-group identity that is threatened on three levels: physically (through crime and terrorism), culturally (multiculturalism is to blame for contaminating the national culture) and socio-spatially (structures like schools and hospitals are often overcrowded); the direct consequence is that the interests of the nation are to be protected through exclusionary demands, a strategy that fits in the right-wing populist politcs observed in many European countries (Breeze, 2018).

Economic insecurity caused by trade, immigration and financial crises, has been previously mentioned as a factor that can lead to an increase of the populist vote but there is another specific element that is considered to be fueling populism in modern democracies, the right-wing kind in particular: globalization. Until the current COVID-19 pandemic and after the Great Depression, the global financial crisis of 2008-2009 was perhaps the most critical economic trauma developed countries underwent. There is not a large body of analyses available about the relationship between populism and both financial crises and globalization but Funke, Schularick and Trebesch (2016) have studied the consequences of financial crises in 20 advanced economies and more than 800 elections since 1870 in order to analyse the impact that said crises have had on voters. They have found that the result of the uncertainty stemmed from economic turmoil is that citizens become attracted to far-right parties, whose vote share generally increases by an average of 30% after a financial crisis. Voters are especially inclined to vote for parties that find targets to blame for the difficult economic situation a country is experiencing, targets often being minorities and foreigners. Gyöngyösi and Verner (2020) have explored the Hungarian case, finding that the increase of the far-right populist vote in places with a higher foreign currency debt exposure after the 2008 crisis. The financial instability is identified as the contributive factor responsible for as much as 20% of the persistent increase in such votes.

So while globalization is a phenomenon that certainly carries a significant amount of positive aspects, such as the expansion of technology and renovation, products sold at lower prices, the opportunity to enter new markets and an easier connection between different countries around the globe; it is also important to

remember the negative effects, some more concealed than others. The distribution of wealth is not always uniform, with the consequence of a rise in inequality and poverty. Other risks include the high investment costs, exploitation, local systems being organized in a confusing way. As Rodrik (2020) states:

> Globalization shocks play on latent cultural and identity divisions in society, both activating and magnifying them. Trade, immigration and financial shocks present obvious "outsider" targets: foreign exporters, culturally different workers, international banks. Economic anxieties and insecurities threats can be recast as threats on the dominant group's traditional way of life[7].

In 2017, the American Anthropological Association held its annual meeting in Washington in order to discuss the rise of far-right and right-wing populism in Europe and the United States. The participants have explored, through a meaningful exchange of opinions, the phenomenon from an anthropological perspective. They identify in the 'politics of affect' the factor that connects the increase in far-right and right-wing populist sentiments in both Europe and the United States, as they "unsettle ideas about politics being a domain of reasoned democratic deliberation based on facts"[8]. Once again there is the idea that different sections of the populations are left with a sense of being threatened by loss of status and strength because of elements such as racism, inequality and especially immigration, often associated by populist leaders to radicalism and terrorism.

The anthropological perspective highlights how extremist arguments that typically belong to right-wing movements have the capacity of penetrating mainstream discourses and find their way into political campaigns, policies, legislations and personal opinions of ordinary citizens (Shoshan, 2017). To unsettle this mechanism, we might need to focus on how to reorganize our thoughts, misconceptions and vocabulary; while at the same time also considering the emotional sphere and how feelings such as hate and fear are shaped. This is why affective politics is essential: for us to better understand the connection between right-wing nationalism and affective attachments to different futurities (Shoshan, 2017).

Douglas Holmes (2017) goes beyond the right-left political axis and chooses a

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[7] Rodrik, D. (2020). Why Does Globalization Fuel Populism? Economics, Culture, and the Rise of Right-wing Populism

[8] Bangstad, S. (2017). The politics of affect, perspectives on the rise of the far-right and right-wing populism in the West

very specific way to identify the kind of cultural politics that is more and more less separated from everyday life: a new type of fascism, with characteristics that are compatible with a more contemporary sociopolitical context. He cites a definition that refers to this new type of fascism as something that does not fully show itself or crystallize in a specific state, it rather is a form of radicalism with a strong European origin. We do not have a single party or leader in which we can identify the danger of authoritarianism anymore, we are instead facing a more dispersed movement that changes and adapts itself to different countries, institutions, societies and political figures.

Along with an anthropological point of view, the literature revolving around the topic has also focused on new conceptual and methodological approaches to understand modern populism and the growing amount of consent it has been gaining. Pappas (2016) attempts to do so by defining it as 'democratic illiberism' and suggesting a way to empirically measure it. While observational studies usually prefer to support the economics argument, survey experiments are more inclined to prefer the cultural theory (Naoi 2020). The variables proposed by Pappas for a quantitative analysis are instead liberalism (acceptance of one exclusive division in society, the pursuit of antagonistic politics, and majoritarianism) and democraticness (electoral participation and constitutional validity). Still, although:

> The empirical evidence produced by continuous research on populist phenomena around the world has become massive, our next task is to bring together the mass of empirical findings into a coherent framework of analysis so as to produce nothing less than a general theory of modern-day populism[9].

## 2.3 Italy

The origins of contemporary Italian populism can be traced back to the arrival of regionalist leagues in the late 1980s and especially with the formation of the Lega Nord (LN), a political party that advocated the secession of the North and greater regional autonomy, particularly for northern regions. Under Umberto Bossi's leadership, the party took a more explicit populist regionalist direction, distinguishing between the people and the self-serving elites while also separating the hardworking

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[9] Pappas, T. (2016). Modern Populism: Research Advances, Conceptual and Methodological Pitfalls, and the Minimal Definition

northerners from the lazy southerners. The second most important Italian populist movement has been Forza Italia (FI) and under the leadership of its founder, Silvio Berlusconi, has entered the political scene with a market liberal and anti-left orientation that found in the small and medium-sized businesses supporting LN a good ally. A final transformation in the Italian populist scene has occurred in 2009, with the arrival of the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S), which was born also as a reaction to the populists in power. It was conceived by its founders as an internet-enabled party with a blog that soon enough became quite popular. In April 2017, the movement was the leading party in most polls for the soon to follow national Italian elections. Under its leader, Italian comedian Beppe Grillo, whose blog (beppegrillo.it) is still one of the most visited blogs in the country, the M5S has become a large political organization and, most importantly, has also developed a very impactful communication platform on different social networks, which are constantly used to be in contact with their supporters. During the 2013 Italian general elections, the M5S reached an incredible result: it was the first time that a new party gained more of the 25% of the electorate thus becoming the second most voted list globally (the first being the Democratic Party's list). In addition to its peculiar media-based populist strategy, which will be further discussed later on, there is something else that distinguishes the M5S from other traditional parties and movements. In their message they lack the nation people appeal and when they use the term 'we' in the typical us vs. them populist discourse, they do not necessarily refer to any form of ethnic or community group: in the M5S' scheme there are no explicitly xenophobic elements or exclusion impulses, in contrast with other traditional populist entities (Lanzone, 2014).

Another prominent figure of Italian modern populism worth mentioning is Senator and Federal Secretary of the Northern League (rebranded as Lega in the run-up of the 2018 elections) Matteo Salvini, who has also served as Deputy Prime Minister of Italy and Minister of the Interior from June 2018 to September 2019. Salvini is a hardline Eurosceptic politician who is also very critical of the European Union and the euro. He fights illegal immigration and the EU's management of asylum seekers, newspapers such as The Guardian and The Independent identified his political ideology as far-right. Soon enough he began to understand how social media could benefit his persona and, much like the M5S, he used it to build an emotional and direct, very close relationship with his supporters. His goal is to generate relatability. Under his leadership, the Lega has replaced the internal 'others' (southern Italians) with

external ones: immigrants, the EU and the dishonest elites in Brussels. Given that the country was already historically influenced by populism, especially after Berlusconi, it is also crucial to remember that Italy was heavily affected by the economic and the migration crises. This has allowed the Lega to gradually increase its influence in the political scene, ultimately becoming part of the coalition government after the 2018 elections. The party increased its share of European Parliament seats from five to 28 with 34.26% of the votes in the 2019 European elections, becoming Italy's largest party. Socio-economic issues and the North–South gap are still relevant problems in Italy and they have certainly been accentuated by the current COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, because after the migration crisis the EU also experienced a solidarity crisis, the Lega will probably keep using the EU as a scapegoat for the country's socio-economic issues, while proposing the aim of reshaping the EU by making it a parochial Europe[10] as a way to realize their nativist goals (Öner, 2020).

As thoroughly underlined, contemporary populism (especially the one that has been shifting towards far-right ideologies) has been gaining a remarkable amount of consent in different countries across the globe. Engaging in a deeper analysis on what are the forms it is able to model itself into across Europe, and also focusing on the fairly recent United States case, is useful to understand not only the similarities and differences between political rhetoric and discourses but it also allows us to examine the impact that divergent historical, socio-political and economic contexts actually have on the public.

Europe is  full of significant examples of a not so positive populist transformation: the vote for Brexit, the growing popularity of the National Front in France, the ever-growing xenophobic sentiments channeled throught Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident (PEGIDA) in Germany, the rising in support of the populist Lega party in Italy, the nationalist Party for Freedom becoming the second-largest party in the Dutch parliament in 2017, the success of the populist Austrian Freedom Party candidate, Norbert Hofer, in the 2016 presidential elections, the growing support for the Swedish Democrats anti-immigration party, the electoral popularity of the Golden Dawn far-right party in Greece. Along with the right and its new extremist versions, part of the responsibility for the creation of an environment in which populist parties could gain so much support and sympathy is to

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[10] Öner, S. (2020). A Europe that perceives EU's supranational structure as a threat to the nation

be also attributed to other European parties and their failures. These mainstream parties, mainly the centrist Christian Democrats and Social Democrats who controlled the European political scene during the 20th century, have been unsuccessful in addressing the economic and refugee crises by proposing clear policy alternatives and solutions or even just proving to be responsive to voters: this partially happened because of the differences between center-left and center-right had become less definite over time, but also because these parties were already divided by internal tensions (Grzymala-Busse, 2019).

The fact that Europe has already experienced a history of similar economic crisis and the scapegoating of 'the other', which have culminated in nazi-fascism and the Holocaust, makes the scenario we are witnessing especially troubling. After World War II and the defeat of the two major evils that had been contaminating Europe for years (Mussolini's dictatorship and the German National Socialism), the general belief was that extremism and fascism had come to an end. Although other events such as the death of Franco in Spain in 1975 seemed to confirm the beginning of a less authoritarian and oppressive historical chapter, the 1980s saw new far-right parties returning to the political scene in different nations across the continent. In his book, Žižek (2001) commented on the rise of far-right parties and the reaction of democracies:

> The first thing to do here is to recall the well-concealed but nonetheless sigh of relief in predominant democratic political fields, when, a decade ago, the Rightist populist parties became a serious presence (Haider in Austria, Le Pen in France, Republicans in Germany, Buchanan in the U.S.). The message of this relief was: at last an enemy whom we can properly hate all together, whom we can sacrifice – excommunicate – in order to demonstrate our democratic consensus! This relief is to be read against the background of what is usually referred to as the emerging 'post-political consensus': the only political force with the serious weight which does still evoke properly political antagonistic response of U.S. against Them is the new populist Right[11].

What is important to highlight, is that many populist extremist parties and leaders have gained a significant percentage of democratic votes, earning parliamentary representation and victories in both regional and national European elections. Since populist leaders often advocate for more popular involvement in political decisions, in

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[11] Žižek, S. (2001). Did Somebody say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions on the (Mis)use of a Notion

order to navigate towards a more 'direct democracy'[12], an interesting data worth analyzing is the growing number of referendums often used as ad hoc political tools. Populist leaders can benefit from them as they can use referendums to attract different sections of society and gather votes on controversial matters, some examples being Poland's 2015 referendum on a change of the electoral system, launched by former President Bronisław Komorowski, or the Italian Five Star Movement party whose distinctive element is that it allows political proposals to be voted by party members and citizens on the Rousseau online platform. Although most referendums continue to be constitutional, citizen-initiated ones in some countries help supporting the idea that referendums are predisposed to result in populist initiatives: in the Netherlands, for instance, successful supporters of a vote against ratifying the EU's trade agreement with Ukraine in 2016, potentially drew on the extended populist sentiment to dispute government policy (Qvortrup, 2017).

Before getting into more detail about specific countries and the political transformations they have been experiencing, there is another European section worth discussing: the countryside. Much like it happened in the city, rural areas have been subject to a rise in support for populist leaders. The elite that rural Europeans are usually opposing is, naturally, mainly the urban one but their resentment and feelings of victimization are also extended towards minorities and the political establishment. An increasing number of Europeans are now looking at politics as something that is more and more non-transparent and distant from the people. This creates the ideal background for right-wing populists to maintain that they act for the concerns of ordinary people to be genuinely accepted, particularly in the countryside, where citizens have been feeling neglected and left behind for decades (Mamonova & Franquesa, 2020). Right-wing populist parties often attract the support of the countryside by engaging in discourses revolving around agriculture, rural development, independence in terms of food provisioning and nationalist promises to safeguard the products so carefully developed by hard working countrymen and their lands. An example is given by the Lega party and its discourse concerning the Italian farming sector. Despite the heavy criticism directed towards the previous centre-left government, the Lega has mainly kept the same agricultural policy but adding a nativist element to the discourse, especially concerning the protection of the 'Made in

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[12] A form of democracy in which people decide on policy initiatives directly

Italy': they continuously underline the concept of agriculture and food being essential in the representation of the Italian cultural identity, something that is being put at risk by foreign multinationals, the EU and the political establishment (Iocco, Lo Cascio, Perrotta, 2020).

In March 2018, an international conference on 'Authoritarian Populism and the Rural World' was held, organized by the Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI). ERPI is a collaboration-based community that has the goal of grasping the social and political processes that are creating other options to replace conservative populist politics in rural areas across different countries. It is possible to aim for a solution in the form of emancipatory rural politics, as highlighted by different scholars: a solidarity-based economy dense of initiatives to find alternative ways to deliver energy, food and water, new technologies that allow for open-source innovation, communities coming together to support each other, new approaches to settlement constructing (Scoones, Edelman, Saturnino, Hall, Wolford, White, 2017). However, it is crucial to remember that the countryside remains a fertile ground for regressive politics and discourses to be implemented, therefore these emerging alternatives should be associated with a more extensive discussion concerning political, social and cultural transformations that can lead to innovations able to not only provide but also support democratic perspectives.

In addition to the already mentioned different forms populism can present itself with in Europe and around the world, we should also focus more on the so-called 'heritage populism', which specifically focuses on the protection of heritage (whether it be ways of life or living standards) in the face of cultural concerns generated by factors such as economic globalization and immigration. Hostility toward Islam and immigrants in particular is now no longer necessarily based only on racist statements or xenophobic denigrations, but on a simulated concern with protecting secularism, gender equality and freedom of speech (Reynié, 2016). In France, this type of ideology is incarnated by the National Front (FN) which in 2018 changed its name National Rally (RN), an anti-globalist far-right political party that notoriously opposes not only immigration but also the French membership of the European Union, the Schengen Area, the eurozone and NATO. The party was founded by Jean-Marie Le Pen and after his resignation in 2011, his daughter Marine Le Pen succeeded him as party leader. She has focused on expanding the party's economic and social programmes while condemning the EU, banks and markets, and at the same time denouncing a secularist

decline affected by the influence of Islam and the impossibility of generating a multicultural society, therefore succeeding in spreading a message that is national on a larger scale and social on a smaller one. In the June 2014 European Parliament balloting, the FN was able to obtain almost a quarter of the general vote. In the March 2015 first round of the département elections, the FN almost doubled the Socialist vote share of 13%, by gaining a solid 25.2%. Most importantly, in the December 2015 regional elections (which were held shortly after the Bataclan attacks in Paris) the FN was able to achieve an all-time high with 27.7%, therefore resulting ahead of the rightist coalition (26.6%) and the Socialist-led alliance (23.1%). Although Le Pen's goal was to soften the image of her father's party through a departure from its more extremist roots, controversial stances against migrants and Islam in particular (In 2018, Al Jazeera's Investigative Unit exposed connections between RN and a group asking for the deportation of all Muslims from Europe[13]) still contribute to make it oriented towards a populism that is far from forgetting its far-right inclinations.

Italy is another great example of a country that, in the last decade, has witnessed a rise in far-right populism. In order to fully understand the Italian situation it is important to primarily explore the factors that have characterized its political context. Fieschi (2019) did a good job in summarizing the country's history and the elements that had impacted its political developments. The disparity of wealth between the North Italy and the South, the fascist ideology and its legacy, the Sicilian independence movement following World War II and a chronic political instability (Italy has had 66 governments in 75 years) are the most significant variables taken into consideration.

A final case in the European context worth discussing in more detail is certainly the United Kingdom. Although far-right populism was not as established in the late 1980s as it happened in other countries, the beginning of the 2000s brought new insecurities and a combination of circumstances that contributed to its rise: an increased number of immigrants, uneasiness generated by the idea of a multicultural society and the ever-present economic crisis. The Great Depression of the 1930s, then the major recession that went on from 1979 to the mid-1980s and finally the financial crisis of 2008–2015, caused great damage to both the British industrial dimension and the general social cohesion. The de-industrialization process was followed up by job

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[13] Harrison, D. (2018). France's National Rally links to violent far-right group revealed. Available at https://www.aljazeera.com/

losses and an inflation that grew quickly. The British National Party (BNP) was formed in 1982 as a splinter group from the National Front, an event that proves how the difficult conditions of the time actually created tensions amongst far-right groups as well. When financial services were deregulated in the mid-1980s, local and regional economies were able to flourish through urban investments (for example, the urban centres of Liverpool and Leeds were rebuilt), low unemployment rates and a remarkable upward social mobility. At the same time, however, the white population of cities such as Leicester, Liverpool and Bradford decreased as more immigrants, especially Asians, began to move into the country. This has led to the spread of several messages concerning the threat posed by the new settlers, generating the fear of 'whites' becoming a minority in the near future. Although 'othering' attitudes are typically found in populist discourses, it is significant to mention that they are considerably more troubling when they can be identified among society. For instance, a survey conducted in 2009 has found that 13% of adults in the UK believe that black people are inferior on an intellectual level (Cutts, Ford, Goodwin, 2011).

The English Defence League (EDL), the BNP and the previously discussed UK Independence Party (UKIP) are the main populist personifications in the country. UKIP and BNP are organized in a more typical political structure, which includes democratic strategies like elected leadership, conferences and different committees who take care of the party's policies. EDL, on the other hand, does not possess a formal membership, it is therefore harder to calculate the actual amount of its supporters.

The rise of populism, the social discontent, the economic difficulties and an increasing hostility towards immigration, all factors that have dominated the socio-political scene in Britain in the past few years, have ultimately led up to the vote to leave the EU in 2016. Many interpretations were given on Brexit, the reasons that led to it and the consequences it would have in the long run. Some argue that populist politicians in the country were able to appeal to a well established 'general will of the people' by supporting anti-EU policies to lessen the negative effects of globalization, such as the cultural challenges posed by the increased immigration phenomenon (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). Before the 2010 general election, Conservative Party leader David Cameron made the promise to significantly reduce migration but such a promise was impossible to keep as long as Britain was part of the EU, since treaty rights guarantee the free movement of EU nationals. Nonetheless, the same effort to take control over migration continued during the Conservative–Liberal Democrat

coalition government of 2010–2015.

On the other hand, Hopkin and Blyth (2019) argue that the key policies of globalization are only to be considered a small part of the neoliberal economic policy model: they identify populism as a reaction to demands for more state intervention in the British economy in order to confront the neoliberalist market policies, which have expanded both social and economic insecurity (Hopkin & Blyth, 2019). Wood and Ausserladscheider (2020) believe instead that these interpretations are not enough to conceptualize the relationship between Brexit and populism in an appropriate way. They focused on analyzing how different populist leaders have challenged the country's neoliberal growth model during Brexit. They have highlighted the fact that, even though Britain was a key import market within the EU, the country's balance of payments was deteriorating while its trade experienced a significant deficit. According to the EU regulations, every international trade agreement between EU and non-EU member states are to be settled through the EU itself (Duncan-Smith, 2017). Liberal Economic Nationalists have argued that the EU has restricted Britain's capacity to debate terms of export-oriented trade with non-EU states with economies more beneficial to its own interests, rather than the ones of other EU states (Economists for Brexit, 2016). The Liberal Economic Nationalists and Democratic Socialists have also relied on the elite/people opposition to identify their policy models as different options in a discursive way: the aim was to present a way to get away from Britain's debt-driven model in order to move towards an export-driven scheme that will benefit the country by allowing the UK to obtain more policy autonomy and to increase its export (Wood & Ausserladscheider, 2020).

Whichever approach and interpretation is chosen to analyze Brexit, the most certain thing is that the vote for it has exacerbated the polarization of values, perspectives and political priorities throughout a society divided between a more liberal youth and a more conservative portion of citizens, while at the same time opening a path that far-right populism seems already eager to take advantage of. Brexit was seen as an opportunity for both new independent models and a reclamation of British essences but winning has not completely provided the expected results: the promise of a final gratification is surely politically appealing and is therefore a central strategy of populist politics, but as such is also one that is only likely to increase the insecurities upon which populist leaders build their strategies and discourses (Browning, 2019).

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**2.4 Matteo Salvini**

When Umberto Bossi founded the Lega Nord (LN) in 1991, the party was first seen as a reaction to both Rome's centralism (the city and its establishment were labelled 'Roma ladrona', which means big thief Rome) and the Italian government. The resentment and mistrust grew after the Mani Pulite (Clean Hands) scandal, when a corrupt political system was uncovered through a nationwide judicial investigation in the 1990s, with the consequence of the First Republic (1948-1992) being demised and many parties disappearing from the political scene. One of Lega's most representative projects was the secession of the North (Padania) from the rest of the country, which resulted in a 'Padanian nationalism'. The party firmly believed that Padania was an already fully developed, modern and Europeanized area: the degree of economic success was compared to the German or Dutch one and the region's entrepreneurial capabilities were globally well known; Padanians were also proud to share the same labour ethic, culture and linguistic specificities with the people living above the Alps (Huysseune, 2010). Bossi's successor was Roberto Maroni, who was elected President of the party in 2013 but soon announced that he intended to leave the party's leadership. Three months later, Matteo Salvini defeated Bossi by obtaining 82% of the vote in the primaries. There is no doubt that under his leadership the party went through a consistent transformation, although that did not happen immediately. He was too advocating for the Northern emancipation during his first years as a leader, often engaging in extremely discriminatory discourses against the Southern Italian regions and cities. But now Rome and the South are not the enemies anymore: they have been replaced by immigrants, Brussels, the EU and the European institutions. He was able to transform the party by not focusing on regional populism anymore and by focusing instead on issues that are perceived from Italy as a whole (economic recession, mass immigration, participation in the euro) while still keeping populist and anti-systemic stances. In 2017, the party began to engage in talks with Marine Le Pen's Front National and Geert Wilder's Dutch Party for Freedom, while also joining the European Alliance for Freedom in the European Parliament.

Nicknamed 'Il Capitano' (The Captain) by his supporters, Salvini was also one of the first Italian populist leaders to sense the power that social media actually held. Flavio Tosi, one of his political rivals, has previously stated that in several private party leadership meetings in 2013, the leader had declared that the best way to gain support

and national growth was to invest in social media and make Europe and immigrants the main targets of their discourse (Horowitz, 2019). Luca Morisi, Salvini's social media strategist, is known for having built a social media software called 'The Beast', which helps him strengthen his presence online. He has also initiated many competitions in which followers who liked Salvini's posts the most and were fast enough were able to obtain prizes such as phone calls or the chance to appear in his posts.

Salvini's most popular video during the 2018 election campaign was the display of two videos side by side: elderly people rummaging through bin bags to find food and a footage of African immigrants complaining about the bad food they received at a reception centre. The title, which is also one of his mottos, underlined the fact that the television never shows such news and that the blame was to be put on the left. He is known for using an aggressive, mocking, divisive language that appeals to nationalists, conservative catholics and supporters of a far-right ideology that is often very hard to separate from a neo-fascist audience. In fact, he is known for having ties with Forza Nuova (New Force) and Casapound, two far-right political parties strongly criticized for their radical positions and for militant acts of violence. Salvini has always categorically refused to acknowledge any form of neo-fascism as he believes that whoever mentions such an ideology at the present time is nothing more than a 'nostalgic'.

In less than a year, Salvini's electoral support has more than doubled. In 2019 he had 3.8 million Facebook followers, more than a million followers on Instagram and 1.2 million Twitter followers. His accounts are also used to arrange protests and meetings where the same slogans he shares on his social media platforms are repeated by his supporters in several squares.

As many other populist leaders do, Salvini too relies on the strategy of aiming to be seen as a common citizen the people can easily relate to. His constant but well-balanced presence in both the popular media and in informal contexts has made him almost a celebrity, earning an almost stable appearance not only on the newspapers but also on gossip magazines. This too has played a role in delivering his political message because the aim is to also reach an audience that is not usually interested in politics. Consumers of 'soft news' are a section that Salvini could not afford to ignore, and whom he was able to convince and involve with significant capacity: the fact that the Lega obtained higher-than-average levels of support among 'housewives' in 2018 was

not a coincidence (Comodo & Forni 2018). Salvini consciously displays his private life to the point that he is almost considered a celebrity: paparazzi often share pictures that depict him while on vacation, spending time with his family, going grocery shopping or having dinner with his girlfriend. One of his past relationships in particular, the one with famous showgirl Elisa Isoardi, was functional in both giving him broad coverage in the gossip magazines and especially in reducing the diffidence of readers towards the politician while highlighting the man behind it (Mazzoni & Mincigrucci, 2020).

His aggressive and constant opposition to immigration is another one of his rhetoric's crucial elements, one that has cost him a trial. He was accused of abusing power by blocking 116 migrants at sea and preventing their ship, Open Arms, from anchoring in a port in 2019, when he was interior minister. Although there were reports of conditions on board rapidly deteriorating and a crowd of protesters had gathered to demand the official permission for migrants to leave the ship, he refused to allow them to disembark and is still waiting to face a trial over kidnapping and sequestration charges. "I am totally at ease and proud of what I did. I am sorry only for the cost of the procedure that is being borne by Italian taxpayers and the magistrate's time that I have wasted"[14], he commented several times. "I will plead guilty to defending Italy and the Italians"[15], he added. At the same time, he called for his supporters to reach the courtroom in Catania (Sicily) to protest against what he has called a plot against his persona.

Salvini surely incarnates the perfect populist figure, one that smartly relies on a good balance of the representations of an ordinary man and a strong politician with no intention of making compromises. In the last few years his popularity grew steadily, eventually making him one of the key figures of the Italian political scene.

## 2.5 The United States

Much like it happened across Europe, the United States have recently witnessed a rise in right-wing populist parties, movements and ideologies. Although they do not necessarily come in the same shape or form due to different nationally specific

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[14] Agence France Press (2021). Matteo Salvini faces trial for blocking migrants at sea

[15] Tondo, L. (2020). Matteo Salvini goes on trial over migrant kidnapping charges

elements such as political history, culture or social system, they do still present similarities when it comes to political, economic and cultural issues.

As previously underlined, populism in the United States during the late 19th century took the shape of a coalition between farmers and workers that eventually led to the formation of the left-wing agrarian People's Party. Their main concerns were related to a graduated income tax, direct election of Senators, a shorter workweek and collective bargaining. During the Jacksonian era of the 1830s the Democratic party coalition, which mainly consisted of farmers, laborers, slave owners and Irish Catholics, believed that the central government was the true enemy of individual liberty, while also guilty of benefitting special-interest groups and the rich with its economic interventions. The groups opposing this corrupt system identified themselves as the producing classes of society and they located themselves against an elite made of bankers and corporations. At the same time, they celebrated whiteness and linked it to the concept of independence by targeting specific parts of the society such as black slaves, Chinese laborers and immigrants.

American populism can be divided between the left-wing and right-wing forms according to the identified main enemy of the people: left populists focus on economic elites, while right populists usually target the state and non-white others (Lowndes, 2017). A representative figure of southern American left-wing populism is Huey Long, 40th governor of Louisiana and member of the United States Senate during the Great Depression. He strongly opposed the elites in the media and the rich, his 'Share the Wealth' program aimed at reducing the wealth of the very rich for it to be dispensed among common citizens. The general plan was to limit annual income to $1 million and inheritances to $5 million so that the resulting reserve could be used to guarantee families an essential household subsidy called 'household estate' of $5,000, and a minimum annual income of $2,000–$3,000.

However, in the last few years and especially since the mid 20th century, populist rhetoric has been more commonly used by the right. Berlet and Lyons (2000) have previously divided right-wing populism in the U.S. in three main currents: groups and individuals who want the government not to interfere with their lives, xenophobes and ethno-nationalists, and, finally, ultra-conservative Christian evangelicals. Of course, since societies change over the course of events and history, the right-wing populism we are looking at at the present time might not be the same one scholars were analyzing two decades ago.

A prominent figure that comes to mind is George Wallace, 45th governor of Alabama. He supported the Jim Crow laws and segregation while opposing bureaucrats and the state, which he constantly attacked in speeches against welfare, school integration and civil right protests. Populism began to spread in the Republican party over the subsequent years: for instance, Ronald Reagan opposed the government and the liberal state while during his campaign Richard Nixon referred to a 'silent majority' and 'forgotten Americans'. In 1992 speechwriter and columnist Pat Buchanan organized a campaign in which he attacked banks, big businesses, immigration and multiculturalism and while he was not able to obtain the populist reaction he was aiming for, he continued to call for 'a cultural war for the soul of America'. Voters' concerns, especially if economic, are valid and should be considered as so. Those sections of society who are distraught by social and economic changes, and who do not feel represented by mainstream parties and the establishment, will be difficult to bring back to the social democracy and unionism side without effective political and economic reforms, as well as a successful management of challenges such as integration (Greven, 2016). What Bonikowski (2017) highlights is extremely relevant: populism is reductive. It enhances moral outrage instead of engaging in a variation of political arguments and this strategy can be useful to minimize the condition of political knowledge within the electorate and diminish the chance of a well educated public debate. Because attacks of a moral kind usually rely on the non-acceptance of the political validity of one's adversary, the probability of engaging in a fruitful conversation and settlement is narrow: this inclination may aggravate the impact of political polarization by further dividing rival political entities, a mechanism that has been noticed in the U.S. Congress in the past years (Bonikowski, 2017).

The Republican party has embraced the 'us vs. them' principle for decades: after Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon's Southern Strategy was successful in making the most of the racism of southern whites, Reagan slandered African-American welfare receivers to gain support from suburban voters from the North, George H.W. Bush used the same strategy with African-American inmates and his son George W. Bush used citizen's concerns about gay marriage to win the 2004 election (Greven, 2016).

Ultimately, it is possible to observe that historically, populist movements in the United States have grown as a reaction to periods of economic austerity, some prominent examples being the Greenback and Granger movements in the 1860s and '70s and William Jennings Bryan's Populist Party in the 1890s (Ray, 2020). After

the Great Recession of 2008, the conservative political movement Tea Party was launched to call for lower taxes, stronger immigration policies and a national economy not controlled by the government, oppose universal healthcare and request a reduction of the national debt of the country. Edsall (2013) argues that when Tea Party movement supporters said they wanted to get rid of entitlements, they actually meant revoke programs that, they believed, went to unworthy African Americans and immigrants. This kind of discrimination, even if expressed in a subtle way, was helpful for corporate interests to channel Tea Party frustration away from big businesses (Sustar, 2013). Even Zernike (2010), who identified openly racist elements among the Tea Party as only a marginal part, admitted that "the movement was inherently attractive to people who believed that the government had coddled minorities and the disadvantaged"[16].

The populist ideology often includes the belief that the central government supports the interests of certain groups and minorities. This idea takes an even more troubling shape in a country with a history of slavery and white supremacy: within the cultural constructions of whiteness and blackness, right-wing populism in the U.S. is rough and very physically expressive (Lowndes, 2017). Part of the left in the country seems to believe that that the 'right-wing' part can be removed from 'right-wing populism', thus making the movement more justifiable, but this reasoning fails to consider a very important issue: 'right-wing populism' is not to be intended as 'right-wing + populism', it is rather a structural phenomenon held together by several chords, one of the most dominant being race (Fletcher Jr., 2016). As Étienne Balibar has argued in the early 1990s:

> The new racism is a racism of the era of 'decolonization', of the reversal of population movements between the old colonies and the old metropolises, and the division of humanity within a single political space. Ideologically, current racism fits into a framework of 'racism without races' which is already widely developed in other countries, particularly the Anglo-Saxon ones. It is a racism whose dominant theme is not biological heredity but the insurmountability of cultural differences, a racism which, at first sight, does not postulate the superiority of certain groups or peoples in relation to others but 'only' the harmfulness of abolishing frontiers, the incompatibility of life-styles and traditions[17].

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[16] Zernike, K. (2010). Boiling Mad: Behind the Lines in Tea Party America

[17] Balibar, É. (1991). 'Is there a "Neo-Racism"?'. Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities, 21

It is not only migrants that are the target through which American populism channels voters' anger and frustration, non-migrants that have been living in the country for generations are also considered a risk for the larger society. Discourses about the linkage between them and the high unemployment rates, crime and other disruptive actions have been spreading rapidly in the last few years, especially with the emergence of tools such as social media and fake news. The white portion of the population has recently noticed a demographic transformation and variegation not only in society but also in the political landscape and the ruling circles, a change that has eventually culminated in the election of a black President. This has caused an increased sense of paranoia and inequality because white people feel like they have lost their privileges. Moreover, it would be unfair not to highlight that in the context of the U.S., right-wing populism does not target every 'foreign other': we rarely hear about protests of citizens concerned about the number of Europeans who arrive to the country. Fletcher Jr. (2016) has also linked the rise of right-wing populism in the U.S. to the 'neo-Confederate' tendency within certain sections of the population. The Confederate States of America (CSA), which existed from 1861 to 1865, consisted in eleven states that fought during the American Civil War with the goal of expanding their lands and preserving their independence and system based on white supremacy and the institution of slavery. Contemporary right-wing populism in the U.S. draws its inspiration from specific elements of the CSA experience and myths which include white supremacy, xenophobia, sexism, states' rights, both hegemonic and isolationist inclinations, conservative Christianity and militarism (Fletcher Jr., 2016).

Taking all these elements into consideration, it is therefore not surprising that the U.S. society is particularly prone to the formation of extremist groups that fuel the right-wing populist ideology. In 2016, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), which surveils extremist groups, estimated that at the time there were 939 units operating in the U.S., with an increase of 56% since 2000. SPLC identifies 'hate groups' as organizations that denigrate and target entire groups of people who possess what they define as 'immutable characteristics'[18]. Although in its analysis SPLC includes some supposed black hate groups, in large part these are white, right-wing organizations, many of which operate in a paramilitary style and are commonly

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[18] From the web page of the Southern Poverty Law Center, available at http://www.splcenter.org

well armed. This particular issue can be connected to another important matter that has its own peculiarities and implications in the American society, especially in the light of right-wing populist ideologies: the relationship between 'blue solidarity', police brutality and racial justice movements, the most famous of which being Black Lives Matter. Black people and minorities have engaged in a movement that aims to protest against racially motivated violence against them, a violence that often comes from the police. The beginning of the movement can be roughly traced to 2014, when two African Americans, Michael Brown and Eric Garner, died as a consequence of police brutality. The movement has recently gained even more international attention following the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin in 2020. The protests in the United States, which were supported by several international demonstrations, involved an estimated 15 million to 26 million people, making Black Lives Matter one of the largest movements in the country's history. The Blue Lives Matter campaign was born as a reaction and is based on the principle of a 'reverse discrimination' discourse through which police officers become victims and are able to undermine critiques of racially motivated violence. The support given by communities and politicians has led to law-making procedures in support for Blue Lives Matter: in May 2016, for instance, the state of Louisiana approved the Blue Lives Matter Bill of Republican State Representative Lance Harris, which included police in the record of categories safeguarded by hate crime statutes. By relying on movements such as Blue Lives Matter, police unions are able to preserve a mutual relationship with right-wing authoritarian populist politicians, who defend them against requests for greater police responsibility and who sustain a larger spending on police forces while applying austerity proceedings for other public sector employees (Thomas & Tufts, 2020).

In sum, although populism in the United States has been historically influenced by factors and ideals that are slightly different from the European ones, it is possible to conclude that similarities and specific patterns can still be identified in both contexts: the 'us vs. them' principle, the rise of populism as a reaction to periods of economic recession, the belief that the central government supports the interests of certain groups and minorities. The U.S. gives great value to concepts such as freedom and independence but in recent years social and economic changes have heavily influenced not only the political scene but also the public opinion on different issues. And, as thoroughly underlined, there is a significant connection between public

opinion and the support given to the populist ideology, especially the more extremist one. Furthermore, it is possible to affirm that all of the factors and transformations mentioned until now have culminated in what is probably one of the most significant populist events in American history: the election of the 45th President of the United States.

## 2.6 Donald Trump

> I, for one, am not interested in defending a system that for decades has served the interest of political parties at the expense of the people. The only antidote to decades of ruinous rule by a small handful of elites is a bold infusion of popular will. On every major issue affecting this country, the people are right and the governing elite are wrong. The elites are wrong on taxes, on the size of government, on trade, on immigration, on foreign policy[19].

Few presidential candidates have simultaneously collected as many critiques and astounding support as Donald Trump. Content analysis of campaign speeches indicates that he employed a rhetoric that was peculiar in its simplicity, anti-elitism and communalism; original survey data also displayed that his supporters were differentiating themselves with their distinctive fusion of anti-expertise, anti-elitism and nationalist stances: together, these discoveries underlined the singularity of populism as a tool of political mobilization and the uncommon character of the 2016 race (Oliver & Rahn, 2016).

The main topics mentioned during the campaign included a strong sense of nativism (the idea that America ought to be protected by national-security threats such as terrorism, illegal immigration and Islam) and a strong opposition to both trade agreements and the political elites in Washington. He was especially able to gain support among voters who were white, male, belonging to the working-class and those who did not have college degrees. The many controversial statements Trump has shared both online and during his speeches, during his campaign and later his presidency, also earned him a large media coverage that increased his popularity very quickly. In addition to that, there were often episodes of violence between his supporters and protesters, journalists were mistreated and Trump was sometimes accused of inciting violence at his own rallies. His most problematic and broadly reported projects were connected to border security and immigration, particularly his

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[19] Trump, D. J. (2016). Let Me Ask America a Question

suggested expulsion of all illegal immigrants, the project of building a wall on the Mexico–United States border at Mexican expense, his descriptions of a large number of Mexican immigrants as 'drug dealers, rapists, criminals'[20], and a provisional ban on foreign Muslims entering the U.S. (which he later adjusted to apply to those who belonged to countries which he identified as having a past of terrorism against the United States or the country's partners).

When he was a presidential candidate, Trump presented the U.S. as an international power that other nations were taking for granted (Lacatus, 2019) and blamed the global elite for having economically weakened the country at the expense of the working class (Chokshi, 2016 & Fisher, 2017). He was therefore able to apply a populist rhetoric to his foreign policy approach as he found other countries to be responsible for exploiting America's role as leader of the international liberal order. Lacatus (2020) conducted a qualitative content analysis of Trump's tweets and speeches in order to better understand how his populist rhetoric shaped his foreign policy attitude. She has found that the approach was characterized by a departure from the core elements of the U.S. global project after the war (internationalism, dedication to open trade and associaton with multilateral regulations and establishments for the the liberal order to develop): guided by a significant distrust in the United States' ability to support a liberal order, Trump indicated both the domestic and global liberal elites as the ones to be blamed for 'bad trade deals' and the employment of American financial and military resources to improve other nations' causes to the deterioration of the best interest of 'the American people' (Lacatus, 2020).

Trump's communication style was always very direct, inflammatory and dense of scandalous statements that did not really take political correctness into consideration. However, more than anything, it was misleading and often filled with lies. In March 2016, Politico Magazine analyzed only 4.6 hours of his speeches and press conferences over a period of five-days and ultimately found "more than five dozen statements deemed mischaracterizations, exaggerations, or simply false"[21]. The sense of social paranoia previously mentioned, something that fairly benefits the populist rhetoric, has also been used by Trump, who publicly supported several

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[20] Trump, D. J. (2016). Reported on BBC News

[21] Lippman, D., Samuelsohn, D., Arnsdorf, I. (2016). Trump's Week of Errors, Exaggerations and Flat-out Falsehoods. Politico Magazine

conspiracy theories and statements: some examples are given by the climate change denial (defined as a Chinese hoax), the idea that vaccines cause autism, the suggestion that Barack Obama's birth certificate was not authentic and he was not born in the U.S., some claims about Muslims in New Jersey who were cheering after 9/11 (Zeballos-Roig, Haltiwanger, Kranz, 2019).

Although Donald Trump's relationship with the media will be discussed in further chapters, his relation with journalism in particular requires some attention. From one perspective, it can be affirmed that journalism had its own 'influence' on his election. As McDevitt and Ferrucci (2017) argued, while scholars found the rise of a figure such as Trump predictable, journalists generally maintained that his victory took place because of the levels of media illiteracy within the public, fake news spreading on social media and failure of the press to actually understand how deeply angry voters were. In sum, they believe that the press often fails to understand and correctly interpret the public sentiment. In the words of political scientist Lance Bennett (2016):

> Most of the press and party elites missed the scale of angry emotion aimed at them by white working and middle class Americans. Indeed, the cosmopolitan press had long rendered these folk nearly invisible, brushing off the early warning signs of the Tea Party as a minor disturbance. And so, most media experts and party insiders engaged in knowing discussions of how impossible it would be for anyone to be elected with Trump's combination of inexperience, shady business dealings, and inability to manage his emotions and stay on script[22].

In addition to that, a portion of journalists certainly could not have ignored such an outspoken and bizarre candidate, therefore they did their best in covering every news related to him and his controversial statements, contributing in a continuous display of his march towards the White House. But there is also the other side of the coin. As already mentioned, populist leaders do not appreciate having 'mediators' between them and their supporters, they prefer a more direct form of communication that can help them establish a more close, intimate kind of relationship with their audience. Mainstream news outlets have often been accused by Trump of spreading 'fake news', an attack that inevitably delegitimizes their work. While attacks on journalists and journalism in general have been a significant element in authoritarian regimes for a long time, this inclination has also begun to appear in democratic nations

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[22] Bennett, W. L. (2016). Democracy Trumped. US Election Analysis 2016: Media, Voters and the Campaign: Early Reflections From Leading Academics

where journalists are being increasingly targeted and denigrated by being described as dishonest or biased in what some have called a war on press freedom (Walters 2017). After different social, technological and political changes, the public trust in mainstream media has declined and populist leaders like Trump were ready to take advantage of that. His attacks are peculiar in the fact that they do not criticize specific mistakes or ethical lapses but instead seem to be aimed at weakening the very procedures (such as asking questions or challenging inaccurate declarations made by politicians) that are the basis of professional journalism (Koliska, Chadha, Burns, 2020). This mechanism becomes symbolical in a dangerous way, especially when journalists are physically prevented from doing their work and asking questions. This has happened to Jorge Ramos at a press event in Iowa in 2015, when he stood up and tried to ask questions about Trump's controversial immigration proposals, he was asked to sit down and then was escorted out of the room by the security personnel.

Among the most controversial stances he has assumed over the course of the last few years, are the problematic declarations he has made regarding some of the key-events that occurred during his administration. In 2017, white supremacists who came together for the 'Unite the Right' rally marched on Charlottesville. The symbols displayed that day included swastikas, Ku Klux Klan paraphernalia, torches and Confederate battle flags. In a violent escalation of events, 32 year old Heather Heyer was killed when James Alex Fields Jr., one of the white supremacists, deliberately drove his car into a crowd of peaceful protesters. When asked who was to be considered responsible for the Charlottesville events, Trump's response failed to show a firm, condemning stance with a comment that stated:

> I'm not putting anybody on a moral plane. I do think there is blame – yes, I think there is blame on both sides. You look at, you look at both sides. I think there's blame on both sides, and I have no doubt about it, and you don't have any doubt about it either. You had some very bad people in that group, buy you also had people who were very fine people, on both sides[23].

When the Orlando shooting happened on June 12, 2016, instead of dedicating his first statement to the victims and their families, he congratulated himself by tweeting "Appreciate the congrats for being right on radical Islamic terrorism, I don't

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[23] Politico Staff (2017). Full text: Trump's comments on white supremacists, 'alt-left' in Charlottesville

want congrats, I want toughness & vigilance. We must be smart!"[24]. He focused on the attacker's identity to fuel a discriminative narrative instead of expressing solidarity or mourning the victims. Trump has always tiptoed around condemning white supremacism and nationalism despite accusing his opponents of using a cautious language when differentiating between radicalized jihadists and broader Muslim populations (Perry, 2018). When it comes to his reaction and involvement in recent events, two in particular stand out and should be mentioned. The first event is the Black Lives Matter protest of 2020. When commenting George Floyd's murder, Donald Trump has delivered mixed messages. He condemned the act and defined it a terrible event but he also called Minneapolis protesters 'thugs', declared that "when the looting starts, the shooting starts" and, at a press conference, stated that whites get killed more by the police than African Americans (Astor, 2020). When he announced a jobs report that showed the unemployment rate falling to 13.3%, he also decided to make a reference to George Floyd by declaring that:

> Hopefully George is looking down right now and saying this a great thing that's happening for our country. There's a great day for him. It's a great day for everybody. It's a great day for everybody. There's a great, great day in terms of equality"[25].

He was immediately condemned for those words, which were defined as revolting and disrespectful. Trump has also referred to the Black Lives Matter movement by calling it 'a symbol of hate', a definition he has never used to describe Confederate or white supremacy emblems (Liptak & Holmes, 2020).

The second major recent event that is important to mention for its connection to Donald Trump, is the storming of the United States Capitol that took place on January 6, 2021. The goal of the violent mob, which consisted of thousands of Trump supporters gathered in Washington, was to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election. Following Joe Biden's victory, Trump has declared several times that the election had been stolen from him and on the same day of the storming he held a 'Save America' rally before Congress could formalize the election results. Part of his speech said:

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[24] Flores, R. (2016). 2016 candidates react to mass shooting at Orlando gay club

[25] Smith, D. & Rushe, D. (2020). 'Revolting': Trump condemned for saying George Floyd is praising US economy

They rigged it like they've never rigged an election before. We will never give up. We will never concede, it doesn't happen. Together we will drain the Washington swamp and we will clean up the corruption in our nation's capital. Looking out at all the amazing patriots here today, I have never been more confident in our nation's future. Together we are determined to defend and preserve government of the people, by the people and for the people. We fight like hell and if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore. You'll never take back our country with weakness. You have to show strength and you have to be strong. So we're going to, we're going to walk down Pennsylvania Avenue. I love Pennsylvania Avenue, and we're going to the Capitol and we're going to try and give… the Democrats are hopeless[26].

The crowd was able to occupy and vandalize the Capitol for several hours, assault reporters and look for lawmakers with the intention of harming them. Trump showed an initial resistance to the idea of sending the National Guard to handle the situation. He later posted a video on Twitter, which was later removed from all platforms for violating different policies, in which he asked the rioters to go home in peace, described them as very special, told them that they loved them and once again repeated his fraudulent election claims. A survey showed that a strong majority of Americans blamed Donald Trump for the Capitol insurrection, however, the overall public opinion remained divided depending on party affiliation: 17% of Republicans believed that he was responsible (compared to 80% who did not), while 94% of Democrats blamed him and 6% did not (Milligan, 2021). It was the first time that a Confederate flag was exhibited inside the Capitol. Many companies, especially the ones related to social media and technology (including Twitter), suspended or banned Trump's accounts from their platforms and a week after the riots, the House of Representatives impeached Trump for instigation of insurrection, allowing him to become the only U.S. President in history to have been impeached twice. After the attacks, the FBI has taken charge of the investigation. Dozens among those who were present at the riots were later found to be already listed in the FBI's Terrorist Screening Database, mainly as probable white supremacists (Barrett, Hsu, Lang, 2021). In an interview for BU Today, Rachel Meade, lecturer in political science, has analyzed the events in relation to the rising of a new, peculiar populist sentiment in the country:

I think they do believe [Biden stole] it. And they believe that because of the basic definition of populism: a group of elites are against the interests of the people, they're in control of a variety of institutions, especially the media. We had anti-

[26] From the Donald Trump Speech "Save America" Rally Transcript January 6, available at https://www.rev.com/

institutional distrust of political parties, media sources, etc., before Trump. Then Trump kind of amped up the type of populism based on him. He made the case— many populists do this—that if you attack me, you're attacking the people, because I am uniquely qualified to represent your interests against these nefarious forces[27].

Few world leaders had the polarizing potential that Donald Trump displayed over the course of his presidency. He was accused of sexual misconduct, tax avoidance, homophobia (for instance, in the first year of his administration he declared his project to block transgender people from serving in the military, a policy that went into effect in 2019), racism, he was impeached twice and concluded his mandate with heavy accusations of having incited the Capitol riots. He is an example of the dangerous forms populist rhetoric and consequent far-right endorsement can take, a form that acquires a whole new lot of power and influence with technological progress and unfiltered tools such as social media

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[27] Barlow, R. (2021). Is the Attack on the US Capitol Populism? Available at http://www.bu.edu/

# CHAPTER 3

# SOCIAL MEDIA

## 3.1 Innovations: Potential and Limitations

New technologies have increasingly become part of our lives, holding a consistent impact on our daily habits, how we communicate, gather information and keep in contact with people all over the world. It is therefore important to introduce them with an analysis on how societies have accepted such changes, adapted themselves to them and the effects that the limitations held by such innovations have had and continue to have on our reality.

The interpretation of the relationship between society and technologies has usually developed along two main axes: the one of technological determinism, according to which technological progress determines social changes and the development of cultural values; and an opposite kind of determinism, which identifies social processes and human needs as the driving forces behind the development of new communication technologies.

Marshall McLuhan's thought is notoriously closer to the first conception: the author focuses in fact on the importance that communication technologies have played in the course of human history. The invention of the printing press was the first to systematically impact many European cultural aspects between 1500 and 1900, presenting itself as a new medium that would later contribute to events and elements such as the Protestant reform, the industrial revolution and even the production line system, which was the first real example of a complex mechanized activity. McLuhan saw tools and machines not as something separate from human beings, but rather as extensions of both his being and his senses, able to have deep and lasting effects on him and his environment.

Each tool has different potential and levels of adaptability within the gigantic 'global village' we are immersed in. According to the author, this expression is mainly connected to the changes that have taken place since the beginning of the 20$^{th}$ century and the fact that, thanks to innovative technologies, the world has become explorable just like a village. At the same time, however, each village is no longer relegated to its own borders but can expand and pout into the entire globe. It is probable that the term globalization derives from this concept. Moreover, according to McLuhan, the moment of transition from one technology to another is the only one in which it is possible to truly observe its effects and influence. However, this understanding can only happen if one focuses on the medium and not on what it contains: this is why the medium represents the message. These mediums are able to carve out their own audience and this mutual relationship is based much more on the medium than on the contents. McLuhan's perspective is not only important but also, and most importantly, still applicable to the present time and modern innovations.

Although we are now rarely holding conversations about the effects of media such as speech, writing, printing, photography or radio, we can still apply his studies and interpretations to the virtual world and its effects on society. In his book[28] he argued:

> With the arrival of electric technology, man has extended, or set outside himself, a live model of the central nervous system itself. It is experience, rather than understanding, that influences behaviour; it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action.

It is therefore crucial to make an effort to learn about new technologies, to come into contact with them, rather than approaching them with a critical, defensive and judgmental attitude. Technological revolutions also revolutionize society and, consequently, human beings: the various phases of transition could generate confusion, fears and disorientation, but the important thing is to accept that change is part of progress and progress is part of history.

The first Internet service provider companies were established in the late 1980s, with the general goal of providing service to the regional research networks and offer a different network access. Then came the new media, with animations, games, interfaces, interactivity and websites. It was perhaps the greatest technological

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[28] McLuhan, M. (1964). Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man

innovation after radio and television. People were discovering the possibility of accessing texts, information, images and videos on a completely new platform that was always within reach. The growth of new media has led to new forms of instant communication between users all over the world. This is a system that has a direct, inevitable relationship to the process of globalization: as previously discussed, the latter has played a crucial role in allowing people from different parts of the world to be connected despite the physical distance between them. An immediate type of communication, now mostly accessible to anyone everywhere, has shortened the distance between us and other individuals across the rest of the world. It gave us the power of finding new friends, expressing our thoughts, engaging in discussions with strangers, looking for new job opportunities and even for love. We find communities we can share interests with, which makes us feel part of something.

This has had an impact on our social relationships, the way our identities change from the virtual world to the real one and also on society as a whole. Social media in particular played a key role in this specific process of constructing new identities ideally separated from the 'real world' ones. Becoming someone else on the Internet is almost uncomfortably easy: anonymity is a widely selected option, not the mention the fact that many users engage in an activity called 'catfishing', which allows them to create a fictional virtual character or fake identity to target other users and obtain financial gains or just personal satisfaction.

The Internet also allows us to create better versions of ourselves. Being behind a screen is a great advantage for people who wish to appear more confident, charismatic, smart, appealing than they are in real life. We can lie just about anything. Technological innovations can bring positive changes but, just like globalization, they are not devoid of negative side effects. New media is sometimes used from governments and nations to monitor public opinion and activities, national security can be easily compromised, there are new ways to engage in mass surveillance, easily gathered data is not always verifiable, personal information is not private anymore.

Social media deserves to be included in an almost separate discussion, as it is probably the most significant section of what we now call Web 2.0[29]. The first examples that come to mind when social media is mentioned are usually Facebook,

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[29] Consists in websites that have more user-generated content, usability and a participatory culture compared to their Web 1.0 predecessors

Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Tumblr, Reddit or LinkedIn. But there are also several blogs, forums, business based websites and many virtual fields in which communities are established each day. The power that social media hold is now more incredible than ever. A wide audience can be reached almost instantly, especially if content posted goes 'viral', which means that it spreads rapidly from person to person, much like infections, ultimately being shared by a massive amount of users. Businesses, for instance, are inclined to take advantage of viral marketing tactics in order for their campaigns to achieve extensive advertising coverage. Many social media sites come with specific features to allow users to reshare content: Twitter has a 'retweet' button, Pinterest has a 'pin' option, Facebook has the 'share' function, Tumblr has the 'reblog' alternative.

When certain content becomes popular, it starts to get reshared over and over again, often with the help of hashtags[30], which can also be used to take count of how many people have used them. For content to go viral, sometimes bots are used: they are programs that have the capacity of automating different communication tasks. Some are programmed to imitate human virtual interactions such as commenting, sharing, following and liking content on social media platforms. Others are programmed to spread other kinds of content, such as spam or fake news.

Social media is also often used by people to idealize not only themselves but also their lives and activities. Most of the content we see online, especially pictures shared on Instagram and Facebook, are hardly an accurate depiction of reality. Online visual content almost always goes through filters, body editing applications and dozens of previous failed attempts before the apparently perfect pictures we go through on social are actually published. Researchers have found that the more time people spend on Facebook, the less satisfied they feel about their life (Chan, 2014). As spectators, we feel the irresistible urge to compare ourselves and our everyday life to what we see online, eventually becoming part of a vicious circle of dissatisfaction and unhealthy, almost obsessive need to keep up with latest trends, lifestyles and beauty standards. Human beings have always been inclined to look for the approval of their peers but now, as a young generation, we are used to measuring our worth according to the number of likes and comments we are able to obtain online. We seek to feel validated by people we do not even know in real life. Social media has given strangers the power

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[30] Tag that is preceded by the hash symbol, #

to impact how we feel about ourselves and the disturbing thing is that we too hold that same power over other people.

Researchers have identified three emotional effects of social media and the first one has been labelled 'Facebook depression'. For instance, a study conducted in 2016 that involved 1.700 young adults from the U.S., has found risks of depression and anxiety among people who used the most social media platforms: they believed that the reasons included cyber-bullying and having a twisted view of other people's lives (Primack, Shensa, Escobar-Viera, Barrett, Sidani, Colditz, James, 2016). A second emotional effect identified is social media burnout, which leads to confusion about the benefits users can actually get from using social media platforms, stress and emotional detachment (Han, 2018). The third effect is called 'fear of missing out' (FOMO), which has been classified as a form of social anxiety and consists in being a "pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent"[31]. Ultimately, literature on the topic indicates that social media can make users engage in a negative feedback spiral of self-comparison, feelings of distress when 'social success' is not accomplished and disordered body perception especially among young girls and women (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016).

'The Social Dilemma' 2020 Netflix docudrama analyzed the rise of social media and its effects on society, with a particular focus on the topics of addiction, manipulation, the spread of fake news, disinformation and data mining. The production featured interviews with many former employees, executives and professionals from significant tech companies and social media platforms such as Facebook, Google and Apple. They shared their first-hand experiences of working in the industry, while highlighting both the positive changes that social media platforms have provided and the social, political, cultural issues they have caused. They got into detail about how the data collected online can be used to predict users' actions and preferences, a system that benefits business companies that seek to maximize their gains through advertisement. That is why every action we take online is actually closely monitored, recorded and measured: when our actions can be used to build a personalized 'virtual path', companies can understand how to increase our engagement and how to keep our interest active in different topics and updates. The professionals interviewed have

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[31] Przybylski, A. K., Murayama, K., DeHaan, C. R., Gladwell, V. (2013). Motivational, emotional, and behavioral correlates of fear of missing out. Computers in Human Behavior, 29(4): 1841–1848

argued multiple times that, even though they know exactly how these manipulative mechanisms are implemented, they too are not immune to them and can hardly spend time being separated from their phones or their laptops.

The documentary concludes with some thinking over artificial intelligence's role in social media and the fears associated with it. Former Google Design Ethicist Tristan Harris argues that "it's not about the technology being the existential threat, it's the technology's ability to bring out the worst in society. And the worst in society being the existential threat"[ 32 ]. All the interviewees eventually came to the same conclusion: that something must be changed for society to thrive, because social media companies have no actual reason to change since this is a system that has enormous benefits for a big amount of people. At the same time, they also suggest some solutions, such as charging taxes on the data that social media companies acquire online, to encourage decreasing data collection measures.

Much like any other 'old media' (print, radio, television), new media are now also part of the political realm and its representatives. We are now living in a new participatory democracy era, one in which online participation is valued just as much as the real-world one, they sometimes even blend together. For instance, social media played a crucial role in the international attention that was given to the Arab Spring, as many protests and meetings were organized on Facebook. Political leaders are also making the most of these online platforms: most of them have Twitter and Instagram accounts, Facebook pages, and are using them to amplify their message and quickly reach a bigger audience that has also increased its reliance on social media to acquire political information (Dounoucos, Hillygus, Carlson, 2019).

This has also a significant polarizing effect because we are subject to a selective exposure: algorithms on social media filter and show us content that is likely to match our political preferences (Hayat & Samuel-Azran, 2017). The term 'selective exposure' refers to the process through which individuals are more inclined to approve information that supports their beliefs and avoid information that opposes their opinions. The study by Hayat and Samuel-Azran directed during the 2016 U.S. presidential election noticed an 'echo chamber' effect of this kind of exposure among 27.811 Twitter users following the content of cable news shows: the Twitter users monitored in the study were found to have had low interactions with users and content

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[32] Orlowski, J. (2020). The Social Dilemma (Documentary, Drama)

whose views were different from their own, perhaps intensifying polarization effects (Hayat & Samuel-Azran, 2017).

It is possible to conclude that the openness that social media platforms provide, gives citizens the power to actively participate in politics: they are no longer passive individuals who are subject to political propaganda or mass media news, they can now engage in discourses, look up for information, have a more direct contact with leaders they follow, share their perspectives and opinions. At the same time, these very same platforms create personalized 'filter bubbles' that often depict a distorted reality and make us unable to correctly interpret the world. They create a comfortable environment in which we are surrounded with content and people that match our personal beliefs, therefore we do not see any reason for popping those bubbles. The term itself has been coniated by internet activist Eli Pariser, who stated:

> The basic code at the heart of the new Internet is pretty simple. The new generation of Internet filters looks at the things you seem to like and tries to extrapolate. Together, these engines create a unique universe of information for each of us, which fundamentally alters the way we encounter ideas and information[33].

This personalization process makes us forget that other opinions and contrasting beliefs exist, we become accustumed to our own truth and do not really want to engage in debates with people who do not already look at things the way that we do.

This process acquires a significant amount of importance once we think about it in relation to politics, electoral campaigns, religious beliefs, gender and race related issues and the world of fake news. Populist leaders and right-wing extremists do not hesitate to take advantage of this mechanism. Donald Trump, for instance, was able to create a new filter bubble in which a community of thousands believed that the presidential election had actually been stolen from him. They had evidence, data, their own former President claiming of having been a victim of voting fraud. The ultimate result was his supporters storming the U.S. Capitol building, an insurrection that has left five dead and other Capitol Police and Metropolitan Police officers injured[34]. Parler was the main social media platform used to coordinate the attack and also the

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[33] Pariser, E. (2011). What the Internet knows about you. Special to CNN. Available at https://edition.cnn.com/

[34] Schmidt, M. S. & Broadwater, L. (2021). Officers' Injuries, Including Concussions, Show Scope of Violence at Capitol Riot

main echo chamber of conspiracy theories, Trump's narrative and unfounded claims.

Given all these elements, it is not hard to imagine the ways in which social media platforms can benefit populist leaders and their discourse. Nonetheless, it would be useful to analyze in more detail the relationship between social media and populism, to highlight the main characteristics, mentioned topics and the effect of populist leaders' messages when they are communicated and shared through these platforms.

## 3.2 Social Media, Populism and The Emotional Dimension

Since the 2016 Brexit referendum and the U.S. presidential election, people have started to look at technological innovations with more pessimism and suspicion as representatives of social media platforms have been asked to testify in front of the UK parliament and U.S. Congress. However, as Crilley and Gillespie (2018) underline, the issues social media can cause go beyond old worries about the alleged election fraud during the Brexit vote or the rumoured Russian influence over the American presidential election. Social media platforms have made it easy for politicians to avoid legacy public service media and transmit their messages to their audiences in a direct way: they have changed how we access and use information and allowed the proliferation of hyper-partisan groups that give rise to disagreements and conflicts that lead to more participation and systematic monitoring of how users behave (Crilley & Gillespie, 2018).

Since populist leaders base their discourse on the idea of giving voice to the people, what better tool than social media to amplify that voice and establish an almost unfiltered communication with their supporters? Šori and Ivanova (2017) highlighted how several right-wing populist politicians prefer to communicate and share their discourse online because they are able to communicate their opinions and express their thoughts in an 'uncensored' way, which is why they often advocate for freedom of speech and attack mainstream media because of its filters. This works especially well when they are at risk of being targeted as racist, homophobic or Islamophobic.

The authors have presented the example of a member of the Danish People's Party, who argued that prosecution of hate speech limits their freedom as it prohibits people from engaging in controversial debates about topics such as immigration and Islam. By analyzing samples from online material across the nine European countries of the comparative research project Hate Speech and Populist Othering in Europe

Through a Racism, Age, Gender Looking Glass[35] (RAGE) (Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, Finland, Greece, France, Italy, Slovenia and the UK), Otova and Puurunen (2017) tried to identify the online strategies that right-wing populist leaders employ in their agenda. Firstly, the main elements they have been found to oppose include elites (34.5%), followed by the EU (27.3%), multiculturalism (24%), the Euro (23.6%), communism (17.8%) and capitalism (16.7%).

The most significant targets of populists' 'othering' discourses were migrants, the LGBT community, Muslims, Jews and other ethnic minorities. Therefore it is possible to affirm that, even online, the most important external enemies are still positioned along two main axes: a national or nativist socio-economic one (where immigrants, minorities, EU institutions and the elite are seen as a socio-economic threat in relation to jobs, social benefits and the pursuit of globalization) and a cultural one (Pajnik & Šori, 2014).

This almost directly leads to another topic populist leaders engage with online, especially in relation to cultural and religious differences with immigrants and Muslims: the gender issue and, more specifically, the role of women. Lazaridis and Tsagkroni (2017) have described how gender equality is used as an argument to promote the idea that certain groups do not belong to advanced Western societies because they hold different values and would fail to adapt their beliefs to our 'modern idea' of gender roles. Women are primarily identified as mothers who hold a key role in reproducing the nation, therefore it is not hard to use this argument to fuel far-right populist discourses that encourage them to have more children to protect the country from the invasion of different minorities. The Danish People's Party puts great effort in supporting gender equality in this sense, an effort that is displayed on both their social media and official website, and so does the UKIP, which constructs an online discourse that revolves around many articles, blogs and news feeds relevant to the issue.

As previously highlighted, microblogging and self-publishing platforms allow users to express their thoughts, build their opinions and decide which movements and ideologies to support. Since populist leaders generally identify the mainstream media as biased against them, social media is the ideal place where to channel their voters'

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[35] A project funded by the European Union commission, Fundamental rights and citizenship, between 2013-2015

emotions against the 'pro-establishment bias' of other platforms and mediators. In fact, another important aspect of the digital world that is worth underlining, is its emotional dimension. The way the Internet has changed how we express ourselves and pour our emotions into the world is highly significant.

The Web has created a world in which the dividing line between the private sphere and the public one is indefinite: the spaces within which one expresses oneself are managed by those who use them but at the same time are visited and shared by a large number of strangers. Writing on a blog, posting content on Facebook, using a microblogging platform like Twitter, means making others participate to our lives and our current of thought, our opinions and our sentiments. Additionally, the process through which Web 2.0 promotes a more extensive number of ways in which private and public life occur, also has the effect of making specific elements such as political life progressively ubiquitous (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011).

Social media can be a powerful tool through which people channel feelings such as anger, fear and frustration; therefore it would be easy to use them for both manipulation and propaganda purposes (Damele, 2019). In this regard, it would be meaningful to cite Bonner's definition of 'punitive populism', described as an ideology that places emotion at the center of politics. Mass media are supposed to be able to reflect the diverse nature of public emotion, even if it can influence what people think, affecting the public opinion and even setting the agenda of a public debate (Bonner, 2019). Therefore, populist actors use social media not to build their discourse on argumentation: they rather base their strategy on an 'affective communication' that takes advantage of their supporters' feelings, beliefs, arguments and logic (Khosravinik, 2017). Overall, they often try to ride the buildup of emotions that originate from their supporters, and use it to impact the political debate with important implications that are political as well as social (Vasterman, 2018).

Rensmann (2017) has presented the analysis of three main insights from previous research on the consequences of the link between new digital media and political communication, a topic that he identifies as particularly relevant for both rethinking populism as a study and theorizing the now different cultural conditions after its impact. First, as previously mentioned, tools such as Facebook and Twitter progressively replace other sources of information like newspapers, becoming mediators standing between citizens and politics. Second, communication studies showed that the rhetorics of horizontalism concerning social media platforms often

conceal vertical structures and inequalities: this includes elements such as intransparency and easily manipulable algorithms. Third, more than a decade ago it was already observed that new digital media can have negative effects on civic cultural norms. More recent studies confirm the assertion that social media discourses have played a key role in generating the growth of unfiltered hate speech and verbal violence, as well as post-factual claims and conspiracy theories through sponsored fake news websites, often expressed anonymously and spreading immediately (Ceron, 2017).

Gerbaudo (2018) has contributed to the discussion about the connection between populism and social media as well, a topic that has interested him especially in the aftermath of Trump's victory over Hillary Clinton, which has been said to be mainly attributable to social media. He calls this peculiar relationship 'elective affinity' and believes that through filter bubbles, aggregation logic and the attention given to people who are usually 'dispersed', social media has played a significant role in supporting populism instead of other establishment movements by supplying a suitable channel to request the support of ordinary people against the latter. Moreover, he argues that:

> The populist hijacking of social media is steeped in the feelings of betrayal many Internet users hold against the neoliberal establishment and the digital corporations which promised them a world of connection, entertainment and comfort only to plunge them into economic insecurity[36].

Pajnik and Meret (2017) have conducted an analysis of websites of political parties across the same nine countries of the RAGE project to better understand the ways in which political parties make use of their presence on the Web. They have found that online presence is a significant factor for all the parties analyzed across Europe, especially for right-wing populist parties. The Danish People's Party, for instance, was among the first parties in the country to develop a homepage in the 1990s, with the aim of making the processes of information sharing and issue campaigning easier. The 63.6% of the analyzed websites included party online media, 16% of the far-right parties have appeared to have their own media, compared to the 8% among far-left party websites.

The main identified trends were those of spectacularization of political

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[36] Gerbaudo, P. (2018). Social media and populism: an elective affinity? Media, Culture & Society, 40(5): 745–753

communication, the personification of party politics, politics reduced to simplified slogans and the rise of demagogy. They have also noticed that online populist discourses are multiplied by the collaboration of other Internet users and the 'populist community' they are part of. Political leaders are possibly not able to easily reach their objectives by having social media access to online platforms, but rather by expanding their dependence on interconnected networks of potential supporters that by commenting, endorsing, and discussing their original messages, play an active and direct role in the spreading of these populist ideas they advocate for (Gil de Zúñiga, Koc Michalska, Römmele, 2020).

A qualitative text analysis of Facebook and Twitter posts was conducted by Engesser, Ernst, Esser and Büchel in 2015 with the aim of exploring how populism presents itself on social media. After establishing five key elements to associate populist communication with in their research (stressing the sovereignty of the people, advocating for the people, attacking elites, excluding others and invoking the heartland), Austria, Italy, Switzerland, and the UK were the countries selected for the analysis. They have found that populist messages posted online manifested themselves in a fragmented form, thus they identified three possible reasons for such strategy. First, the leaders may have the objective of reducing their ideology's level of complexity in order to make it more comprehensible for users on the Internet. Second, they might keep their populist ideology willingly ambiguous and flexible so that social media users can also make their personal contribution with different, supplementary ideological elements and adapt them to their specific political beliefs. Third, bits of populism may travel below the radar of political adversaries and observers from one like-minded person to another. All of these processes have the advantage of occurring without mass media's filters and journalists' interference.

Virality is another mechanism that works very well for the online dissemination of populist messages. Previously conducted research has found that for a certain message to become viral, it has to include certain specific components such as emotional attachment, new and striking information, incite a passive form of broadcasting and pursue a personalized message (Aral & Walker, 2011; Hong, Dan, Dvaison, 2011). There are many different click-baiting strategies that can trigger or amplify virality processes and a misleading presentation of the events. As previously mentioned, social media is a space in which triggering and expressing indignation or discontent is very easy. For instance, Vasterman (2018) discussed the case of a 15-

year-old Sicilian boy who had a website, later closed by the Italian authorities in 2015, through which he used to incite racial hate through fake news. One of his posts had received 500.000 hits and earned 1.000 euros. That is an example of how the almost uncensored online communication can have a significant impact on society and public opinion. As Alvares and Dahlgren have argued:

> Civil society and policy makers have voiced concern that by displaying a range of videos to choose from on the basis of user viewing history and number of visits, YouTube recommendation services may be promoting political extremism while increasing the attractiveness of such sites to advertisers. Such polemics should inspire research into the status of free speech in a multimedia context[37].

Another example is given by Matteo Salvini's social media operation software, 'The Beast', which is rumored to have been created to perceive the mood of the Italian electorate in order to give them what they expect to receive, allowing such content to become viral after a few minutes from its publication (Casati, 2019). These elements are intensely exploited by populists because the more direct, unmediated, scandalous, polarizing and emotional the message is, the higher the chances of becoming viral and effective on a populist level: it is a victory that such politicians achieve at the expense of weakening a civil, useful and rational public sphere (Gil de Zúñiga, Koc Michalska, Römmele, 2020).

With their unmediated, simplified communication style, populist leaders aim to establish a sense of closeness with their supporters. Othering discourses and the opposition between the people and the evil elite is crucial for citizens to see such leaders as deserving of trust: they not only are honest enough to highlight the issues and groups that are oppressing the society they live in, they are also resourceful enough to present solutions.

In their research article, Enli and Rosenberg (2018) have explored voters' trust in politicians with a focus on how honest and authentic they were perceived. They have based their study on a 2016 survey directed in Norway, in which 1.013 citizens were asked about the trustworthiness of politicians both in common and particular communication circumstances. The 60 years and above voter portion considered politicians as more honest when compared to younger voters. Social media was the single media platform that was more trusted by voters in the age group 30 years and

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[37] Alvares, C., & Dahlgren, P. (2016). Populism, extremism and media: Mapping an uncertain terrain. European Journal of Communication, 31(1): 46–57

younger. The survey also showed that populist leaders were identified as more real and authentic than traditional or moderate politicians. The conclusions reached by the researchers included the following results: first of all, media trust and political trust were identified as crucial for a well-functioning democracy. It was also very important to specify which media systems, genres and communication forms were taken into account when discussing media trust. Populism was described as a communication strategy characterized by anti-elitism, spontaneity, and forthrightness, which are also means used to build a sense of authenticity.

Although social media platforms provided us with new spaces in which we can express our thoughts, research for information and build meaningful communities through instant communication, it is important not to forget that they are now inevitably linked to elements of the 'non-virtual world' such as public opinion, society and politics. What happens online hardly stays online: that includes emotional responses, interpretations given to different issues, the condivision of misinformation and political strategies, especially populist ones. In order to have a more balanced relationship between what is virtual and what is real it is certainly necessary for political actors to be willing to play a role in promoting democracy and refrain from demonizing mainstream media and journalism. At the same time, however, social media platforms need to be regulated to ensure transparency and a clear distinction between what is true and what is just speculation. Moreover, it is crucial to assure an effective monitoring of the distribution of targeted advertising for political purposes, making sure that algorithms do not allow or even encourage the spreading of racist, sexist, homophobic and generally extremist content, and making social media companies accountable for the content that is published and spread on their platforms.

**3.3 The Italian Case**

As previously discussed, Italy is one of the European countries that has experienced different forms of populism in the last few decades. The emergence of Lega Nord in the late 1980s and Forza Italia under the leadership of Silvio Berlusconi in the early 1990s can be defined as the first steps populism took in the country.

The process through which the Italian political leadership was constructed over carefully organized communication strategies through media, with a major emphasis on image and personality, began with Berlusconi and his personalization and

mediatization of politics. Campus (2010) has analyzed his case and the ways in which he was able to succeed both in political marketing and news management. Firstly, she was able to identify four distinctive regular elements in political communication in Italy: constructing an appealing image (voters are attracted by different personality traits, clothes, body language), establishing an emotional connection with voters (ideally, a political leader should be able to provide reassurance, generate trust and build an effective storytelling process), creating media events (aiming at attracting maximum news coverage, these political events are adjusted to the demands of the media system and are used by leaders to reinforce their image) and going personal (private lives have been progressively perceived by the leaders themselves as a resource to be profitably exploited to fabricate a political identity). Berlusconi entered the Italian political arena in 1994, by announcing the foundation of his party (Forza Italia) and heavily promoting it through television advertisement. As Campus underlined, before he entered the political field, he was already a celebrity: one of the richest men in the country, president of the AC Milan football team, owner of the Italian commercial television network. Therefore, the fact that such a famous figure could run for prime minister was already likely to attract a consistent amount of media coverage.

As opposed to most political leaders at the beginning of their career, Berlusconi did not need to become recognizable. Nevertheless, he was still an outsider with no previous political experience and had to demonstrate his credentials as a political leader to the public. It was in order to achieve such a purpose that he decided to dedicate himself to a mediatized leadership: he used the media, and especially television, to develop a virtual but personal relationship with his potential supporters. In other words, he collected television audiences and turned them into followers (Campus, 2010). The author argues that this objective was mainly reached by transforming issues into slogans and emblems that could be directly associated with his personality: to a middle class tired of high taxes and big government while still traumatized by the several corruption scandals of the time, Berlusconi proposed a mix of free-market ideology, introducing himself as someone who had reached the greatest personal success through his own potential and hard work.

With transformations that went on inside the parties and the rise of the M5S, the phenomenon has changed and adapted itself to new social demands, cultural consumption and communication styles. The current relationship between Italian

populism and social media platforms can be analyzed in relation to two main cases: the M5S and Lega's leader Matteo Salvini. The former is an interesting starting point as the movement was able to gain popularity and support mainly because of its founder's popular Internet blog. Beppe Grillo's career and Internet presence took a twist in 2004, when he decided to contact computer scientist and web strategist Gianroberto Casaleggio, who saw in his blog a potential platform for political campaigns. They founded the M5S together and, just a year later, the movement competed in five regions and gained about half a million votes, for a total 1.77% of the preferences. In May 2011, during the local elections, the movement had already increased to 4.4%. The M5S is a peculiar case in the Italian political scene because it managed to both establish itself as an influential political organization that opposed the establishment and was ready to represent the people and its will, and develop a powerful communication platform on social media that allows its supporters to be in direct contact with their political messages and even have a say in some internal decisions through the online Rousseau platform, which was used to launch online primary elections for the selection of candidates at the general election held in 2013.

This platform requires some attention: Casaleggio's company is the only one that has access to the database of registered voters as well as to the voting records. Therefore, since every vote expressed on Rousseau is secret, there is no actual way to guarantee its reliability both at the level of the software architecture and at the level of potential manipulations of the database records. However, the decision of holding secret ballots online has political consequences that go beyond the issue of verifiability: since the secret ballot is regarded as the most reliable system for citizens to freely express their political preferences, in most political systems it is associated with binding consultations (Deseriis, 2017). Users registered on Rousseau have been given the power to express binding votes on the party statute, the removal of activists and representatives, the party primaries, as well as important parliamentary votes. Considered together, these elements have the capability of reducing the autonomy of elected representatives while allowing the M5S leadership to propose Rousseau as a large-scale experiment in direct democracy (Mello, 2013).

The M5S not only entered the Italian political scene with an anti-establishment attitude, it also sought independence from the model of traditional parties as it defined itself a 'non-party'. Beppe Grillo believes in a direct participation of citizens in the political process, a mechanism that allows greater transparency and accountability and

that can be achieved online. Different aspects in the structure and functioning of the M5S reflect the principles of their model of direct political representation, such as the large use of online consultations both for the selection of candidates and for discussing the approval/abolition of bills or the direct involvement of the constituents in a number of different activities: all strategies fundamentally aimed at reducing the divide between common citizens and politicians (Bassini, 2017).

Grillo has previously declared that "the Internet is not just a language, it modifies relationships, the way we look at the world. We want a change of civilization, a change of world vision"[38]. That is why, in addition to its significant social media presence, the M5S also has control of a large network of independent Internet newspapers and blogs, which are very successful and provide alternative sources of information for their followers. The covered topics vary from alternative medicine to politics. As Dittrich (2017) underlines, it is possible to state that the M5S has succeeded in establishing its very own social media news empire while taking advantage of the fact that, online, every piece of information can be discussed, edited and shared ad infinitum by both common citizens and actors who can push their political agenda.

Dittrich's study offers an important interpretation of populism, which he identifies as a communication strategy with a political connotation. The data the author examined for his paper, showed a large growth in supporter and interaction numbers among populist parties and movements on Facebook between 2015 and March 2017 in Italy and in other European countries. The M5S in particular witnessed significant gains connected to their mobilization against an Italian constitutional referendum in December 2016.

In an interesting essay, Biancalana (2014) identified the main elements of the rhetorical use of the Web by the M5S: (a) the process of disintermediation (the Internet allows citizens to reconnect, a process that makes elements such as institutions, parties or journalists unnecessary), (b) the absence of a leader (on the Internet decisions can be made without the need for any leadership), (c) transparency (one of the most promoted elements online, since those who lie can eventually be unmasked), (d) the creation of community and the chance of establishing a 'true' democracy (the Internet redefines the relationship between the citizen and the state and creates a new correlation in which the citizen becomes the state).

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[38] Grillo, B. (2013). BBC interview. Available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/

The Internet is basically used as a tool that, at least symbolically, can allow people to regain sovereignty through forms of direct democracy (Bobba & Legnante, 2016). However, since all the relevant decisions are taken on the basis of consultations held on an online platform, in order for such a model of direct and participatory democracy to be effective, Internet access should be universal, granted to the citizens of all generations and all areas of the country; however, the digital divide is still a significant issue in Europe and in the U.S. (Bassini, 2017).

When it comes to the Lega, the party's presence on social media mainly revolves around the single figure of its leader Matteo Salvini. As previously discussed, his social media strategist, Luca Morisi, created a mysterious social media software that helps him cultivate his persona in the digital world. He is also known for having initiated many different contests in which supporters who liked Salvini's posts the most and the fastest received awards such as phone calls or the possibility to appear in his posts. Salvini uses his social media by implementing a double strategy. One of his most significant goals is to build an emotional and close relationship with his supporters. He succeeds in merging the qualities of a 'super leader' with those of an 'ordinary' person: the time we are living in shows that political leaders are called upon to handle difficult issues that require specific qualities, but at the same time we know that citizens prefer to rely on political leaders who display characteristic that are similar to those of ordinary people (Mazzoni & Mincigrucci, 2020). Just like D'Agostino states:

> The social media usage of Matteo Salvini allowed him to influence, and therefore, orient the processes of formation of the public opinion. As minister of the interior and deputy premier, as secretary and guide of the Northern League party, as a family man or in his free time dimension[39].

He aims at generating relatability through live broadcasts on Facebook, videos in which he speaks to the camera while holding his phone, selfies in which he wears the Italian Police uniforms or hats, pictures of his Italian products based meals and "messages often packaged as common sense solutions"[40]. He was rather successful in taking advantage of the two personalities the media allowed him to fit into: he was able to exploit his celebrity status to promote a very distinct image of himself, a person

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[39] D'Agostino, L. (2019). L'Italia Salvinista. Available on sens-public.org

[40] Horowitz, J. (2019). Matteo Salvini likes Nutella and kittens: it's all part of a social media strategy

with the right attributes to find a solution to most of the problems that oppress the country, one of the main elements that have contributed to the growth of his notoriety and popularity with the electorate (Mazzoni & Mincigrucci, 2020).

As Diamanti and Pregliasco (2019) argue, this focus on political leaders' personalities and the transformation of the relationship with their supporters, increasingly identified as 'fans' rather than voters or activists, could modify the type of trust that there is between them: citizens may become more inclined to rely of a good communication strategy rather than giving value to accountability (Mazzoni & Mincigrucci, 2020).

In this regard, the same researchers also conducted an analysis of the pictures that Salvini published on his personal Facebook profile (the total sample consisted in 772 pictures), in order to resolve the paradox of political leaders having to appear similar and intimate with people while also having to possess particular qualities for being allowed by said people to rule over them. The variables they took in consideration were (a) the principal subject represented in the picture, (b) whether the picture referred to a private or political context, (c) the type of activity Salvini was engaging in, (d) his clothing. They have found that 45,3% of the pictures depicted the leader with at least another person, 20,1% of the pictures usually showed Salvini participating to public initiatives (the 88,2% of the total sample consisted in pictures related to the political context), a 17,4% consisted in pictures or selfies with his supporters, 3,6% of the pictures were related to food (the 'made in Italy' one, specified in the captions, is the only one shared), a 37,8% showed him in a suit but without a tie and a 31,3% depicted him while wearing only a shirt.

They were able to conclude that, in his digital visual representation, Salvini used his presence to both be a 'super celebrity politician' while also being an 'everyday celebrity politician' when sharing elements of his private life or some details of his clothing and consumer choices.

The second part of Salvini's social media strategy includes a constant nationalist, far-right propaganda: defending different catholic and Italian culture symbols (such as crucifixes or nativity scenes), scapegoating immigrants (Giuffrida, Safi, Kalia, 2018), often relying on the usage of an aggressive, divisive language that attacks the elites, with a focus on Europe and the left. Bobba (2018) conducted an interesting study that focused on the Lega's Facebook presence and the results showed that the relationship between Salvini and his supporters was the most important factor when it came to the

likeability of online posts. In November 2015, a quantitative content analysis of the messages shared on the official Salvini and Lega Facebook accounts counted a total of 735 messages. The party account was more active (61.6%) than the leader one (31.4%). Three key elements were selected to distinguish the populist content: elites, the people, the others. The results showed that populist messages represented the largest portion of Salvini's and Lega's online communication: 84.5% of their posts contained at least one reference to one of the previously identified key elements.

The approval that populist posts had received was almost the double than that of the other posts. The feelings around which the emotionalized-style messages (35.4%, received three times more likes than the remaining posts) mostly revolved around were anger, fear, hatred, disgust and blame attribution (Bobba, 2018). He came to the conclusion that "populism, emotional style and the role of the leader as a source of communication, positively affect the likeability of a message"[41].

Another study was conducted during a period of four weeks before the 2018 Italian general election, with the aim of highlighting the difference between populist communication and non-populist communication on Facebook in terms of volume and likes received. The first result that was found by Bobba and Roncarolo (2018) proved that leaders of populist parties appeared more active and their posts were more liked: on average, populists published 4.5 times more posts than non-populist leaders, while they received about 1.000 likes more for each post. Among the most popular posts (it achieved 74.000 likes) there was a video published by Salvini on February 6th, which contained his speech to the European Parliament against the EU on the topic of immigration. However, the researchers were also able to gather the information that not all populist messages were equally popular over the period analyzed, as in their sample (which consisted in a total of 1.459 posts) they found that only complete and excluding populist messages significantly increased the number of likes given to a post.

It would be interesting to cite certain results found after comparisons made between the M5S and Salvini's Lega but also between them and leaders of other parties. Di Cicco and Sensales (2019) explored the Facebook activity of Luigi Di Maio and Salvini, focusing on the interactive aspect of some posts chosen from 24/02/2016

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[41] Bobba, G. (2018). Social media populism: features and 'likeability' of Lega Nord communication on Facebook. European Consortium for Political Research

to 24/02/2019, a total of 4.993. The posts were divided in the 'immigration' (connected to what the researchers define as 'excluding populism) and 'PD' (Democratic Party) (associated with 'contentious populism') categories with the aim of describing the polarization of the followers compared to two different outgroups. The variables considered were (a) number of posts published per page, year and category; (b) involvement index (measured as the sum of reactions, comments and shares), (c) number of reactions divided by the three main indicators ('Love', 'Angry', 'Haha').

The results showed a general higher involvement and emotional reactions (especially high for anger) in Salvini's followers, an attitude of mockery (common to the followers of both leaders) towards the PD and, in Salvini's case, towards immigration as well, a convergence of anger reactions (again, for the followers of both leaders) towards the posts connected to both to the PD and immigration. The study has also proved the importance of emotional factors and Salvini was identified as more capable of activating the emotional responses of his followers (Di Cicco & Sensales, 2019).

Finally, a presentation and discussion of empirical data about Italy's populist and non-populist leaders that use Facebook on a regular basis has been presented by Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018). The study analyzed the Facebook timelines of different political leaders: Silvio Berlusconi, Luigi Di Maio (former front-runner of the M5S and currently Italian minister of Foreign Affairs), Giorgia Meloni (leader of the far-right populist party Brothers of Italy), Matteo Salvini and Matteo Renzi (former leader of the Democratic Party and now leader of liberal political party Italia Viva, founded in 2019).

At the time of the study, the researchers had found that in Italy there were about 43 million Internet users, 34 million social media users and 34 million monthly active Facebook users. Every analyzed post received a minimum average of over 7.000 interactions and a maximum of more than 25.000. In just one year, the five leaders had received a total of more than 53 million interactions. The researchers concluded that sections containing populist content had emerged in different Italian leaders' Facebook posts: their results showed that populism can be defined as endemic in the Italian online Facebook context, and that even non-populist politicians do not disdain the usage of a populist rhetoric in their communication (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018). A further October 2016 to October 2017 analysis of the Facebook posts of Meloni, Salvini, Renzi, Berlusconi and Di Maio indicated that 67% of their posts contained at

least one populist ideology related element (Canneddu, Serlupi Crescenzi, Leone, Martire, Ruggiero, 2019). One last analysis identified four main styles of communication among major exponents of the Italian political context: the engaging style, the champions of the people style, the man of the street style (utilized by both Salvini and Grillo) and the intimate style (Bracciale & Martella, 2017).

It is possible to conclude that the leading populist actors of the Italian political scene have understood the benefits that social media can bring to their discourse: not only it offers the possibility of enhancing their rhetoric, it also allows a new kind of political participation in which a good communication strategy and emotional responses can be more persuasive and effective than traditional political campaigns.

As 'ordinary people', we have recently witnessed a plethora of changes. The current COVID-19 pandemic has heavily affected Italy's socio-economic situation and the 2021 political crisis, which led to Giuseppe Conte's resignation and the appointment of Mario Draghi as the new Prime Minister, has reflected an instability that could turn out to be especially troubling in a time where so many populist parties and leaders gained a significant amount of consent. Moreover, the last year has also proved how EU policies and solidarity between Italy and other members of the EU were crucial to halt the drift towards Euroscepticism and populism (Öner, 2020). It is therefore indispensable to keep observing how populism transforms and adapts itself to different socio-political changes that, in turn, can take place when new technologies and innovations intertwine with political discourses and strategies.

**3.4 The American Case**

In the past decade or so, political campaigns in the U.S. have witnessed a period of growth and trial, followed by a process of reinforcement around the most used social media platforms. Between the 2008 and 2016 U.S. presidential elections, social media has transformed and become a more stable presence in the lives of citizens and voters. In 2008, the Democratic and the Republican campaigns relied on platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Myspace and Flickr; by 2012, Facebook had largely increased its user base and Twitter had appeared as the new social media network with a high concentration of users. In the 2012 U.S. presidential election, the Democratic Obama campaign relied on more social media platforms (nine) than the Republican Romney campaign (five), while during the 2016 presidential election both the Hillary Clinton

and Donald Trump campaigns used Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram (Enli, 2017).

Before getting into further detail about the more recent connections between American populism and social media platforms, it would be beneficial to focus on how such tools have initially become a part of political campaigns and presidential elections. The advantage that communication technologies and Web 2.0 tools provided were already recognized at the beginning of the 2000s and the Obama campaign was one of the first ones to implement a plan that would strategically exploit them.

Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez (2011) studied the use of social media tools during the 2008 Obama presidential campaign using the Obama '08 website (BarackObama.com), his Twitter feed, Facebook site, MySpace page, emails, iPhone application and the Change.gov and Transition.gov sites created by the Obama-Biden transition team as their primary data sources. One of their first findings includes the discovery that the Obama '08 campaign used their Web 2.0 and social media tools not just as means to share information, which was the leading strategy of most of the other candidates, but as instruments to gather data about their members and to build a geographically dispersed virtual community. Facebook was used to organize, Twitter to share news and YouTube to establish a communication. Another new way of mobilizing supporters was through an entirely unique (among the candidates), original, and free application for the Apple iPhone: a tool that allowed the campaign and the candidate to be linked to an additional brand recognition.

Web 2.0 and social media platforms were also used to break all previous records for online fundraising: they were eventually able to bring in a record amount of nearly $750 million for Senator Obama's presidential campaign. The researchers underline that this was a result obtained mostly through a strategy based on personalized emails. These would include a variety of signatures, ranging from campaign manager David Plouffe to Michelle Obama and, of course, the candidate himself. This personalized content would often be sent right before or right after a key event and was built to make the community feel as if they were insiders and personally close to Obama. As also underlined by Aaker and Chang (2009), these results and strategies were mainly pursued through the campaign's internally created online social network, www.my.barackobama.com (MyBO), a site that allowed users to rely on technology and web tools to connect with each other and engage in activism on behalf of the campaign itself. Two million profiles were created on that social network: registered

users and volunteers organized more than 200.000 offline events, wrote 400.000 blog posts and originated 35.000 volunteer groups.

Ultimately, The Obama campaign was able to differentiate itself for making the voters, particularly the young, aware of the fact that they were not to be considered simply passive consumers of information but could instead play an active role in sharing and shaping that same information. Online Social Interactive Media (OSIM) allowed candidates to do electronically what, until then, had to be carried out in person, while also changing the way political candidates communicated, campaigned, how the media covered the election and how voters received information (Johnson & Perlmutter, 2009).

Bennett (2012) has discussed the new patterns of participation allowed by the linkage between social media platforms and the personalization of politics. Among the most relevant elements of the personalization process, he argued, has been the rapid growth of a large-scale political participation with several different aims: more traditional parties or candidates, a direct form of participation with companies, brands and multinational policy contexts. In their protests, these mobilizations often include a variety of issues discussed through a shared essence of diversity and inclusiveness.

The author believes that the political identity of the 'new social movements' that originated after the 1960s were focused on group identity (women, minorities, immigrants) or specific problems (antinuclear, environmental preservation) still existed but, at the same time, they were joined by more diversified organizations in which different issues like economic equity (fair trade, inequality, development), environmental conservation, war and peace were aimed at changing targets from local to national and from government to business. In other words, the more miscellaneous the mobilization, the more personalized its expressions became. Bennett underlined two important consequences of this process: first, new forms of individual activism and protests had emerged and, second, the younger generation of citizens was given new means to quickly progress in the understanding and participation in politics. He also argued that when conventional political institutions seem about to act against the interests of different and supposedly isolated populations, the social networked communication of Digitally Networked Activism (DNA) can generate unexpected outcomes.

In early 2012, for instance, the U.S. Congress was about to vote on some invasive antipiracy bills: the legislation was backed by traditional media companies and the

general discussion revolved around the idea of filtering the Internet while turning online companies into police agencies. Wikipedia and Google led a protest which involved a large number of other sites that directed millions of users and citizens to get in touch with their representatives. This protest, which lasted twenty-four hours, led to sponsors being forced to withdraw the legislation and backers to reorganize themselves. A significant point worth highlighting is that there was no specific collective frame to mobilize people: instead, they were presented with a variety of reasons to take action (the legislation would have had a negative effect on business, would have been a threat to innovation, a job killer, would have invaded citizens' privacy…). The common direction was a call to prevent the government from censoring elements that included Internet in its entirety, the security of personal communication and the independence of preferred websites (Bennett, 2012).

The most significant figure that comes to mind at the present time when discussing the relationship between social media and populist rhetoric in the U.S. is, of course, Donald Trump. In 2018, the account had 55.6 million followers and, right before it was suspended after the 2021 Capitol attacks, it counted over 88.5 million followers. Ott (2016) has provided us with an analysis on how Twitter, as a platform, has modified the character of public discourse through a study of Donald Trump's feed. He argued that Twitter is not the right place where to handle complex content as it is an informal platform that demands simplicity, promotes impulsivity and, often, encourages a type of speech that is impolite and offensive. He identified each of these three characteristics in Trump's feed and described his communication style as simple, impulsive and uncivil, responsible for not only reflecting negative ideologies (such as racism, sexism and xenophobia) but also of spreading them.

When he was later interviewed by Brookey (2018), he once again focused on how Trump's divisive rhetoric was especially troubling in a reality where "we are not having conversations across the political aisle; we are having shouting matches across the political aisle … and, worse still, we're having them on Twitter"[42]. Ott also highlighted the idea according to which political communication has to be theoretically grounded and he has also underlined the need to pay attention to how technology can impact our communication exchanges. He believes that our personal rhetoric is

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[42] Brookey, R. A. & Ott, B. L. (2018). Trump and Twitter 2.0. Critical Studies in Media Communication, 36(1): 92-96

inherently shaped by the medium through which we decide to communicate and since the younger generation has grown up in an environment that is dominated by social media and digital technologies, they have to be assisted and directed towards a better understanding of the ways in which political discourse has changed as a result of those technologies. He does not fully embrace Marshall McLuhan's theory according to which 'the medium is the message', but nevertheless he admits that the medium or any type of communication technology has a heavy influence on the messages it carries, shaping, altering and affecting the way we make sense of our social world.

He also states that because so much of our social world is now mediated by social media platforms, their influence is generally invisible to users: he describes social media as so omnipresent, so taken-for-granted that we are unable to actually notice the very intense and deeply structural effects they have on our communication broadly and on our political discourse more specifically, constantly with both of them being transformed and altered by social media (Brookey & Ott, 2018).

The textual analysis of tweets and rally speeches conducted from September to November 2018 by Lacatus (2020), found that Trump kept relying on the use of a populist rhetoric in order to engage his electorate prior to the midterm elections. In his rally speeches and official tweets, he was found to have used a sensationalist language to talk about 'unprecedented economic growth' and a remarkable decrease in unemployment across communities in the Midwest and the South of the United States. The main variables that positively influenced such domestic economic progress were identified in a stricter control of illegal immigration and better negotiated trade deals. Illegal migrants in particular were described as violent and criminal, supported by equally criminal representatives from the Democratic Party, and a real danger for the safety, integrity, and prosperity of the American people. In comparison with previous political leaders, Trump identified himself as the most successful President in history and pointed to economic, military, and foreign policy as evidence of his success (Lacatus, 2020).

According to the data collected on the Twitter analytics tool called 'Twitonomy', Shafer (2017) notes, in 2017 Donald Trump's Twitter account had over 29.7 million followers with 96% of his tweets retweeted more than 16 million times and 96% of his tweets favorited by other users between December 2015 and July 2016 (the exact time span in which he went from a fringe candidate to the Republican Party nominee). Trump's included tweets had anywhere from 8.000 to 100.000 likes and retweets,

positive Twitter user responses to his content were also collected to display ways in which Trump's neoliberal 'incorrectness' was supported (Shafer, 2017).

In a previous analysis, presented in 2018, Lacatus focused her attention solely on the 2016 presidential election and both the official campaign discourse and populist rhetoric that were used. In terms of broad comparative patterns, the researcher has found that Trump made more extensive use of Twitter to reach out to voters and also had more than 30% more followers than Hillary Clinton and close to 60% more than Bernie Sanders, the other two main presidential candidates. For the most part, Trump's tweets were critiques directed towards other candidates and much less of a tool to share policy positions or strategies to implement them in case he won the election. By preferring an intense use of Twitter, his campaign was able to rely its communication style on short and direct statements that favored personal opinions over official policy standpoints and projects.

One challenge that political leaders and candidates face online is certainly to seem as authentic as possible, even though their personal social media accounts are usually controlled by their campaign staffers. Even when users are conscious of the fact that there is a team of advisers and media staffers whose job is to administer politicians' social media accounts, the image presented online might sometimes result too distant from the leader's general image to be captivating or believable: that is why a key issue for electoral campaigns is to identify the correct equilibrium between the common image of the candidate and their social media alter ego (Enli, 2017). This problem was not as relevant to the Trump campaign as he stayed more involved in his staff's tweeting and even wrote many of his own social media content. According to news interviews, Trump usually:

> Wrote his own tweets after 7:00 p.m. and when he was at home, but during the day he dictated exactly what he wanted to say right down to the punctuation mark, while an employee typed out the message and posted it[43].

In his article, Morrow (2016) has also underlined the fact that on his social media account he often retweeted white supremacists (In January 2016, Little Bird examined the most recent 21 people Trump had retweeted and 62% of them had recently used the hashtag #WhiteGenocide, while 28% of them followed White Nationalist

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[43] Morrow, B. (2016). Does Donald Trump Run His Own Twitter Account? 5 Fast Facts You Need to Know. Heavy. Available at https://heavy.com/

accounts), that hundreds of 'pro-Trump' accounts and followers were found to be fake, that his content was based more on sharing remarks about the media than on discussions related to politics (most of his content was found to be about promotions for his TV interviews, his campaign slogan 'Make America Great Again', cable news and ratings) and, finally, that during his first years on the platform (his account was registered in 2009) his tweets were not as outrageous or aggressive.

Ultimately, Trump's discourse on Twitter during the presidential campaign showed rhetorical elements of populist right-wing ideology. He used the platform to promote his view of 'the people' (identified as poor, greatly ignored by the political elites in Washington and condemned to a life of inequality by the selfish economic elite that formed the richest 1% of the population) and therefore inevitably excluded illegal migrants, Muslims, refugees and other minorities from his electoral agenda. A more detailed examination of the tweets posted on the @realDonaldTrump Twitter account proved that more than one-third of the tweets contained 'authenticity markers', meaning that they conveyed impoliteness and political incorrectness relying on elements such as name-calling and sometimes insults, often using capital letters and exclamation marks as a way of emphasizing authenticity and spontaneity (Enli, 2017). Shafer (2017) has analyzed Trump's rhetoric on Twitter, in order to identify thematic elements in his discourse on 'political incorrectness'. The author highlights how, on his feed, Trump offered regular reminders according to which the political system was damaged due to its 'political correctness' and lack of urgency and effectiveness.

A tweet from January 2016 reads: "Being politically correct takes too much time. We have too much to get done!", while another tweet from December 2015 states: "People have got to stop working to be so politically correct and focus all of their energy on finding solutions to very complex problems!". In these examples, Trump therefore suggests that taking time for being 'politically correct' is a consistent obstacle for goals to be achieved efficiently. Moreover, Trump's Twitter activity also indicated that he felt that 'political correctness' should have been avoided in the name of national security. A tweet from March 2016 reads: "Obama, and all others, have been so weak, and so politically correct, that terror groups are forming and getting stronger! Shame". As he has continuously done in the public sphere, Trump saw 'political correctness' as an element that belonged to liberal politicians and their supporters and that represented a weakness (or an unwillingness to tell the truth); when leaders are 'weak', or do not attend to a neoliberal, white-centric point of view, Trump claimed they harmed national

security (Shafer, 2017).

Focusing on the 2016 presidential election is particularly interesting as Trump's victory has been largely attributed to his success on social media and the support he received online. Groshek and Koc-Michalska (2017) were able to identify the effect that specific variables had among the models of individual candidate support. The most influential ones were demographics, ethnicity (specifically, being white) and relying on a more conservative political orientation. These were all significant predictors of selecting the more populist candidates for both the Democratic and the Republican party. However, the probability of support for Trump was found to be the most impacted by different social media usage patterns.

American voters who used social media to actively participate in politics by sharing their own opinions and posting or commenting on social media were more likely to not support Trump as a presidential candidate. Yet, those who were more passive receivers of political information via social media were more likely (by 1.26 times) to support Trump as their preferred candidate (Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017). He was not unknown to the public (he was the host of the American reality television program The Apprentice for the first fourteen seasons),  therefore his 'celebrity status' fuelled his campaign and allowed a strategy based on a controversial and uncommon use of social media platforms, especially Twitter: his candidate identity was mainly constructed in relation to his broadly spread tweets, which were often quoted and discussed in the mainstream media (Enli, 2017).

The fact that populist leaders prefer to express themselves on social media platforms in order to bypass the traditional media has already been mentioned. Not only Donald Trump managed to do that successfully both during his campaign and his presidency, he was also able to use Twitter to generate a significant amount of free media for himself. This is the process on which Francia (2017) has focused his attention on, referring to such mechanism as the free media thesis (FMT). He argued that Trump's usage of social media, especially Twitter, created a remarkable amount of news coverage. This unpaid and free media exposure had the consequence of allowing him to stay in the public eye without his campaign having to to spend millions of dollars on paid forms of media such as advertising, like Hillary Clinton did.

Through this technique, Trump was able to take control and overcome many of the disadvantages that political experts and commentators had highlighted earlier during the election: in fact, the general belief was that Trump's campaign was not

appropriately equipped to challenge his better-organized adversaries in the Republican primaries and later Hillary Clinton in the general election. The part of the study that focused on voter perceptions and activities has found that 43% of likely voters in June and another 40% in August declared that they saw more news stories about Trump than they did about Clinton. At the same time, 12% of likely voters in June and 13% in August reported that they saw more news stories about Clinton than they did about Trump, providing him with a consistent advantage of 31% points and 27% points in June and August, respectively. In line with FMT expectations, Trump surpassed Clinton in unpaid media exposure.

Additionally, the results also showed something else: Trump was more often the topic of personal conversations among probable voters. In fact, 12% of them stated that they spent more time talking about Hillary Clinton than about Donald Trump in June compared to 34% who reported that they spent more time talking about him than about her (Francia, 2017). Similarly, a group of researchers (Wells, Shah, Lukito, Pelled, Pevehouse, Yang, 2020) identified six main elements of the American media system in order to measure candidates' attempts to gain attention from them. Their results ultimately showed that social media activity, specifically retweets of candidate posts, provided a remarkable boost to news media coverage of Trump, but no corresponding boost for other candidates. Moreover, Trump was found to have tweeted more at times when he had recently accumulated less of a relative advantage in news attention, indicating that he relied on Twitter to strategically obtain coverage.

Professor of Journalism and Media Communication Michael Humphrey (2021) has written an article for The Conversation, in which he attempts to analyze Trump's communication style and content by collecting tweets from June 16, 2015 (the day he announced his candidacy) to January 8, 2021, the day Twitter permanently suspended his account. The first result that captured his attention was the fact that Trump was among the most frequent users of storytelling methods, a common practice among politicians. The overall story structure found by the author was summarized as: "the establishment is stopping me from protecting you against invaders"[44].

The elements Trump most frequently mentioned were usually adaptable to different individuals. 'The establishment' category could have included Democrats,

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[44] Humphrey, M. (2021). I analyzed all of Trump's tweets to find out what he was really saying. The Conversation. Available at https://theconversation.com/

the NFL, a media outlet, a corporation or, more recently, Vice President Mike Pence as well. 'The invaders' were China, migrants crossing the U.S. border with Mexico or Black Lives Matter protesters. However, the basic structure never seemed to change: the nation was under threat and Trump was the only one capable of protecting the U.S., while being encouraged by the valid support of 'real' Americans.

Donald Trump's election as President of the United States could be regarded as an unprecedented event that has had repercussions on both a national and a global level. Trump's communication style, political discourse and general rhetoric has been subject to countless analyses that attempted to trace a pattern in order to bring his picture into focus and understand its place in the modern populist landscape. While the consequences of his legacy as a President in the long run are still unclear, it is important to highlight that he is one of the best examples to associate with the concept expressed by Crilley and Gillespie (2018): 'power without responsibility'.

Political actors at the present time no longer need journalists to get their messages out and for these to reach big audiences in a short amount of time. They have now the power of producing media content themselves and watch it circulate with almost nonexistent filters. The authors underline how this process leads not only to political messaging lacking any editorial responsibility according to agreed professional ethics, it also contributes to the proliferation of misinformation and therefore somehow promotes an eroding of trust in the traditional, mediated media. Some given examples of the continued reproduction of disinformation include Trump's tweets spreading deceptive statements about his inauguration crowd size, refugees and Muslims in particular, the Republican party's usage of social media advertising to overpower voter turnout, the Russian state's creation of adverts to affect the elections (Crilley & Gillespie, 2018) and, more recently, the narrative revolving around an allegedly stolen election.

As previously stated, what happens online hardly stays online: how political leaders use social media and how these platforms are governed is now a matter of public concern and interest. It is crucial to keep in mind that building a belief system based on the information received on the Internet can have troubling consequences in the real world.

**3.5 Fake News, Hate Speech, Disinformation**

There is one final point worth discussing in more detail in relation with populism and social media strategies, as it is perhaps one of the elements that have the most impact on the non-virtual-world: the issue of fake news and disinformation. The ways through which people are currently acquiring and validating information has changed: while once we were inclined to trust and believe what authoritative sources shared on television or newspapers, the Internet has now made it possible for any type of news to circulate with close to no effective controls that could confirm their truthfulness.

As underlined by Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks and Ardèvol-Abreu (2017), this leads to citizens and potential voters to believe that they do not need to actively look for information because on the web they will be exposed to it anyway, remaining well-informed through social media and their peers. The authors have conducted a study that initiated and experimented what they have defined the 'news-finds-me perception and effect', identified as a process through which people believe they can be informed about public affairs in an indirect way, without actively following the news or looking for them, trusting their general Internet use instead, along with information received from acquaintances and relationships within online social networks.

The news-finds-me effect appears to originate from individuals' impressions that (a) they are well informed about contemporary events despite not purposely monitoring the news because (b) the important information 'finds them' anyway, through their social media use and social relations. The scholars have evaluated the effects of these perceptions on individuals' active news consumption patterns and extent of political knowledge. Ultimately, their results suggested that subjects who perceive news will find them are less likely to make use of traditional news sources and are also generally less well informed about politics over time. Since the news-finds-me effect does not facilitate political learning, it is not hard to imagine the troubling consequences of false information being passively received by citizens, especially if they are potential populist supporters.

But how to, specifically, define fake news? How and why is false information so easy to believe and spread on the Internet? Edson, Zheng Wei and Ling (2017) have analyzed 34 academic articles published between 2003 and 2017, to attempt to identify the main definitions of the term and how it had been used by other scholars. Contemporary discourse, and especially media coverage, refers to fake news by describing them as viral posts built on false accounts made to appear like actual news. The authors underline how, while the expression is currently used to describe fake

stories spreading on social media, earlier studies have applied the term to describe related but distinct types of content, such as news parodies, political satires and news propaganda. Their research has showed that previous studies have utilized six main ways to operationalize the term 'fake news': satire (referring to mock news programs, which usually use comedy or exaggeration to present news updates to their audiences), parody (as opposed to satire, instead of providing direct commentary on actual events through humor, parodies play on the absurdity of issues and underline them by making up entirely fictitious stories), fabrication (which refers to articles that have no factual basis but are published and spread with the help of bots to appear as legitimate news articles often with the direct intention of misinforming), manipulation (this category refers to visual news and specifically videos and photos being manipulated in order to create or fuel a false narrative), propaganda (stories that are created with the general intention of benefitting a public figure, organization or government, often spread by a political entity to influence the public opinion) and advertising (referring both to fake news used to describe advertising materials as apparent legitimate news, and press releases published as news).

Ultimately, what all these definitions have in common is how fake news assume the appearance and feel of real news, from how websites look, to how articles are written, to how photos and videos appear. As the researchers argued, fake news have the ability of hiding behind a facade of legitimacy and they can take on some form of reliability by trying to take the shape of actual news. Moreover, going beyond the simple aspect of a news product, through the use of tools such as bots, fake news are also able to emulate news' omnipresence by constructing a network of fake sites: this is a clear recognition of the place that news hold in society, however, by misappropriating news' credibility, it is crucial to highlight that fake news also play a key role in undermining journalism's legitimacy (Edson, Zheng Wei, Ling, 2017).

It would be beneficial to give specific examples of some of the fake news that went viral in the last few years, to better understand the correlation with conspiracy theories and how the media can be manipulated to benefit misinformation. The 'Pizzagate' case went viral in 2016, when the personal email account of John Podesta, Hillary Clinton's campaign manager, was hacked and his emails were published later in November. Proponents of the Pizzagate conspiracy theory claimed the emails contained coded messages that connected several high-ranking members of the Democratic Party and U.S. restaurants with a human trafficking and child sex ring, one

of the establishments supposedly involved was the Comet Ping Pong pizzeria in Washington. On December 4, 2016, a man with an assault rifle walked into the restaurant with the intention of investigating, he fired several shots and although no one was injured, it was only one of the several threats made to the restaurant after the news report spread through social media platforms such as Facebook, Reddit and Twitter.

Other minor examples include news according to which Pope Francis endorsed Donald Trump as a presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton and her State department were accused of having actively armed Islamic jihadists and specifically ISIS, vaccines are now inevitably associated to claims that link them to autism, several groups believe that the earth is flat or that the Holocaust never happened, Emmanuel Macron's campaign was said to have been financed by Saudi Arabia, George Soros is still accused of being in control of a large portion of the world's wealth and governments. However, the Pizzagate example specifically shows how fake news can lead to dangerous, concrete actions.

Douglas (2018) has made an interesting claim, according to which religion and fake news nowadays are closely connected in three significant ways: (1) religion is a topic often found in fake news, (2) religious believers frequently take place among the targeted subjects for fake news and (3) religion itself is a significant historical origin of fake news, especially in the form of Protestant fundamentalism. Most importantly, he argued that fake news have greater distribution and receptivity on the right political spectrum. In 2018, three political scientists released a major study[45] on the spread of fake news in 2016.

By relying on a combination of surveys and softwares that tracked which sites participants visited on their computer, the scientists mapped the proliferation of viral sites between October 7 and November 14, 2016.

According to their results, over 27% of adults visited an article on a pro-Trump or pro-Clinton website that had been identified as a fake news hub. Those visits made up 2.6% of all articles they read. In a 2018 article for NBC News, Benjy Sarlin interviewed Brendan Nyhan, the Dartmouth professor who co-authored the study with professor Andrew Guess and professor Jason Reifler. He has stated that:

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[45] Guess, A. M., Nyhan, B., Reifler, J. (2018). Exposure to untrustworthy websites in the 2016 U.S. election

The group that visited fake news websites the most frequently was the 10% of Americans with the most conservative information diets. It's not that fake news is a substitute for political news, it's being added on to a diet of like-minded political news of a more conventional variety[46].

Nyhan has also argued that fake news hold the potential of trapping users in echo chambers that not only play a role in reinforcing their already existent opinions, but they also provide them with incorrect and misleading claims.

In this regard, Spohr (2017) has addressed the topic of the connection between fake news, filter bubbles and ideological polarization on social media, which brings a loss of diversity of opinions and discussion. He also mentioned the issue related to the news-find-me mechanism by arguing that such a psychological detachment can lead to individuals giving up the active procedure of looking out for news content and therefore giving up the responsibility for their being informed citizens by handing it over to algorithms. The centrepiece of his article was the hypothesis according to which ideological polarization on Facebook is led more by selective exposure than by elements such as echo chambers or filter bubbles.

It is possible to find many different research results showing a significant presence of selective exposure and confirmation bias in Facebook users, however, the formation of echo chambers can be as relevant and impactful on public discourse and political information. Spohr concludes by demanding more responsibility for fake news and misinformation from technology firms like Facebook, Google and Twitter, especially in the light of certain political events (the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the 2016 EU referendum in the UK) have made it clear that such companies cannot deny their mixed role as technology firms and media establishments with significant editorial powers (Spohr, 2017).

It is not hard to imagine the possible associations between politics and online misinformation, however, this relationship is even more worth exploring by focusing on far-right and populist ideologies. Wiesehomeier and Flynn (2020), for instance, have argued that populist leaders and parties often promote conspiracy theories and question the credibility of experts, while also finding that voters with conspiratorial and populist attitudes are more likely to believe fake news stories found on the Internet.

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[46] Sarlin, B. (2018). 'Fake news' went viral in 2016. This expert studied who clicked. Available on https://www.nbcnews.com/

They have conducted survey experiments in Spain with a sample of 8.000 participants that resembled the Spanish population in terms of gender, age, education, and region of residence. The main focus was on the role of populist and conspiratorial perspectives, analyzing whether voters who held such attitudes were more vulnerable to fake news and/or resistant to fact checks.

Respondents they categorized as 'populist' displayed a greater inclination to believe five out of the eight fake news items the researchers presented them with, especially those involving colluding elites (political or otherwise). Respondents with a conspiratorial mentality gave more credit to information that suggested broader conspiracies instead: general claims about withheld medicines, clandestine fumigation or the risk constituted by genetically modified foods.

Furthermore, a troubling finding showed that providing arguments against the fake news claims not only failed to offset the belief in the information but actually reinforced the subjects' degree of trust in the story. The researchers observed this effect for the news concerning the link between vaccination and autism or the introduction of Islamic studies into the school curriculum. In both cases, corrections did nothing but strengthen the belief in fake news.

Bennett and Livingston (2018) have discussed the phenomenon of several democratic nations undergoing elevated quantities of untrue information spreading through social media and political websites that emulate journalism formats. Often, they argue, this misinformation is associated with the attempt of radical right movements and parties to encourage their supporters to oppose  centre parties and the press that conveys their messages. Thus, the authors link the spread of disinformation to the increasingly spread of legitimacy problems in different democracies.

When it comes to populism specifically, there is a fair amount of literature that explores its ties with misinformation. Schulz, Wirth and Müller (2018) explored the associations between populist inclinations of citizens, perceptions of public opinion and the ones of mainstream news media. Their main argument revolves around the idea populists believe that the public opinion coincides with their personal opinion and that mainstream media reporting is antagonistic toward their point of view. They have found that an individual's perception of the media turns progressively hostile as their populist attitudes strengthen. Furthermore, the difference in perceiving public opinion to be non conflicting with their own perspective and believing the media to be hostile increases with the growth of populist attitudes.

Hameleers (2019) argues that, since we live in a post-truth era in which the mainstream press if often scapegoated for not representing the people, right-wing populist leaders are not only attributing blame to the political elites, but also supporting this attitude by politicizing fake news and using them as a label to delegitimize political opponents or the press. In his article, he argues that it is possible to identify a conceptual connection between populism and misinformation for two main reasons: first, populism relies on a hostile framing of the ordinary people versus the corrupt elites that can specifically lead to the attribution of blame to a supposedly inaccurate and dishonest media and, second, populism typically focuses on conflict and the people's feelings and experiences while carefully bypassing or attacking empirical evidence or expert analyses.

Hameleers underlines that although these processes do not necessarily mean that populism should be equated with the politics of disinformation, they still show that the main elements of populism can give rise to a type of argumentation in which people-centric experiences are taken more in consideration than expert knowledge or empirical evidence.

In a more recent paper, Bergmann (2020) supports this argument by maintaining that this situation in which misinformation has been significantly spreading on social media since 2016, has allowed conspiratorial populists to be especially successful in spreading suspicion of established knowledge, which they argue to have been fabricated by the elite. Bergmann mentions several country-based examples on how fake news and misinformation have been recently used as a political tool. In Russia, over the past two decades, Moscow-based and state-controlled 24-hour television news station, Russia Today (RT), was made available as a platform for conspiracy theorists to express themselves with discussions revolving around climate change conspiracies, 9/11 'truther theories' and theories about aggressive outsiders, foten Western powers, actively promoted by the Kremlin for their domestic political gain. The Brexit debate was also filled with misleading claims, such as the EU being responsible for the NHS's being underfunded, or tactics that included discrediting experts and specialists.

Monti (2018) has also explored the spread of fake news online and its connection with populist movements in order to better understand how misinformation can be used as a political weapon. He argues that such usage has had as a consequence the creation of a bench of online activists, especially through social networks and search engines, which are both key tools used by citizens to consume and share information

that eventually contributes in forming their political opinions. Monti has also dedicated part of his analysis to the Italian case and has underlined how Lega and M5S may be politically close to websites that spread fake news with a focus on the establishment and immigrants. The author adds that when the Italian parliament made an effort to enact a law that would have regulated the news on the web, the reaction of the M5S was very disappointing as Grillo argued that elites were trying to act as new inquisitors of the web.

During the 2016 U.S. election, politicians and especially Donald Trump have functioned as amplificators for different fake news and conspiracy theories. His election is among the most prominent examples of a campaign based on disinformation and misleading declarations. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) have found that election-period fake news exposure was on the order of one or possibly multiple articles read per adult, with higher exposure to pro-Trump articles than pro-Clinton articles.

The researchers' database contained 115 pro-Trump fake stories that were shared on Facebook 30 million times, and 41 pro-Clinton fake stories, shared a total of 7,6 million times. A study of fake and 'real' news on Facebook during the 2016 U.S. election indicated that the top 20 fake stories generated more participation than the top authentic news by a margin of 8,7–7,3 million, estimated through shares, comments and reactions; furthermore, the untrue content obtained increased participation levels in the final months preceding the election, while engagement with real news declined: the stories that drew the most participation were either anti-Clinton or pro Trump (Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

Moreover, according to Hameleers' (2019) analysis, Trump has also played an active role in creating and spreading a discursive framing of a supposed climate of disinformation by accusing the mainstream media of being corrupt and dishonest, framing it as an enemy of the American people. Although the effective influence of fake news on Twitter during the 2016 U.S. presidential election remains to be further explored, Bovet and Makse (2019) attempted to provide us with some data. They relied on a dataset of 171 million tweets in the five months preceding the election day, in order to identify 30 million tweets from 2.2 million users, which contained a link to news outlets. Based on a classification of news outlets, they have found that 25% of those tweets spread either fake or extremely biased news and the activity of Trump supporters significantly influenced the processes of the top fake news spreaders. Overall, the period preceding the official election saw a consistent spread of

misinformation being amplified by Donald Trump and his supporters, but his presidency was affected by the same mechanism as well.

When compared with his predecessors or with most other well known U.S. politicians of the past, Donald Trump has cultivated a particularly loose relationship with truth; however, it can be argued that his statements were not necessarily all deliberate lies but rather unplanned, incorrect fabrications that distorted what was considered to be correct and acceptable (Bergmann, 2020). Because stories and storytelling capacity are crucial elements that play a key role in building a sense of collective identity, they are easily prone to become a feature of politics.

Ultimately, Donald Trump did not win the presidential election because he told a single story that unified Americans' fears, hopes and anxieties in a captivating way: rather, the stories he told, the arguments he made, slogans he floated and events he claimed ended up reinforcing already existing stories of cultural loss (Polletta & Callahan, 2017).

Marwick and Lewis (2017) dedicated themselves to a significant in-depth study of media manipulation and disinformation online. While Internet trolls, conspiracy theorists and gamergaters (a community organized around users' consumption of video games) play a role in online misinformaton, white supremacist and nationalist groups, including the alt-right, transformed different Internet platforms in fertile ground for their theories and beliefs (especially through a hyper-partisan right-wing network of news websites and blogs). The researchers have also identified the most common places in which manipulators operate on the Internet. Blogs and websites, for example, are important spaces in which information is created and shared. It is important to underline that most of them are associated with the far-right. Alex Jones[47]'s 'Infowars', for instance, is a powerful source for conspiracy theorists, Roosh V[48]'s blog 'Return of Kings' is read by many members of the Men's Rights Movement. The comment sections and other forums associated with these websites are ideal places for building specific communities.

The 'Daily Stormer', a neo-Nazi website, is said to attract a group of readers and commenters who call themselves the 'Stormer Troll Army' or just 'Stormers': this

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[47] American far-right radio show host and conspiracy theorist

[48] American blogger, former pickup artist and writer connected with the alt-right

community engages in specific actions (often harassment campaigns) at the request of the website's founder, Andrew Anglin[49]. Forums and message boards are also online spaces in which far-right ideas and conspiracy theories are shared and discussed. When it comes to the motivations behind the creation of false information, the authors mention ideology, radicalization (far-right movements exploit users' sense of rebellion and dislike of 'political correctness' to spread white supremacist concepts, Islamophobia and misogyny), money, status and attention.

As for the most frequently used techniques that make manipulation possible and amplify certain messages, the most common ones are based on a participatory culture and include networks (the use of hashtags, channels in which participants work together to gather information, streaming apps), memes, bots, strategic amplification and framing (for manipulators, it is not important if the media is reporting on a story in order to confute or dismiss it, the important thing is getting it covered in the first place).

All these processes are fueled by a lack of trust in the mainstream media. A 2019 Gallup report showed that Americans are greatly mistrustful of mass media, as only 41% had 'a great deal' or 'fair amount' of trust in newspapers, television and radio to report the news 'fully, accurately and fairly'. Confidence in the media in the European Union has been declining over the past five years. A 2019 Ipsos survey indicated that trust generally decreased across Europe as well, but the impact of the decline is different from country to country. The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism shared its 2020 'Digital News Report' results about news consumption. The research was conducted by YouGov using an online questionnaire. Overall, across the examined countries, less than four in ten (38%) expressed their trust in most of the news they are exposed to. Less than half (46%) said they trust the news they use themselves: political polarization linked to rising uncertainty is indicated as the element that undermined trust in public broadcasters in particular.

A final factor worth mentioning when discussing the processes through which deceiving information is shared and encouraged online as well as in the political realm, is the consequent issue of hate speech. Soral, Bilewicz and Winiewski (2016) have conducted three studies in order to explore the impact of exposure to hate speech on outgroup prejudice. The results indicated that even a relatively short exposure to hate

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[49] An American Neo-Nazi, white supremacist, antisemitic conspiracy theorist

speech has the ability of desensitizing participants to its offensiveness, while confrontation with hate speech effectively causes an increase in the level of prejudice. Moreover, in the case of minority members, ingroup-directed hate speech has the potential to magnify emotional reactions to it rather than to reduce them.

This is an especially fitting research, since a significant part of the hate speech detectable in political rhetoric, extremist groups and reactions to fake news, is directed towards migrants and refugees.

The public discourse about international migration has been a globally relevant topic, particularly after the 2015 migration crisis. There is a consistent network of fake news, disinformation and conspiracy theories revolving around the subject, which is troubling, especially because migration is often a crucial element of the populist political discourse. Juhász and Szicherle (2017) have found that some governments rely on migration in order to reshape the political system or even transform a liberal democracy into an autocracy. Moreover, their analysis indicated that fake news and anti-immigrant propaganda promote the European far right's political vision on immigration, which includes fundamental elements such as the idea of a cultural war, the impossibility of integration and immigrants being public security threats.

Thus, disinformation methods are said to assist propaganda outlets in supporting the immigration policy of far-right parties and they are also fitted for invalidating the very foundations of the current European system. Andersen (2019) underlines how the Trump White House referred to the Central American migrants as 'invaders' and made unverified claims about the group as it traveled to the U.S. border. In addition to using the term 'invaders', untrue 'facts' they cited included assertions that gang members, criminals and Middle Eastern terrorists were traveling with the refugee caravan: the language of invasion was repeated in news reporting and social media platforms, the false narrative revolving around the refugees' identities, why they fled their home countries to enter the United States, were all fake stories deliberately fabricated using divisive, politicized content that exploited feelings of hate and fear Andersen, 2019).

The analysis of an Italian corpus of about 6.000 tweets containing hate speech against immigrants conducted by Sanguinetti, Poletto, Bosco, Patti and Stranisci (2018), has indicated that the categories that co-occur more frequently with hate speech were stereotype (72% of cases), aggressiveness (66%) and offensiveness (51%). Wright, Brinklow-Vaughn, Johannes and Rodriguez (2020) have pointed out that normally, untrue information targeting immigrants and refugees is not only

exaggerated, in order to produce shock value and remain more memorable, but also provides stereotypical and prejudicial fabrications: for instance, some examples of fake news that were shared via Twitter and Facebook include the claim that in India 95% of rape cases involved a Muslim perpetrator, or the diffusion of a meme that was shared on Facebook in December, 2019, which argued that illegal immigrants killed 10.150 Americans in 2018.

In sum, hate speech is an issue that is spreading at an alarming rate and that has often been used as a political tool in the past few years. It is also important to mention that the recent COVID-19 pandemic has favored the diffusion of xenophobic conspiracy speculations and discriminatory discourses, therefore strengthening exclusionary and nationalistic feelings (Estellés & Castellví, 2020).

As previously discussed, misinformation and fake news spread online and when endorsed by political exponents can have troubling outcomes and effects on society. Among the most significant ones, Marwick and Lewis (2017) mention a growing distrust in the media and the further radicalization of far-right ideologies. It would be naïve to ignore the fact that such political orientations often base their exclusionary rhetoric on an 'othering' strategy that has migrants and foreigners as its main concern. As previously mentioned, false information targeting immigrants and refugees can have troubling effects and consequent concrete actions that heavily impact both the public opinion and the electorate.

That is why, as Pepp, Michaelson and Sterken (2019) argue, it is crucial to keep talking about fake news and actively discuss their influence, while demanding that social media platforms undertake more effective controls and filtering options to stem their diffusion. However, it is also essential to focus on the migration discourse specifically: what has changed in the last few years in terms of media representation, securitization, legal actions and the narrative that revolves around those who engage in acts of support or solidarity. This analysis is fundamental to better understand the ever so important and contemporary ties that the populist rhetoric holds with the immigration discourse.

# CHAPTER 4

# MIGRATION

## 4.1 The Criminalization Of Humanitarian Actors and Solidarity

In the past few years, different countries and politicians have been condemning not only immigration but also some of the acts of solidarity shown towards migrants and those who help them, which is a significant phenomenon worth discussing in order to highlight the connections between right-wing populism and the criminalization of solidarity towards migrants and refugees.

According to the UN Migration Agency (IOM), a migrant can be identified as:

> Any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of the person's legal status; whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; what the causes for the movement are; or what the length of the stay is[50].

There are several reasons that can lead people to cross state or international borders and they include the search for better opportunities, family reunification, environmental factors such as climate change or natural disasters, escaping conflict or human rights violations. In 2019, the global number of migrants reached an estimated 272 million, with international migrants comprising 3.5% of the global population (International Organization for Migration, 2019). Migration is a phenomenon that has always been part of human history and, especially in the last few years, it has taken a remarkably important place in many of the frameworks that characterize our increasingly globalized world. An important aspect to consider is the fact that the distinction between migrant and refugee has become significantly blurred, particularly in the social, legal and political discourses of our time. The criminalization of

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[50] United Nations Migration Agency

humanitarian actors providing help to migrants and refugees has been a troubling issue especially across Europe, where undocumented migrants are helped entering or crossing states regularly. Activists, volunteers and NGOs performing search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean are among the most targeted humanitarian groups and are often addressed as smugglers.

According to a report released in 2019 by the UK-based news organization Open Democracy, at least 250 volunteers across 14 European countries have been charged, investigated or arrested for having provided assistance to undocumented migrants in the last five years (Karas, 2019). The EU migration policies, which have the ultimate aim of battling human trafficking and protecting both borders and national security interests, are negatively affecting the work of humanitarian actors. Prioritizing security over humanitarian action means contributing to the criminalization of both individuals and organizations that wish to help migrants. The criminalization processes, bureaucratic obstacles, attacks on and vexation of volunteers have restricted the access to the concerned individuals in Europe (Roepstorff, 2019). According to the 2020 World Report by Human Rights Watch, in March 2019 the EU's anti-smuggling mission called Operation Sophia stopped naval patrols that had rescued thousands of migrants in the Mediterranean. The EU wanted to rely on aerial surveillance instead, given that planes would have provided information to the Libyan Coast Guard to support returns to Libya instead of spreading information about boats and rescue NGO ships being in trouble. In October 2019, the European Parliament refused a proposal to ameliorate search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean. The United Nations refugee agency evaluated that at least 1.098 people had lost their life or disappeared in the Mediterranean by mid-November (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

One of the main reasons why humanitarian actors seem to be identified as criminals is the fact that they are often associated with human traffickers and smugglers. Watson (2015) has highlighted the ambiguity associated with smuggling and undocumented migration. Separating altruistic and financial or self-interested motivations is not enough to distinguish the categories of smuggler and humanitarian, especially after the 1951 Refugee Convention and the acceptance of the idea that there could be plausible humanitarian motives for people to internationally move to secure spaces, even if 'illegally' (Watson, 2015). However, motivation as a defining attribute of smuggling has been removed from certain states such as Canada and Australia, which resulted in focusing on the mode of entry instead. Watson also suggested that

the very fact that smuggling is criminalized in both international and domestic legislation, makes it impossible for a humanitarian form of smuggling to exist. The criminalization process is useful for states to be able to manage international migration but, nevertheless, it is hard to question the prevailing representations of smuggling at a time when significant numbers of asylum seekers and migrants suffer because of strategies employed by traffickers, smugglers and states (Watson, 2015).

According to the UN's definition, a smuggler must be working in order to obtain financial or other material benefits: this policy implies that volunteers helping and supporting migrants should not be included in the criminal human traffickers category (Sinead, 2019). However, it has been reported that it is possible to identify an increasing trend in Europe to "stigmatise, pose obstacles to and criminalize humanitarian assistance"[51] and many EU countries continue to target humanitarian workers. This overextension of the criminal justice system is highly counterproductive because it significantly damages social capital, while weakening the possibility for people to build confidence and collaboration (Pali, 2017). Jalušić (2019) has focused on not only the reasons but also the possible consequences of the criminalization process of non-governmental initiatives that offer help to irregular migrants. She mentioned a phenomenon called 'double superfluousness': migrants and refugees are seen as unequal and therefore superfluous but, at the same time, proto-totalitarian governments dehumanize their own citizenry by significantly reducing their capacities and framework for agency. In a democratic political order, humanitarian actions do not assume a political aspect. Criminalizing solidarity across Europe indicates that the work carried by organizations is being limited by authorities through the attempt of discrediting their work by a public demonization of their activities: such a tactic is way more effective than direct criminalization because it leads people to hide or give up their activities, a path that will ultimately lead to dehumanization as well (Jalušić, 2019). The distrust in the ability of these organizations to deliver effective humanitarian support to people in need is another major debate around which the narrative revolves. Efforts to restrict immigration is making it harder for proper help to be granted within the confines of the law: globalization has had the consequence of a diminished respect for the individual and a greater emphasis on the group instead. That is why, for some people, the interests of the nation come before those of migrants,

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[51] Caritas Europa, 2019

a mechanism that has had a negative effect on the humanitarian sector (Battaglia, 2019). Several governments have refused to provide state funding to offer services for undocumented migrants and have also established legal obligations to report the undocumented ones to the authorities because, generally, they assume that by harassing and punishing volunteers the refugees will not come anymore or will simply be more easily expelled (Pali, 2017).

There are several countries in which humanitarian actors have faced, or still face, not only particularly heavy restrictions and formal prosecution or sentencing in criminal justice courses of action, but also intimidations and harassment. In France, the case of the farmer Cédric Herrou is emblematic: he had to face the French Constitutional Court after he was suspected of smuggling more than 200 people when he declared that he had provided humanitarian assistance to refugees and other migrants. He was arrested and a four-month suspended sentence was handed in 2017 for helping refugees escaping from war-torn nations to enter France (Carrera, Vosyliute, Allsopp, Sanchez, 2018). France has a specific immigration law called 'délit de solidarité' (crime of solidarity) and even if in 2018 a court ruled that it was not constitutional to use it against people acting for humanitarian causes, it is not the only French law used against humanitarian actors (Archer, Torrisi, Provost, Nabert, Lobos, 2019). In 2018, Hungary passed a law making it illegal for individuals or organizations to help irregular migrants and asylum seekers. According to the 'Stop Soros' law, those convicted can face up to a year in prison and fines (Reggio & Mittelstadt, 2018). NGOs in the country estimate that only two asylum-seekers per day are allowed to enter in Hungary, which has some of the strictest anti-immigration laws in Europe and has also built a 109-mile-long fence along its southern border to protect it from migrants arriving from Serbia and Croatia (Barry, 2019). 11 volunteers and migrants have faced a trial in Belgium in September 2018 after being accused of trafficking migrants who were attempting to reach the UK from Brussels: three volunteers (a social worker and two journalists), sheltered migrants at their home and, as a result, they have faced up to ten years in prison (Caritas Europa, 2019). Danish author Zornig Andersen and her husband Mikael Lindholm were accused of transporting people without valid documents and they were ultimately convicted in 2016. They asked the police whether it would have been legal to give a Syrian family a lift and the police said they did not know. They were charged the next day (Archer, Torrisi, Provost, Nabert, Lobos, 2019). Manuel Blanco, a Spanish firefighter, volunteered for a search and rescue NGO and,

in 2016, was arrested in Greece, facing up to ten years of imprisonment. In the end, he was absolved of all charges but the process took two years. Moreover, he had to pay a fine of €15.000. According to the 2020 World Report by Human Rights Watch, during 2019 in Germany several NGOs criticized reductions in social benefits and the reasons for detaining migrants waiting to be deported out of the country, along with the use of prisons for immigration detention. Attacks on refugees, asylum seekers and especially those assisting them, are still alarming. In the first half of the year, police recorded 609 attacks on refugees and asylum seekers, 60 attacks on shelters, and 42 attacks against organizations and volunteers (Human Rights Watch, 2020). According to police authorities, the majority of the attacks are to be linked with right wing motivations. In June 2019, a federal jury in Arizona ultimately refused to convict the immigration activist Scott Warren on felony charges that could have had him imprisoned for twenty years. He was accused of having offered food, water and shelter to two migrants after they had crossed the U.S.-Mexico border without authorization in January 2018. The Trump administration has contributed to putting humanitarianism on trial, a process that today is supported, widespread and growing (Bayoumi, 2019). In Italy news come in from the Mediterranean regularly about search and rescue ships that are not allowed to enter the harbors for weeks (Jalušić, 2019). In 2018, Matteo Salvini (Interior Minister back then) closed the country's harbors to the MS Aquarius as it sought to disembark 629 migrants, and later extended the decision to all NGO boats, accusing them of supporting trafficking (Reggio & Mittelstadt, 2018). The same year, a migrant-friendly mayor who promoted several integration projects, was banished from his own town.

There is a thesis according to which the criminalization and penalization of migrants and the ones that support them are mainly driven by moments of crisis: the immigrant, previously considered beneficial during a period of economic growth, has acquired the image of a criminal during economic recession (Melossi, 2003). The toxic narrative concerning migration and those who help migrants is used to strengthen migration regimes and increase border control: EU politicians create an antagonistic environment in transit areas in order to force migrants to move out of their territory, especially in areas such as Calais, Ventimiglia and the Serbia/Croatia border (Caritas Europa, 2019).

Another significant process that has been going on is the stigmatization and the framing of NGOs and general solidarity by the media, which plays a key role in

questioning both the role of NGOs and international cooperation. Cullen (2009) has mentioned how pro-migrant NGOs in Ireland have been building campaigns in order to oppose the negative media and societal framing of migrants. The Irish media have created different discursive opportunities for debate related to immigration but the political discourse revolving around migrants and a 'racialized public' is still heavier in importance compared to NGOs (Cullen, 2009). That is why policies concerning integration stay restricted and migrants, among other minorities, occupy a marginal place within society. As a response to such dynamics, the strategies employed by NGOs and pro-migrant groups included the creation of an alliance structure with non-state actors and different state bodies that sympathize with their objectives. Moreover, NGOs have been using international political spheres such as the EU and the UN to amplify the mobilization on migrant rights in Ireland. The media has been spreading a racialized kind of discourse, relying on tools such as a selective memory and a nationalism aimed at distinguishing Irish citizens (and their experiences of emigration) and certain immigrants (Cullen, 2009). NGOs have therefore started to use media to spread the testimony of migrants through newspapers, radio and documentaries, in order to challenge the social vision of migrants as untrustworthy and suspect. As Frances Webber (Vice-chair of IRR Council of Management) has stated, the criminalization of solidarity in the EU is not new as it began several decades ago with the prosecution of individuals involved in the sanctuary movement, providing help to those facing deportation (Fekete, 2018).

The stigmatization process operates through a legislative targeting: the 'illegal' solidarity towards migrants is set against the 'legal' solidarity addressed to proper citizens (Reggiardo, 2019). Media is also very important to obtain legitimacy: frames in media discourse are able to both reflect and shape public opinion, therefore they can indicate social values but, at the same time, create meanings for the audience and shift its values (Marberg, Van Kranenburg, Korzilius, 2016). Since the 2015 crisis in particular, several NGOs have been formed with the purpose of providing assistance to migrant boats in the Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea. Some specific events like the arrest of Carola Rackete, captain of the Sea Watch 3 (June 2019) or the three weeks voyage of Open Arms (August 2019), have been heavily discussed in the media and have also affected the general public discourse in Europe as well. Italy, Spain and Malta closed their harbors, vessels were confiscated and legal proceedings against crew members have ultimately led to humanitarian action in Europe happening in an

increasingly reduced space (Roepstorff, 2019). Focusing on only maritime search and rescue (SAR) activities prevents us from seeing such a demoralizing result. In the EU, the Coast Guard is primarily focused on border-enforcement operations (Ghezelbash, Moreno-Lax, Klein, Opeskin, 2018). In 2018, Italy had prohibited aid organizations from operating rescue vessels in Italian territorial waters and, at the same time, Malta did not allow them to enter its harbors (Hockenos, 2018). The 'security decree bis', approved by the Italian government in June 2019, allowed the then Ministry of Interior to limit the activities of SAR boats at sea and seize their vessels when necessary. Fines of up to €50.000 per incident were foreseen for the captain, owner, and operator of a ship entering territorial waters without authorization (Caritas Europa, 2019). The criminalization of both NGOs (such as Doctors without Borders, Save the Children and SOS Méditerranée) and independent actors (including Sea-Watch, Sea-Eye or Jugend-Rettet) began with a mobile sea-barrier implemented by Libya, through which the Libyan Coast Guard gained both the responsibility and the right to intercept migrant vessels and bring them back. As a result, being rescued equaled to being captured and contained (Tazzioli, 2018). Another significant issue mentioned by Tazzioli, is the fact that a migrant at sea is not necessarily seen as a refugee, which means that even if rescued, they may not have the right to obtain protection and refuge in Europe.

The question of whether a base for criminalizing the humanitarianism involved in rescuing migrant boats exists or not has been debated in Germany. Journalist Mariam Lau believes that the more migrants are rescued, the more boats will come in an inevitable, fatal process. A political philosopher from Münster University, Matthias Hoesch, believes instead that charities act morally and they should not be charged with a crime, since a democratic process can be illegitimate if it ultimately results in policies with immoral effects (Hockenos, 2018). Luckily, there are aspects related to this whole narrative that can be celebrated, such as the continuous resistance shown by key actors like authorities on both the local and the regional level that stand up to policies in order to protect non-reigstered migrants' dignity and access to basic rights (Pali, 2017).

### 4.2 The Securitization Of Migration

The securitization process allows state actors to convert certain issues into matters of security and to sometimes enable 'extraordinary means' to be used in the

name of it. As previously mentioned, after the end of the Cold War, the concept of security has evolved, as it began to include a wider set of concepts and dangers that were no longer only confined to the military field. With rhetoric, politics and politicians increasingly involved in the measures and social perceptions related to the phenomenon of migration, it is possible to affirm that there is now a consistent linkage between migration and security.

When it comes to migration, there are several examples on how the process has been taking place: through border control, national policies, signed agreements, the creation of international and domestic institutions. International migration has been increasingly perceived as a security threat, therefore it takes place among other security-related issues. There have been specific factors that have been particularly alarming: the definition of migration as something that represents an existential threat to the security of the state and/or society, the importance given to immigration as a security threat and its ultimate effects in politics, which have experienced remarkable changes (Bourbeau, 2011). Worries about topics such as irregular immigration already existed in different countries from the early 1980s (some examples are Belgium, France, Italy and Spain). When in 1989 the restrictions on emigration from the eastern bloc were abolished, fears of a significant flood of irregular migrants from eastern Europe began to emerge (Boswell, 2007). Other concerns were related to the social and economic impact of these individuals on societies. Most of the apprehension revolved around a possible abuse of social and welfare services, the prices of asylum systems and the thought that irregular workers could weaken the national labour force. Worries concerning asylum abuse have especially been notable in some Western European countries such as France, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK (Boswell, 2007).

Since it was included as a significant political subject in public discussions, migration has been converted into a threat to both the state, the security and the identity of host societies: that is why through the migration issue there has been a consistent growth of immigration-control policies that mixed restricted 'thin' and extended 'thick' policing at the borders, inside the territories and in migrants' own countries through the application of a hard visa system (Ceyhan & Tsoukala, 2002). The securitization of migration can also be analyzed as a discourse that allows the exercise of relations of power (Ibrahim, 2005). While understanding the ways in which migration has become a security issue, it is also useful to underline how cultural

differences, which are used as a system of classification, are in fact associated with threat: this specific use of cultural differences as a criterion for exclusion can be identified as a racist discourse (Ibrahim, 2005). Nevertheless, addressing the connection between migration and security can be quite problematic because both concepts, their consequences and linkage are subjective: they depend on who is defining the terms and who actually benefits from defining them in a certain way (Choukri, 2002).

In 1992, Myron Weiner (American political scientist and scholar), provided several reasons why security and migration are inevitably linked and his analysis is still extremely valid in the present-day. He stated that the characteristics of population movements (such as internal political disorders, economic inequality, the global character of migration and the constraints on the admission of migrants and refugees) clearly indicate the necessity for a security framework for the study of international migration that identifies state policies as influenced by concerns over an eventual internal instability and international security (Weiner, 1992). According to Ceyhan and Tsoukala, the rhetorical arguments used in most of the anti-immigration discourses are similar but they present different strategies of discussion according to the context they belong to. Often originated from political leaders, the media and security organizations, such debates are often expressed by relying on four main axes: the socioeconomic one (unemployment is often connected with migration), a securitarian one (migration is related to a narrative that underlines the loss of control that concerns borders, sovereignty and security), the identitarian one (migrants are identified as a threat to the national identity of host societies) and a political one, which includes anti-immigrant discourses (Ceyhan & Tsoukala, 2002). Threat and insecurity are concepts that have been and still are continuously being defined again and expanded. Because of the declarations of organizations on an international level, academics, states and journalists, migration has ultimately been associated with a risk for the liberal reality: such discussion has normalized the view according to which migrants are a threat and any old thoughts about how they can actually be useful for a capitalist expansion is left behind (Ibrahim, 2005). In the early 2000s, repressive immigration policies were being commonly associated to the European context and not, for example, to the United States one, which was regarded as being more open-minded. However, despite the significant social, economic distinctions, including the ones concerning immigration and integration policies, both European countries and America have been

characterized, since the 1980s, by a change of the social depiction of migrants and asylum seekers: the same people who were welcomed after World War II (they were seen as a useful labor force), were being identified as criminals, defrauders, terrorists, drug traffickers or associated with criminal activity, and they were constantly being accused of taking advantage of social services while stealing jobs away from nationals (Ceyhan & Tsoukala, 2002). Migrants were being increasingly identified in a negatively oriented security framework through legal, social and political discourses and in the wake of September 11th, the agenda assumed not only new urgency and importance but also and most importantly a new kind of justification.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, have had a significant impact on securitization processes and initiatives to battle terrorism. The effects of 9/11 have led to several forms of negative attitudes and discrimination towards migrants, not only in the US but in Europe as well: just ten days after September 11, the first EU counterterrorism plan was released. The European Council established different multilateral counterterrorism operations. Intelligence-sharing platforms, external border management projects (such as the controversial FRONTEX) are some important examples. FRONTEX controlled joint border supervision operations with guards and necessary items from different states members of the EU: the purpose was to restrict migration flows. The role of the military in such operations ultimately suggests a semi-militarization of border controls. FRONTEX's position in helping member states the migrants returning procedures (including asylum seekers whose request was rejected) to their countries of origin may have in certain circumstances constituted a violation of the nonrefoulement principle, which forbids states from sending individuals to countries where they may have to deal with human rights violations such as torture (Léonard, 2010). Important bilateral relationships were established as well and they were all characterized by rigorous transgovernmentalism: the effort of controlling illegal immigration by Italy and Libya has grown, France and its North African state partners initiated a cooperation to deport illegal immigrants and terror suspects, the same thing happened for Spain with Morocco and Algeria. However, in the securitization process of their migration regimes, such states have vowed an only rhetorical adherence to EU human rights standards: an emblematic example were the continued Italian, British and German procedures of deportation of suspects to countries recognized to carry out counterterrorism in a way that violated EU norms (Moscoe, 2013). Since the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks included non-

nationals residing in Hamburg, the EU had the responsibility of addressing the relation between Europe and the attacks. The Hamburg Cell revelation had a significant impact on public opinion in relation to Islam-related terrorism, since it led to the "reification of Muslim migrants into the mythologized personification of an exaggerated threat and thus the object of securitized policies"[52].

When the attacks occurred in the U.S., two were the most often used databases to collect data on third country nationals throughout Europe: the Schengen information system (SIS) and Eurodac. Shortly after 9/11, the JHA Council started to debate the chances of implementing part of a counter-terrorism strategy for border and migration control by relying on the information collected. The use of such material moved through a second route as well: the development of a new visas database. Eventually, in September 2001, the Commission had been called by the Council to present suggestions for setting up a data trading system (Boswell, 2007). In Germany, public attention became centered on the possible presence of Jihadi terrorists in the country, therefore the securitization discourse ended up portraying Islam and Muslims as incompatible to German society and its principles. The discourse thus established an immediate threat connected to both terrorism and religious radicalism, but also a long lasting risk to economic success and social order (Banai & Kreide, 2017). Another significant example worth mentioning is given by the UK which, after the attacks, realized the need to come up with measures that would have proved the government's ability to protect its citizens from the threat of terrorism. Some measures included attempts to create a relation between immigration control and terrorism and the call for the asylum procedures to become more strict. However, it is interesting to note that ultimately the government did not completely pursue this securitizing agenda, mainly because of conflicting interests (there was an attempt to gain public support for expanded labor migration programs) and also because the Home Office was not particularly capable of delivering legitimate migration targets (Boswell, 2007). Moreover, in 2001 an Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act was inaugurated by the government and it incorporated arrangements for the detention and eventual expulsion of foreign nationals suspected of terrorism. However, it later emerged that they were mainly not foreign (at least half of the detained suspects were British) and even if they

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[52] Jackson, R. (2007). An Analysis of EU Counter-Terrorism Discourse Post-September 11. Cambridge Review of International Affairs, 20(2): 233-247, 236

were, people were questioning whether their exclusion from the country, instead of keeping them under surveillance, would have been an effective way to reduce the threat. Many reports and parliament-based debates revolved around such issues and, eventually, they discouraged the government from responding to terrorism by targeting foreign nationals and assuming they were suitable for detention or deportation (Boswell, 2007).

There were different demonstrations of the general securitization of migration, some of which included the extended differentiation between the EU's borders on an external and internal level, the institution of some 'detention zones' in airports in order to successfully expel individuals who were lacking appropriate documentation and a reduction in the quantity of accepted asylum-seekers (Bigo & Tsoukala, 2006). After 9/11, the EU has shown a significant readiness to integrate both border supervision and migration control with goals related to counterterrorism, through measures like information collection on irregular migrants and asylum seekers (Boswell, 2006). France, for example, has focused on its fight with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb of Algeria and Mali: EU member states had to confront their history, which has an inevitable connection with colonialism, while at the same time focusing on battling transnational terrorism and strengthen the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (Moscoe, 2013). Migration control remained one of the top priorities in EU discussions but the logic for this focus was the necessity to battle trafficking and improve the protection of Europe's frontiers from undesired immigration: the Hague Program, the most important European Council document that emerged after 2001, highlighted the necessity to prevent humanitarian crises by relying on a better-controlled migration system. However, the control of migration was not formally described as a way of keeping out possible terrorists (Boswell, 2007). Although the combination of border and migration control with counterterrorism operations allowed for a significant amount of effective and calculated collaboration, it is important that the two goals (the regulation of migration and the battle against the threat of terrorism) are pursued using distinct approaches: the association has often permitted the hastened securitization of migration to indicate the decline of the EU's normative power, while simultaneously threatening the protection of rights and freedoms, therefore putting at risk not only the entire EU Counterterrorism Strategy, but also the EU itself and its vision of common peace and security (Moscoe, 2013).

The September 11th events gave a new definition of the notion of security itself.

Migration began to be seen as a threat often associated with terrorist activities, therefore it is important to question the impact that the securitization dynamics of the phenomenon have had on migrants' human rights and fundamental liberties. Although Europe has historically experienced both the inflow and the outflow of migrants, opinions and policies have transformed. The perception of immigrants within the continent deteriorated especially in the 1980s and 1990s. A significant element of the securitization approach is that migrants have been identified as compact groups, the distinctions between them were just ignored: European politicians did not want to point out any potential differences among migrants, mainly because such an approach would have weakened the securitization rhetoric as a whole (Demirtaş-Coşkun, 2006). The Europeanization of migration policy has securitized migration by relating migration policies to a security framework. The construction of an internal security field, paired with restrictive policies, and other strategies supporting the idea of cultural homogeneity as a balancing element ultimately add up to the negative politicization of immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees, often identified as illegitimate presences and scapegoats (Huysmans, 2000). Another important reaction to migration was based on the approach of the paradigm of center versus periphery, meaning that European countries identified themselves as the center and the other countries from which refugees were arriving were seen as a periphery with the central idea that the periphery was trying to interfere in and harm the center (Demirtaş-Coşkun, 2006).

The information on international migration and security on a global level are in large part produced nationally and regionally. States are inclined to reinforce the legal framework of migration past their frontiers so the problem becomes related to hazard administration as well: security plans of action should be constructed in conformity with human rights, this is the issue that genuine liberal democracies have to face (Topulli, 2016). In a communicate concerning human rights, Special Rapporteur on Human Rights noted that:

> In exercising their sovereign right to regulate the entry, stay and movement of migrants and their policy on immigration, asylum and refuge, States should bear in mind the international obligations they have assumed in the area of human rights[53].

States are inclined to underline and stress security on a national level more than

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[53] United Nations General Assembly, 2004:11

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on a human one (Topulli, 2016).

The 2015 migration crisis is another good example to take into account when discussing the EU migration policies in relation to the respect of human rights. Five years ago, there were mass drownings at sea of people escaping from war-damaged countries like Syria and Eritrea. The EU mainly responded by declaring war to traffickers and smugglers, responsible for the deaths of so many refugees. Italy, in particular, relied on a double strategy. Matteo Renzi, then Prime Minister, argued that a new cross-Mediterranean 'slave trade' was emerging and politician Federica Mogherini identified traffickers as a threat to the EU as a whole (refugees were automatically perceived as part of the threat and the EU became the referent object to securitize), an idea that was supported by the institutions (Hintjens, 2019). Renzi's metaphor was highly criticized both for being 'too soft' on refugees (since the ones escaping on traffickers' boats were also fleeing real slavery inside Libya and the allegory encouraged the protection of 'good, genuine refugees', the opposite of 'bad illegal migrants') and a cynical excuse for unlawful EU military intervention in the Mediterranean (Kingsley, 2015). The idea thus failed to convince popular and expert audiences, which is a key process of the securitization approach in the first place. In 2015, Hein de Haas, a migration expert at Oxford University and Maastricht University, explained that smugglers did not give rise to illegal migration but merely responded to border controls by providing journeys in exchange for money, journeys that would definitely cost less if they had not been made illegal by the EU (Hintjens, 2019).

As mentioned before, when it comes to the securitization of migration a great emphasis is put on border control, the linkage between migration and threat, the necessity to balance humanitarian protection and security. An example of the common regulations on migration in western Europe is the Dublin Regulation, which establishes which EU Member State has to examine a certain asylum application: the criteria for determining responsibility includes elements such as family considerations or whether the applicant has entered the EU regularly or not. Since it is not possible to submit asylum applications in different Member States, the possibilities of being accepted are quite low, which automatically discourages other refugees from applying for asylum in Western Europe (Bolten, 1991). As mentioned before, another turning point in the EU migration management has been the Hague Program, which mainly focuses on strengthening security, freedom and justice. Moreover, with the Amsterdam Treaty of

1999, two areas on which the EU would have focused were ultimately identified: first, requirements of ingress and residency for citizens coming from developing countries, second, illegal immigration and residence. Two elements were especially taken into account while examining the issues: the minimum standards which should have been provided in order to protect the rights of third country nationals, and the right of legal residents in one Member State to settle in another country of the Union (Demirtaş-Coşkun, 2006). The EU has also been conceiving new externalization and surveillance measures to acquire more control nationally and at the European level. Some examples include the use of biometrical data of individuals, identity systems and electronic databases. The main databases are the Schengen Information System (SIS), generally used for keeping the records of asylum applicants, EURODAC, and the Visa Information System (VIS), used to store information about visa applications. Technological developments were important for the evolution of modern surveillance mechanisms. Such tools are represented as necessary measures to safeguard internal security, but they also have the capability to threaten the security of individuals by confining them in a total surveillance system where their daily actions are stored: that is why states are being empowered at the expense of personal freedoms, which is a challenge not only for migrants or asylum seekers but for all Europeans (Benam, 2011).

Another significant aspect to consider in relation to the securitization of migration in Europe, is the politicization of the whole discourse. Buonfino argues that the process is nationally generated and by debating connections between public opinion, mass media, identity politics and concern about the transformation of immigration policy discourses in the European Union (Buonfino, 2006). The political sphere is certainly connected to mass media now more than ever. The impact is significant and the audience that these new forms of communications can reach is extremely wide: every discourse has the potential of being amplified while influencing a large portion of citizens. Social fears are easily heightened and that is one of the reasons why the discourse revolving around migration, especially through political discussions, has the ability of causing so much concern. The securitization processes have emerged with a certain urgency because governments had not only the responsibility of controlling the influx of migrants, but also the task of satisfying the public opinion while keeping the media pressures under control. The politicization of immigration has been unavoidable from the start because the phenomenon itself

significantly highlights the conflict among unity and plurality presented by democracy (Buonfino, 2006).

A final factor worth considering in the framework of the securitization of migration in Europe, is climate change. Environmental problems have become part of the international agenda as a global security threat only recently but the interest in its security dimensions has highlighted the linkage with a new type of migration, the climate-induced one. Some of the main difficulties that force individuals to migrate include droughts, natural disasters, extreme weather events and the sea levels rise. Within the EU context, in 2008 migration was addressed in the paper concerning 'Climate Change and International Security' by the High Representative and the Commission. The discussion concerning migration affected by climate change has been identified as a mean to encourage measures on an environmental level and different types of administration of migration influenced by cooperation and security on a human level (Geddes & Somerville, 2012). The evolution of the migration set in motion by environmental issues into a security concern has been backed by two types of securitization processes: the first relies on uniting environmentalists and other individuals worried about the developments and migration (the aim is to generate awareness and encourage action), and a second strategy distinguished by talks reinforced by communicates, the media and politicians is instead used to validate new interventions and surveillance. As Topulli argued, almost all European countries have the same problem in common: the imperial history has transformed them into being more defensive of their identities. France and the United Kingdom, for example, are countries that were modelled in the name of safeguarding human rights. Moreover, the European Union is supposed to take action to reduce the arbitrariness of its Member States, but such a purpose appears to be ambiguous in the elaboration of its official papers (Topulli, 2016).

What is distinct in the discussions concerning security on a national and European level can be found in how the attention to the topic is constructed: hegemonically, security is often connected to territoriality and processes for keeping control over the acceptance of non-natives, while in the European context security is linked to debates related to humanitarian help, human rights and safeguarding (Buonfino, 2006). Of course there are some integration policies too, but they often support the idea that a culturally uniform society was present before migration: consequently, migrants are placed outside of the national or European social sphere of

which they are actually part of. Therefore, they are ultimately identified as late arrivers who damaged a previously existing culturally homogenous environment, in a way that disregards their significant contribution to the creation of any society (Huysmans, 2000). That is why the European Union "needs a comprehensive approach to migration addressing political, human rights and development issues in countries and regions of origin and transit"[54] .

Since migration is a globally widespread phenomenon, it would be useful to briefly analyze some securitization processes in relation to different countries with contrasting historical and sociopolitical contexts. In March 2006, the Netherlands implemented a new policy for migrants. They had to take a civic integration exam, which consisted of questions about the Dutch society and language: any individual who wanted to marry someone living in the Netherlands or wished to apply for visa for family unification, was required to take the test. The Dutch system was famous for its generally liberal approach towards migrants but the logic behind such examinations could have been associated to the idea that migrants had to be assimilated as much as possible into the host states and societies, in order to diminish the threat they could have represented (Demirtaş-Coşkun, 2006). As a result of the recent growing popularity of Populist Radical Right (PRR) parties in Europe, there is are several analyses that focus on the role of migration in the growth of such parties: the research has largely found that the growth in the number of migrants now plays a crucial role in the electoral successes of PRR parties in different European countries, including the Netherlands (Davis & Deole, 2017).

As mentioned before, migration is often identified as a threat in social, economic and cultural terms. Germany has had a complex history of immigration, especially after World War II (when more than 20 million people resettled in the country), and many transformations of citizenship laws as well. Political discourse, particularly among conservative actors and the far-right, targeted non-natives by relying on the rhetoric of how urgent it was to prioritize fellow citizens and identify immigrants as a threat to safety, values and other recurrent factors of simple xenophobia (Thränhardt, 1995). Germany reformed its citizenship law by setting in motion processes of both inclusion and exclusion: it granted long-term residents a conditional access to citizenship while at the same time reinforcing external borders to block the arrival of other labour-

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[54] EU refugee policy, Council of the EU, 1994

migrants and asylum seekers (Banai & Kreide, 2017). In 2000, a new law eventually allowed foreign nationals the legal right to become naturalized citizens.

In the 2010 Australian election campaign, migration was strongly linked to security (an emphasis was especially put on border control, terrorism and social cohesion) and to other matters of concern related to the future (such as population size, sustainability and economic growth). Since the 1990s, Australian governments have controlled asylum requests through deterrence policies and different regional agreements. However, the securitization of migration identifies irregular migrants and refugees as an issue of border protection, which in Australia has been linked to the management of the number of illegal boat arrivals and the general public opinion on the matter since in the country the securitization of asylum seekers identified as potential terrorists has mainly made it more difficult to be granted an asylum status (Humphrey, 2014). Greece, which has historically been one of the most significant emigration countries after World War II, is the final referent country of this section's analysis. In the 1990s, migrants were identified as a significant danger for the settled community and the issue had to be addressed with all possible strength (Swarts & Karakatsanis, 2012). According to the IOM, from 2007 the quantity of irregular migrants and asylum seekers travelling through the Aegean Sea has increased but, as from 2010, there has been a rise in the numbers of illegal crossings at the border with Turkey. Since in 2011 the European Court of justice discovered that 90% of irregular entries to Europe happen through Greece, a regulation (Law 3907/2011) was established to set up a system that could manage migration via a self-sufficient Asylum Service, the foundation of First Reception Centers and the transformation of Greek legislation for it to adapt to the directive related to the return of irregular migrants (IOM). The presence of the far-right and populist parties plays an important role as well: the Golden Dawn (GD) is a good example of a far-right party that has gained a significant amount of support and benefits from the debate of the securitization of immigration. In 2014, it obtained the third highest share of votes in the European Parliament elections in Greece. GD's anti-immigrant positions are clearly defined by their slogan "every foreign worker is a Greek unemployed" and their demands for an immediate deportation of undocumented immigrants residing and working in the country (Lazaridis & Skleparis, 2015). Ultimately, the securitization processes in Greece were not the consequence of an order or economic crisis, they were mainly originated from the threat of the 'other', which was identified by political and security

elites as unwanted, threatening, and inferior: the process implied the representation of migration as a danger through a variety of resources, including the discursive, institutional and regulatory ones (Karyotis, 2012).

The matter is especially relevant at the present time, given that the securitization of migration still takes place among the most important political topics of our time, particularly in the light of the significant rise of far-right and populist parties throughout the world. Despite the attempts to efficiently conduct the securitization of migration at a global level, more research and efforts are needed to understand how the process can be separated from the consequent heavily negative perception of migrants and disregard of their rights. We still do not know how to conciliate preventing threats such as radicalism or terrorism with the integration of minorities (Jaskulowski, 2018). This provides more reasons to find better ways to ensure that securitization processes do not ultimately lead to negative perceptions of migrants and criminalization-based frameworks.

## 4.3 The Ties Between Populism and Immigration

It has already been discussed how populist leaders give great importance to the domestic sphere of their nations, the well-being of their people and their interests. To ensure an internal balance, they have to be careful and attentive to external factors: immigration is one of them. It would be meaningful to observe that, while populism emphasizes cultural roots and nationalist sentiments in order to rely on the support of a socially cohesive electorate, voters who actually support radical right and populist parties often belong to a marginal social group in their own societies. Gidron and Hall (2018) relied on a comparative survey data across European democracies to establish if the support given to parties on both the radical right and left is related to a sense of social marginalization: they have found that people who feel more excluded are more inclined to vote for parties of the radical right and left, a mechanism that actually reflects issues of social integration. It is therefore interesting to underline how, in the relationship between the migration phenomenon and populism, the idea of an improbable social and cultural integration is often highlighted.

The idea of a context that, in the last few years, has allowed EU institutional settings and policies to being perceived as not attentive enough towards social cohesion and solidarity, with the consequence of populism emerging as a backlash

against globalization, is a concept underlined by Buti and Pichelmann (2017). They mention how protectionism and hostility towards immigration is a significant issue that dominates the public debate and is exploited by populist leaders to defend the thesis according to which the arrival of migrants is a threat to not only the preservation of national culture and language, but also to jobs, wages, health and education services enjoyed by citizens of host countries. The authors suggest that a significant amount of anti-EU stances are fueled by a native-identity perspective but, at the same time, the EU institutions are growing more and more distant from the ordinary citizen, who perceives them not as a system capable of advocating for equal treatment and the protection of minorities, but instead as an additional level between ruler and the people, which suits the populist narrative. Issues such as the financial crisis and its fall-out, or the migration/refugee matter, are said to have been faced with an hesitant and still incomplete response. Moreover, Buti and Pichelmann also underline how safeguarding minorities and upholding the rights of free movement of people, a stronghold of EU policies, can now easily be understood as running against the will of a 'no longer silent majority'.

Shehaj, Shin and Inglehart (2021) conducted an analysis of data collected from 15 high-income Western European democracies from 1961 to 2013, investigating the impact of the economic and cultural attributes of states from which migrants arrive on the support given to right wing populist parties (RWP). Their research showed proof that the kind of immigration and its origin elements do influence the support for said political parties, although impactful characteristics are different based on the countries considered in the sample and the specific empirical approach utilized in every specification. The results suggested that immigrant-sending states' attributes can have an impact on voter support for RWP parties by building the way in which citizens from host states look at immigration. The researchers focused on two specific dimensions that are relevant in the importance that immigration holds when it comes to the success of radical right populist parties: the economic and the cultural one. The former illustrates how, although empirical research suggests that immigrants do not represent a noteworthy labor-market challenge to low-skilled national citizens, labor-market anxieties are still intensified when governments sponsor plans give immigrants access to employment chances, social welfare advantages and other opportunities usually only accessible to native citizens. The researchers also mention the social identity theory, according to which individuals who have similar cultural features in common

also hold an intrinsic disposition to associate with their inner group and believe that their identity is better than that of other groups different on a cultural level. Migrants' arrivals often activate alterations in the cultural standards of local societies. These transformations give rise to emotional counter-reactions used by nationalist parties to obtain electoral support: by relying on electoral strategies that overemphasize incompatibility between immigrants' and natives' cultural principles, right wing populist parties are able to enhance native voters' feeling of uneasiness (Shehaj, Shin, Inglehart, 2021). The researchers ultimately suggest that scholars should take into consideration not only the features of immigration but also the processes through which the presence of immigrants interconnects with elements such as voter impressions, media coverage and political mechanisms.

Lutz (2019) has focused on a methodical inspection of the repercussions of radical right anti-immigration parties on the reforms of migration policies in 17 West European countries from 1990 to 2014. The author identifies immigration policies as the regulations involved with the entrance and stay of migrants, while integration policies hold the role of determining the rights of immigrants allowed to enter. The research leads to interesting results. The policy success of the radical right has the limitation of lacking policy-making ability and structural constraints preventing governments from acting out on immigration restrictions. Radical right populism and anti-immigrant stances are therefore said to be more probable to have an impact on immigrants' rights instead of on their quantity: when radical right populist parties obtain government office, the single migration policy they are successful at is the approval of more limiting reforms concerning integration policy.

One of the most significant events worth mentioning in relation to the topic, is the European migrant crisis of 2015 and its implications. High numbers of people, mostly refugees seeking international protection and escaping from countries engaged in armed conflict (such as Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq) arrived in the EU from across the Mediterranean or overland. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), more than 911.000 refugees and migrants arrived on European shores in 2015, and some 3.550 lives had been lost during the journey. Over 75% of those who reached Europe were escaping conflict and persecution. Approximately 600 people drowned in the Mediterranean in April 2015, 71 refugees were found dead in a refrigeration truck left near the Austrian border with Hungary in August and, unfortunately, it is hard to forget the image of a Syrian child, Ālān Kurdî, found on a Turkish beach in September, after

a failed attempt to reach Greece. The latter was a wake up call for the EU, guidelines were established in order to encourage all efforts to find a solution for the crisis facing the continent. Austria and Germany opened their borders but other countries, such as Hungary, closed theirs and a long tradition of open borders in the EU ultimately came to an end. Crawford (2019) has explored the affiliation between the European migrant crisis and the rise of right wing populism. The author states that such parties' xenophobic rhetoric and scapegoating of immigrants does not facilitate a successful integration in Europe, contributing instead to different tensions of social nature and rising extremism: that is why integration policies should target not only refugees but also host communities, in order to ensure a European long term social and political stability. Moreover, the results of the conducted research suggest that political association with the right is a statistically relevant predictor of anti-refugee attitudes, but also that the relationship between affiliation with the right and anti-refugee stances seems to be stronger in countries hosting higher numbers of refugees, and among individuals who are not satisfied with their income. The idea that there is a specific way of politicizing the migration discourse has also been underlined by Ylä-Anttila, Bauvois and Pyrhönen (2019): after an analysis of populist discourse in the Finnish context, conducted on both a mathematical and a qualitative level, they were able to obtain results that suggested that migration is politicized through a discursive style utilized by both the countermedia and right wing populist politicians. Moreover, the study also provides further evidence that such discursive style has a fairly international nature and can be applied not only to political communication specifically but also to frame news events from the start to create a hyper-partisan type of news media.

According to Kaufmann (2017), the key to crafting new migration narratives lies in values, culture and psychology. The author believes that immigration has a tendency to polarize citizens through such factors much more than through elements like income: authoritarian values (for instance, the support for strict parenting or the death penalty) are said to be less correlated with wages or class position and more connected to the opposition to immigration instead. Kaufmann also underlines how most western societies do not rely on significant differentiations between refugees and immigrants. They are inclined to support refugees in general, but they also recognize refugee inflows as part of the immigration phenomenon. That is why people who combat immigration frequently oppose refugees and the other way round. Polarizing effects are particularly drastic when refugees are Muslim, because overemphasized security

and freedom anxieties blend with cultural concerns. The research he conducted showed that an encouraged campaign of reassurance and education is essential to reduce concerns about the divisive impact of immigration on a cultural level. In a perfect world, Kaufmann suggests, liberal and conservative politicians or supporters should be free to interpret a communication from the government concerning immigration freely. However, as social psychologist Stenner (2005) argued[55], attempting to highlight the merits of diversity (such as the idea of becoming multicultural) will likely have the effect of aggravating authoritarian fears and strengthen resistance among conservative audiences. Kaufmann also provides us with some significant data concerning the success of pupulist parties and the anti-immigration discourse in Europe and America. Opposition to immigration is identified as the most significant cause for the Brexit vote in Britain and the support gained by Donald Trump during the 2016 primaries. Norbert Hofer's 48% of the in the Austrian election of the same year and populist polls or votes of between 20% and 35% throughout countries like Sweden, Denmark, France, Norway, Switzerland and the Netherlands during 2014-2016, are a clear indicator of the importance played by right wing populism in the West. After terrorism, immigration came second in the Eurobarometer of 2017, indicating that it was considered one of the most significant matters for Europeans. Maps of different countries showed the presence of liberalism around big and college cities, with most of the countryside inclined towards populism. It would therefore make sense to assume that rural voters, who were less exposed to immigrants and diversity in general, were most hostile. It is crucial to remember that more young people, ethnic minorities and professionals with degrees live in large cities such as London or Paris, rather than in the countryside. These demographic elements highlight the actual modern differences between the two contexts. Being in contact with immigrants can build more toleration among communities, however, it is crucial to remember that it is also necessary to take into consideration the presence of an enhanced association of immigration with danger in zones that surround cities and districts with a higher number of white population.

Davis and Deole ( 2017) focused on the European case and attempted to address, among other issues, the distinctions existing in different countries in the level to which immigration has strengthened the support given to far-right parties. The data used for

[55] Stenner, K. (2005). The authoritarian dynamic. Cambridge University Press

their study is from the first seven waves of the European Social Survey (ESS), a biennial survey launched in 2002. The sample consisted of individuals who, in the last national election, had voted and lived in one of the 14 countries selected (Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Denmark, Finland, France, Great Britain, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, and Sweden) with no less than one noteworthy far right party, and for which the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) database of 2017 reported data on immigrant population share. The researchers found a significant positive association between the portion of immigrant residents and the inclination of citizens to vote for a far right party. They supposed that it was possible that such an association could change across individuals with different characteristics, therefore they focused on elements such as educational

attainment, employment status, urban location and religiosity. Not only were the poorly educated (12 or less years of education) found to be more inclined to vote for a far right party for any amount of immigration, moreover, their voting behavior also resulted in being more sensitive to a rise in immigration. Far right voting was also indicated as more sensitive to changes in the portion of immigrant population among the unemployed and the rural population than among their employed and urban equivalents. It is interesting to notice that far right voting was also higher among non-religious individuals, but still more sensitive to changes among the religious ones. High national unemployment rates were also found to strengthen citizens' reactions to growth in immigrant population shares. These results suggest that it is expected from the economic, demographic, educational and cultural elements of a country's population to play an important role in the degree to which a growth in the immigrant residents portion creates support for far right political parties. Moreover, the political response to immigration can change across time and countries as well. The differences in the association between immigrant population share and far right voting in countries with high and low levels of individualism is quite significant. The more individualist societies in the sample are identified in Belgium, Denmark, France, Great Britain, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden. Voters in more individualist societies appeared to be less likely to react to immigration by embracing an ideology of ethno-nationalist nature.

In a chapter of the book Routledge Handbook of Global Populism, Ruzza (2019) addresses the topics of populism, migration and xenophobia in Europe. What is often identified as the 'European people' is said to be usually qualified in terms that lead to

a 'politics of the enemy' frame, which mainly consists in the identification of the enemy in religious and ethnic terms. This approach makes different radical right parties feel like they are related to one another through a sense of cohesion. The author focuses on how some extreme right associations have an exclusionary approach that is so radical that it can be defined as xenophobic and uncivil. This ideological extremism and the sometimes marginal status that these parties, groups and associations hold, can attract a frustrated and violent youth while producing a new, dangerous model of civil society. Moreover, "the radical right parties recreate a sense of community in a context of perceived competition with migrants for jobs and resources of the welfare state"[ 56 ]. Ultimately, Ruzza suggests that European populism is related to disenchantment, especially in relation to the process of integration. People are discontent with the dominant democratic model of political representation, often identified as elitist and dense of corruption and scandals. Populism also manifests itself, Ruzza argues, in the form of a search for roots, which is a new and less elitist type of political participation able to connect politics and society. In this context, the radical right is not only able to offer a new vision of state-society relations but, at the same time, it encourages ethnic-bonding processes that exclude minorities while providing a sense of territorial belonging.

As previously mentioned, in relation with the impact of immigration in Europe, one of the most significant events worth looking into is the Brexit as, in the referendum discussion about the UK's membership of the European Union, a significant topic of the Leave campaign was that Brexit would have allowed more jurisdiction over immigrants coming from the rest of the EU. In a report for the Centre for Economic Performance (CEP) Wadsworth, Dhingra, Ottaviano and Van Reenen (2016) have analyzed the matter. Between 1995 and 2015, the amount of immigrants from other EU countries residing in the UK went from 0,9 million to 3,3 million. The portion of EU nationals grew from 1,5% to 5,3% of the total population and from 1,8% to 6,3% of the working age population (adults aged 16-64). In 2016, according to the Office for National Statistics, about 70% of EU immigrants declared that they went to the UK because of job relats reasons. Still, national workers are said not to have been impacted or harmed by such an increased competition for jobs. The best way to look into this

[56] Ruzza, C. (2019). Populism, migration, and xenophobia in Europe. Routlege Handbook of Global Populism, 13

issue, the researchers argue, is to inspect if certain zones of the country that had larger inflows of EU immigrants also had unfavorable job and wage results for nationals in comparison to other areas. The results indicate not only that there is no scientifically relevant correlation between immigration and unemployment ranks of nationals, but also that a 10% point increase in the share of EU immigrants in a local area was associated with a 0,4% point reduction in unemployment in that same area. Ultimately, the researchers reached the conclusion that the reduction in immigration from the EU after voting for Brexit would not have led to any improvement in terms of living standards for those born in the UK. Moreover, cuts in EU immigration would not have nullified the actual fall in the living quality of the country, which was a result of the reduction in trade and investment resulting from Brexit.

Favell and Barbulescu (2018) have focused, among other topics, on the meaning of the 'EU immigration' concept, addressing it as inappropriate to describe the view of free movement and population in the UK and Europe. Moreover, the authors underlined the idea that, although foreigners are almost always present in large numbers in contemporary globalized societies, defining some of such movers as 'immigrants' is nothing but a strategy of the receiving nation-state employed to assert its sovereign power over a numerically small part of the overall populations that cross its borders every day. Former Prime Minister David Cameron is said to have focused on an alleged 'welfare benefits abuse' by immigrants, in order to justify both strengthening the rules and a political deal on redesigning freedom of movement with the EU. By instigating ideas about 'bad immigrants' who could have been denied equality with 'good' citizens, the government could have strengthened and aligned efforts to exclude other 'bad' citizens, who were full national members of the country, from the full citizenship and welfare rights it guarantees under the usual conditions of social citizenship (Favell & Barbulescu, 2018).

Öner (2020) hypothesizes that, in Italy, Europe's economic and migration crises were seen as related to EU institutions and elites, a mechanism that has hastened and fuelled both populism and Euroscepticism. Interacting and combining with each other, they have had an impact on Italian politics because of economic and cultural concerns. This theory is evaluated through a comparative analysis of the Lega and the M5S parties: the data is gathered from 22 semi-structured, in-depth, face-to-face expert and elite interviews conducted in Italy in 2018. In the article, the Lega and the M5S are compared in relation to Euroscepticism and kinds of populism while taking into

consideration their policies before the last European Parliament (EP) elections in May 2019. All the interviewees agreed that the Lega is a populist party and most saw the M5S as a entity party as well. Moreover, all the interviewees believed that Italy has been one of the most pro-European members of the EU. The most significant turning points were the economic and migration crises.

When the migration crisis hit Europe in 2015, most countries found themselves to be unprepared and lacking national policies or regulations to efficiently handle the situation. The case of Italy is emblematic because it shows how, to this day, the topic of immigration still holds great relevance among citizens and in the political agendas of far right populist parties and politicians. According to UNHCR, in September 2019, 2.499 refugees and migrants arrived in the country by sea, in comparison to the 947 who arrived in the same period the previous year. Between January and September 2019, there were 25.584 new asylum applications in Italy, by the end of September, 99.599 asylum-seekers and refugees were sheltered in reception establishments across the country. In 2019, the total number of migrants who arrived in Italy by sea was 11.471, with 754 dead or missing. In 2020, the number grew to 34.154, with 955 dead or missing[57]. Public debates often revolve around the arrival of undocumented migrants, national identity, rescue operations in the Mediterranean and the overcrowdings of hosting facilities. Belardo (2019), who has analyzed the impact of the migration crisis on Italy, has underlined how Italians' unhappiness with how the situation was being handled by their government and the EU led to them feeling like the system was broken and the future generations were going to lack opportunities. Therefore, the March 2018 election gave them the occasion to have their voices heard and express their anxieties. Immigration was identified by the vast majority of citizens as among their top priority concerns, influenced by feelings of insecurity which were fuelled by a continuous media coverage of boat arrivals across the Mediterranean and right wing populist parties ready to implement a divisive strategy to gain power and support. For many years now, immigration in Italy has been portrayed as an invasion, with migrants identified as threats to the economy, society, culture and national security, with the Lega making 'Italians First' one of their most prominent slogans. Belardo conducted both a qualitative and a quantitative sentiment analysis to

[57] UNHCR data, available at https://data2.unhcr.org/

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understand the voting behavior of Italians was influenced by their feelings towards immigrants, with a special focus on the position taken by Lega and its electoral success. An interesting data that the author provides us with, concerns the inaccuracy in the evaluation of the quantity of immigrants present among citizens. Europeans were found to have overestimated the percentage of immigrants present in their countries. The 7,2% of non-EU immigrants actually present in European states were estimated by the interviewees to be 16,7%. Italians were the ones to show the highest detachment (percentage wise): non-EU immigrants present in the country were estimated to be 7%, while citizens believed them to be 24,6%. This perception mistake was the highest error among all EU countries. This data is used by the author to underline how public opinion revolving around the topic of immigration can often be poor and distorted. Moreover, she adds that between 2014 and 2018, the percentage share of Italians feeling negatively with regards to immigrants remained at around 80% for non-EU immigrants and at 60% for EU immigrants. When it comes to the 2018 elections, the research institute Tecnè Italia[58] analyzed the impact level of the subjects of immigration and security on voting behavior. The results indicated that, although issues such as unemployment and the economic situation were considered relevant as well, for 41% of Lega supporters who voted for the party the most significant issues that needed to be taken care of were, in fact, immigration and security.

Something else that Italian right wing populism does is use the religious argument specifically to oppose immigration. Molle (2019) has explored this topic and suggested not only that religious traditions could influence voting for right wing populist parties, but also that there could be an indirect impact of government regulation of religion on the growth of populism in the European Union. As highlighted by the author, right wing populist forces usually rely on narratives that allow them to mention immigration by relying on wartime slogans that connect it to elements such as invasion, extinction, war and ethnic substitution. They also supply some sort of religious identification by connecting people's personal religiosity to their public cultural life by using influential metaphors such as 'Judeo-Christian roots' or 'Christian DNA'. Molle's research results indicate that, along with religious regressors, the proportion of immigration is an important predictor in terms of the

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[58] Tecnè, (2018). Elezioni 2018, così la sociologia del voto. T-Mag. Available at https://www.t-mag.it/2018/03/05/elezioni-2018-cosi-la-sociologia-del-voto/

support given to the Lega: voting behavior is especially affected when immigration is is identified as a cultural danger rather than a crime problem. The church-state relationship in Italy was also found to be playing an important role in providing circumstances for religious prejudices to come to light, thus allowing populism to take advantage of a feeling of a deprived national identity which, of course, strengthens people's negative attitude towards non-native immigrants of different religious backgrounds. Moreover, while the author did not find proof of a direct relationship with the decreasing support for the EU, he predicted that the increased support given to the Lega will likely, in the future, result in Italy's open opposition towards the European integration project.

In mentioning the differences between Europe and the United States in relation to the evolution of populism, Schain (2018) underlines that, altough the latter lacks a fascist, anti-regime tradition, it still has a history of racist and anti-Semitic type of populism. The first significant anti-immigration political party in the West was the American 'Know Nothing' party, founded in 1844. The author also underlines how there is considerable evidence supporting the thesis according to which negative attitude towards immigrants is a significant predictor of how citizens vote. A survey conducted in the United States in 2016 showed that 60% of Republicans and Republican-leaning respondents believed that immigration should be decreased[59]. As highlighted by Van Ramshorst (2018), the election of Donald Trump undoubtedly marked a period of severe anti-immigrant nationalism and rising populism in the country. The author reports that migrants travelling across Mexico often rely on dangerous, clandestine journeys in order to reach the U.S., frequently stopping in migrant shelters for weeks, months and, sometimes, even years.

Béland (2020) has provided us with a deeper analysis on the role that Donald Trump played in framing migrants as collective threats through populism and the politics of insecurity (a concept used in social science to indicate the ways in which politicians identify perceived threats and, at the same time, provide possible responses to them). The author argues that the framing of collective threats on a political level is a crucial aspect of right wing populism. The action of framing is a contribution to the ideational part of populism, which is not identified as a coherent ideology but more

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[59] Newport, F. (2016). In U.S., Support for Decreasing Immigration Holds Steady

like a kind of communication strategy through which perceived dangers are framed to both aggravate collective concerns and obtain popular support by pledging to protect citizens against such threats. An example is given by the threat posed by Mexican immigrants, from which Trump wanted to protect the American people by building a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border. In 2018, he sent more than 5.000 troops to meet a caravan of migrants at the border. He also suggested that Democrats were likely to be behind the caravan, while Fox News repeatedly mentioned the migrant 'invasion' and one Fox anchor asked the then homeland security secretary, Kristjen Nielsen, if there was any possibility for U.S. soldiers to have simply shot the migrants when they arrived[60]. The caravan episode is a key example of how Donald Trump intensified collective anxieties among his supporters, while generating a sense of emergency. In the end, Béland argues, collective insecurity remained a crucial characteristic of the midterm campaign as both parties attempted to publicize and frame different insecurity-generating problems to their benefit while communicating a specific understanding of factors such as national identity and protection of the state. As Democrats focused on the need to fix the healthcare system and support socioeconomic solidarity, Donald Trump and his allies heightened collective insecurity concerning migrants, which he openly portrayed as criminalized and dangerous 'folk devils'.

As discussed in the previous chapter, media and especially social media hold now great importance in the context of political communication and representation. They often play a key role in either changing or reaffirming an already existent public opinion about certain topics, immigration being one of the most significant ones. Gavin (2018) mentions the often negative tone used by UK newspapers to cover immigration from 2011 to 2016, which intensified preceding the Brexit vote. Some of the expressions used to refer to the phenomenon included 'out of control', 'floods', 'waves' and 'rocketing influx of immigrants'. Such representations provided by the media often lead to misperceptions: as an example, the author mentions that, at the time, British citizens hugely overestimated the scale of immigration to their country, believing that 31% of the UK population were immigrants (when it was actually 13%). Musarò and Parmiggiani (2017) explored the role of the media in shaping impressions and policies in relation with immigration in Italy, as well as how this impacts solidarity with outsiders. The authors indicate the coexistence of the humanitarian perspective of

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[60] Mealer, B. (2018). This is what Trump's caravan 'invasion' really looks like

saving lives and the display of militarized borders: the daily circulation of exaggerated and stereotyped representations of immigrants helps to convert them into subjects and objects of fear, experiencing both the anxiety of being repudiated and scaring the locals.

> Depicting the newcomers as threats to security or merely vulnerable subjects, and not as agents of their own destiny, with education and employment experiences and skills, the 'spectacle of the border' adopts different languages to speak to different audiences[61].

Kamenova and Pingaud (2017) provided an analysis of how right wing populist parties use websites, blogs, online networks and social media monopolize topics such as the one of immigration, with a specific focus on how right wing populist leaders 'other' migrants and Muslims in their online discourse. The analyses of the RAGE project showed that migration was the main message for 37,1% of the analysed populist websites. The percentage was the highest for far right parties: 72,5% of the websites of these parties had migration as the main topic and were followed by right parties (52,5%), far-left (41,2%) and centre (40,7%). The communication strategies implemented to address the issues of immigration and Islam were connected: immigration was usually linked to the supposed threat to the welfare state and the identity of the people. Islam was found to be present on all the selected websites, even in the communications of parties that did not make of religious or cultural issues their priorities. Analysis of the content of the selected articles published on the examined websites indicated that discourses concerning Islam were similar to those used to mention migrants, foreigners or refugees: the role of Muslims was highlighted in relation to criminal behavior (and, occasionally, terrorism) and Islam was defined as an 'invasion', to the point where most of the populist groups analyzed firmly shared the idea that Islam will never be compatible with Western democracies.

Because the Internet allows political leaders to reach a high number of potential supporters in a short period of time, it is especially important to give attention to the topics they discuss, particularly when their content has the potential of going viral and contains misinformation or attacks towards a specific category. Populist leaders are known for relying on outrageous language and for often mentioning events in a

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[61] Musarò, P. & Parmiggiani, P. (2017). Beyond black and white: the role of media in portraying and policing migration and asylum in Italy. International Review of Sociology, 27(2): 241-260

provocative frame. It is crucial to remember that what they share online is as significant as what they state in speeches, statements and declarations, especially in the light of being aware, now more than ever, of what a powerful populist propaganda tool the Internet can become. Social media gives political leaders the ability to control the presentation of facts, allowing them to publish content that is representative of their own perspective. When fake news, misinformation, bots, softwares and virality can have an impact on real life and on how people receive information, thus also possibly influencing public opinion and voting behavior, it becomes even more crucial to be aware of the type of communication we, as citizens, are exposed to. That is why the next chapter will attempt to analyze the specific language used by two of the main populist leaders mentioned until now, Matteo Salvini and Donald Trump, in relation to immigration, which is possibly one of the most significant subject matters of our time.

# CHAPTER 5

# METHODOLOGY

## 5.1 Research Component and Research Methodology

Social media are currently among the most powerful tools used to communicate and reach a significant amount of people online. They allow common citizens and politicians to share and present an often personal perspective on facts, news reports, crucial contemporary topics and global issues such as equality, corruption, climate change, human rights and immigration. We are continuously exposed to these discourses and debates, which have a significant impact on real life and, as previously underlined, are able to influence public opinion while contributing to build a specific narrative in relation to different matters.

It is possible to explore how a given topic is addressed online, especially if the analysis focuses on a social media widely used on a global scale such as Twitter, with the aim of attempting to understand the attitudes, opinions and emotions that lie behind an online text. This process is called 'sentiment analysis', or 'opinion mining': it focuses on establishing the emotional attitude behind words and is used to comprehend the attitudes, opinions and emotions communicated in an online mention. The most common kind of sentiment analysis is 'polarity detection' and consists of classifying statements as positive, negative or neutral. In order to identify, extract and quantify the information contained in words or texts, the analysis usually relies on artificial intelligence, language processing, computational linguistics and specific softwares.

This study takes the tweets shared by 45$^{th}$ president of the United States Donald Trump and Italian populist leader Matteo Salvini throughout 2018, to conduct a manual comparative content analysis in order to identify the main characteristics of their anti-immigration discourse on social media. This includes the attempt to also determine the

emotional tone, attitudes and opinions used to address immigration and immigrants by both leaders. Trump's tweets have been recovered and manually downloaded through the Trump Twitter Archive website (https://www.thetrumparchive.com/), while Salvini's tweets have been downloaded through the Python programming language and Twint, which is an advanced Twitter scraping tool written in Python.

Content analysis is a research technique that relies on the interpretation of textual material in order to identify the presence of specific expressions, themes or concepts in order to analyze and quantify them. For instance, researchers that choose this approach, can evaluate the language used in news articles to identify bias or partiality within them. It is also useful to identify additional elements such as attitudes, intentions, emotional state, patterns. The relevant data can be extracted from different sources such as interviews, open-ended questions, conversations, books, essays, speeches or media. In order to analyze a textual material using this approach, the text is usually disassembled into manageable code categories. The benefits of this approach include the fact that it allows for both qualitative and quantitative analysis, can provide social and cultural insights and is useful to focus on social interaction. Some disadvantages involve a potentially time consuming process that is often difficult to automate or computerize, an increased margin of error and a process that often simply consists of word counts. This particular approach has been selected because it provides an insight into human thought and language use, which are both significant elements for the purpose of this research, whose aim is to identify the structure of two political leaders' anti-immigration discourse on a social media platform.

Twitter has been selected as the preferred social media for this study because it provides a large amount of data via a number of Application Programming Interfaces (API), allows a more personal engagement between its users and the content shared, along with the communication, is usually shorter and more immediate, therefore easier to explore. Such mechanisms are especially relevant when considering peculiar accounts such as those of businesses or politicians. As previously mentioned, the selected time period is especially significant because it was the year in which the Trump administration signed the family separation policy, presented as a 'zero tolerance' approach, aimed at stopping irregular immigration and encouraging harder legislation. It was also the year in which the Italian centre-right coalition, whose main party was Matteo Salvini's Lega, obtained a large number of seats in the Chamber of Deputies and in the Senate, a result that led to the formation of a coalition between the

M5S and the Lega, with both leaders eventually becoming Deputy Prime Ministers.

Finally, the two political leaders have been selected as relevant cases for this research because they are both known to hold a strong populist perspective and, most importantly, a consistent opposition to immigration.

The present chapter provides a comprehensive overview of how the relevant data has been collected and examined. Beginning with an outline of the research question this thesis aims to answer, this chapter will discuss data collection, coding procedures and the three stages of analysis.

**5.2 Research Question**

The empirical design for this study consists of three stages. The first stage is dedicated to the manual selection of the relevant tweets sent throughout 2018 by Matteo Salvini. The content has been read in its entirety and the pertinent information has been isolated and categorized. The second stage involves the same process in relation to the tweets shared by Donald Trump. The third stage consists of an in depth textual analysis of selected tweets: the relevant anti-immigration discourse content has been separated from other categories, which were identified and chosen according to the main topics generally addressed in the entirety of the tweets shared by the two political leaders. The aim is to identify the main textual elements, dominant frames and narratives employed by the two populist leaders to discuss and oppose immigration. This study addresses the following research question:

How did Donald Trump and Matteo Salvini use Twitter as a platform for anti-immigration discourse in 2018?

This research hypothesizes that the results will show a continued level of framing immigrants as potential threats to the country's safety while a narrative in which most immigrants, especially if irregular, are an economic burden is constructed through fake news and a populist perspective that seeks to put nationals in the foreground.

**5.3 Data**

The present study takes the tweets shared by Donald Trump and Matteo Salvini

throughout 2018 as its main data. After being monthly organized (Table 5.1 & Table 5.2) and meticulously read, relevant tweets have been detected and subsequently filtered and divided in categories suited to the most mentioned topics and discourses encountered on the leaders' social media platform.

Table 5.1. Matteo Salvini's monthly total and relevant tweets in 2018.

| Month | Total | Relevant |
|---|---|---|
| January | 401 | 90 |
| February | 665 | 120 |
| March | 304 | 46 |
| April | 241 | 33 |
| May | 206 | 33 |
| June | 351 | 80 |
| July | 373 | 69 |
| August | 329 | 73 |
| September | 395 | 96 |
| October | 492 | 78 |
| November | 532 | 50 |
| December | 645 | 71 |

Table 5.2. Donald Trump's monthly total and relevant tweets in 2018.

| Month | Total | Relevant |
|---|---|---|
| January | 182 | 20 |
| February | 165 | 11 |
| March | 159 | 9 |
| April | 215 | 27 |
| May | 235 | 6 |
| June | 320 | 35 |
| July | 266 | 22 |
| August | 337 | 4 |
| September | 276 | 2 |
| October | 326 | 26 |
| November | 261 | 20 |
| December | 272 | 35 |

Taking a first look at the data, it is possible to observe that the entirety of Matteo Salvini's 2018 tweets amounts to 4.934, the relevant ones being 839. In 2018, Donald Trump has instead shared a total of 3.014 tweets, with 217 relevant ones.

All of the tweets have been read, manually selected and categorized in the first two stages of analysis, whilst in the final stage, only the relevant tweets have been handled and analyzed within the content analysis.

## 5.4 First Stage Analysis: Matteo Salvini

In the first stage of analysis, the 839 relevant tweets have been read through and coded for the following:

- Anti-immigration
- Anti-Europe
- Strong nationalist/patriotic sentiment
- Pro-Trump

Although the focus of this research lies strictly on the analysis of the anti-immigration discourse employed by the two political leaders on Twitter, it has been useful to further divide the relevant tweets in additional categories based on the general orientation of their Twitter discourse in 2018. Understanding the general frame makes it easier to fathom the ways in which a certain topic is approached. Since the two selected politicians are generally acknowledged populist leaders, it would not have made sense to look for 'populist elements' in their discourse, as it would have meant to consider nearly every tweet and content as relevant. Selecting other categories has proved to be a successful alternative and a good strategy for locating populist elements in relation not only to immigration but to other topics as well.

The 'anti-immigration' category is clearly the most crucial one to this study. Together with tweets that clearly oppose immigration and those who allow or support it, content that included opposition to Islam, mentions of terrorism in relation to religion and/or immigrants, news in which immigrants or foreigners are identified as crime perpetrators reported with the clear intention of framing immigrants as a potential threat, was taken into consideration.

As previously mentioned, Europe, the EU and Bruxelles being among the most notorious targets of Salvini's populist discourse, the 'anti-Europe' category was useful to identify a significant amount of populist elements, the most typical one being the Us vs. Them dichotomy. Moreover, it has also been observed that, in Salvini's discourse, Europe has sometimes been identified as the one who "has mistook Italy for a large refugee camp"[62].

The 'strong nationalist/patriotic sentiment' category was also functional to the identification of populist elements, with a particular focus on the factors that are seen as a threat to the country (low birth rate, not enough preservation of the Italian products, activities and companies) and the occasional mention of the need of having a stronger border control policy while highlighting that "saying 'Italians first' is not a matter of racism but of common sense"[63].

Finally, the 'pro-Trump' category was selected in order to better explore the grounds on which Salvini based his support for Donald Trump. Salvini's endorsement for the former President is well known, especially in Italy: he has always praised his policies and political positions, to the point where he was addressed as his 'Italian cheerleader' by the Independent[64]. They also met in 2016, at a rally in Philadelphia, when they had a 20-minute conversation that focused on immigration[65].

Additionally, in order to conduct an in depth content analysis of the anti-immigration discourse and explore the frequency of certain expressions and topics, three other categories were further selected among the 839 relevant tweets:

- Tweets containing anti-Islam attitudes/mentions of terrorism in relation to immigrants/immigration
- Tweets in which irregular immigration is cited and immigrants are addressed as 'clandestines'
- Tweets in which it is possible to detect a clear hostility towards NGO

[62] Salvini, M. (@matteosalvinimi), February 2018, 20:57:04 (Italian timezone). Retrieved from https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/963502303226531840

[63] Salvini, M. (@matteosalvinimi), February 2018, 08:57:15 (Italian timezone). Retrieved from https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/968394583330705409

[64] Perrone, A. (2020). Trump's Italian cheerleader spreads baseless conspiracy theories over votes

[65] Kirchgaessner, S. (2016). Donald Trump gets my backing, says Italy's Matteo Salvini

ships/smugglers & irregular immigration is described as a business

Each category has been selected after having read the 4.934 tweets in their entirety, therefore having a clear understanding of what the most mentioned topics and used expressions in relation to immigration were.

## 5.5 Second Stage Analysis: Donald Trump

In the second stage of analysis, the 217 relevant tweets have been read through and coded for the following:

- Anti-immigration
- Strong nationalist/patriotic sentiment

There are a few reasons why Donald Trump's tweets have been filtered through less categories than the ones shared by Salvini. First of all, the content identified as relevant for the purpose of this study is considerably less large if compared to the previous one (there are 1.920 less total tweets and 622 less relevant tweets). Moreover, it would not have made sense to use the same categories to analyze the discourse of two subjects coming from different historical, social and cultural backgrounds: a politician from the U.S. will be less likely to share a significant amount of tweets against Europe, as opposed to a European political leader. Finally, Donald Trump was found to almost never endorse foreign leaders. Most of his 2018 tweets revolved around the endorsement of American senators and political candidates, as well as defending himself and his party from the accusations of a collusion between the Trump 2016 campaign and Russian operatives.

The 'anti-immigration' category essentially includes the same content mentioned in the first stage analysis for the same category: tweets that clearly opposed immigration and those who permit or support it, news and a narrative through which immigrants are framed as criminals, the need of having an improved border security and the will of establishing a merit-based immigration system.

Similarly, in the 'strong nationalist/patriotic sentiment' category, the relevant content identified includes tweets that praise the U.S., its economy, the men and women who work hard for it and respect the country's flag.

As previously done for Matteo Salvini's tweets, in order to conduct an in depth

content analysis of the anti-immigration discourse and explore the frequency of certain expressions and topics, three other categories were further selected among the 217 relevant tweets:

- Tweets in which the wall is mentioned
- Tweets in which irregular immigration is cited and immigrants are addressed as illegal
- Tweets in which open borders/illegal immigration and immigrants are associated with crime/drugs

## 5.6 Reliability and Validity

As previously underlined, content analysis usually has a particularly high margin of error. Although extremely likely, given that this research has been conducted manually by a single individual, it would be difficult to effectively prove that other researchers, under the same circumstances, would come to the exact same conclusions reached through the present study.

However, in order to ensure maximum validity, I have strived to guarantee the reproducibility of this study by: (1) selecting a limited number of tweets, shared by specific accounts in a defined time-period, (2) classifying each relevant tweet through well-defined criteria, (3) describing in detail the categories and the process that I followed to analyze the selected relevant tweets.

# CHAPTER 6

# RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

## 6.1 Analysis of Matteo Salvini's Tweets

The first stage of this study was dedicated to the categorization and analysis of the relevant tweets shared by Matteo Salvini in 2018. As previously mentioned, the data was divided between a total number of 4.934 tweets and 839 relevant ones (Figure 6.1).
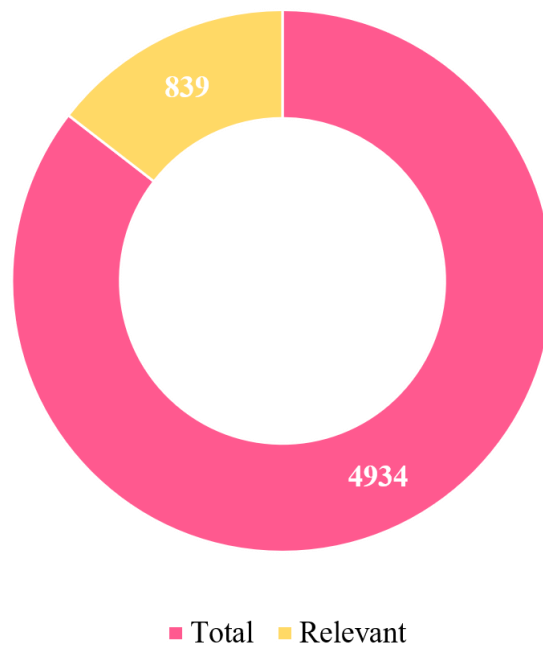


Figure 6.1. Division between total and relevant tweets shared by Matteo Salvini in 2018.

The relevant tweets were further divided into additional categories, based on the main topics and attitudes found in Salvini's Twitter discourse throughout 2018 (Figure 6.2).



■ Anti-Europe ■ Anti-immigration ■ Strong nationalist sentiment ■ Pro-Trump
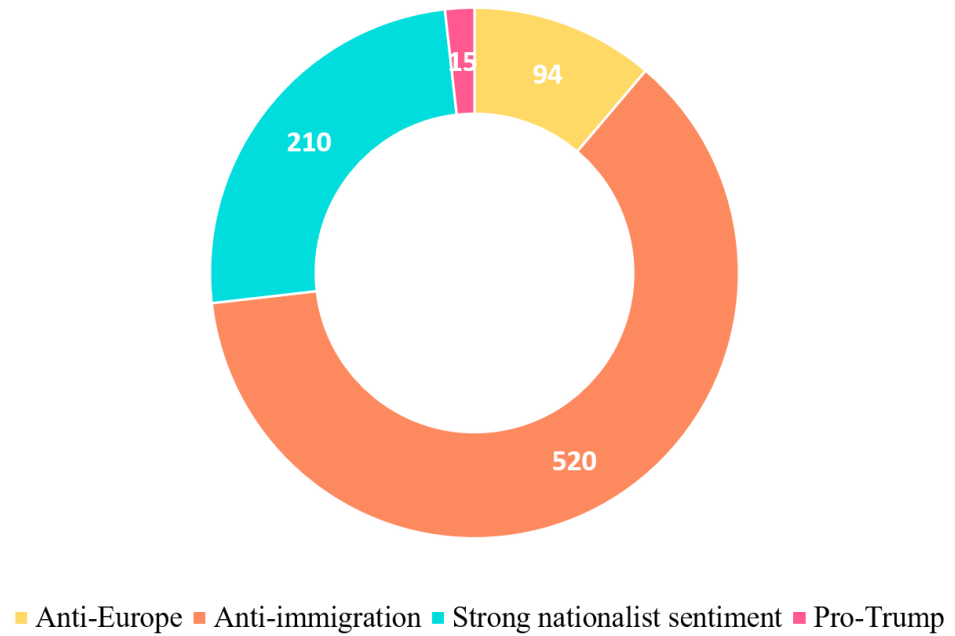
Figure 6.2. Categorization of the relevant tweets shared by Matteo Salvini in 2018.

It is significant to also highlight that the majority of the selected relevant tweets have been found to be anti-immigration, as observable in Figure 6.3.
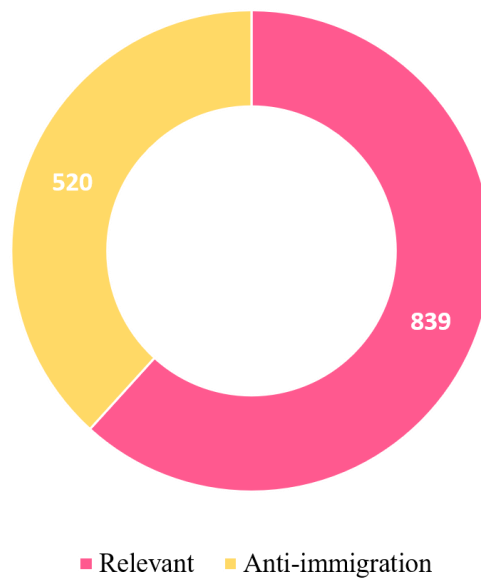
Figure 6.3. Proportion of the relevant anti-immigration tweets shared by Matteo Salvini in 2018.

Initially, Salvini's anti-immigration discourse revolved around elements such as the sharing of news reports in which immigrants or foreigners were identified as crime perpetrators, the continued blaming of other parties (guilty not only of having allowed and supported an immigration that is often referred to as 'invasion', but, in the specific case of PD and M5S, also of having voted in Strasbourg for the introduction of the 'climate migrant' figure), the presence of too many foreign inmates that should instead have served their sentence in their own countries, examples of immigrants accepted into the country and yet protesting and not being satisfied with their accommodation or food while demanding for better treatment, a residency permit or improved services. Salvini also relied on the narrative of other immigrants, the regular 'proper' ones, asking him to have stricter rules and more border control to manage the issue of irregular immigration. More often, Salvini referred to 'fake refugees' that are not fleeing war, do not have the aspect of actual refugees and are bringing the war within the country (identified as 'our home') instead.

> 2018-02-16 21:32:37 +0200 <matteosalvinimi> #Salvini: They are filling us with clandestines who say they are fleeing WAR, but they are bringing the war in our home. Asking for ORDER is not fascism, it is COMMON SENSE. #Kronos

2018-03-01 09:45:11 +0200 <matteosalvinimi> #Salvini: the ones who in recent years have made hundreds of thousands of clandestines land are guilty of a CRIMINAL ACT. Italian citizens pay it every day on their own skin, it is caos. #mattino5 @mattino5

2018-09-05 20:57:41 +0200 <matteosalvinimi> More than 50 of the immigrants who landed from the Diciotti (NGO) were so "in need" of protection, food and accomodation, that they decided to leave and disappear. It is yet another confirmation that not all those who arrive in Italy are "little skeletons fleeing war and hunger".

It is also worth mentioning Salvini's comments on one of the most significant events occurred in Italy in 2018, the two-hour shooting rampage carried out by far-right extremist Luca Traini, who ended up wounding six migrants. The five men and one woman were from Ghana, Gambia, Mali and Nigeria.

2018-02-03 17:12:38 +0200 <matteosalvinimi> Violence is never the solution, violence is always to be condemned. And whoever makes a mistake, has to pay. Out of control immigration leads to caos, to rage, to social conflict. Out of control immigration leads to drug dealing, thefts, robberies and violence. #Macerata

2018-02-04 20:46:49 +0200 <matteosalvinimi> #Salvini: Violence is always to be condemned. However, I have the duty to tell Italians HOW to avoid events such as those of Macerata. An example? By repatriating clandestines. #nonelarena @nonelarena

In Salvini's discourse, immigration is often found to be the reason for several negative situations affecting the country. It is almost used as a unit of measurement and it is the main topic in relation of which Salvini takes solid, strong positions, without relying on evasive comments and declarations.

Another often observed element in Salvini's anti-immigration discourse is the request of allowing him and those who oppose immigration to 'help them in their home', which means supporting immigrants in their own countries through agreements, at a lower cost, and through a system that would not require them to want to reach other countries in search of new opportunities and jobs. This narrative aims at identifying immigrants as an economic burden for Italy.

2018-09-11 23:43:54 +0200 <matteosalvinimi> #Salvini: I want to conclude an agreement with Nigeria within the year, on which I am working on with entrepreneurs, on repatriations. With 8,50€ a day I guarantee a future for a child in Africa. #portaaporta

2018-02-11 14:45:49 +0200 <matteosalvinimi> #Salvini: helping a child in Kenya costs less than one euro a day, while in Italy fake refugees cost us 35 euros a day. And in Verona in the past days they have protested because they do not have Sky TV… do you think that those who are really fleeing war think like that? #Mezzorainpiu

The first of the three additional categories selected among the relevant tweets in relation of the anti-immigration discourse, includes the tweets containing anti-Islam positions/mentions of terrorism in relation to immigrants or immigration. This narrative is especially relevant and often used in the first three months of 2018, as Figure 6.4 shows.
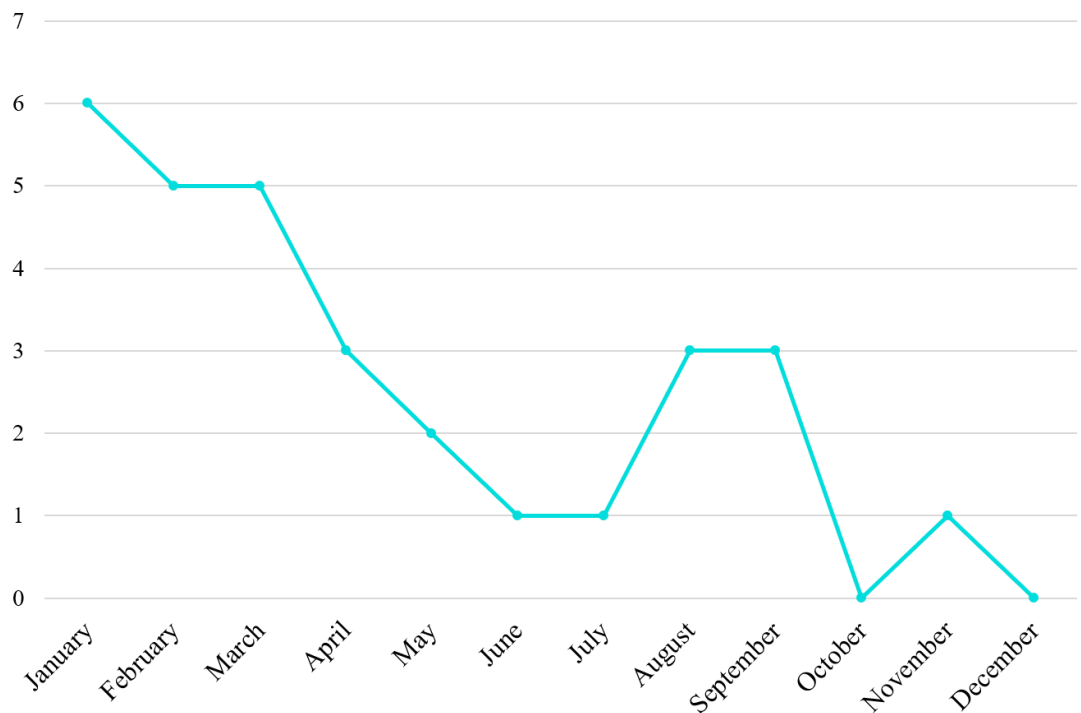


Figure 6.4. Monthly tweets containing anti-Islam attitudes & mentions of terrorism in relation to immigrants or immigration among the relevant tweets shared by Matteo Salvini in 2018.

As shown by the examples below, Salvini's anti-Islam discourse was associated to his anti-immigration attitudes by resorting to a number of different reasons, which included the association of Islam with terrorism and extremism, the incompatibility between certain religious beliefs and the Italian culture, the danger that Islam poses to

women and their freedom.

> 2018-01-29 19:22:02 +0200 <matteosalvinimi> Islam in Italy? Either it evolves and opens up, otherwise it is a danger. With the Salvini government STOP to any irregular or abusive Islamic presence in Italy. Do you agree? SHARE!

> 2018-01-29 13:58:10 +0200 <matteosalvinimi> #Salvini: If applied to the letter ISLAM is an act of VIOLENCE, INCOMPATIBLE WITH OUR FREEDOMS. #fattiemisfatti @MediasetTgcom24

> 2018-04-26 16:04:48 +0200 <matteosalvinimi> ⬤⬤⬤ TERRORISTS on the boats and the invasion of hundreds of MILLIONS of potential immigrants. From the UN they invite Europe to WAKE UP, the Lega has been denouncing it for YEARS! I would like to govern with those who lend us a hand to implement our program: #STOPTHEINVASION*!*

The second of the three additional categories selected among the relevant tweets includes the tweets in which irregular immigration is mentioned and immigrants are addressed as 'clandestines', a term that Salvini almost always uses when engaging in an immigration-related discourse (Figure 6.5).
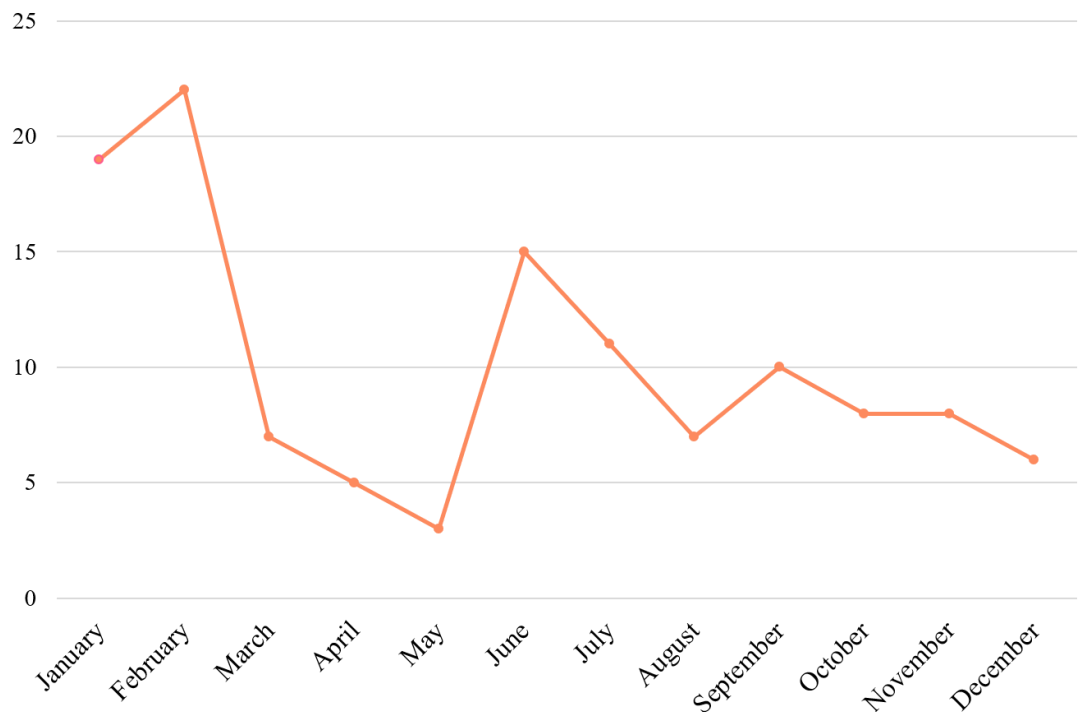


Figure 6.5. Monthly tweets in which irregular immigration is mentioned and immigrants are addressed as 'clandestines' among the relevant tweets shared

by Matteo Salvini in 2018.

Salvini's anti-immigration discourse is heavily influenced by the terms that he uses to refer to immigrants and 'clandestine' is the most notorious one. The Italian novelist, playwright and radio personality Michela Murgia, has recently criticized the expression and explained how discriminatory it is by stating that:

> If you decide that you have to call migrants 'clandestines', immediately the perception of that category becomes threatening. A clandestine is someone who sneaks into your house. One has to be very careful about the words one chooses[66].
> In 2017, the Lega party was sentenced by the Court of Milan to a payment worth

10.000€ of damages and 4.000€ of court costs. The episode that led to the conviction occurred in April 2016, when the party used the word 'clandestine' in the posters put up in the city of Saronno. The judge ruled that the term was discriminatory and derogatory[67].

> 2018-05-19 17:04:39 +0200 <matteosalvinimi> SHEER MADNESS... They want income and hospitality for everyone to the cry of STOP SALVINI. I say: STOP CLANDESTINES, all of Africa does not fit in Italy. I hope to be able to get to work soon to begin making up for the disasters of the PD on immigration. #letsgogovern

> 2018-01-15 10:10:15 +0200 <matteosalvinimi> Record of landings of clandestines in January: already 841 since the beginning of the year (+15% compared with last year). And in hotels we are sustaining 183.681 of them. I can't wait for you to give me the opportunity to stop this INVASION, organized and financed to erase our culture

> 2018-04-23 15:14:22 +0200 <matteosalvinimi> Landings alert, 1.400 in 48 hours! We immediately need a government that controls the borders and expels clandestines. #stoptheinvasion #letsgogovern

The third and final additional category selected, includes the tweets in which it is possible to detect a clear hostility towards NGO ships, smugglers, and irregular immigration is referred to as a business that brings a large amount of profit to third-parties (Figure 6.6).

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[66] neXt quotidiano, (2021). Salvini attacca Michela Murgia perché spiega che non si dice clandestino (ma la Lega è stata condannata per questo). Available at https://www.nextquotidiano.it/
[67] Matteini, C. (2017). Usare il termine "clandestino" per i migranti è discriminatorio: condannata la Lega Nord. Available at https://www.fanpage.it/
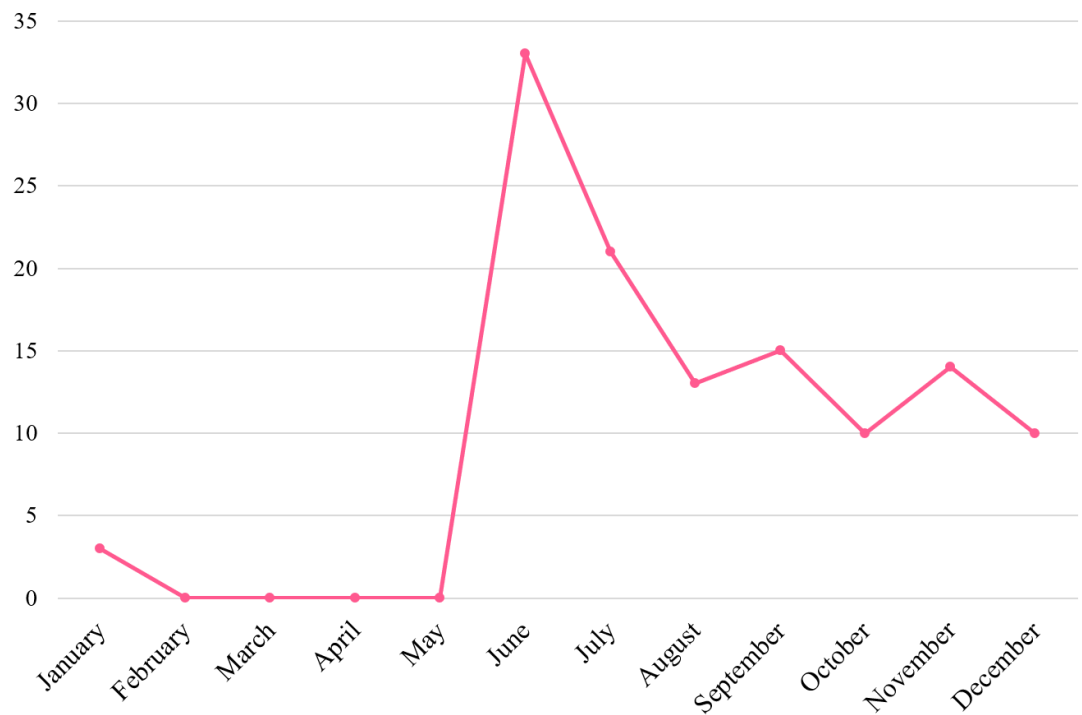
Figure 6.6. Monthly tweets in which hostility towards NGO ships/smugglers is detectable & irregular immigration is referred to as a business among the relevant tweets shared by Matteo Salvini in 2018.

The reason for the grouping of anti-NGOs, anti-smugglers and the mention of illegal immigration as a 'business' under one category is that, in Salvini's anti-immigration discourse, they are all interconnected. NGO ships are referred to as associates of smugglers and human traffickers who are, therefore, benefiting from the business revolving around irregular immigration.

2018-06-28 19:13:02 +0200 <matteosalvinimi> Is Malta closing its harbors to foreign NGO ships? Good, therefore this means that we were right, there is no going back! Stop human trafficking, stop those who help smugglers. #stoptheinvasion

2018-06-20 23:55:55 +0200 <matteosalvinimi> #Salvini: I know that there are some public prosecutors' offices that investigate the NGOs that roam the Mediterranean in search of migrants. NGOs like VULTURES in the Mediterranean. #portaaporta

2018-10-06 17:42:36 +0200 <matteosalvinimi> Less landings, less money for

the welcoming business. The good times are over!

2018-10-18 10:01:49 +0200 <matteosalvinimi> ⬤UPDATED MAP Thanks to our activity, NO NGO ship is in front of Libya anymore, so smugglers are done doing their dirty work. And to think that according to Pd "migrations" were "inevitable processes, there is nothing one can do"… Where there's a will, there's a way!

**6.2 Analysis of Donald Trump's Tweets**

The second stage of this study was dedicated to the categorization and analysis of the relevant tweets shared by Donald Trump in 2018. As previously underlined, the data was divided between a total number of 3.014 tweets and 217 relevant ones (Figure 6.7).
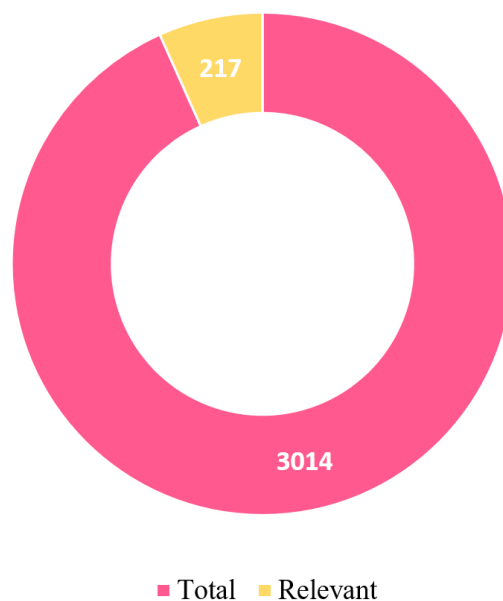


Figure 6.7. Division between total and relevant tweets shared by Donald Trump in 2018.

The content found to be relevant for the purpose of this research is notably less large if compared to the number of tweets identified among the total ones shared by Salvini. The most significant reason for that is that, in 2018, the two political leaders were channeling their Twitter discourse in two different directions. Given the Italian

general election, Salvini was campaigning most of the time, while Trump was focused on defending himself and his party from the accusations of a Russian interference in the 2016 United States elections. Their usage of the social media platform has also proven to be different: Salvini liked to engage in a more intimate relationship with his followers (he shared content related to what he was doing at home, what he was eating, how he was spending the holidays; he has used the #ITALIANSFIRST hashtag a total of 303 times and has referred to his followers as 'friends' a total of 357 times) while Trump was found to tweet less and use a less affable language (his signature #MAGA hashtag was used a total of only 87 times, while there was a heavier mention of fake news, cited a total of 172 times). Moreover, Salvini was inclined to live-tweet his most significant statements and declarations while he was a guest on television or radio programmes, while Trump has shared a consistent amount of tweets in which he gave his endorsement to other senators and political candidates.

Trump's relevant tweets were further divided in two categories, based on the main topics found in his Twitter discourse throughout 2018 (Figure 6.8). As previously highlighted, the strong nationalist/patriotic sentiment category was useful to the identification of populist elements in the subject's social media discourse and particularly to understand what the strengths and threats cited in relation to the country were. 'Europe' was judged not to be a topic mentioned a relevant number of times for it to be analyzed as an additional category.
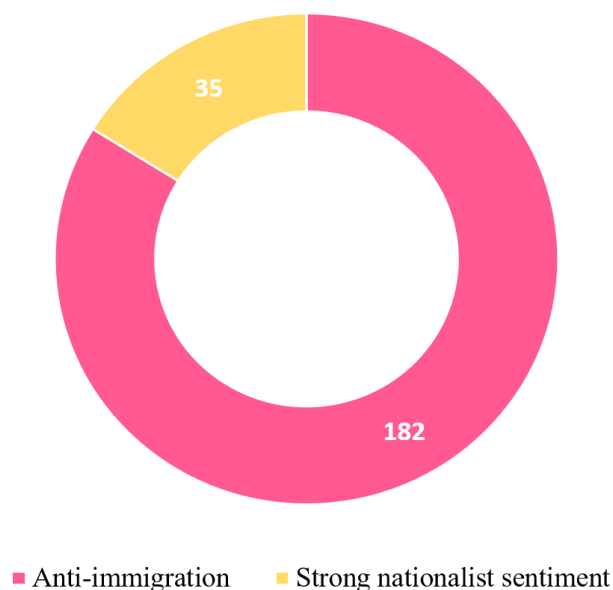


■ Anti-immigration    ■ Strong nationalist sentiment

It is significant to highlight that the majority of the selected relevant tweets have been found to be anti-immigration, as observable in Figure 6.9.
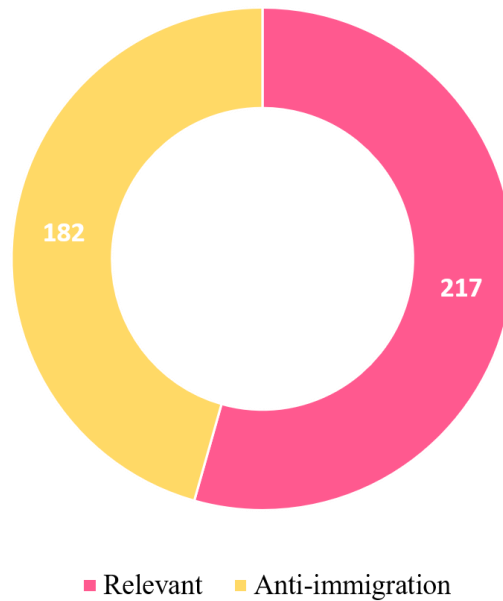


Figure 6.9. Proportion of the relevant anti-immigration tweets shared by Donald Trump in 2018.

Trump's anti-immigration discourse remained fairly unchanged throughout the analyzed tweets. Border control is described as something absolutely necessary for the safety of the country, a position often enhanced by the straightforward requests of letting the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Border Patrol Agents 'do their job'.

> Apr 2nd 2018 - 7:10:19 AM EST
> ...Congress must immediately pass Border Legislation, use Nuclear Option if necessary, to stop the massive inflow of Drugs and People. Border Patrol Agents (and ICE) are GREAT, but the weak Dem laws don't allow them to do their job. Act now Congress, our country is being stolen!

> Aug 6th 2018 - 5:46:47 PM EST
> Democrats want Open Borders and they want to abolish ICE, the brave men and women that are protecting our Country from some of the most vicious and

dangerous people on earth! Sorry, we can't let that happen! Also, change the rules in the Senate and approve STRONG Border Security!

Apr 1st 2018 - 9:56:34 AM EST
Border Patrol Agents are not allowed to properly do their job at the Border because of ridiculous liberal (Democrat) laws like Catch & Release. Getting more dangerous. "Caravans" coming. Republicans must go to Nuclear Option to pass tough laws NOW. NO MORE DACA DEAL!

Dec 27th 2018 - 7:06:25 AM EST
Have the Democrats finally realized that we desperately need Border Security and a Wall on the Southern Border. Need to stop Drugs, Human Trafficking,Gang Members & Criminals from coming into our Country. Do the Dems realize that most of the people not getting paid are Democrats?

Another element often detected in Trump's anti-immigration discourse was the plan of establishing a merit based immigration system that could allow a selection of the foreigners coming into the country, in order to be able to select the ones that could bring richness and a relevant contribution to the greatness of the country.

Jan 12th 2018 - 7:09:58 AM EST
....countries which are doing badly. I want a merit based system of immigration and people who will help take our country to the next level. I want safety and security for our people. I want to stop the massive inflow of drugs. I want to fund our military, not do a Dem defund....

Feb 6th 2018 - 11:05:42 AM EST
We need a 21st century MERIT-BASED immigration system. Chain migration and the visa lottery are outdated programs that hurt our economic and national security.

Jun 24th 2018 - 11:08:33 AM EST
....Our Immigration policy, laughed at all over the world, is very unfair to all of those people who have gone through the system legally and are waiting on line for years! Immigration must be based on merit - we need people who will help to Make America Great Again!

Several references to the 'caravans' of migrants trying to enter the country and how children were being used as means to being allowed access were also found among the relevant tweets. At the same time, the migrants being part of the 'caravans', were sometimes referred to as dangerous criminals. Such references are particularly significant to highlight because, as previously mentioned, 2018 was the year in which the Trump administration adopted the family separation immigration policy (adopted across the U.S.-Mexico border from April 2018 to June 2018). Federal authorities separated children and infants from their families to place them under the supervision

of the Department of Health and Human Services, while the adults were often prosecuted, held in custody or deported.

Jun 18th 2018 - 9:50:40 AM EST
Children are being used by some of the worst criminals on earth as a means to enter our country. Has anyone been looking at the Crime taking place south of the border. It is historic, with some countries the most dangerous places in the world. Not going to happen in the U.S.

Jul 29th 2018 - 7:58:09 AM EST
Please understand, there are consequences when people cross our Border illegally, whether they have children or not - and many are just using children for their own sinister purposes. Congress must act on fixing the DUMBEST & WORST immigration laws anywhere in the world! Vote "R"

Oct 22nd 2018 - 8:37:40 AM EST
Sadly, it looks like Mexico's Police and Military are unable to stop the Caravan heading to the Southern Border of the United States. Criminals and unknown Middle Easterners are mixed in. I have alerted Border Patrol and Military that this is a National Emergy. Must change laws!

Oct 29th 2018 - 10:41:56 AM EST
Many Gang Members and some very bad people are mixed into the Caravan heading to our Southern Border. Please go back, you will not be admitted into the United States unless you go through the legal process. This is an invasion of our Country and our Military is waiting for you!

Oct 31st 2018 - 8:45:36 AM EST
Our military is being mobilized at the Southern Border. Many more troops coming. We will NOT let these Caravans, which are also made up of some very bad thugs and gang members, into the U.S. Our Border is sacred, must come in legally. TURN AROUND!

Moreover, in Trump's anti-immigration discourse, countries such as Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador were subject to what could be easily described as blackmail. Trump requested for them to take action and prevent their citizens from attempting to illegally enter the U.S. He believed that they were not doing enough to effectively control the situation, therefore he stated the intention of cutting off the foreign aid and payments given to them.

Oct 16th 2018 - 9:05:04 AM EST
The United States has strongly informed the President of Honduras that if the large Caravan of people heading to the U.S. is not stopped and brought back to Honduras, no more money or aid will be given to Honduras, effective immediately!

Oct 22nd 2018 - 8:57:48 AM EST

Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador were not able to do the job of stopping people from leaving their country and coming illegally to the U.S. We will now begin cutting off, or substantially reducing, the massive foreign aid routinely given to them.

Dec 28th 2018 - 8:06:13 AM EST
.....Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador are doing nothing for the United States but taking our money. Word is that a new Caravan is forming in Honduras and they are doing nothing about it. We will be cutting off all aid to these 3 countries - taking advantage of U.S. for years!

The first of the three additional categories selected among the relevant tweets includes the tweets in which the wall was mentioned (Figure 6.10).
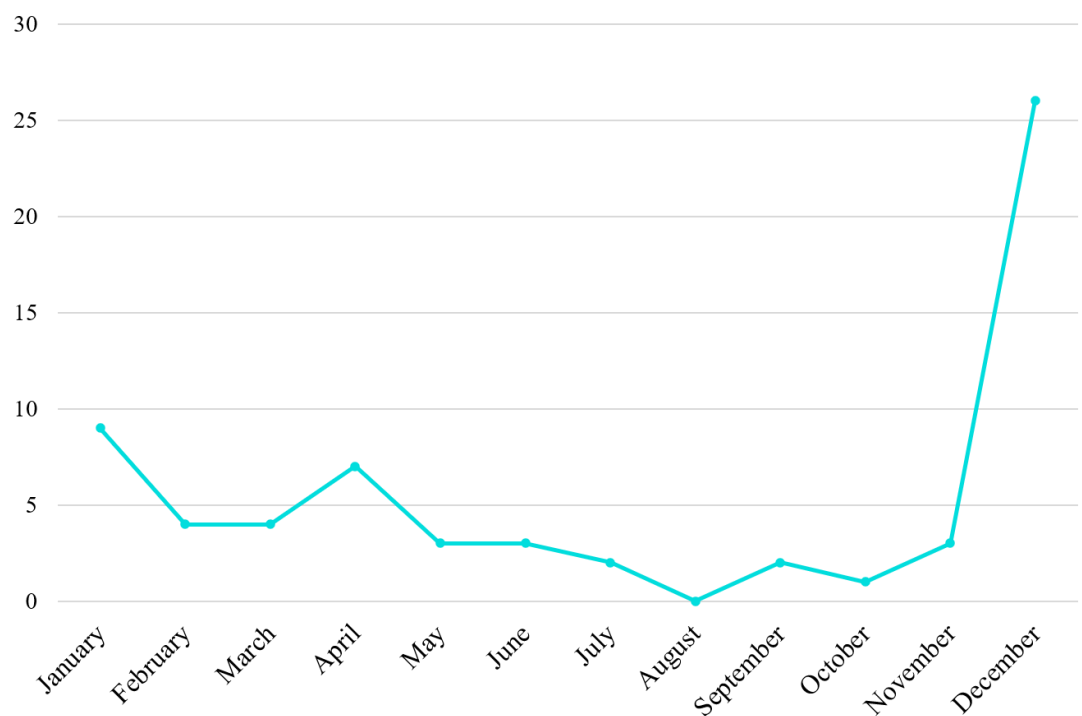


Figure 6.10. Monthly tweets in which the wall was mentioned among the relevant tweets shared by Donald Trump in 2018.

'The wall' has always been one of the most notorious elements of Trump's anti-immigration discourse, often mentioned during both his electoral campaign and his presidency. As it can be observed from the graph above, the wall has been mentioned throughout the entirety of 2018.

Mar 13th 2018 - 6:23:26 PM EST

If we don't have a wall system, we're not going to have a country. Congress must fund the BORDER WALL & prohibit grants to sanctuary jurisdictions that threaten the security of our country & the people of our country. We must enforce our laws & protect our people! #BuildTheWall

Dec 23rd 2018 - 9:17:54 AM EST
The only way to stop drugs, gangs, human trafficking, criminal elements and much else from coming into our Country is with a Wall or Barrier. Drones and all of the rest are wonderful and lots of fun, but it is only a good old fashioned Wall that works!

Dec 31st 2018 - 7:51:43 PM EST
The Democrats will probably submit a Bill, being cute as always, which gives everything away but gives NOTHING to Border Security, namely the Wall. You see, without the Wall there can be no Border Security - the Tech "stuff" is just, by comparison, meaningless bells & whistles...

The second of the three additional categories selected among the relevant tweets includes the tweets in which irregular immigration is mentioned and immigrants are addressed as illegal (Figure 6.11). Although the references made to both elements were not as numerous as the ones made by Salvini, the same category was worth taking into consideration as the anti-immigration discourse in both cases is often built on the idea that the specific phenomenon that deserves opposition is, in fact, irregular immigration.
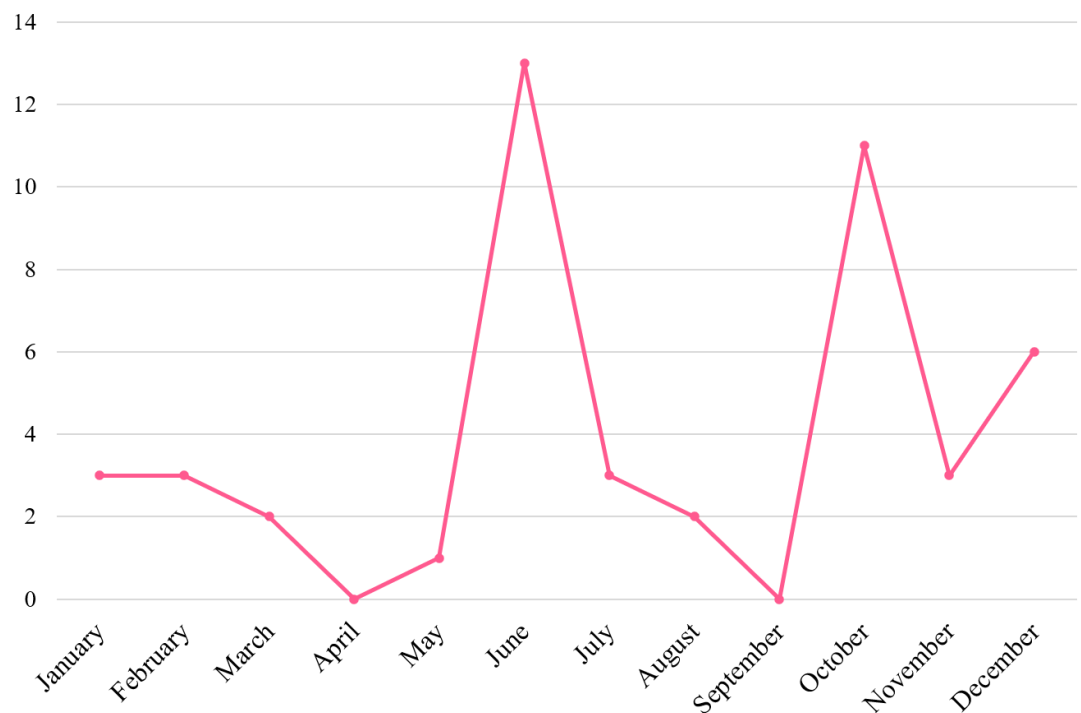
Figure 6.11. Monthly number of tweets in which irregular immigration is mentioned and immigrants are addressed as illegal among the relevant tweets shared by Donald Trump in 2018.

Trump usually mentioned irregular immigration and illegal immigrants in relation to border security, the economic burden that illegal immigration has been for the country and to also to refer to Europe as an example of the damages that irregulat immigration can cause.

Jun 22nd 2018 - 3:40:20 PM EST
We are gathered today to hear directly from the AMERICAN VICTIMS of ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION. These are the American Citizens permanently separated from their loved ones b/c they were killed by criminal illegal aliens. These are the families the media ignores...

Jun 23rd 2018 - 1:05:33 PM EST
It's very sad that Nancy Pelosi and her sidekick, Cryin' Chuck Schumer, want to protect illegal immigrants far more than the citizens of our country. The United States cannot stand for this. We wants safety and security at our borders!

Oct 24th 2018 - 7:52:29 AM EST
For those who want and advocate for illegal immigration, just take a good look at what has happened to Europe over the last 5 years. A total mess! They only wish they had that decision to make over again.

Oct 26th 2018 - 9:55:48 AM EST
The United States has been spending Billions of Dollars a year on Illegal Immigration. This will not continue. Democrats must give us the votes to pass strong (but fair) laws. If not, we will be forced to play a much tougher hand.

The last one of the three additional categories selected among the relevant tweets includes the tweets in which open borders/illegal immigration and immigrants are associated with crime/drugs (Figure 6.12).
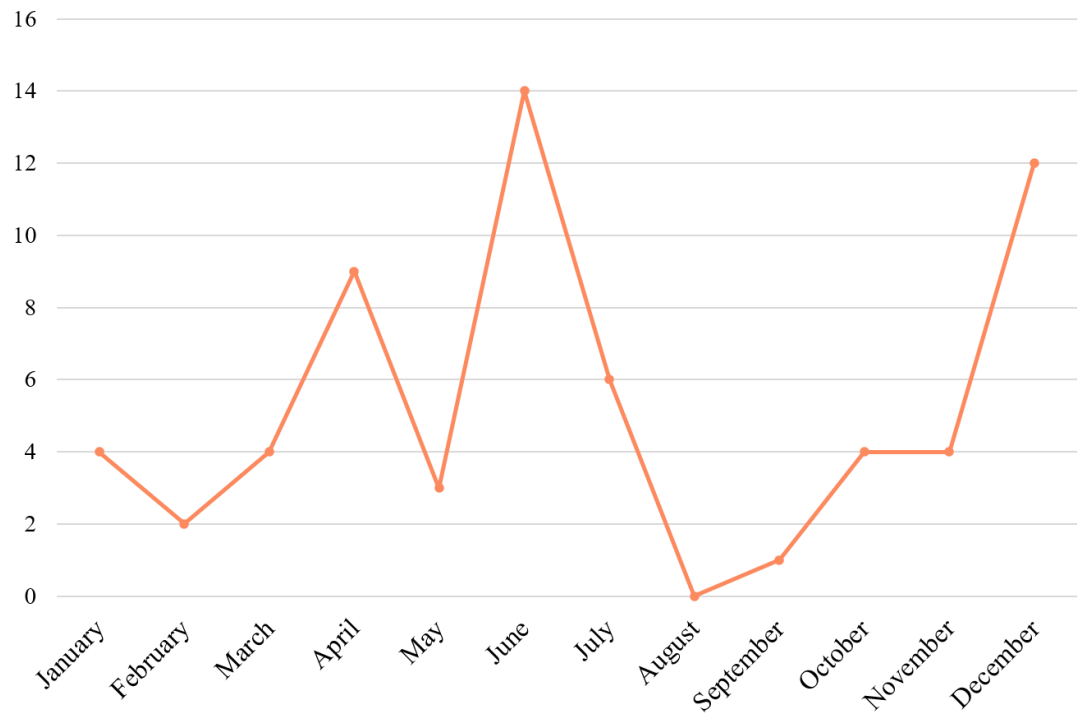
Figure 6.12. Monthly tweets in which open borders/illegal immigration and immigrants are associated with crime/drugs among the relevant tweets shared by Donald Trump in 2018.

Along with mentions of the wall, the association of illegal immigration and open borders with the inflow of drugs and crime was found to be the most prominent element of Trump's anti-immigration discourse on Twitter in 2018.

Dec 31st 2018 - 8:29:32 AM EST
I campaigned on Border Security, which you cannot have without a strong and powerful Wall. Our Southern Border has long been an "Open Wound," where drugs, criminals (including human traffickers) and illegals would pour into our Country. Dems should get back here an fix now!

Jan 18th 2018 - 8:16:26 AM EST
We need the Wall for the safety and security of our country. We need the Wall to help stop the massive inflow of drugs from Mexico, now rated the number one most dangerous country in the world. If there is no Wall, there is no Deal!

Feb 23rd 2018 - 6:28:35 AM EST
MS-13 gang members are being removed by our Great ICE and Border Patrol Agents by the thousands, but these killers come back in from El Salvador, and through Mexico, like water. El Salvador just takes our money, and Mexico must help MORE with this problem. We need The Wall!

**6.3 Discussion**

The main goal of this study was to explore the most significant elements of the anti-immigration discourse employed by two prominent populist leaders such as Donald Trump and Matteo Salvini on their Twitter platforms in 2018.

The reason why this particular topic has been found relevant enough to be selected, is that migration, with its economic and cultural implications, is considered as one of the most significant topics of our time. It is not unusual for journalists or politicians, especially populist leaders, to refer to it as 'an issue', which brings attention to the type of language, debates, narratives and expressions used by public figures when immigration is the main subject of discussion.

The comparative content analysis conducted in this study has been useful to identify the frequency of specific expressions/words, the major narratives built around immigrants and immigration and, therefore, also the ways in which framing processes are implemented. The results suggest that the online anti-immigration discourse of the two political leaders was composed of forseeable and expected elements such as the scapegoating of immigrants, opposition to illegal immigration, the narrative according to which immigrants are identified as an economic burden and framed as potential threats for the country they want to reach. However, the results also provide some additional insights.

The major difference found between Salvini's and Trump's discourses, was that the former underwent a transformation. It began with expected elements such as comments on news reports in which immigrants were crime perpetrators, framing strategies such as the associations of immigrants with terrorism and extremism, a narrative in which irregular immigration was an unnecessary economic burden for the country. However, from June to December 2018, Salvini shifted the main topic of his anti-immigration discourse by mainly and heavily targeting not immigrants but NGO vessels, human traffickers, smugglers and the business of illegal immigration. His anti-immigration stance was suddenly aimed at protecting them and his strategy relied on the idea that if less people were allowed to depart, there would have been less deaths in the Mediterranean. The almost sudden change in tone and content of Salvini's tweets can be seen as a strategic move directly connected to populism identified as a communication strategy. The Italian elections were held on March 4, 2018, with Salvini's party achieving considerable success, and a few days later, on March 18, the

Proactiva Open Arms NGO ship was seized by Italian authorities with the accusation of having rescued 218 refugees and migrants at sea three days earliner and having refused to hand them over to the Libyan Coast Guard. Italy found itself involved in a debate concerning NGOs and their criminalization but it was only when Salvini was officially appointed Interior Minister in June 2018 that the debated was transformed into a political communication strategy. One of Salvini's main goals had always been to prevent migrants from landing but, as Interior Minister, he needed a communication strategy to match and justify his new policies. When he closed Italian ports and denied access to NGO boats, he explained that his only aim was to finally stop the mafia of human trafficking and that less people would have died in the Mediterranean if less people were allowed to depart.

In this regard, it is also interesting to highlight the trust and support given to Libyan authorities in their policies and migrant rescue operations. If they were able to retrieve migrants and bring them back, Salvini celebrated it as a success in the war declared to smugglers. Moreover, among anything else, the projects that would have allowed Italy to help and assist migrants in their own countries to relieve the economic distress often mentioned in relation with immigration, were a clear indicator of something already mentioned in Chapter 4: the will to improve Italians' unhappiness with how the situation was being handled by their government and the EU. Salvini has continuously proposed projects after projects, no matter the odds of them becoming reality, because the important thing and most significant strategy was to give citizens the impression of having a firm control over the situation, unlike those who had governed the country up to that moment.

However, the ever-changing 'enemies' he targeted in his anti-immigration discourse (immigrants themselves, Europe, other parties, activists, NGOs, smugglers) actually showed that there was no clear, decisive strategy planned. The goal was always to reduce the number of landings but his attitudes, language and positions did not remain static throughout the year. In addition, a final significant element that emerged from the analysis of his anti-immigration discourse on Twitter in 2018, is the preference for often derogatory and discriminative terms and expressions when referring to immigrants, and the occasional mockery of any support given to the process of integration or any opinion according to which immigration could be seen as something to be treasured.

While Salvini's tweets ranged enough to be divided into multiple categories and

were also generally more numerous, Trump's tweets were mostly focused on topics of little interest to this research. Moreover, his anti-immigration discourse on Twitter in 2018 was also found to be more fixed. The most significant elements identified were, as expected, the association of open borders and immigration with crime, danger and drugs, and multiple references to the 'desperately needed' wall. His strategy for promoting anti-immigration stances relied on framing immigrants, especially if irregular, as not only dangerous threats to the country but also as 'not deserving' of moving into the U.S. unless they complied to an ideal merit based system that could only select people capable of adding something to the country, in terms of value and richness. It is also interesting to underline some of his comments about the heavily criticized family separation policy. Similarly to Salvini, who believed that the ones allowing irregular immigration were to be blamed for the deaths occurring in the Mediterranean, Trump shared the idea that Democrats and whoever else was not opposing immigration, were guilty for the incidents, struggles and separations occurring at the border. Not only did he refer to children used as means to enter the U.S., he also clarified that if he did not take the decision of separating them from their families, more people would have attempted to cross the border and illegally enter into the country. Therefore, the anti-immigration discourse found on Trump's Twitter platform throughout 2018 reflected the expected elements already mentioned in other studies cited in Chapter 3: requests for a stricter control of illegal immigration, illegal migrants depicted as dangerous and criminal while supported by equally dangerous representatives from the Democratic Party, and referred to as a significant threat for the safety and prosperity of the U.S.

The absence of a significant number of tweets containing fake news concerning immigrants/immigration, and the low number of tweets including references to immigrants as irregulars among the relevant ones (121 for Salvini, only 47 for Trump) were quite a surprising result. Their inferior number can be a coincidence, also possibly attributable to the fact that, as shown by the discourse implemented by Salvini, when it comes to opposing immigration, attitudes and targets can change very quickly, especially if there is an electoral campaign going on. Perhaps, if the focus of this research had not been the year 2018, the main elements of the two leaders' anti-immigration discourse on Twitter would have been slightly different. The focus of this analysis has been a single year, therefore its implications on the long term are limited. A study covering a longer period of time would be possible by using a software

program for content analysis and could certainly be more successful in establishing the major elements of Salvini's and Trump's anti-immigration discourse on Twitter.

# CHAPTER 7

# CONCLUSION

## 7.1 Conclusion

The political changes we, as societies, have been experiencing throughout the last years, and particularly the significant rise of populism, have led to important debates that, along with the availability of new communication tools such as the Internet and social media, have transformed and shifted from private discussions to public discourses. Such discussions often take place online, resulting in the expression of opinions and perspectives that can therefore be collected and examined. Immigration is one of the most controversial topics of our time and it is especially relevant in the context of populist discourses.

Populist leaders give great importance to the internal balance of their nations and, in order to ensure it, they often focus their attention and rhetoric on external factors that can be identified as potential threats to their societies: immigration is one of them. The immigration discourse has been increasingly politicized over the last few years, especially after the crisis of 2015, it is therefore important to dwell on the type of language and emotional tone used by political leaders to address it, especially online. Social media allows political leaders to reach a high number of users in a short period of time and their content often has the potential of going viral. The implication of this is that their expressions, perspectives and discourses hold the potential of having a significant impact not only on their supporters but on citizens and public opinion in general.

Based on the ties between populism, social media and the different debates and discourses revolving around the topic of immigration, this research looked at Donald Trump and Matteo Salvini's Twitter posts published in 2018 in order to identify the

main textual elements, expressions and emotional tone used to oppose immigration and to mention immigrants, with the aim of recognizing the most relevant frames and narratives employed in the discussion.

This thesis hypothesized that the results would show that the selected populist leaders used social media as an anti immigration discourse platform by creating a hostile and negative narrative, often influenced by the proliferation of misinformation and fake news, a strategy that frames immigrants as potential threats and a narrative in which most immigrants, especially if irregular, are referred to as an economic burden.

Based on a manual comparative content analysis methodological approach, the study aimed at answering the following research question:

How did Donald Trump and Matteo Salvini use Twitter as a platform for anti-immigration discourse in 2018?

The two political leaders have been selected as relevant examples for the purpose of this study because of their generally acknowledged populist ideology and anti-immigration positions. Although Italy and the U.S. have different social, cultural and historical backgrounds, the early chapters of this work have provided an analysis of how the populist elements of different political landscapes can, nonetheless, share the characteristics at the base of the ideology.

The results of this research suggest that the online anti-immigration discourse of the two political leaders in 2018 was constructed on expected elements such as the scapegoating of immigrants, opposition to illegal immigration, a narrative that identified immigrants as an economic burden and a framing process that referred to them as potential threats. However, the results also provided some additional insights.

Salvini's discourse was found to be less static and more inclined to change its targets throughout the year. Although his efforts were aimed at proving that he had a clear strategy planned on how to handle the 'immigration crisis' affecting the country, not enough proof confirming a concrete course of action has been found. Moreover, it was observed that he was in the habit of referring to immigrants by relying on derogatory language and several associations of immigrants with religious extremism and crime.

Trump's anti-immigration discourse was found to be more stable. The most significant elements identified were, as expected, the association of open borders and

immigration with crime, danger and drugs, and numerous references to the construction of the 'desperately needed' wall. He also framed immigrants as potential threats for the U.S. and, in addition, mentioned the desire of establishing a merit based immigration system that could only select people with the ability of bringing value and contributions to the country. His language was also found to be generally derogatory, with several references made to 'unknown Middle Easterners', 'bad thugs' and 'gang members' hidden in the migrant caravans at the border.

The absence of a significant number of tweets containing fake news concerning immigrants/immigration, the low number of tweets including references to immigrants as irregulars among the relevant ones and the differences between the online discourses of the two leaders are the most significant unexpected elements of this research. While the low number of content including misinformation and mentions of irregular immigrants might be a coincidence related to the year choice, there are some factors that can be important in explaining the differences found between the two discourses.

Trump's anti-immigration content was less large if compared to the number of tweets identified among the ones shared by Salvini. The most significant reason for that is that, in 2018, the two political leaders were channeling their Twitter discourse in two different directions. Salvini was campaigning for the Italian general election, while Trump was focused on endorsing other political candidates and defending himself and his party from the accusations of a Russian interference in the 2016 elections. Moreover, Salvini had his social media team live-tweet his most significant statements and declarations whenever he was a guest on television or radio programmes, something that was not part of Trump's communication strategy.

Additionally, I believe that the differences found in the anti-immigration discourse of the two political leaders can also be traced to their backgrounds. Matteo Salvini has been active in politics since 1990 and has always been associated to the Lega, which is a party that has always had a past of exclusionary and discriminatory discourses (against Southern Italians and immigrants). On the other hand, Donald Trump has not been as involved with politics and has changed his party affiliation several times. These differences could explain why Salvini's anti-immigration tweets were found to be more large in number and his language more strategically exclusionary and subject to change.

Few recent studies have addressed the characteristics of online populist communication in relation to a specific topic, especially not through the manual

comparative content analysis of two political leaders coming from very different backgrounds. The purpose of this research is to fill this gap by supplying a framework for the analysis of the populist anti-immigration discourse on social media. By focusing on the controversial discourses, debates and perspectives of two of the most prominent populist leaders of our time, this study also aimed at raising awareness and providing an opportunity to study and better understand the processes and elements composing the political discourses revolving around a subject matter as significant as immigration.

Because the focus of this analysis has been a single year, its implications on the long term are limited. To understand the effects of the findings brought out in this study, a non manually conducted study or research, perhaps with a bigger team involved, could focus on a more extended period of time and therefore certainly be more successful in providing a more general perspective on the major elements of Salvini's and Trump's anti-immigration discourse on social media. Another interesting attempt could consist in emphasizing the emotional tone of the textual elements found to be relevant: instead of on general language, comments and expressions, the researchers could focus on identifying more peculiar emotional elements such as mockery, sarcasm or humor.

The implications of the presented findings paint a clear picture of the language used to oppose immigration within the online populist discourse framework and the present study in particular offers a strong starting point for future studies and researchers to both make use of the points it already offered and build upon the considerations made as well.

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