

## 'Post-fascism', or how the far right talks about itself: the 2022 Italian election campaign as a case study

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### ABSTRACT

While the mainstreaming of the far right is attracting growing scholarly interest based on its contemporary relevance, the role that far-right self-representation strategies play in this process has seen limited engagement. In this article, we argue that far-right actors employ a post-fascist logic to bring their ideas closer to the mainstream. This logic rests on a dual message, whereby they attempt to outwardly distance themselves from fascism while at the same time recontextualising fascist ideas. To explore these dynamics, we use a mixed-methods approach to discourse analysis to examine far-right social media posts during the 2022 Italian general election. Taking all Facebook, Instagram and Twitter posts during the official campaigning period from the party and leader accounts of *Lega per Salvini Premier* and *Fratelli d'Italia*, we explored articulations of the post-fascist dyad within this context. Our findings underscore how both far-right parties ridiculed accusations of fascism and depicted themselves as 'centre-right', yet they commonly used fascist dog-whistles and violent anti-immigration discourse to construct a broader conspiracy narrative and portray themselves as Italy's saviour. While Italy proves a paradigmatic case, this research has wider implications for the need to explore the relationship between self-representation and mainstreaming.

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Like any political entity, far-right parties and actors have an interest in positive self-representation and identity construction. While bearing numerous similarities in their articulation of exclusionary and racist discourses to the fascism of the 1920s and 1930s, such groups seek to reconstruct their image as 'post-fascist'. Strategies include the outright denial of racism (Lentin, 2020, p. 55), embracing the term 'populist' (Brown & Mondon, 2021), the invention of labels such as 'Alt-Right' and 'Alt-Lite' (Ma, 2021; Thompson & Hawley, 2016), and framing reactionary politics as 'centre-right' or 'common sense' (Capdevila & Callaghan, 2008; Mondon & Winter, 2020). Such strategies have contributed to an

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increased normalisation of reactionary politics and discourse, forming part of a wider political logic used by the far right to mainstream its ideology and discourse.

Recent examinations of mainstreaming have attributed great importance to the role of mainstream actors in the legitimisation of far-right ideology, in particular centring on how they talk about the far right, i.e. discursive construction(s) of the far right in everyday narratives (Krzyżanowski, 2020a; 2020b). There has, however, been a relative lack of attention paid to self-referential strategies used by the far right and the role they play in mainstreaming. As such, our research addresses the following question:

How do far-right actors discursively construct the far right (including groups, individuals and/or their ideas) and what strategic role does this play in their mainstreaming?

This approach draws not only on existing work around discursive processes and mainstreaming (Brown, 2022; Brown & Mondon, 2021) but also recent analyses of post-fascism as a way in which the far right has rearticulated fascist ideas for the present (Broder, 2023; el-Ojeili, 2019; Traverso, 2019).

To address this question, we examine how Italy's two main far-right parties, the *Lega per Salvini Premier* (the Lega) and *Fratelli d'Italia* (Fdi) employed a post-fascist discourse to enact a discursive shift and move their ideas closer to the mainstream during the 2022 Italian general elections. Overall, we underscore how post-fascist discourse hinges on a dyadic logic whereby far-right parties outwardly distance themselves from fascism while at the same time recontextualising fascist discourses. The article is divided into three main sections, with the first two providing essential contextual and methodological information, followed then by a detailed outline of our findings.

## Post-fascism, the far right and mainstreaming

In 1993, Gianfranco Fini, the leader of the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement (MSI) was asked about his party's historical links to Mussolini's fascist regime. Attempting to appear moderate and respectable, he responded that 'fascism was irreversibly consigned to history' and 'like all Italians we are not neo-fascist, but post-fascist' (Griffin, 2000, p. 163). The term 'post-fascism' has been adopted in various contexts, both within and outside Italy to describe far-right politics. To establish our understanding of post-fascism, we first address important historical context around the Italian far right and then examine existing conceptualisations of post-fascism, before proposing a revised definition.

### *The September 2022 elections and contemporary far right in Italy*

Whether through the formation of far-right governments (Broder, 2023) or shared discourses/actions (Wodak, 2020), Europe has seen growing congruence between centre- and far-right forces across various contexts. A paradigmatic example was noted ahead of the 2022 Italian elections:

the right-wing coalition's leadership show[ed] that far-right politicians are by now well embedded in the mainstream establishment; and the main issues on the agenda illustrate that some of the key ideas of the far right are now normalised, and deemed 'common sense' in public debates. (Castelli-Gattinara & Froio, 2022)

The victory of this coalition, led by Giorgia Meloni's far-right Fratelli d'Italia, emerged from a government crisis which toppled the technocratic administration of Mario Draghi. As the only major party to have remained outside this grand coalition, Fdl could present itself as the main opposition (Castelli-Gattinara & Froio, 2022). Meloni therefore became de-facto head of a right-wing alliance which had seen various permutations over the years (Fella & Ruzza, 2009). Indeed, while the 2022 elections resulted in Italy's most right-wing government since the fall of fascism (Broder, 2023), this was but the latest step in the gradual normalisation and rehabilitation of the far right in Italy.

We define both the Lega and Fdl as far-right parties, whereby they espouse a racist ideology, thinly veiled behind covert and coded references to culture and identity (Mondon & Winter, 2020, p. 19). Specifically, we define the far right as follows:

A position characterised by a generalised commitment to inequality, with racism at its core. This may be accompanied by a broader 'politics of fear' (Wodak, 2020) which encompasses various forms of exclusion targeting different marginalised groups. (Brown, 2022, pp. 28–29)

While the more widely used 'populist radical right' boasts several strengths,<sup>1</sup> it pays insufficient attention to racism (Sengul, 2022, p. 51; Newth, 2023a), misogyny and anti-LGBTQ narratives (Blee, 2020), and its crucial distinction between populism and nativism has often not been heeded (Newth, 2023a; Sengul, 2022). Our definition maintains the centrality of racism but remains attentive to other forms of interconnected exclusion. Blee (2020, p. 427), for instance, suggests engaging seriously with how far-right groups 'build support for misogyny, homophobia and transphobia, and gender and sexual essentialism.' With Fdl's emphasis on 'traditional values', attempts to restrict same-sex parents registering children, and both parties' key role in previously blocking legislation to criminalise homophobia and transphobia, these issues are clearly significant in this case and beyond.

Our use of 'far right' also aims to capture the evolution of these parties, whereby they have attempted to outwardly moderate their image for wider appeal. It builds on existing studies of Fdl's evolution from 'neo-fascist to radical-right party' (Baldini et al., 2022; Donà, 2022). It also follows analysis of how the Lega evolved from regionalism to nationalism under Salvini, with this change sharpening the party's far-right outlook (Newth, 2023b). Other work has established how the Lega and Fdl have distanced themselves from the physical violence of extreme-right movements such as Forza Nuova and CasaPound (De Giorgi & Tronconi, 2018, p. 341). The attempt by the far right to present itself as more moderate should be viewed as part of a wider process of mainstreaming in which post-fascist discourse plays a key role.

### ***The trajectory of 'post-fascism' in Italy and beyond***

The terms post-fascist and post-fascism are by no means new but have recently made a re-emergence in academic research and discourse (Newth & Maccaferri, 2022). Indeed, in the decades following Gianfranco Fini's use of 'post-fascist' as a self-referential device, several scholars have employed post-fascism as a term to describe the transformation of the neo-fascist MSI through its various iterations to today's Fdl (Bruno, 2022; Fella & Ruzza, 2009; Griffin, 2000). Before that, post-fascism was not necessarily associated with the far right in Italy, given the marginality of such groups in the post-war Italian political settlement.<sup>2</sup> However, in the 1980s, the Italian republic's anti-fascist constitutional basis

'became increasingly criticised and contested by new political and intellectual forces' (Newth, 2023b, p. 136). This constituted a discursive shift in which post-fascism 'was not unequivocally a rejection of fascism' (Donovan, 2015, p. 22; see also Ignazi, 1996) but ranged from 'calculated ambivalence'<sup>3</sup> (Engel & Wodak, 2013, pp. 73–74) to outright historical revisionism regarding the history and memory of fascism and anti-fascism (Cento Bull, 2016; Carli, 2015).

This culminated in Silvio Berlusconi's entry into politics amidst the collapse of the First Italian Republic between 1992 and 1994. Berlusconi formed a speciously labelled 'centre-right' coalition between his own personal party, Forza Italia, with the heirs to the neo-fascist MSI (the National Alliance) in the south and the far-right Lega in the north. Fini's comments regarding 'post-fascism' in 1993 were later marked by an ostensible 'post-fascist' transition of the MSI into the National Alliance (AN) at the party's conference in Fiuggi in 1995. This supposed transformation, however, 'was in reality, an ambiguous one, with a majority of [MSI-AN] delegates and activists still identifying with Fascism and its philosophers' (Newth & Maccaferri, 2022; p. 4 see also Ter Wal, 2000, p. 40). Further contributing to this ambiguity was the Lega Nord's political strategy in the 1980s and 1990s of depicting all political opponents as fascist and false equivalences between fascism and communism (Newth, 2023b). This, alongside Umberto Bossi's self-depiction as 'anti-fascist' while espousing far-right policies and discourse, entailed a hollowing out of the meaning of fascism. In terms of historical revisionism, Berlusconi's 're-imagining of the Resistance and the civil war of 1943–5' can be viewed as a significant moment in post-fascist discourse. This discursive strategy was 'aimed at legitimizing the heirs to the neo-Fascist party and thus integrating them fully into the nation' (Cento Bull, 2016, p.226).

Beyond self-depiction in Italy, the term has been employed in various contexts to define different formations of far-right politics. Tamás (2000) describes post-fascism as the suppression of progressive politics within the neo-liberal hegemony, emphasising that '[t]he mere idea of radical change (utopia and critique) has been dropped from the rhetorical vocabulary.' Post-fascism has also been used as an alternative term for post-war far-right parties (Finchelstein, 2022). For Traverso (2019, p. 6), post-fascism defines an ideology which 'comes from a classical fascist background, but has now changed its forms'. According to this interpretation, post-fascism is a twenty-first-century phenomenon which consists of 'a cocktail of nationalism, xenophobia, racism, charismatic leadership, reactionary "identitarianism," and regressive anti-globalization politics' (Traverso et al., 2019). Elaborating on such conceptualisations, el-Ojeili (2019, p. 1153) illustrates how post-fascism might signify the recontextualization of 'five core ideational features' of fascism in the post-war era. These see palingenetic nationalism turn to sovereignism, explicit conspiracy theorising to conspiracy-inspired denunciations, charismatic authority to 'new media democratic populism', counter-revolution to anti-'political correctness', and militaristic masculinity to sexual aggression (el-Ojeili, 2019, pp. 1153–1154).

### ***Post-fascism as a mainstreaming discursive strategy***

Our approach, while indebted to the cross-section of conceptual work outlined above, argues that it is preferable to not use it to *define* far-right parties. This is not least because the prefix *post* may suggest such actors have surpassed fascist ideas and in turn euphemise exclusionary politics. Instead, we build on recent scholarly work which

interprets ‘post-fascism’ neither as an ideology, nor political identity, but rather a political logic or discourse (Newth & Maccaferri, 2022). In the case of the Lega, post-fascist discourse served to rearticulate far-right politics as common sense (Newth, 2024; Newth & Maccaferri, 2022). Viewing post-fascism as a political logic thus shifts the focus from *what* the assumed ‘ideational content’ of a supposed post-fascist ideology is, to *how* political actors formulate this content (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017).

This approach holds affinities with Broder’s (2023, p. 14) definition, emphasising the reformulation of fascist tropes:

not a turn back to the past [but] the recomposition of this tradition in the present, setting specifically fascist ideas and historical references within a nationalist identity politics geared to postmodern times

This *rearticulation and recontextualisation* of ‘the wide symbolic repertoire produced by the fascist regime in the 20s and 30s’ (Trillò & Shifman, 2021, p. 2849) is central to the conceptualisation of post-fascism as a political logic. Drawing on discursive approaches to mainstreaming, we contend that a post-fascist logic is, to this effect, a form of ‘talking about the far right’ (Brown, 2022, p. 73). It is a self-referential device used by the far right to create both distance and affinity with fascism, therefore forming part of a wider process of mainstreaming, i.e. ‘the process by which parties/actors, discourses and/or attitudes move from a position of unacceptability (outside the norm) to one of legitimacy (within the norm)’ (Brown, 2022, p. 5; Brown et al., 2023, p. 127).

## **Methodology, data and analysis**

With Italy’s clear relevance to these themes, our analysis centred around the Lega and FdI’s social media communication in the build-up to the September 2022 Italian general election. We adopted a mixed-methods approach to discourse studies in order to take both a wide-angle and in-depth view of their output through the lens of post-fascism. This section first provides an overview of the combined approach and then outlines its application in the study.

### ***Combined approach to discourse studies***

The project is underpinned by an amalgamation of discursive perspectives and methods, combining poststructuralist Discourse Theory (DT), Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) and Corpus Linguistics (CL) (Brown, 2022). By bringing together these diverse traditions, it is possible to harness their respective strengths at the level of theory, practical application and analytical capability. The discursive reading of politics and multiple levels of meaning afforded to discourse within DT (De Cleen et al., 2021) make it an ideal foundation from which to both interpret the broader significance of post-fascism as a political logic and to derive the ‘theoretical grammar’ (Horner, 2014, p. 8) informing our analytical approach. We incorporate CDS, and specifically the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) (Reisigl, 2018; Wodak & Krzyzanowski, 2008), as a way to support the translation of theoretical concepts into empirical linguistic analysis for the purposes of politically engaged research (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). To complete the trio, CL acts in a supportive capacity to identify patterns and probe ideas further (Baker, 2006). These traditions complement one another, addressing different yet overlapping components of methodology.

Specifically for this project, DT's attention to subject positions proves instructive for exploring far-right self-positioning strategies. Wilkinson (2022) underscores the radical contingency of identities, whereby they are 'constituted by their relationship to other discourses and, indeed, other identities' (Wilkinson, 2022, p. 2). The far right is therefore active in constructing its own identity through balancing its insider/outsider status. The DHA to CDS provides support in this regard through examining perspectivisation strategies, and its emphasis on different levels of context allows us to draw intertextual and interdiscursive links with historical fascism while situating these discourses within their contemporary articulation. Finally, CL enables us to work across a large dataset spanning various social media platforms and accounts, facilitating both deductive and inductive modes of enquiry.

### Implementation

Our analysis centred on the Facebook, Instagram and Twitter posts from Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni's personal and party accounts in the official campaigning period between 21st July and 23rd September 2022.<sup>4</sup> The decision to focus on social media derives from its increasing relevance 'for both political parties and citizens' (Bobba & Roncarolo, 2018, p. 51). Its importance in scrutinising attempts to influence public opinion (Parmelee, 2014, p. 437) and construct identities becomes especially relevant in pre-election phases where dissemination activities are crucial (Battista, 2023, p. 118). Furthermore, in Italy, restrictions on parties' public funding have increased the centrality of social media; this means that 'individual willingness to mobilize is positively influenced by the quality of the structural connections, determined especially by the use of technological platforms' (Bracciale & Cepernich, 2018, p. 38). Far-right groups have specifically benefited from 'the vague [regulatory] policies and the algorithmic clustering of social media content' which facilitate the 'distribution of hostile and racist content' (Nikunen, 2018, p. 13) and disproportionately amplify such ideas to blur the boundaries between the extreme and mainstream (Ekman, 2022; Froio & Ganesh, 2019; Gallaher, 2021). The veneer of direct communication between users and political figures also caters to the far right's frequent self-depiction as the *vox populi* (Ernst et al., 2017).

Drawing on studies that focused on the Italian far right's activity on one platform (Zappettini & Maccaferri, 2021), we took a multi-platform approach (Trillò & Shifman, 2021). This presents its own of challenges, notably the presence of repetition across multiple platforms. Rather than remove duplicates, we retained them to provide important context, whereby repeated sentiments could indicate particularly salient messages. Our overall dataset, comprising two principal sub-corpora, had the following composition (Table 1):

**Table 1.** Overview of the dataset.

Platform	Salvini/Lega		Meloni/Fdl	
	Posts	Words	Posts	Words
Facebook	3248	94,065	723	20,789
Instagram	1110	39,582	718	19,333
Twitter	5180	122,609	855	16,369
<b>Total</b>	<b>9538</b>	<b>265,794</b>	<b>2296</b>	<b>56,491</b>

Clearly, there is great disparity in sub-corpora sizes, but the use of relative frequencies within CL means that both could be analysed in unison with appropriate nuance.

We moved between computerised techniques on the full dataset and manual analysis of a reduced sample. Our starting point was a keyness test for each sub-corpus, identifying unusually frequent terms in the data compared to a reference corpus (Baker, 2006). With PAISÀ in this role, we produced a list of 50 keywords for each group,<sup>5</sup> using them to identify themes of interest and to facilitate our choices when filtering for the sample. The keyword lists<sup>6</sup> are provided here for information<sup>7</sup> but will be returned to in the results section (Table 2).<sup>8</sup>

**Table 2.** Top 50 keywords for each corpus with their translation.

No.		Lega/Salvini		Fdl/Meloni
1	<i>credo</i>	<i>faith/believe</i>	<b>sinistra</b>	<b>the left</b>
2	<b>PD</b>	<b>Partito Democratico</b>	<b>scegli</b>	<b>choose</b>
3	<i>sbarchi</i>	<i>boat arrivals</i>	<i>pronti</i>	<i>ready</i>
4	<b>italiani</b>	<b>Italians/Italian</b>	<b>italiani</b>	<b>Italians/Italian</b>
5	<i>bollette</i>	<i>bills</i>	<i>risolvere</i>	<i>resurrect</i>
6	<i>unisciti</i>	<i>join/unite</i>	<i>nazione</i>	<i>nation</i>
7	<i>tax</i>	<i>tax/taxes</i>	<i>ascoltate</i>	<i>listen</i>
8	<i>Lampedusa</i>	<i>Lampedusa</i>	<b>centrodestra</b>	<b>centre-right</b>
9	<b>fiscale</b>	<b>tax/fiscal</b>	<i>nostro/a/i/e</i>	<i>our</i>
10	<b>tasse</b>	<b>taxes</b>	<b>PD</b>	<b>Partito Democratico</b>
11	<b>sinistra</b>	<b>the left</b>	<b>chi</b>	<b>who</b>
12	<i>stop</i>	<i>stop</i>	<i>difendere</i>	<i>defend</i>
13	<b>centrodestra</b>	<b>centre-right</b>	<i>fermare</i>	<i>stop</i>
14	<b>chi</b>	<b>who</b>	<b>immigrazione</b>	<b>immigration</b>
15	<i>buonsenso</i>	<i>common sense</i>	<i>governo</i>	<i>government</i>
16	<i>rifaremo</i>	<i>we'll do it again</i>	<i>vogliamo</i>	<i>we want</i>
17	<i>migranti</i>	<i>migrants</i>	<b>tasse</b>	<b>taxes</b>
18	<b>clandestini</b>	<b>illegal immigrants</b>	<b>imprese</b>	<b>companies</b>
19	<b>imprese</b>	<b>companies</b>	<i>basta</i>	<i>stop/enough</i>
20	<i>pensioni</i>	<i>pension</i>	<i>assumi</i>	<i>hire</i>
21	<i>hotspot</i>	<i>hotspot</i>	<i>mistificazioni</i>	<i>misinformation</i>
22	<i>capitano</i>	<i>captain</i>	<i>intimidire</i>	<i>intimidate</i>
23	<b>lavoro</b>	<b>job/work</b>	<i>presidenzialismo</i>	<i>presidentialism</i>
24	<i>sicurezza</i>	<i>safety/security</i>	<i>avanti</i>	<i>forward/ahead</i>
25	<b>sceglie</b>	<b>choose</b>	<b>fiscale</b>	<b>tax/fiscal</b>
26	<i>scopri</i>	<i>discover</i>	<i>seguite</i>	<i>follow</i>
27	<i>nucleare</i>	<i>nuclear</i>	<b>idee</b>	<b>ideas</b>
28	<i>pace</i>	<i>peace</i>	<i>ridare</i>	<i>restore</i>
29	<i>iva</i>	<i>VAT</i>	<i>pandemia</i>	<i>pandemic</i>
30	<b>idee</b>	<b>ideas</b>	<b>scegliamo</b>	<b>let's choose/we choose</b>
31	<i>energetica</i>	<i>energy</i>	<i>speranza</i>	<i>hope</i>
32	<i>patrimoniale</i>	<i>asset/wealth</i>	<b>lavoro</b>	<b>job/work</b>
33	<i>giovani</i>	<i>young people</i>	<i>forza</i>	<i>strength/come on</i>
34	<i>paese</i>	<i>country/town</i>	<i>solidarietà</i>	<i>solidarity</i>
35	<i>famiglie</i>	<i>families</i>	<i>coerenza</i>	<i>consistency</i>
36	<i>Italia</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>lascero</i>	<i>we'll leave/we'll let</i>
37	<i>confini</i>	<i>borders</i>	<i>andiamo</i>	<i>let's go/we're going</i>
38	<i>sanzioni</i>	<i>sanctions</i>	<b>diretta</b>	<b>live</b>
39	<i>tocca</i>	<i>affects</i>	<i>intervista</i>	<i>interview</i>
40	<b>proposte</b>	<b>proposals</b>	<i>bravo</i>	<i>well done/good</i>
41	<i>priorità</i>	<i>priority/priorities</i>	<b>immigrazioniste</b>	<b>immigrationist</b>
42	<i>risparmieresti</i>	<i>you'd save yourself</i>	<i>paghi</i>	<i>you pay</i>
43	<i>no</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>elettorale</i>	<i>electoral</i>
44	<i>pulita</i>	<i>clean</i>	<b>clandestina</b>	<b>illegal immigrants</b>
45	<i>vinciamo</i>	<i>let's win/we'll win</i>	<b>proposte</b>	<b>proposals</b>
46	<i>verdura</i>	<i>vegetables</i>	<i>seguitemi</i>	<i>follow me</i>
47	<i>emergenza</i>	<i>emergency</i>	<i>accordo</i>	<i>agreement</i>
48	<i>caro</i>	<i>expensive</i>	<i>fragili</i>	<i>fragile/weak</i>
49	<i>immigrati</i>	<i>immigrants</i>	<i>nordafricane</i>	<i>North African</i>
50	<b>diretta</b>	<b>live</b>	<i>povertà</i>	<i>poverty</i>

Exploring the context around these terms using concordance (Baker, 2006, p. 71), it was clear that immigration dominated as a topic. As well as obvious keywords within the semantic field of migration (e.g. migrants, borders, illegal immigrants), others proved closely linked through prominent collocations, i.e. statistically significant co-occurrences ((Baker, 2006, pp. 95–6). For example, the most common collocate of ‘stop’ was ‘boat arrivals’, co-occurring in more than a third of cases (77/218). Similarly, ‘borders’ was the top collocate for ‘defend’, occurring in more than half its uses (80/149). Immigration was chosen as a key area of recontextualisation based on its significance and the fact that:

Fascism sets forth a politics centred on the figure of an organic, integral, and pure nation or ethnic group. This entails hostility towards outsiders, explicitly or implicitly, which is frequently articulated principally as racism (el-Ojeili, 2019, p. 1153).

As such, when narrowing down our sample, we used key terms in relation to immigration as a filtering device.

To define our sample, we targeted highly relevant posts to the dyad of post-fascism, capturing those that included an attempt to distance from fascism and/or recontextualise it. Based on aforementioned literature as well as keyness results, we produced two lists of filtering terms,<sup>9</sup> where any post containing them was included in the sample (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Terms used to filter posts for the sample.

Distancing		Recontextualising		
*fascis*	*fascis*	*migra*	*migra*	
*destra*	*right*	sbarchi	boat arrivals	
*razzisi*	*racis*	Lampedusa	Lampedusa	
demonizz*	demonis*	clandestin*	illegal immigrant*	
buonsenso	common sense	famigli* <sup>12</sup>	famil*	
ideologi*	ideolog*			

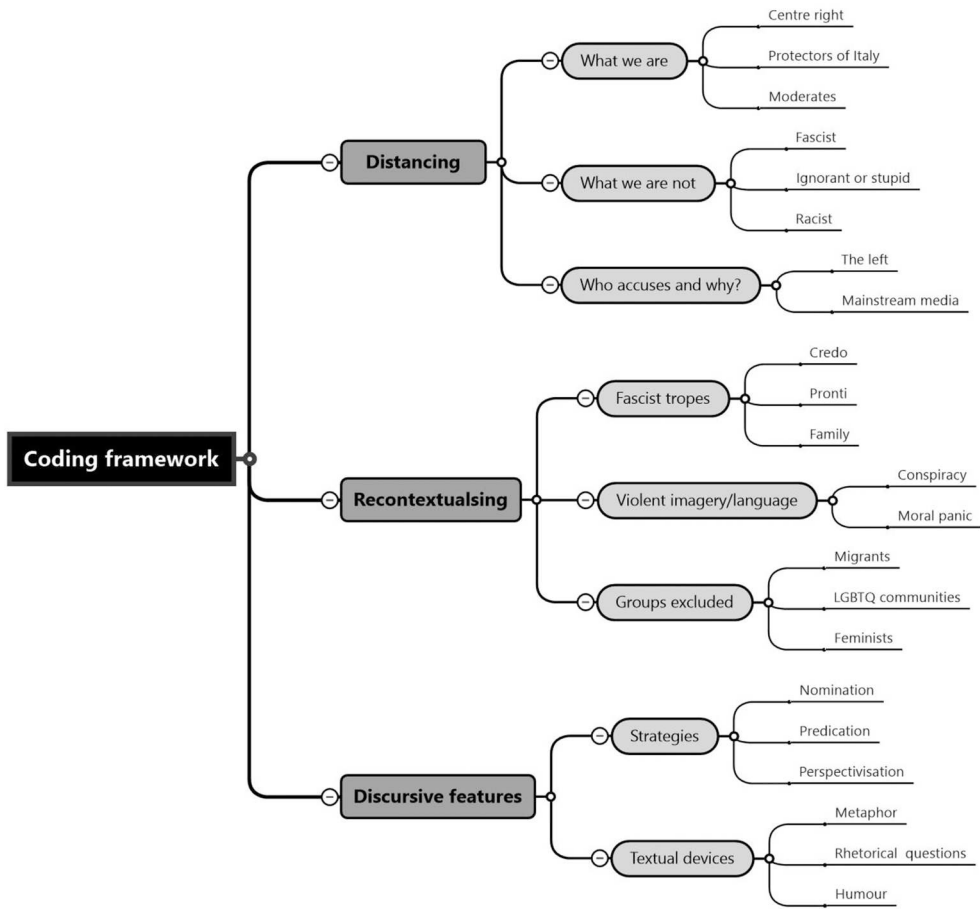
Clearly, more search terms could be included, but these choices were deemed highly relevant, sufficient and manageable. Although key terms such as ‘credo’ (faith/believe) and ‘pronti’ (ready) are discussed, their use as hashtags across a huge number of posts meant they were unsuitable at this filtering stage. This process resulted in the following sample composition (Table 4):

**Table 4.** Overview of the sample.

Platform	Salvini/Lega		Meloni/Fdl	
	Posts	Words	Posts	Words
Facebook	504	20,677	111	7620
Instagram	223	12,232	111	6702
Twitter	634	14,991	107	3164
<b>Total</b>	<b>1361</b>	<b>47,900</b>	<b>329</b>	<b>17,486</b>

Split between the two authors, with each taking two platforms for one party and one platform for the other, we qualitatively coded using the following framework as a starting point (Figure 1):





**Figure 1.** Initial manual coding framework.

While we started with the three main headings and their direct branches, the rightmost nodes were added as observed.<sup>10</sup> We shared our coding tree after the initial round and then explored elements identified by the other in the next phase. Once completed, we established key findings in relation to post-fascism, to which we now turn.

## Findings

Here, we present two sides of the post-fascist dyad individually before illustrating their combination to form a unitary logic contributing to far-right mainstreaming. A content warning comes at this stage as we do include examples of violent language, though only those most relevant to each point.

### *Distancing from fascism*

The Lega and FdI sought to distance themselves from accusations of fascism in two main ways: (1) by denouncing ‘demonisation’ attempts, and (2) by claiming a ‘centre-right’ positioning.

### ***Ridiculing accusations of fascism***

While references to fascism specifically were fairly rare, with 49 occurrences across the corpora (43 for Salvini/Lega and 6 for Meloni/Fdl), both parties repeatedly defended themselves against negative assertions and undermined those who accused them. The left were portrayed as lacking ideas, distant from ordinary Italians and focusing instead on a demonisation campaign:

According to the mayor of Bologna **'Fascism is at the gates of Italy'. Come onnnnn!** Let's hold on to our Freedom and Democracy, offering Italians **ideas and solutions, not insults.** (Salvini, FB/IN/TW, 25/07)


demonstrates how **out-of-touch** they are to talk about the **'danger of fascism'** (Meloni, FB/IN/TW, 28/07)

A **divided and desperate left**, with some **silly servants in the newsroom**, spend their time looking for **fascists, Russians and racists where there are none.** (Lega/Salvini, FB/IN, 28/07)

Highly negative predication strategies – defining the Left as 'out-of-touch', 'divided' and 'desperate' – contribute to a distancing from fascism by shifting attention to the accusers rather than the accusation itself. The Lega and Fdl claim that they are pursuing 'solutions' to real-world issues while the left fixate on name-calling to distract from their failings. Rather than a defence, therefore, it becomes a strategy of attack, signalling that the claim itself is too ridiculous to dignify a proper response.

This notion is reinforced through humour and sarcasm, where claims of fascism and other negative attributions become a source of entertainment rather than something to engage with seriously. The following quote is accompanied by an image of an article in newspaper *la Repubblica*, which links Meloni with fascism through policy priorities beginning with M and Mussolini's initial. Describing the quote as 'DELUSIONAL' in capitals, she mocks:

The **letter M is fascist.** Anyone with a **surname beginning with M refers to Mussolini.**

God, **what a mess.** What does that mean then for **Minister Messa or President Mattarella?!**  
 (Meloni, FB/IN/TW, 25/07)

Suggesting that this could also apply to politicians associated with the centre-left, Meloni uses mitigation to play down the suggestion itself and avoid engagement with what is being said. Exasperation conveyed through the final emoji not only serves to ridicule the media and left but the very thought of fascism itself and its contemporary presence within Italian politics.

In another post, Meloni (FB/IN, 05/09) takes negative adjectives used to describe her and places them alongside her policies, depicted in modes to appear reasonable and mask their exclusionary foundations:

- 'Inhuman. Meloni's programme includes a naval blockade to stop boats arriving (and deaths at sea).' [...]

- 'Backwards. Meloni wants to invest in improving birth rates.'

- 'Cruel. Meloni posts a video (which is completely anonymous and used by the press) to sympathise with the victim and denounce sexual violence and the state of insecurity in our cities.' [...]

Well, yes, I lay claim to all of it.

And if that's all they've got on us, we're obviously on the right path.

Meloni's sarcasm undermines condemnation of her policies, placing critical commentary in contrast to motivations portrayed as honourable: e.g. where immigration measures protect migrants. The idea that there is a concerted effort to create controversy feeds into the notion that the Lega and Fdl represent common-sense positions in contrast to those demonising them.

### **Self-positioning as centre-right**

The term 'centre-right' (*centrodestra*) forms a key part of post-fascist discourse and represents perhaps the most explicit attempt to self-position as mainstream. While enjoying the heritage of the 'centre-right' label from previous right-wing alliances (Bruno, 2022), the Lega and Fdl also attempted to shape it in several ways. Notably, the term 'centre-right' features within the top 15 keywords for each group (see Table 2). With 258 total occurrences (178 for Salvini/Lega; 80 for Meloni/Fdl) and similar rates (1.3 and 1.6 occurrences per thousand words respectively), its prominence indicates a concerted strategy to appear more mainstream.

Beyond frequency, a finer-grain analysis reveals how both parties attempted to shape the term 'centre-right' in three interconnected ways; first, as a patriotic alternative to the left; second, as post-ideological; finally, as common sense and rational. All depended to varying extents on a populist logic which depicted the centre-right as representing the *vox populi*. Regarding a patriotic alternative, both the Lega and Fdl depicted a 'centre-right' united by a love for Italy juxtaposed against a left united only by its hatred for the right:

On the **left, chaos and in-fighting!** The **Lega and centre-right** move forward together, focused only on **what is good for Italy**. (Salvini, FB/IN/TW, 07/08)

**Them, united by hate** for the centre-right. **Us, moved by love** for Italy. (Fdl, FB/IN/TW, 07/08)

These posts, published on the same day, create clear in- and out-groups via the 'ideological square' (van Dijk, 2015, pp.73–4), with similar contrasting qualities ascribed to each group. With 'united' one of the principal collocates of 'centre-right', positive attributions of this political positioning were reinforced. While claiming the ideological mantle of centre-right, both parties also purported to represent 'post-ideological' politics. This depended on a populist logic of being beyond left and right via discourses of common sense. Indeed, a common refrain of both parties was the need to 'say no' to 'the ideological left'. This can be illustrated via Fdl's claims about opposition to nuclear reactors:

Italy is starved of energy: we must cut through the **red tape** and stop the **ideological environmentalism** of the left. (Fdl, FB/IN/TW, 13/08)

Here, they represent reason and rationality in contrast to those harming the nation through ideological pursuits. Closely related to this, they claim to be a common-sense alternative representing the will of the people, or *vox populi*:

On our side we have the **Italian people**, who on 25 September will **respond to the left, to the mainstream**, and to their **miserable attempts to demonise us**. (Meloni, FB/IN/TW, 03/08)

These examples underscore the paradox that emerges through their dual claim both to represent the centre-right (and therefore the mainstream) and be in opposition to the mainstream. This contradiction emphasises their attempt to balance insider/outsider status, of which post-fascist logic forms a key part.

### **Recontextualising fascism**

Despite explicit attempts to distance from fascism and construct a more moderate image, both parties maintained clear links to their ideological heritage through the language of their social media campaigns. By examining dog-whistle references to the fascist era and violent anti-immigration imagery, we can see how the exclusionary foundations on which fascism is built remain central.

### **Fascist dog whistles**

The respective slogans of the Lega and Fdi, '*Credo*' (Faith/Believe) and '*Pronti*' (Ready) – with the latter often complemented by '*Risollevere*' (Resurrect) – illustrate the centrality of fascist dog-whistles to their election campaigns.<sup>11</sup> Such slogans hark back to Italy's fascist era while simultaneously claiming to 'look to the future'.

We are **ready to resurrect Italy** with a **strong, united government** that takes care of the **interests of our nation and of Italians**. (Fdi, FB/IN, 19/08)

The portrayal of resurrection here is tied to the vision of a strong Italy and invokes fascist themes vis-à-vis the strength and unity of the nation. Meloni claims to embody such characteristics and reinforces a message of 'Italy and Italians First'. As for the Lega, Salvini (FB/IN, 13/08) pronounced via his social media channels:

It saddens me to see a **society without roots, without identity** and quality, which **believes in nothing**. Belief is vital and drives everything. '*Credo*' is **an act of secular faith** in a beautiful politics and in the beauty of democracy.

Such passages are central to recontextualising fascist tropes, with the term 'rootless' widely recognised as a dog-whistle antisemitic trope (Waxman et al., 2022). Although '*credo*', '*pronti*' and '*risollevere*' were not always attached to issues directly related to far-right politics, prominent articulation patterns suggest their common usage to invoke nationalist pride and anti-immigration positions. '*Credo*', as the Lega's campaign slogan, occurred 2166 times across various topics. However, in hashtag form, the following were most prominent:

#I BELIEVE IN **ITALIANS** (115 occurrences)

#I BELIEVE IN #FLATTAX AND TAX STABILITY (67)

#I BELIEVE THAT **NO ITALIAN SHOULD BE LEFT BEHIND** (49)

#I BELIEVE IN A CLEAN ITALY COMBINING GROWTH AND ENVIRONMENT: YES TO NUCLEAR ENERGY (42)

#I BELIEVE IN A **SAFE ITALY: STOP BOAT ARRIVALS!** (40)

With multiple invocations of Italy and Italians, '*credo*' was clearly used as a way to galvanise nationalist sentiment. The Fdi slogan '*pronti*' served similar ends, which when used in

the form 'ready to' was accompanied by five main verbs: *resurrect* (52), *defend* (31), *restore* (18), *protect* (13) and *support* (10). The most common uses of each illustrate similar patterns to 'credo': *resurrect Italy* (50), *defend borders* (10), *restore the strength of popular will* (7) and *restore safety in our cities* (7), *protect the self-employed* (7) and *support businesses* (10). Both the final 'credo' hashtag and following quote illustrate the exclusionary base of these slogans:

We are **#ready to defend Italy's borders**. Fdi wants a #navalblockade: a European mission in agreement with North African states [...] **no to migration managed by criminals** and human traffickers. (Meloni, TW, 19/08)

The discursive links drawn between migration, war and criminality are given closer attention in the following section.

### *Violent anti-immigration discourse*

Migration was central to campaign discourse, as evidenced by the keyness results (see Table 2). It provides one of the clearest examples of recontextualisation vis-à-vis creating a 'pure nation' through the racist exclusion of 'outsiders' (el-Ojeili, 2019, p. 1153). A key focal point for this racist hostility were Lampedusa boat arrivals. Consistently portrayed via war metaphors, our analysis aligns with work on invader/enemy metaphors about migration (Taylor, 2021, p. 474):

**IMMIGRATION EMERGENCY: THE FINAL ASSAULT** (Lega, FB/TW, 12/08)

#SALVINI: **FIGHTING AND BOAT ARRIVALS** AS SICILY IS **UNDER SIEGE** THANKS TO PD-55 DISASTERS (Lega, FB/TW, 18/08)

A proper State must **defend its borders**. No more illegal immigration. (Fdi, FB/IN/TW, 17/09)

Here, metaphors invoke notions of real danger by 'shap[ing] and constrain[ing] understanding' (Bougher, 2012, p. 145) within the semantic field of war, while nomination strategies (e.g. 'final assault', 'siege') serve to intensify the sense of peril and threat. Both parties made some limited attempts to suggest their opposition was out of concern for migrants' welfare (e.g. Meloni, FB/IN/TW, 27/07; Salvini, FB/IN/TW, 28/07) – another distancing strategy – but the consistency of invading-army imagery served to demonise, undermining any such humanitarian claim.

Both parties portrayed themselves as protectors of Italy, fighting the threat. This is encapsulated in the Lega's simple Tweet (10/09), 'MISSION: STOP BOAT ARRIVALS!', as though they were conducting a military operation. Salvini repeatedly used the term 'Blitz' to describe turning up unannounced in Lampedusa to 'uncover the reality' of migration (Salvini, FB/IN, 31/08) and 'defend Italy's borders' (Salvini, FB/IN/TW, 12/09).

**BOAT ARRIVAL EMERGENCY. MATTEO IS ALREADY PREPARING THE BLITZ ON LAMPEDUSA** (Lega, FB/TW, 26/07)

**Blitz on the hotspot** at #Lampedusa: look at the SHAMEFUL conditions in the centre. (Salvini, FB/IN/TW, 31/08)

Clear links to war (specifically to Nazism via *Blitzkrieg*) were compounded by Salvini's self-depiction as a commander leading a military operation. Such claims further cement the

lineage between violence, war and hegemonic masculinity (Steinert, 2003, p. 281), qualities that were traditionally lauded in fascism (Bellassai, 2005).

Meanwhile, both parties repeatedly associated immigration and crime, with top collocates of \*migra\* including '*clandestina*' and '*illegale*' (illegal), '*sicurezza*' (safety) and '*emergenza*' (emergency).

**Illegal immigrants and fake refugees, drug dealers and rapists: send them all home** from 25 September!!! (Salvini, FB/IN/TW, 24/07)

Violent nomination strategies in list-form create sequential associations, whereby those entering the country are depicted as doing so for nefarious ends. Relying on entrenched racist myths of Black criminality (Gilroy, 2008) and Muslim violence (Kumar, 2012), the implied (and sometimes explicitly stated) identities of the perpetrators served to construct a clearly racialised threat. Both parties used individual crimes reported in the media as an intensification strategy, with Salvini particularly prolific in this respect:

They've **taken over an old people's home to deal drugs**. Can you **guess who? Illegal immigrants**. DEPORTATION. Immediately. (Salvini, FB/IN, 21/07)

**Again** in Emilia, **again** someone is **raped, again** by an **immigrant, again** a woman's life ruined. We can stop **them**, indeed we must. (Salvini, FB/IN/TW, 23/08)

The rhetorical question suggests an obvious answer, thus racializing all immigrants as criminals, while repetition of 'again' implies a regular occurrence and builds on common tropes of femonationalism (Farris, 2012). In each case, the identity of the perpetrator(s) is portrayed as an explanation for the act. With Salvini vowing to stop 'them', a collective threat is constructed, drawing boundaries between 'good Italians' and 'bad immigrants'.

When criticised by opponents about weaponising suffering, both parties claimed to simply support the victims:

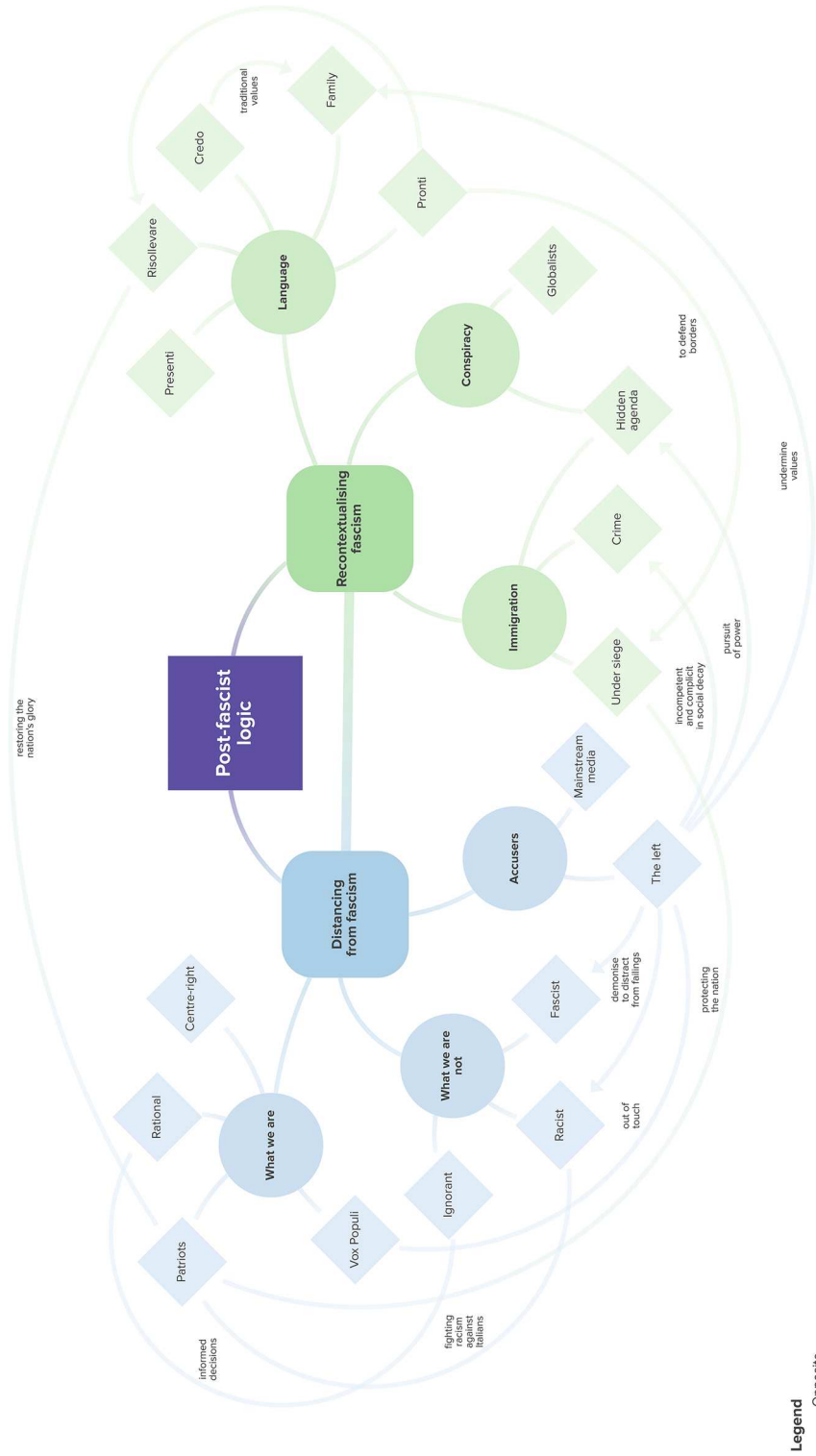
I am frankly ashamed of political leaders who **use an incident of rape to attack me** and **don't offer a word of sympathy for the victim**, clearly through **fear** of having to face up to the **security emergency exacerbated by mass illegal immigration**. (Meloni, FB/IN, 22/08)

The **left** are **incapable of sympathy** for victims if the **rapist is an illegal immigrant**. (Meloni, FB/IN, 23/08)

Meloni juxtaposes her purported concern for the victim not only with supposed indifference from the left but a conscious failure to engage based on the identity of the perpetrator. This hints towards a broader conspiracy narrative, a theme the following section examines in greater detail.

### ***A combined narrative of left-wing conspiracy***

The following section examines how the two sides of the post-fascist dyad come together to emphasise a combined narrative of left-wing conspiracy (see Figure 2). This narrative combines distancing and recontextualising through claims of victimhood based on 'lies' against them and self-positioning as 'centre-right'. There are several steps to this logic of conspiracy against the nation. The first is that allegations of fascism form part of a concerted witch-hunt by the left to demonise the right:



**Figure 2.** Intersections between distancing and recontextualising.

What's the difference between **the Italian left** and **the Italian patriots**? Simple, **the patriots always defend Italy**, while the left go around **discrediting the Nation to defend its own interests [...] spread[ing] fear and lies about Fratelli d'Italia**, saying that the **victory of the centre-right will spell catastrophe for Italy and Europe**. (Meloni, FB/IN, 19/08)

This illustrates how the sanctity of the nation is said to be under threat from the left, whose sole concern is their own self-advancement, placed in contrast to the noble pursuits of the 'patriots'.

The next step is the notion that the left are racist against Italians. The far right claim that accompanying accusations of racism are unfounded and that instead it is the left who are the real racists by disadvantaging Italians compared to migrants. Outright denials of racism came in response to anti-racism protests held after the murder of Nigerian street vendor Alida Ogorchuku and a subsequent case of physical assault against Nigerian woman Beauty Davis:

Italians are the **least racist people** in the world. Some on the left instead have decided to **instrumentalise that poor man** massacred at Civitanova Marche as part of their electoral campaign [...] **every death deserves respect regardless of skin colour**. (Salvini, TW, 02/08)

Drawing on colourblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2006) and a topos of justice to play into the far-right narrative of 'All Lives Matter', notions of reverse-racism are invoked, where the left are depicted as the 'real racists' towards Italians.

Part of this active unfavourable treatment towards Italians is said to be compounded by the left hiding real migration levels which forms the next step of the combined narrative. This is encapsulated in the following post:

THE LEFT ARE **HIDING THE IMMIGRANT BOMB** (Lega, FB/TW/IN, 30/08)

In this scenario the left are active assailants, planting and concealing a dangerous weapon which could explode at any moment. Claims of deceit extend also to the amount of support given to those entering the country:

Is it really possible that Italy has to take care of those who **pose a danger to public safety**? Another crazy EU ruling, this time forcing us to guarantee food, accommodation and subsidies to **immigrants who are responsible for 'violent crimes and acts'**. The **left are silent**, but we will continue to **demand dignity for Italian citizens**. (Meloni, FB/IG, 12/08)

Repeating the association between immigration and crime, particular outrage is expressed at the left's 'silence' on the disadvantaging of Italians.

This in turn is linked to the next step of the combined narrative consisting of moral panics of social decay, whereby the failures of the left have seen traditional family values and law and order come under attack from outside forces. Meloni frames the election as a choice between two different sides of the 'culture wars'.

**We are conservatives**, because we want to bring with us into the future everything we've loved and continue to love: our history, our traditions, **belonging to a gender, the possibility for a child to have a mother and a father** [...] and the left, what does it want for women? [...] **the flattening of biological sex**, a new patriarchal model that **makes women vanish and destroys motherhood**. (Meloni, FB, 05/09)

A combined narrative is created by euphemising language around 'conservative' visions while at the same time recontextualising fascist tropes around the traditional family and



gender essentialism. This final step brings the logic of conspiracy to the solution they propose: a united ‘centre-right’ resurrecting the nation.

## Conclusion

With the importance of positive self-representation in constructing political identities, we argue that post-fascism forms a key logic through which far-right actors seek to mainstream themselves. It ties into ideas of a ‘postracial’ society (Lentin, 2020; Titley, 2019), where fascism is ‘frozen’ in time and no longer relevant, in turn serving to legitimise exclusionary positions through denying association (Richardson, 2017). We can see these dynamics play out in the context of Italy, where two far-right parties of differing heritage (one with direct lineage to neo-fascism) ridicule any notion that fascism continues to pose a threat while at the same time articulating oppressive and authoritarian positions through fascist dog-whistles. As such, we point to the dyad of post-fascism, which relies on a dual yet interconnected message of distancing and recontextualising. On the one hand, the far right in Italy attempted to distance themselves from fascism by deriding any accusation/accuser linking them to it and claiming a centrist position; while on the other, they remained tied to the ideological foundations of fascism through their expression of similar language and positions. Crucially, these two messages come together to offer a sanitised image of the far right while at the same time retaining its exclusionary core.

These findings have broader implications for the mainstreaming of the far right, both in electoral and discursive terms. First, it may allow parties to appear more acceptable in their apparent rejection of extreme-right politics despite continued discriminatory practices. This may contribute to greater prospects for electoral success, as achieved by FdI in Italy. However, we must not limit our understanding of mainstreaming simply to electoral results, because this forms just one part of a broader political picture. Critically, post-fascist logic can serve to normalise far-right discourses as ‘common sense’ and render them seemingly uncontroversial to deeply harmful effect for those who are targeted. It is for these reasons that serious engagement with the logic of post-fascism is needed when assessing the potential threat of far-right politics. While our analysis is situated within the Italian case, where the memory of fascism is particularly potent, our findings indicate the potential impact of self-referential strategies among far-right actors more broadly. Where talking ‘about’ the far right can have significant implications for its mainstreaming, it is crucial that we address and challenge such logics across a range of contexts.

## Notes

1. These include acknowledging populism as secondary to nativism (Sengul, 2022) and identifying key recurring features of far-right politics.
2. The term was used by a group of intellectuals linked with Bologna’s journal *Il Mulino* who called themselves the first post-fascist generation of Italian intellectuals and emphasised Italy’s transition to democracy (Maccaferri, 2016).
3. Calculated ambivalence ‘allows for possible ambiguous interpretations and is open for at least two opposite meanings’ (Engel & Wodak, 2013, pp. 73–74)
4. We scraped posts using ExportComments software (<https://exportcomments.com/>)
5. Proper nouns, dates, hashtags (e.g., #25settebrevotoLega), etc. were removed as appropriate, for instance where their absence from the reference corpus would inflate their keyness

score. Even with the recommended set  $p$ -value of less than 0.000001 (Baker, 2006, p. 127), the list was still of unmanageable length, so the top 50 results are provided.

6. Each term is given in both Italian and English. Context is crucial in producing accurate translations (Soku, 2010, p. 3) so in its absence, the most common meanings of the terms in this case are provided.
7. Any emboldened results denote a term that is shared across both lists, either in identical or similar format.
8. Terms of particular interest for our analysis are indicated through italicisation.
9. A \* is used to show that various beginnings and endings to the stem could be included (e.g., \*fascis\* could include *anti-fascist*, *fascists*, *fascism*, etc.).
10. The examples in Figure 1 are by no means exhaustive.
11. As Duggan (2013, p. 104) notes, 'the idea that fascism was religious in character and was driven by faith, idealism and will' was present from the outset. The 'new fascist man' was urged to be '*pronti*' (ready) to fight and/or die for the Fatherland, something commonly expressed by Mussolini (Bidussa, 2022). Both words are linked to 'resurrection' or 'palingenesis', which is a central component of fascism (el-Ojeili, 2019).
12. The idea of 'family' was included because it featured in the keyword list and we wanted to remain attentive to any potential anti-LGBTQIA+ narratives.

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