



Sofia Ventura

# The Profiteers of Fear?

Right-wing Populism and the COVID-19 Crisis  
in Europe  
**Italy**

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### About this publication

The extreme right wing of the Lega and Fratelli d'Italia, led by Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni, today has the quasi-monopoly of the opposition. In the months of the outbreak and management of the pandemic, the management of the opposition role was ambiguous and confused: however, an attitude of non-cooperation prevailed. The style and rhetoric of the two leaders often evoked populist frames and themes, particularly immigration and Europe, naturally suited for the pandemic situation, although Meloni tried to show a less extreme profile. The growing consensus of her party and the decreasing consensus of Salvini's party leave open the question of the impact of the pandemic on the consensus of populist parties. What seems certain is that their traditional themes have lost strength.

### About the author

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# The Profiteers of Fear?

## Right-wing Populism and the COVID-19 Crisis in Europe Italy

Understanding the attitude of the Italian right wing populists during the months of coronavirus pandemic management requires, first and foremost, highlighting certain of their characteristics in relation to the current Italian political system.

First of all, the Italian right is made up of three parties, two on the far right – Lega and Fratelli d'Italia (Fdi), and one centre-right, Forza Italia (FI). These are personalised parties (in the case of FI we might even talk of a personal party) whose image is powerfully bound up with that of their leaders: Matteo Salvini in the case of Lega, Giorgia Meloni for Fdi, Silvio Berlusconi for FI. Whilst political and party personalisation is also a feature of the mainstream parties (Rahat and Kenig: 2018), in the case of contemporary populist parties it is based on populist leaders' claims to a direct relationship with the people or rather the »'right', 'good' or 'best' part of the people« (Urbini: 2020, 17). These parties campaigned in the last elections of 2018 as allies, although this did not stop Lega from forming a government with Movimento 5 Stelle – M5S (Italy's other populist party, though one with no clear location on the right-left axis). After the governmental crisis triggered by Matteo Salvini in the summer of 2019 and the formation of a new governmental majority made up of Partito Democratico (PD) and M5S, the three right wing parties all moved into opposition.

In the second place, it is important to highlight that these three dominate the opposition to the government headed by Giuseppe Conte: the only other parties outside the majority are small and mainly centrist in stance. In turn, Lega and Fdi dominate the Italian right: polls in October<sup>1</sup> showed Lega with 24.8% of support, Fdi with 15.8% and FI with just 6%. In other words, the two far right parties account for almost 90% of the Italian right and over 75% of the opposition as a whole. For this reason, as we will see, the strategies of these two parties, in general and in the specific situation generated by the pandemic, can be seen as a combination of »normal« opposition and typically populist strategies, although the former inevitably have repercussions on the latter.

### THE BORDERS, IMMIGRATION, HOSTILE EUROPE AND FAKE NEWS FRAMEWORK<sup>2</sup>

Lega leader Matteo Salvini's response to the onset of the crisis, from mid-February onwards, was his usual approach focusing on protecting the borders and the dangers of immigration. Thus, on 21 February, Salvini asked the government to impose mandatory quarantine on people coming in from China and, above all, to temporarily suspend the Schengen agreement and he did so in strident propaganda on the social networks in particular, juxtaposing those who might have brought the virus in from abroad and a government incapable of defending Italy to the Italian people:

»Voluntary quarantine for those returning from China??? Are they joking??? Our people's health comes first. We're sick of a government which decides nothing.« #Contedimettiti (#Conteresign) (Twitter)

»I want to know who's coming in and out of my country. Let's shut down, seal off our borders. If anyone hasn't or won't do his duty let him answer to the people. If Conte is not capable of defending Italy and the Italians he should stand down« (Facebook).

In subsequent months, too, Salvini appealed to immigration themes in his propaganda, conjuring up an even more pressing need to shut down the borders during a pandemic. In July, at a parliamentary press conference on the subject of the new arrivals at the island of Lampedusa, he argued: »The Italian government is importing infected people. Perhaps it's a strategy to keep us in a state of emergency until the 31st of October«. Fdi leader, Giorgia Meloni, has attempted to adopt a less radical profile. When Salvini was talking about closing the borders in February, she was writing on Twitter: »The global coronavirus emergency requires seriousness, common-sense and tenacity«. But Meloni has herself never abandoned the Italian/immigrant juxtaposition in her rhetoric either. In this respect her approach has always been a juxtaposition between the Italians – neglected by the government and obliged to remain locked up at home as a result

<sup>1</sup> 5 October, SWG data.

<sup>2</sup> For this and subsequent sections my reconstruction of events and the stances and behaviours of the two right wing populist parties and their leaders refers primarily to articles in Italy's main three newspapers (Repubblica, Corriere della sera and Stampa) and a series of Bloomberg articles.

of the pandemic - and illegal immigrants left unsupervised, potentially infectious and prioritised by the government over Italians. According to an analysis carried out in June 2020 into the themes dealt with by the principal Italian political leaders on Twitter and Facebook, immigration was the subject of only 7% of posts and tweets, and almost exclusively by Meloni and Salvini. For their fans immigration remains the most popular theme (Buccione: 2020).

Europe has also been in the two populist leaders' firing line, however diverse their approaches to it. In particular both have resolutely opposed Italy's recourse to European Stability Mechanism (ESM) funds, considered too costly in terms of the pre-conditions required, despite these latter now having been reduced to a requirement that the funds be used to deal with the pandemic only. Once again the leaders of the extreme right have raised the spectre of a hostile Europe obliging the Italian government to undertake costly and damaging policies for its citizens, such as the wealth tax or the raising of the retirement age. On this theme, the attack on the government has reached surreal proportions. It has, in fact, not been a clash between supporters and opponents of the ESM but between a government which claimed to have no intention of applying for it (it should not be forgotten that Conte's governmental majority comprises M5s which is as contrary to the ESM as Lega and FdI) and Meloni and Salvini who accused it of lying. Meloni has adopted a more moderate approach to the Recovery Fund. The FdI leader considered the EU agreements reached at the 17-21 July meeting to be positive for Italy, whilst arguing that even better results could have been obtained. Salvini, on the other hand, has continued on his hostility to Europe path, speaking of the Recovery Fund as a trick and comparing the European Commission to the Greek troika.

Neither Salvini nor Meloni has ever taken a negationist stance as regards the coronavirus pandemic and neither did they take part in or lend their support to the two (poorly attended) negationist demonstrations held on 5 September and 10 October in Rome, with these being attended by a coterie of diverse groups ranging from the extreme right to sovereignist, no-vax, QAnon and anti-European groups and the like. But neither have they distanced themselves explicitly from these. The first of these demonstrations was, in fact, an opportunity to turn the negationist accusation on its head and against the governmental majority and many of its exponents, accusing them of having underestimated the severity of the pandemic. As regards the protests against the government and new lockdown forecasts from Milan to Turin and Naples to Rome in late October, which followed on from infiltration by far right groups, social centres and organised crime, Meloni and Salvini did not take the same approach. While the former clearly distanced herself from these episodes of serious urban warfare, Salvini took no specific stance. It should be remembered that there is some overlapping with the far right at the activist level in his party.

In March both leaders supported and disseminated the international fake news circulating on the social networks according to which the virus was artificially created in a Chinese lab in Wuhan. In his public behaviour, moreover, Salvini has re-

peatedly demonstrated a certain contempt of governmental virus control guidelines, especially the use of masks, for example, appearing in public with his fans, especially during his summer rallies, after lockdown came to end, minus protection and taking part on 26 July 2020 in a conference organised at the Senate by a Lega MP which downplayed the seriousness of coronavirus and criticised pandemic containment measures, including those adopted in the most critical phase. On this latter occasion Salvini ostentatiously refused to wear a mask, refusing an explicit request to do so by a Senate employee. This, however, in no way constrained him from staging simultaneously dramatic and tasteless scenes, such as his late March prayer for the dead intoned together with famous TV presenter Barbara D'Urso in a Sunday afternoon TV entertainment broadcast.

## THE RIGHT-WING OPPOSITION: THE RHETORIC

Governmental leaders are not the only ones putting forward and communicating an interpretation of the situation at times of crisis (meaning-making). In fact their actions are taking place within a context in which other players expressing different positions and interests are putting forward potentially alternative interpretations in promoting their narratives (Ansell, Boin and t'Hart: 2014). The leaders of Italy's far right who, as we have seen, virtually monopolise the opposition to the Conte government, have sought to generate a narrative around the crisis and the strategies to be adopted in it. In so doing they have attempted to find a balance between the need to distinguish themselves from the government and demonstrate an identity and the need to appear responsible, given the seriousness of the situation. The outcome has been extremely confused, however, especially in the case of Matteo Salvini. This latter, as we have seen, has sought to respond to the pandemic within his usual framework: closed doors, juxtaposition between immigrants and Italians, hostility to Europe, scepticism regarding expert advice. At the same time he has sought to offer his own solutions and on this plane he has shown himself to be extremely erratic, lacking a clear awareness of the situation, what the literature defines as »sense-making«. This latter has effectively been absent and the upshot has been contradictory messages. In particular, his diatribes against the government have alternated demands for closure and then reopening: from the closing of the borders in late February to an invitation to the government a few days later to get Italy back to work, even inviting foreigners to come to Italy for their holidays and then new demands for closure on 20 March and demands to reopen churches on Easter day. He then supported the demands of the president of the Lombard region, Attilio Fontana (expression of a centre-right majority very close to Salvini), to bring all restrictions to an end on 4 May, with Fontana having himself changed direction frequently. Salvini has come to Fontana's defence at various moments of tension between the government and the Lombard president. It is significant that he has not done the same for a further Lega regional president, the Veneto president Luca Zaia, who, by contrast with Lombardy, has been extremely successful in containing the pandemic in his re-

gion thanks to ‘testing, tracing treatment’ policies put forward by virologist Crisanti, which have been significantly lacking in the rest of Italy.

Lastly Salvini has sought to keep a high public and media profile with constant – extremely unrealistic and questionable – proposals designed to demonstrate his empathy with the difficulties of the Italian people, such as »war« bond issue and building and tax write-offs. Giorgia Meloni has avoided following Salvini in his impromptu calls for opening or closing down (arguing against Easter opening, for example) and alongside her personal rallying cries she has preferred more circumspect criticism around issues such as the legal tools used by the government and extensions of the state of emergency. However, on the distributional proposal terrain she, too, has opted for a one-upmanship game, with proposals of immediate media resonance such as one thousand euro payments to the most needy.

### THE RIGHT-WING OPPOSITION: CO-OPERATION OR NON-COOPERATION?

The government’s approach to the pandemic has been little inclined to take advantage of outside input and contributions, including by the opposition, in the face of the latter’s preoccupation with highlighting its own specific profile. And this despite a more conciliatory approach than those of Salvini, Meloni and Silvio Berlusconi. In actual fact, in the first phase of the crisis, and until early April, a series of meetings between the government and the three opposition parties took place to consider a number of proposals made to the Conte government. This phase foundered, however, after accusations of a lack of governmental openness by the three parties. This same period witnessed Matteo Salvini whipping up popular opinion around the idea, which he himself mooted, of a new crisis government resting on a wide majority, a hypothesis ultimately held to be unworkable by both the majority parties and FdI.

The absence of a government-opposition partnership, which did not stop certain opposition suggestions from being incorporated, however non-explicitly, into governmental measures, equally did not stop the right and centre-right from voting in favour of an emergency € 55 billion budgetary addition, approved on 30 April 2020. The vote left the opposition with little choice, as rejecting a necessary measure for a country on its knees would have been difficult to justify to its electorate. Subsequently, however, Lega, Fratelli d’Italia and Forza Italia all voted against various laws enacting governmental legislative decrees in COVID-related health and economic matters, including certain significant decrees such as the Cura Italia decree of March 17 designed to reinforce the national health service and provide financial support to families, workers and firms, the 19 May Decreto Rilancio and the 16 May decree setting out the various steps in the direction of reopening.

It should, however, be underlined, that a close examination of parliamentary activity reveals a situation which, to some extent, differs from that put forward by Giorgia Meloni and

Matteo Salvini and other political figures close to them representing, together with Salvini, the party’s most anti-establishment soul. A reading, for example, of the voting statements of the two party groups reveals a very different rhetoric, one lacking the two leaders’ strident and propagandistic tones and paying greater attention to concrete policy aspects. Criticisms generally revolved around organisational aspects of the government’s management of the pandemic and the subsequent steps to be taken for reopening and on the government’s fiscal, economic and employee and company support decisions. A common theme is accusations of the government’s lack of openness to opposition participation. In the case of Lega these differences also reveal approaches differing to some extent from those of its leader which, after many months of the coronavirus crisis witnessing a constant fall in support for the Lega, were consolidating their position. Lastly, it is by no means irrelevant that, as often occurs in the Italian political system, many opposition amendments, revolving less around general policy approaches than around micro-decisions of a distributional character, found their way into the legal forms taken by decrees.<sup>3</sup>

### HAS COVID WEAKENED ITALIAN POPULISM?

Since the advent of the crisis Salvini’s popularity has continued to hover around the 30% figure (with a slight drop from 33% to 31% from March to September 2020) of the pre-pandemic period, in the months following on from his exit from the government. In July 2019, when he was still in government, his popularity was 40%.<sup>4</sup> His party, on the other hand, has clearly lost popularity: from 32.9% in the pre-crisis period to 30.9% at the outset of the crisis (3rd March) to 24.4% in mid-October 2020.<sup>5</sup>

Does this mean that coronavirus has weakened Italy’s main populist party? Pundits and scholars have repeatedly underlined the existence of a common theme in the approaches to coronavirus by the populist parties and leaders of the various democratic countries. It is an approach influenced by the same typically populist frameworks at work in Salvini and Meloni’s rhetoric (Cliffe: 2020). The populists’ rhetorical framework has, however, been revealed to be unsuited to the reassurance and certainties asked of political leaders by citizens in their management of crisis and the way this is put across (Boin, t’Hart, Stern and Sundelius: 2017). Salvini’s insistence on the classic immigrant versus Italian citizen framework, for example, has turned out to be ineffective in popularity terms. As has been observed, »COVID knows no borders, be they physical, cultural, ethnic, national or other« (Cliffe: 2020, 30). And neither does it distinguish between a benign people and the establishment (ibid.). Quite the contrary, the corollary to the people-establishment juxtaposi-

<sup>3</sup> I would like to thank the two lower parliamentary house officials who helped me to navigate my way through the complex parliamentary crisis phases, providing information, suggestions and interpretations.

<sup>4</sup> Ipsos, s.r.l. data

<sup>5</sup> SWG data.

tion, i.e. anti-intellectualism (Bufacchi: 2020) and thus a distrust of science and the value of competence in general, has probably worked against the Italian populist leader (and others) precisely in the light of the need felt by citizens living with pandemic (in all its health, economic and everyday life connotations) for capable and competent leaders, crisis managers, doctors and scientists to rely on (Pusic: 2020, 14).

However, the bond between populism and attitudes towards the pandemic crisis are not as one directional as this, as well-known populism scholar Cas Mudde has, for example, noted in a Guardian article. Mudde (2020) has detected differences in the behaviours of populist leaders (both governmental and otherwise) although certain common features of the best known cases - from Trump to Johnson - have given the impression of an approach common to all populist forces. The differences notwithstanding, however, it would seem to be possible to detect the widespread presence within these forces, those identifying with the far right of the political spectrum, less of common specific opinions on how to deal with the crisis, than of consolidated stereotypes on immigrants and immigration which are the main populist and far right themes (Mudde: 2019). There is no doubt that these stereotypes, which worked so well for Salvini in the period of his rise, have now left him high and dry. At the same time, however, it should be noted that, despite using this same framework, his ally/rival Giorgia Meloni has seen her popularity improve slightly, making her marginally more popular than Salvini<sup>6</sup> and, above all, leading to a clear growth in support for her party. In fact Fdl's popularity rose from 10.4% on 14th January to 12.1% on 3rd March and 16% in October:<sup>7</sup> Salvini's populist vote has, to some extent, shifted to Meloni. There may be many explanations of this and not all of them are bound up with the crisis. But there is no doubt that Meloni's use of certain populist themes has been accompanied by an attempt to appear more responsible, reasonable and open to debate, with a clear objective of adapting to the changing situation. The Italian case thus demonstrates the weakness of the populist rhetorical framework in the COVID crisis situation, although the various leaders have managed this in different ways and with varying degrees of success.

Matteo Salvini has come across as trapped within a political discourse wholly designed to mobilise conflict, rage and the identification of internal and external scapegoats as well as obsessed with recouping the visibility lost after his exit from the government. It is important to observe, in conclusion, that many in his party are aware of this, including his number two, Giancarlo Giorgetti. At the moment of writing (October 2020) a less heated approach by Salvini can also be observed and an attempt, at least by some Lega sectors, to orient the party, including its parliamentary wing, in a more co-operative direction, as votes on the budgetary addition of 14 October 2020 show, with the Lega having abstained. It should, however, be observed that populist leaderships such as those of Salvini and Meloni rely for much of their popularity on anti-establishment feelings and an appeal to identity-based,

constant juxtaposition, themes. In the interplay between being reasonable to adjust to the status quo and evoking one's identity themes, it would be ingenuous to believe that a willingness to abandon these latter exists but rather these latter survive with the emphasis on them varying in the various political phases. At the same time, certain arguments, such as criticisms of the government in the name of the rights and freedoms put in jeopardy by crisis politics would appear highly contradictory in the light of the support given to political systems, such as Hungary and Poland, in the process of destroying these rights and freedoms (Manucci: 2020, 31). This contradiction is even more evident given the importance attributed by the populist right, Salvini and Meloni comprised, to security themes (Mudde: 2019) at the expense of rights. In my opinion, this may constitute an interesting sign, not only of the »subtle« character of populist »ideology« (Mudde: 2017), but also its changing and opportunistic nature. Or at least this is what Italy in the coronavirus period might suggest.

<sup>6</sup> In Ipsos 26th September data Meloni's popularity stood at 35% as against Salvini's 31%.

<sup>7</sup> SWG data.

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# EUROPA

## Right-wing populism and the COVID-19 crisis

In many countries the COVID-19 crisis had initially led to increased trust in government. The restrictions to personal freedoms, curfews, restrictions on social contacts, the closure of large segments of the economy as well as the widening of executive powers in many countries was largely accepted and supported by the public. However, frustration and distrust of government have been increasing the longer the restrictions have been in place. Some countries, such as Germany, witnessed large demonstrations against the counter measures. Moreover, the wide dissemination of fake news and conspiracy theories are influencing the public debate on how to handle the pandemic.

Reports from Sweden, Finland, Italy, France, Spain, and Germany – all countries with large or growing right-wing populist movements and parties explore the question, if right-wing populism in Europe has been able to benefit from the Corona-crisis. A synopsis interprets and classifies the developments in the individual countries in a comparative perspective.

Further information on the project can be found here:  
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