

# THE SOCIAL REPRESENTATION OF MIGRANTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC. AN ITALIAN CASE STUDY ON HOSTILE NARRATIVES AND VISUAL POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

<http://dx.doi.org/10.56754/0718-4867.1502.139>

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Recibido el 2022-04-15

Revisado el 2022-09-01

Aceptado el 2022-09-12

Publicado el 2022-11-02

## Abstract

The present research investigates the social categorization and construction of immigrants in Italy during the Covid-19 pandemic. For this purpose, hostile political narratives deployed on Twitter by three monitored Italian political forces (Matteo Salvini - La Lega party - Giorgia Meloni - Fratelli d'Italia - and the neofascist movement Casa Pound) and their visual representation of migration and migrants were analyzed. Following a defined theoretical framework on the phenomena of othering, moral panic, processes of social exclusion, and the role the “new” digital media play in such processes - especially in terms of negative and emotional political communication - the analysis deconstructs and identifies the founding

elements of the political narratives on migrants, focusing on their visual component. The review of the sociological literature on the construction and representation of diversity and otherness introduces the empirical case study of the digital and visual communication monitoring performed from March 2020 to December 2021. Through the qualitative analysis of the visual content retrieved from the tweets collected, recurrent themes and communication strategies were investigated, determining the identification of four macro-categories upon which the construction and representation of immigrants and migration was carried out in the chosen context.

**Keywords:** Social Media/Social Networking Sites, Marginalization, Social Representations, Digital Communication, Politic/Policy/Politics, Symbolic Power, Case Studies.

*Artículo*

## **LA REPRESENTACIÓN SOCIAL DE LOS MIGRANTES DURANTE LA PANDEMIA DE COVID-19. UN ESTUDIO DE CASO ITALIANO SOBRE NARRATIVAS HOSTILES Y COMUNICACIÓN POLÍTICA VISUAL**

### **Resumen**

El presente trabajo investiga los procesos de categorización y de construcción social de los inmigrantes en Italia durante la pandemia del Covid-19, a través de un análisis de las narrativas políticas hostiles desplegadas en Twitter por tres fuerzas políticas italianas monitorizadas (Matteo Salvini, el partido La Lega, Giorgia Meloni, Fratelli d'Italia y el movimiento neofascista Casa Pound) y su representación visual de la migración y de los inmigrantes. Siguiendo el marco teórico sobre los fenómenos de la alteridad, del pánico moral, de los procesos de exclusión social y el papel que los "nuevos" medios digitales juegan en dichos procesos – especialmente en términos de comunicación política negativa y emocional – el análisis deconstruye e identifica los elementos fundantes de las narrativas políticas sobre los migrantes, centrándose en particular en su componente visual. La revisión de la literatura sociológica sobre la construcción y la representación de la diversidad y de la alteridad introduce el estudio de caso empírico del monitoreo de la comunicación digital y visual realizado entre marzo de 2020 y diciembre de 2021. A través del análisis cualitativo del contenido visual recuperado de los tweets recogidos, se investigan los temas recurrentes y las estrategias de comunicación, identificando cuatro macro categorías a partir de las cuales se realizó la construcción y la representación de los migrantes y de la migración en el contexto elegido.

**Palabras clave:** redes sociales, migración, representaciones sociales, comunicación digital, Política/ políticas, poder simbólico, caso de estudio.

## Introduction

The role of mass media in representing, at times distorting, social reality has long been discussed in communication research (McQuail, 2001; Cohen, 2002; Binotto & Bruno 2018). Like the author Carlos del Valle (2021) reminds us, indeed, a lot has been said about the roles, the functions, and the effects of the media industry on the construction of social reality, from the relationship between media discourses and power to the production of constructed representations of reality.

Even more today, in what is generally called the digital era, processes of construction of social reality through media discourse have multiplied with the development of social networking (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Like Couldry and Hepp (2017) point out, with the introduction of social media platforms from the mid-2000s: “media are now much more than specific channels of centralised content: they comprise platforms which, for many humans, literally are the space where, through communication, they enact social life” (p. 2) The social world is therefore interwoven with the (social) media. Textual and audio-visual information, shared today for the most part on social media platforms, constitute an invaluable source material to describe and understand 'what is happening' in the attempt to make sense of the world's complexity. At the same time, social media platforms are the place where 'common sense' is collected, filtered, reproduced, and transformed into an objective version of reality (Lago, 2005).

Communication is the set of practices through which we make sense of our world and build arrangements for coordinating our behaviour, through that process that Berger and Luckman call the *social construction of reality* (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Within that process people constantly create, through their actions and interactions, a shared reality that is at the same time objectively factual and subjectively significant (Wallace & Wolf, 2008). The communicative dimension is therefore of great relevance in shaping the ways in which the social world is constructed and how individuals construct the social world as meaningful (Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

Narrations, indeed, whether big or small, produce common and shared scenarios that orient and enable social action, guaranteeing unity within society as much in its functioning as in its evolution through time (Marzo & Mori, 2019). As social reality becomes more and more complex, narratives help individuals make sense of that complexity, producing a common

imaginary of society and making the invisible visible through the construction of shared meanings and understandings.

Such a role of communication - specifically digital communication - strongly emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic, in which social media-related practices multiplied and took a central role in describing and representing the pandemic “reality” as well as its root causes. While the pandemic itself exacerbated social gaps and inequalities, exposing different segments of the population to differential degrees of vulnerability (Birnbaum, 2020), communication about the pandemic contributed to reproduce such inequalities often explaining the pandemic through processes of bordering and othering (Houtum & Naerssen, 2002; Morrison, 2018). Such processes relied, among other things, on the obsessive polarisation between “us” and “them”, based on the construction and the production of an enemy to explain and make sense of the pandemic itself.

This polarisation materialised in the connection established between international migration and the pandemic that was particularly evident in the strict limitations on international travels and cross-border movements implemented by states to protect their countries from the spread of coronavirus (Heller, 2020). Mobility restrictions applied in the framework of the Covid-19 pandemic, indeed, overlapped and reinforced the already existing hierarchical mobility regime, in which borders already functioned as instruments of differentiation and selectivity (Mau *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, the return of health as a key criterion in organising local and transnational mobility and border control, also reinforced the *migration-security nexus* directly associating migrants to the spread of the virus. As contagion containment measures overlapped with the containment of certain kinds of invasive people, producing new demarcations, divisions, and exclusions (Ticktin, 2017), the war on the virus soon converged with the war on migration (Heller, 2020). While international borders functioned as filters sorting out the desirable from the undesirable (Anderson, 2013), socio-political narrations of invasiveness sustained, supported, and legitimised exclusionary political practices. Such narrations established specific types of social and political exclusiveness, transposing the contagious virus onto and into the socially constructed “invasive otherness” of migrants, connecting and explaining the spread of the virus with the movement of certain categories of people.

Similar political narratives of invasion and the symbolic construction of migrants as a threat to social unity, national identity, and public health, were all evident features of the social and

political representations of migration displayed by the three Italian political subjects monitored for the present research: *La Lega* (The League), *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brothers of Italy) and *Casa Pound*, respectively two nationalist right-wing parties and a neofascist social movement. Through the analysis of their visual communication on Twitter from the beginning of the pandemic emergency - March 2020 to December 2021- the research used the Italian case study to show how political discourses, representations and contents created for and disseminated through social media platforms eased and supported the implementation of specific processes of social categorisation and symbolic construction of migration and migrants. The analysis was performed on a specific time span - the pandemic emergency and the development of public restriction measures – to investigate how such narrative practices situated migrants as the root causes of the spread of the virus while also legitimising *politics of exclusion* (Binotto & Bruno, 2021).

Hostile political narratives and representations deployed by the monitored parties - often based upon and reinforced by a xenophobic and populist framing of migration - served the goal of endorsing those politics of exclusion, building *ad-hoc* enemies, the migrants, on which responsibilities in terms of public health, national security and social decline were pinned. The social representation of migrants as invaders and migration as a multifaceted threat was at the core of such political narratives that also reinforced and reproduced social and political hierarchies discriminating between the established group and the outsiders (Elias, 1994). Media representations supported and disseminated social categorisations and symbolic constructions of migrants defining and using the concept of *otherness* to sustain hostile political narratives.

## **1. BUILDING ENEMIES: MIGRATION, HOSTILITY, AND PROCESSES OF SOCIAL CATEGORISATION**

### **1.1 Constructing otherness: processes of social categorisation through (digital) media-related practices**

The relationship with otherness is an inevitable element of human life and the meanings as well as the symbolic and cognitive elaborations that each individual produces about his own group and about other groups are at the basis of the definition that they give of themselves and of their social identity, as well as that of others (Tajfel, 1985). Such processes of social categorisation contribute to defining the specific place of individuals within society, also establishing the way individuals relate one to another producing shared or conflictual

identities. The characteristics of a group, in fact, acquire much of their meaning in relation to the perceptions of differences with respect to other groups. This means that the definition of a group only makes sense and acquires meaning in the presence of other groups (Tajfel, 1985). Such a cognitive mechanism of categorisation is at the basis of all social divisions between “us” and “them”, where distinctions are made between the group to which the individual belongs and the external groups to which he compares (Tajfel, 1985).

Within such processes, media discourses and political narratives strongly contribute to the construction of social identities and definition of otherness, defining and constructing social reality while also orienting public opinions towards common understandings of social and political phenomena. Narratives help individuals make sense of the increasing complexity of the social reality, producing a shared imaginary of society through the construction of shared meanings and understandings which ultimately lead towards specific definitions and constructions of reality (Pogliano, 2019). They delimit the contours of spaces by defining identities, establishing who is the insider, and who is *the other*, the outsider, as well as giving explanatory dimensions and attributions of responsibility, precluding the formation of public policies (Binotto & Bruno, 2018). Media discourses and socio-political narratives constitute indeed “the skin of the social world” (Lago, 2005, p. 15).

It is precisely upon such processes of categorisation, sustained by media-related practices and political discourses, that the connection between migration and the health emergency due to Covid-19 pandemic developed, reproducing mechanisms of social and political exclusion. In the pandemic context, such connection was socially and politically constructed through the intertwinement of images and narratives about migration with pandemic representations. These polarised narratives and framings contributed to the construction of migrants as dangerously responsible for the spread of the virus, influencing and orienting public opinion towards a determined understanding of the pandemic and its causes, while also sustaining and, to a certain extent, legitimising exclusionary politics.

Such narratives and framings are diffused and sustained by media and their practices, which play an active role in constructing social categories, identities, and distinctions. Their role in this sense is not only that of “informing” on facts and events but rather explaining them through specific lenses, configurations, and frames. Such instruments can reduce themselves to stereotyping when they address diversity and otherness: complex social facts and actors are reduced to their most “extreme”, divisive features, with the result –

sometimes the objective – of fuelling conflict theories and strengthening ideological cleavages on “hot topics” - as migration is. The categorisation and classification of otherness are deeply connected with the symbolic and communicative dimensions, in which demarcations between differentiation and belonging are drawn. Individuals are positioned within constructed social categories – who belongs where? – that are juxtaposed one against the other in asymmetrical and hierarchical distributions of meaning and power.

The construction of social categories and the stereotyping of diversity emerge with great evidence in the digital environment, characterised by the need for immediacy and hyper-simplification of the contents shared. Such simplification pursues two objectives: conveying catchy and easily understandable messages and reducing complexity adapting the content to the social network logic of programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication (Dijck & Poell, 2013). Political communication also adapted to the new media: an organic change of its language, aesthetics, and instruments that aimed at maximising users' engagement with the contents proposed - likes, comments, shares, “virality”.

The predominance of images and *visual politics* (see also section 4) follows the imperatives of immediacy and political marketing. Such a visual turn added to the process of *emotionalization* of political communication, in which strategies exploit and capitalise voters' emotions through communicative techniques borrowed from neurosciences, increasing the emotionality of the messages to the detriment of the rational and argumentative rhetoric (Garzonio, 2021). The role played by emotional leverages in political communication is of particular interest to the results of numerous studies of political psychology (Marcus, 2000; Valentino *et al.*, 2011; Cepernich & Novelli, 2018) based on cognitive assessment and Affective Intelligence Model (Marcus *et al.*, 2000), which suggest that anger and anxiety are positively associated with political participation. However, while the effect of anxiety pushes to actions of low-cost participation (in terms of time and money), anger motivates more expensive and complex forms of activism. Anger and indignation of the users/electors can be elicited by negative political communication - based on attacks on political opponents or actors with the use of openly hostile languages - which has been widely used in the context of the case study concerned.

### **1.2. Migration and pandemic: framing otherness through moral panic**

The phenomenon of migration has generally and historically been a matter in which processes of social categorisation, based upon the symbolic construction of otherness and



the depiction of diversity in negative terms, have always been central. Migrants, indeed, are an ideal public enemy for any kind of national, local, or sectoral identity claim: they are depicted as criminals who threaten the security of everyday life, aliens who contaminate ethnic purity, foreigners who undermine the compactness of society, parasites who rob the working class of its achievements (Lago, 2005). Such mechanisms of *othering* (Houtum & Naerssen, 2022; Morrison, 2018) towards migrants strongly intensified and re-emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In this context, migrants' otherness was symbolically constructed in the need to respond to a disruptive, complex, and unknown global phenomenon, and to reinforce the idea of a solid and homogeneous "us", a crucial element in the definition of social and political identities. The need to make sense of such phenomena restored indeed processes of social categorisation based upon hostility, and sustained not by rational logics but rather by socio-political and cognitive mechanisms produced by social discourse and common sense (Lago, 2005). Hostile political narratives based upon the construction of migrants as enemies emerged during the pandemic as generators of ontological security and social cohesion (Pavoni, 2019). This led to the construction of a negative portrayal of migrants that was not necessarily real, yet socially accepted and legitimised – and therefore perceived as real – which also served the purpose of building public consensus around policies of social exclusion.

The unconditional closure of borders and the restrictions on human mobility in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic were, indeed, mainly legitimised on the ground of a social representation of migrants as responsible for the spread of the virus. The differential impacts the closure of borders had on people's lives - according to their different social and political positions within the global hierarchies of mobility, which were already in place before the pandemic (Heller, 2020) - was based upon an imaginary of migration constructed in negative and hostile terms.

Common sense opinions about migrants, although scientifically false, become socially true because their capability to crystallise social reality transforms them in *social dogmas* (Lago, 2005). As social actors constantly engage in the construction of reassuring strategies to cope with their everyday world, common sense opinions, which are supposed to describe the world, end up constituting reality itself because of their performative and productive character. Common sense is therefore a way of explaining facts and problems that, although

not necessarily explaining anything, becomes popular because it endlessly reproduces what the public thinks and therefore wishes to be confirmed as true. In this sense, discrimination against migrants is implemented by multiple practices that converge in a central explanatory mechanism imposing itself as unquestionable (Lago, 2005).

It is precisely upon such mechanisms that Italian political narratives of exclusion, depicting migrants as dangerous for public health, were built during the pandemic. Political initiatives and media – as much as social media – generalisations during the pandemic converged in shaping a general common sense through which the foreigner was incessantly constructed and reconstructed as an enemy. Following Thomas' theory of the definition of the situation (Thomas & Thomas, 1928), according to which if individuals define certain situations as real then those situations will effectively become real in their consequences (Thomas & Thomas, 1928<sup>1</sup>), the symbolic construction of the migrant as a threat to public health became real in its legitimation of the political consequences that such understanding triggered: the unconditional closure of borders and the definition of asymmetric relationships between the subjects within and those outside (Maier, 2016).

Migrants' otherness was constructed and represented through an overall narrative constituted by a single, virtually uninterrupted message of hostility and rejection through what Cohen has defined as *panic discourse* (Cohen, 2002). According to Cohen, indeed: "societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person, or group of persons emerge to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media" (Cohen, 2002, p. 1).

As the empirical analysis will show, in the context of the pandemic, political narratives based on panic discourse constructed migration as a risk factor, not only through the spread of information about the dangerousness of migration but also, and foremost, by formulating potential political solutions to such danger (e.g., closing the ports). Such construction of migration as a risk was absorbed into a wider culture of insecurity and fear within which migration has historically been framed in Italy (and elsewhere in Europe), while also finding

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Lago, A. Non-persone. L'esclusione dei migranti in una società globale.

points of resonance with broader social anxieties the pandemic brought about. Such fears and anxieties activated processes of scapegoating as a response, on one hand, to the complexity and the uncertainty of the pandemic and on the other, to the need for political consensus. This allocation of blame to migrants, in the attempt to find and inform about the supposed root causes of the uncontrollable spread of the virus, intrinsically allowed the construction of migration as a moral panic, through the elicitation of concern about the potential or imaginary threat migrants posed.

Hostile narratives, expressed through moral outrage towards migrants – embodying the enemy and the problem – generally build political consensus about the existence of such a threat. In these cases, the political storytelling is characterised by disproportionality and exaggeration of the potential threat as well as of the real risk of offensiveness (Cohen, 2002) migrants pose.

Within this context, the role of digital political communication deployed on social media platforms by the three monitored political actors concretely sustained such political processes of social categorisation and construction of otherness in negative terms through the reproduction of specific cognitive narrative frames (McQuail, 2001) of emergency, crisis, exaggeration, anxiety, and hostility towards migrants. Constructing migration and migrants as deviant and socially problematic using selected and specific images “naming the guilty men” (Cohen, 2002, p. 22), and using panic as a mode of representation, the political narratives of Matteo Salvini (La Lega), Giorgia Meloni (Fratelli d’Italia) and Casapound – moral entrepreneurs in the attempt to win public support – not only transmitted rather actively shaped the social construction of migration in terms of moral panic. Operating as agents of moral indignation, by means of political discourse based upon moral directives, they strongly influenced the public designation and perception of migration as a social and political problem.

## **2. THE COVID PANDEMIC AND NARRATIVES OF EXCLUSION: THE SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE INVASIVE MIGRANTS**

Narratives thus acquire importance insofar they become social and political instruments through which individual and collective subjects attempt to unravel the complex and, at times, unacceptable conditions of society. Narratives of migration during the pandemic depicted migrants as being directly connected to the spread of the virus, hence representing, and constructing them as dangerous threats to national citizens. In Europe, such a

connection was made evident by different political leaders' declarations. Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban, for instance, declared that:

Our experience is that primarily foreigners brought in the disease, and that it is spreading among foreigners [...] We are fighting a two-front war, one front is called migration, and the other one belongs to the coronavirus. There is a logical connection between the two, as both spread with movement (France24, 2020).

In Greece the nationalist New Democracy government used the pandemic as a reason for pressing ahead with its controversial plan to build "closed" camps, that is detention centres, for asylum seekers trapped by European policies on the Aegean islands of Lesbos and Chios. In France, as well, Marine Le Pen has used the spread of the virus as the reason to recall the need to close France's frontier with Italy, effectively suspending the Schengen agreement (Trilling, 2020).

In Italy, leaders of right-wing political parties focused their communication on the need to stop migrants' disembarkation from NGOs' ships and makeshift boats on Italian coasts to prevent the contagion. Giorgia Meloni – who had widely focused her campaign for the European elections in 2019 on the theme of "naval blockade", a European military mission carried out in agreement with the Libyan authorities to prevent the boats of immigrants from leaving towards Italy – during the pandemic emphasised the unfair treatment of the Italian population, forced to immobility due to restrictions, lockdowns, and curfews, compared to the "privileged" migrants travelling illegally throughout the country. Matteo Salvini, on his part, summarised his hostile narrative to migrants' reception with the slogan *Porti Chiusi*<sup>2</sup> a *leitmotif* of his political agenda throughout recent years.

In the rushing process of scapegoating, in the political narratives of right-wing nationalists throughout Europe, the containment of the invasive pathogens of the virus soon conflated with the containment of supposedly "invasive" people (Ticktin, 2017). Through the language of invasiveness, aggressive pathogens got transposed into political others, producing ontological categories, and confusing the eradication of the disease with the eradication of

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<sup>2</sup> "Closed ports"

people (Ticktin, 2017). In this respect, the notion of *invader* got carried from one semantic framework (war and battles, colonisation, acts of aggression, etc.) to another (human mobility and migratory flows), consequentially legitimising the discrimination of specific categories of people.

Such conflictual character of political narratives and imaginaries of migration resulted in politics of exclusion based upon processes of segregation and isolation, alienating migrants from conventional society (Cohen, 2002). This was made evident, for instance, through the production of isolated spaces of protection. An example of such sanctuaries (Ticktin, 2017) during the Covid-19 pandemic were quarantine ships, used in Italy for the health surveillance of migrants arriving by sea. The controversial and discriminatory character of such measure lies in the fact that, besides being a device for the deprivation of personal freedom, it clearly differed from the measures to which other categories of foreign citizens who arrived in Italy by other means had been subjected during the lockdown<sup>3</sup> (Associazione per gli Studi Giuridici sull'Immigrazione [ASGI], 2020). Such spaces of exception also demonstrated the asymmetrical relationship between those within and those outside, raising questions about who has the power and the authority to provide protection, to divide up space, hence, to divide who is invasive and who is threatened. Such spaces of “protection” became, indeed, sites of containment and imprisonment (Ticktin, 2017) in which the priority did not seem much to protect and take care of migrants, rather to protect the outside population from them.

Political narratives underpinning the claim to “close borders” during the pandemic and linking migrants to the spreading of the virus can be sociologically understood and analysed through what Moscovici has defined as *social representations* (Moscovici, 2005). As knowledge is never disinterested, rather it is always the product of groups of people, social representations are to be understood as elaborated and shared knowledge that contribute to the construction of social reality (Moscovici, 2005). Representations, sustained by the social influences of communication, constitute the reality of people’s daily lives, and serve as the

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<sup>3</sup> According to the Interministerial Decree of 17 March 2020 people arriving from abroad, in the absence of symptoms, had to report their presence to the public sanitary office, department of prevention, and undergo isolation and health surveillance for a period of 14 days (Asgi 2020).

principal means for establishing social affiliations through which people are bound to each other.

Social representations define and conventionalise objects, people, and events within society by locating them in each category, gradually establishing a shared and common understanding of social phenomena. They can also be understood as sociological instruments helping to make sense of social reality while also constructing it. They make the unusual and unknown familiar, producing consensual universes of understanding whereby people feel safe from any risk or conflict (Moscovici, 2005). As Moscovici explains, social representations are also *prescriptive* as they impose themselves upon individuals. The representation people have of social phenomena is, in fact, not always and necessarily directly related to their way of thinking. Social representations are transmitted by and are the product of a whole sequence of elaborations and changes occurring in the course of time. In a way, such representations are social entities with a life of their own, vanishing only to re-emerge under new guises. Through social representations the immaterial gradually materialises, often becoming persistent and permanent. Moreover, social representations can influence the behaviour of individuals, and their relevance lies in their power to construct and reproduce specific contents and shared understandings of social and political matters. They are embedded in language and produced in a complex human environment. More importantly, they are historically bounded: imaginaries individuals have of the world derive and are rooted in the social environment in which they live and interact. The specific feature of these representations, indeed, is precisely that they embody ideas produced through collective experiences and interactions (Moscovici, 2005).

During the uncertain times of the Covid-19 pandemic, the social imaginary of migration and migrants produced through social representations of the latter in terms of conflict and exclusion, strongly oriented and defined the public discourse on migration by means of conventionalisation and categorisation. Identifying migrants as the common threat to fight against, and borders as the ultimate instrument of security against the pandemic, social representations on migration reproduced erroneous understandings of the phenomenon, while also enabling social and political actions pushing to conflict and aversion.

The communication of some political leaders in Italy, such as the ones the present analysis focuses on, influenced the collective understanding of migration, shaping a common and socially constructed representation of such phenomenon both in the public debate and in

the political arena, ultimately producing controversial interpretations of the pandemic and its relationship with immigration. The moral panic of the pandemic thus overlapped with the moral panic of migration, as migrants started being identified as a threat not only to societal values and interests but also to the overall health status of Italian citizens. In offering their diagnoses and solutions to the pandemic - strongly connected with hostile narratives against migrants - Italian right-wing political communication relied upon an interpretation of migration framed as a threat under the social, cultural, securitarian and health profile.

### **3. ITALY AND THE “MIGRANT EMERGENCY” PARADIGM: FROM SOCIAL REPRESENTATION TO POLICY MAKING**

Over the last century, Italy switched from being a country of departure of massive migratory flows - between 1861, the year of the Unification of Italy, and 1985, almost 30 million people left Italy; over 14 million left in the following decades, during the so-called «Great emigration» (1876-1915) - to being a country of arrival and one of the largest destination of immigrants in Europe (Einaudi, 2010). From the Sixties to the Eighties, this transformation was scarcely perceived and therefore scarcely ruled. Since 1990, both openness and closure assets regarding labour immigration were experimented in Italy, with a growing polarisation and politicisation of immigration policies despite the structural nature of the phenomenon.

As the debate on immigration also began to polarise, the 1990 Martelli Act (*Legge Martelli*) sought to respond to the phenomena of xenophobia and discrimination that emerged especially after the deep economic crisis and the rising unemployment of the Eighties, when Italy opted for the total block of incoming labour migration flows. This law is relevant also in terms of social categorisation since it introduced control and expulsion measures for those migrants considered «illegal». The debate on «clandestine immigration» is still very current and it leads to a categorisation of human beings that distinguishes between legal and illegal ones, *de facto* erasing many basic rights of the latter. Following the Martelli Act, the former Interior Minister Roberto Maroni’s “security package” introduced the *crime of illegal immigration* in 2008, providing for fines and the immediate expulsion of illegal subjects while, in the context of criminal proceedings, the aggravating circumstance of irregular immigration could amount to one-third of the sentence.

The enlargement of the EU in the early 2000s progressively exempted more than one million foreigners from the legislation on non-EU migrants and it acted as a watershed under the

profile of increasing *securitisation* of migration policies. As Lynn Doty clarifies, securitisation “refers to a process through which the definition and understanding of a particular phenomenon, its consequences, and the policies deemed appropriate to address the issue are subjected to a particular logic” (Lynn-Doty, 1998, p. 71). Issues, therefore, are not inherently matters of security, rather they become so as they are socially and politically constructed within the framework of security. In this regard, issues of migration, especially related to undocumented immigration and refugees’ movements, have been prominent among those being securitised. Securitisation is also connected to a broader politicisation of immigrants and asylum seekers, depicted as dangerous to public order, cultural identity as well as domestic labour and market stability (Huysmans, 2000). Such political interpretation – and deceptive use – of migratory phenomena rely on the construction of immigration as being interrelated with a range of different threatening political and social issues (Huysmans, 2000). For instance, through the national securitisation model, migration is often inscribed and framed within transnational threats such as organized crime and international terrorism (Campesi, 2015) thus defined as a major threat to the security of the nation-state (see 5.3).

The redefinition of European internal borders and the enlargement of the Schengen area of freedom of movement for European citizens reinforced, in the member states as well as in Italy, the exclusion of citizens from the global South and pushed control towards the EU’s external borders (Bialasiewicz, 2012). The rapidity of the phenomenon created social alarm and conflict in reaction to a perceived blaze of violent crimes committed by immigrants. Stemming from this social and historical context, «zero-tolerance» policies on migration were implemented and many others followed along the last two decades. In Italy, examples of the consequences of such policies were, amongst others, the extension to six months of undocumented immigrants’ detention period in CIEs<sup>4</sup>, the abolition of the second instance for asylum seekers appealing against rejection of their application, the enlargement of

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<sup>4</sup> Italian acronym for Centri di Identificazione ed Espulsione, Identification and Expulsion Centres



detention centres network, the introduction of voluntary work for migrants<sup>5</sup> and the criminalisation of NGOs rescuing migrants at sea<sup>6</sup>.

After half a century, the migratory phenomenon is still narrated, perceived, and ruled - by both Italian centrist, democrats, and nationalist right parties - as an *emergency*. Direct consequences of this approach are the (ab)use of emergency legislation<sup>7</sup> and the strengthening of the detention centre and hotspot systems for irregular migrants, denounced for years now for their ineffectiveness and inhumanity (ASGI, 2021).

The conceptualisation of migration as an emergency allows political forces to abuse strategies that could not be tolerated if migration was faced as a structural phenomenon and an organic reform of the law-making on migration was proposed. The overlap between the law-making on security and the legislation on migration expresses a connection between the two spheres that also emerges at the social level, in the definition of migration as an external threat to «our» societal security. Along the decades, the answer has been more or less the same: the criminalisation of «illegal» human categories, the narrative of invasion to sustain this process, and the creation of «non-places», artificial detention centres often located at the outskirts, far from the «centre» - of power, of decision, of wealth - and near the borders (if not floating on seas, as it is in the case of quarantine ships). Both this conceptualisation of migration and the «migrant emergency» paradigm lie in specific social representations, constructions, and shared knowledge about migration, sustained by and disseminated through media communication.

Against this background, the specific phenomenon of the Covid-19 pandemic legitimised the strengthening of securitarian policymaking already well-established in Italy. The «migratory threat» is now understood in the fear of contagion, that cannot spread from within but only be brought from outside, by «the others», the invaders. In this context, the dualistic political

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<sup>5</sup> Through the *Minniti-Orlando* decree, proposed by representatives of the Italian Democratic Party and applicable as of 2018

<sup>6</sup> As in the contested «Security Decree» by former Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, later amended by current Minister Luciana Lamorgese

<sup>7</sup> In the Italian context, it translates into the preference for legal instruments such as the decree-law and the legislative decree, acts having the force of law issued by the Government in situations of necessity and urgency, while legislative power is normally conferred on Parliament

narrative «us vs. them» gains strength, the demand for security increases (*refoulement*, naval blockade, closed ports, quarantine boats) and borders reinforce their symbolic power as a dividing element between those who are *entitled* to specific rights (social, civil, health, mobility etc.) and those who must be pushed back to the periphery, both in geographical and symbolic terms.

#### **4. THE ITALIAN CASE STUDY. METHODOLOGICAL OUTLINES FOR THE MONITORING OF ONLINE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION**

As the growing politicisation of migratory phenomena takes hold of the national debate, it is increasingly important to look at how public discourse, social representations and political storytelling around migration are built. Political communication adapts to its – textual and visual – vocabulary the complexity of migration, offering a narrative that often adjusts to the national common feeling and proposing simplified representations based on oppositional logic and strategies. Consequently, centre-right, populist, and nationalist movements build their narrations of immigration around the themes of national identity - depicting immigration as “ethnic replacement” of the native population and their values, with consequent loss of local identity - and security - immigration as a risk factor for radicalisation or as a cause of urban decay. These general patterns also characterised political communication style and strategy in the Italian scenario. Furthermore, the use of social media as the most prominent political and institutional channel for communication is strongly consolidated in Italy (EEMC, 2019). Based on this consideration, the analysis specifically focused on the social network environment – Twitter in particular – where a simplified communication, characterised by the great predominance of visual over textual elements and emotional levers over analytics and data, finds its perfect place and serves the goal of defining and disseminating symbolic constructions and social representations of migrants. The objective was to deconstruct and identify the elements composing the narrations on migrants and immigration and to analyse and understand which features the construction of migrants was based on, particularly during the pandemic.

For this purpose, we chose to monitor three Twitter accounts: Matteo Salvini’s (political leader of *Lega*, the League party) and Giorgia Meloni’s (*Fratelli d’Italia*, Brothers of Italy) personal accounts and *Casa Pound* movement account. The chosen period of the monitoring started from March 9th, 2020 - date of the initial lockdown in Italy due to Covid pandemic - to December 31st, 2021, to intercept the different and important stages of the institutional

emergency management in Italy: the first restrictive measures as travel restriction and curfews, the implementation of vaccination certificates, the mandatory Covid-19 testing – and subsequently required vaccination - for accessing everyday services.

For several years now, online communication platforms have occupied a prominent place in the public debate (Tufekci, 2017). Twitter - a platform created in 2006 to share text messages limited to 280 characters - represents a central arena for defining current affairs and framing political events (Weller *et al.*, 2014); for this reason, the study of the messages circulating in its infosphere is of great interest to social science researchers. This consideration motivated the choice of Twitter as the reference network for our social media analysis: a communication channel characterised by the immediacy and the "forceful" brevity of text content, which leave more manoeuvre to the power of images. A keyword query was thus performed on Twitter, which allowed us to collect tweets containing any of these words: *migranti, immigrati, immigrazione, sbarchi*<sup>8</sup>.

Text-only tweets were discarded from the corpus collected because we chose to prioritise visual contents to investigate how symbolic representations are conveyed through social media, visual channels *par excellence*. The clean corpus was composed of 72 tweets, consisting of a visual component of greater importance for the analysis and a short text, as per the mentioned Twitter norms.

The choice of focusing on visual contents derives from the increasingly recognised relevance of visual political communication research, VPCR, a field of communication analysis that has acquired through the years importance and methodological strength. If in the past, analyses of the role of digital media in politics have tended to focus on the verbal content of media (Small, 2010; Tumasjan *et al.*, 2010) or the broader tactics behind their deployment (Stromer-Galley, 2016), in our current "society of the image" visual matters are gaining greater significance, evolving rapidly as the technological substrate of digital communication acquires greater complexity. According to Veneti *et al.*, (2019) even long before our contemporary digital age, human culture was visual culture:

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<sup>8</sup> Migrants, immigrants, immigration, landings

Early men left their mark in the form of cave paintings (...) imagery is used in religion, with scenes of devotion and pilgrimage, in creating social norms, family scenes, depictions of aberrance and justice (...) images are used for state control through censorship and by dissident groups to challenge the established order through the use of iconoclastic imagery (...) All of these examples demonstrate the *socio-political power* of the image, and all can impact how viewers think and feel about their society and the place within that society they occupy (p. 2).

Furthermore, especially in the digital age, with its possibilities in terms of manipulation and graphic design, the ubiquity and power of imagery can raise evident challenges, since with visuals the illusion is created that we are gazing out of a window at the real world (Gurri *et al.*, 2010):

the idea that a picture never lies is a powerful instrument in the hands of communicators. Politics indeed has always had a visual dimension but in an age of information overload where around 79% of earth's population has access to television and 51 % has access to the Internet, the image may be an even more powerful means for grabbing attention than ever before» (Veneti *et al.*, 2019, p. 2).

“Visuals” includes various types of content: photos, videos, visual cards - or *web cards*, the digital transposition of the poster prototype that summarises textual, graphic, and visual elements and adapts them to the Web aesthetics (Novelli, 2019). The latter, as the next section will show, represents the perfect visual synthesis between the purpose of delivering messages with a high rate of immediacy and enhancing the emotional aspect through powerful images.

On the selected tweets, qualitative content analysis was performed to comprehend both the visual and textual components. In particular, the variables of the analysis aimed at investigating how migration was interpreted in terms of social representations, how the relation migration/pandemic was characterised, how migration and migrants were constructed at the visual level and which emotional leverages were more commonly exploited. The analysis assessed similarities and differences between the contents collected, which highlighted the presence of four thematic macro-categories (that will be presented and examined in the next section) that sustained the symbolic and social construction of migrants' otherness.

Finally, the choice of monitoring Salvini's, Meloni's and Casa Pound's twitter accounts was linked to the strong focus of most of their political agenda on anti-migration policies, and on

issues related to migratory flows and bordering policies in the country. This common trait of their political agendas, indeed, has made them subjects of great interest for the analysis and for its objectives. Their policymaking on migration includes both loud proclamations, at the communicative level, on how migrants affect national identity, economy, and social unity and, at the policy level, legislative initiatives, petitions, and proposals aimed at concretely blocking “clandestine immigration” to Italy. Furthermore, these three political actors represent interesting case studies because their communicative strategies make evident those processes of social construction through which phenomena are narrated and framed in a certain way. Such framings can lead to an intentional manipulation at the social and political level: in this sense, the political communication styles and strategies analysed were emblematic of the artificial connection established between migration and pandemic (see 5.1).

La Lega and Fratelli d’Italia, although being born as anti-system and anti-establishment parties, became in the last decade mainstream ones, gathering growing shares of political consensus and elected representatives within the Italian government. Their ascent toward the governmental establishment forced them to somehow soften their tones and try to comply with a more elevated institutional communication – with mixed results. Despite La Lega being born as a secessionist party, representing the interests of northern Italian regions – its original name was indeed *Lega Nord*, Northern League - with openly racist declarations on southern ones, it speaks today on behalf of all the Italians and collects political consensus even in southern regions. Fratelli d’Italia, on its part, denies its fascist legacy, publicly denouncing racist and homophobic assaults occurring in Italy. Still, its leader Giorgia Meloni resorts to nostalgic rhetoric and discursive strategies in her campaign rallies, both at the national and European level, such as «we’ll fight for God, for our homeland, for our family» (Agenzia Giornalistica Italia [AGI], 2019), a declaration which is deeply linked in Italian historical memory to that *Dio, Patria, Famiglia* often echoed in Mussolini’s speeches. Casa Pound Italia - “the Third Millennium fascists” - is a former political party retired in June 2019 from electoral competitions and now an extra-parliamentary movement, born in 2008 from the political experience of Roman underground, neofascist realities that started to join together from the early 2000s. Prior to the electoral retirement, Casa Pound presented its independent list both at national and local elections, having its first city councilman elected in Bolzano in 2015; in the 2014 European elections, Casa Pound supported the former Northern League leader, Mario Borghezio, and further collaborations occurred between the two parties (Repubblica.it, 2014).

This alliance is one of the examples of how the Italian right-wing political framework is composed of two only apparently separated layers: one of “anti-establishment-no-more” parties that became, through the years, structural and even majoritarian forces within the Parliament, riding the wave of populist and nationalist ideals, and the other one composed of extra-institutional and ultra-right movements. The latter is still anchored to the galaxy of local extremist realities excluded from electoral representation (Associazione Nazionale Partigiani d’Italia [ANPI], 2019); nevertheless, they show evident and consolidated connections, both at the personal and institutional level, with the leaders and representatives of those mainstream parties that publicly refuse the mark of extremism.

Important similarities also emerge between the communication strategies of the three subjects. Their political storytelling on immigration, indeed, shows prominent points of convergence, exacerbated by the pandemic contingency: from the exploitation of emotional levers such as anger, national pride and even hatred, to the call upon fear of diversity and the construction of migration as a vehicle of identity decay, social and cultural depletion and as a major threat to the European lifestyle.

## **5. THE MONITORING RESULTS. THE SOCIAL AND SYMBOLIC CONSTRUCTION OF MIGRANTS IN RIGHT-WING ITALIAN ONLINE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

This final section is dedicated to the results drawn from the analysis of the 72 selected tweets: together with the description of the themes and visual characters upon which the symbolic construction of migrants was based, the most representative visual contents of the thematic strands identified were selected. The representation of immigration flows as a threatening, disruptive element is very evident in the contents analysed and, more in general, in the communicative processes of nationalist inspiration relying on the identitarian construction of “us” and “others”. The politicisation of migration leads to the deceptive depiction of the phenomenon as inherently threatening to the local social unity and security, cultural and religious identity and the national labour and market stability. More broadly, migrants – as “diverse subjects” – are defined and classified in their belonging to socially constructed categories and labels – the criminal, the aggressor, the virus carrier, the uncivilised, the radicalised Muslim, the invader and so on – that are in themselves multiple and often intertwined.

Through the securitisation approach, immigrants are also depicted as vectors for criminality, violence and terrorism, the latter being the major threat to Western security. In addition, they also represent a wider and more creeping danger in social terms: the forced contamination of native identity, a shock for Italy's cultural equilibrium, will lead – in Casa Pound's words<sup>9</sup> – to

social, cultural, and existential eradication and privation to the detriment of all the peoples involved, be they guests or hosts. In this system for killing people, there are no winners except a few private bodies, imbued with ideological or sectarian prejudices, and some anti-national business cliques.

Within this already stratified conceptualisation of immigration, the pandemic contingency also added a relevant layer of meaning. Italian political narratives of migration during the pandemic depicted migrants as being directly connected to the spread of the virus and responsible for the tightening of control and restriction measures from which, in the perspective of the chosen political actors, they would be exempted. All these interrelated components of the securitarian framework - the menace represented by migration in security, social and health terms - emerge in their political communication strategy and are transposed into visual in such a way to channel feelings of fear toward migrants and to depict incumbent, concrete threats against which the Nation legitimately must arm up.

### **5.1. The health threat: migration and pandemic**

The figure of the foreigner has always been subjected to social representations and stereotyped categorisations – an *enemy otherness* that enforce the nationalist political discourse - being the newcomers and immigrants the "others" *par excellence*, against which certain political narratives deploy an exasperated sense of national belonging and pride. While the pandemic has exacerbated ideological, political, and social divisions that were already present within our societies, narrations about its nature and its causes have charged further responsibilities on migrant people. The categorisation of migrants in the pandemic context is articulated on a series of elements also retrievable in the traditional political

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.casapounditalia.org/il-programma/>

narration on the theme, and common to other types of representation. In this sense, the perception of migrants as a threat under the health profile concerning the pandemic was integrated into an already stratified construction and representation of migratory inflows as a broader threat. The core of the social construction of the migrant was structured on the contrast between social identities that characterises the relationship with otherness (see 1.1): *we* live in a democratic country, respectful of civil rights, *they* come from underdeveloped countries where the rule of law is unknown; *we* have a sense of civic duty, *they* refuse to respect the most basic norms of social life; *we* are not violent by nature, *they* come from contexts of systematic prevarication; *we* respect women, *they* veil them; *we* respect institutions, *they* don't recognise them as such - black and white, good and bad, such dichotomies could go on and on.

The health emergency fitted in this semiotic framework – previously structured and consolidated in Italian hostile political narratives – leading to a social categorisation of the migrant that contains the multiple ingredients of conflict and danger, no longer only in terms of a threat to society (see 5.2) or decay (5.4), nor simply from a securitarian perspective (5.3) but also identifying migrants as active subjects in the spreading of the contagion and therefore embodying a health threat.

In the contents analysed on the connection between immigration and pandemic, anger emerged as the most relevant emotional lever: while the native population, the *insiders*, is subjected to rules and restrictions imposed by those institutions that should protect them as Italian citizens, the foreigners, the *outsiders*, the virus carriers, manage to evade those same rules (as quarantines, Covid tests, vaccinations) and even violently protest them.

Giorgia Meloni defines the governmental health policies - too strict against Italians and too lax with immigrants - as the "hypocrisy circuit". Through an infographic - information simplified and projected in graphic and visual form – she illustrates how migrants would be the trigger of the increase in the rate of infections and thus directly responsible for the strengthening of restrictions (Figure 1). The infographic text reads:

Immigration and contagion, the Government is mocking us! 1. They encourage landings with amnesties and open ports 2. Packed hotspots with mass escapes of Covid 19-positive immigrants 3. Rise in the rate of infections 4. New restrictions and lockdowns for the Italians



While the causal link between migration and pandemic is taken absolutely for granted, immigrants are identified as being almost the only responsible (together with government inefficiency) for the worsening of the situation in Italy.

The same tone characterises several contents by Matteo Salvini. In a web card shared on June 16th, 2021<sup>10</sup> the image of a boat overflowing with migrants is surrounded by textual graphics with bright colours: «Sicily: 10 cases of DELTA VARIANT AMONG MIGRANTS [in a bigger font over a red background] landed in Lampedusa». Using visuals, therefore, roles and responsibilities are highlighted: the boat is full of men standing close, without health protection measures or social distancing; the bright and resounding title suddenly catches the reader's attention - the message conveyed indicates the cause of the spread of yet another variant. In another web card, the former Minister reports the case of a (non-vaccinated)<sup>11</sup> policeman who died of Covid after serving at the hotspot in Taranto. While the title of the right-wing newspaper *Liberio* reproduced in the web card indicates, subtly, "Policeman dies at 58 years, infected *between* [not *by*] migrants", Salvini comments: «A policeman died of Covid after serving at the Taranto hotspot, that housed 300 migrants, 33 of which tested positive. He had contracted the virus at the migrants' shelter».

The web card (Figure 1) shows a stylistic feature that we will also encounter later (see 5.3, Figure 3), that is the visual juxtaposition of "victim and executioner" within the same image. On the left some African men are portrayed while entering the reception centre; on the right of the same frame, we can spot a man wearing the Italian army uniform. On the other side, in contrast, a close-up of the deceased policeman, portrayed in an intimate and personal moment, while he smiles looking at the camera hugging his dog. This type of emotional content is exploited to make users empathise on the one hand with "the man like you", the ordinary victim, and on the other to indicate, not even covertly, who is responsible for his killing.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1405116587963731976>

<sup>11</sup> <https://bit.ly/3uJVbjT>

**Figure 1.** On the left, an infographic shared by Giorgia Meloni<sup>12</sup> (August 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020). At the center, a webcard by Matteo Salvini<sup>13</sup> (August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021). On the right, a video excerpt from a tweet shared by Matteo Salvini<sup>14</sup> (June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020).



Source: Twitter.

In another of his web cards on the issue of quarantine ships, above a photo portraying one of such boat, Salvini titles «Virus outbreak among migrants in the port: they brought the red zone»: these kinds of high-flown statements always catch the readers' attention and powerfully leverage specific emotions. The subject of quarantine ships has been widely discussed by Italian politics and this attention also emerges in the analysed contents. Giorgia Meloni (August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020) focuses on the weight of this choice on the national budget<sup>15</sup>, emphasising: «Instead of blocking the illegal immigration, the government continues to launch quarantine ships at the expense of the Italians». Immigration, as well as a health and social risk, represents a cost that the Italian population, already depleted by the devastating economic effects of the pandemic, cannot tolerate.

<sup>12</sup> <https://twitter.com/GiorgiaMeloni/status/1298543875359899648/photo/1>

<sup>13</sup> <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1432437682219757568>

<sup>14</sup> <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1271453067339276291>

<sup>15</sup> <https://twitter.com/GiorgiaMeloni/status/1300410194271367175>

Casa Pound also follows this narrative thread and shares on June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2021<sup>16</sup> the photos of a demonstration action carried out in Sicily against «the infamous opening of the maritime borders». Their banners, placed in different Sicilian cities, reads: «Delta variant: Close ports, not airports». Such statements exemplify, at the practical level, those politics and narratives of exclusion proving the existence of asymmetrical relationships and hierarchies among citizens; here, the social categorisation performed discriminates between those who legally travel by plane – in Casa Pound’s view, tourists, and European citizens – and those who illegally land by sea. The latter constitutes the only real threat and the main cause of the virus spreading.

Besides identifying migrants as responsible for the increased diffusion of the virus in Italy, the thematic components of the representation of migration as a health threat intersect with the main themes of other types of social categorisation. This is the case of the interweaving with elements of securitarian logic: migrants’ reactions to the limitations imposed by the pandemic are framed as a matter of security and crime to be contained. In supporting this approach, Salvini and Meloni continuously report every case of tension at the hotspots, or more generally regarding migrants, skilfully evocating feelings of anger and indignation through the juxtapositions of the duties Italians are subjected to and the obligations migrant keep evading. Salvini for instance shares a video dated October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020<sup>17</sup> in which an African migrant walk away from the Identification centre and verbally attacks the journalists following him. The video is framed by a caption written in a bold black font - «Hotspot in Bari out of control. “Go f\*\*k yourself, I kill you, I burn you alive!”: clandestine immigrants escape the quarantine and threaten». The former Minister also comments «Fines for Italian citizens, and “Please, go ahead!” to the clandestine immigrants landed yesterday morning».

This type of content follows the categorisation of migrants as uncivilised, violent subjects and it stresses their arrogant deviation from the rules of the host country (see also 5.2). Another example on the same issue is a video shared by Matteo Salvini on June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020 (Figure 1) - "Clandestine immigrants in Revolt: No to Covid-19 testing" - showing a group of young African migrants with a belligerent attitude, some shirtless, climbed on the fences or

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<sup>16</sup> <https://twitter.com/CasaPoundItalia/status/1407618943343341571>

<sup>17</sup> <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1316477564102348801>

barricaded in the hotspot, while yelling against the journalist and the policemen deployed to quell the revolt.

In conclusion, the nexus migration-pandemic is supported and characterised through visuals that summarise the multifaceted threat migrants supposedly represent: not only a risk factor for the whole integrated population as carriers of contagion (the dead policeman, the new variants, the red zones), but also a threat in terms of personal security (the escapes from quarantine, the assault on journalists, hotspot staff, even ordinary people), a burden for Italian economy (the quarantine ships) and a clear example of asymmetries between rights and duties that privilege illegal migrants “versus” honest Italian residents.

### **5.2 The societal threat: the invasive otherness**

A vivid example of how the threat is concretely represented is the visual framework of invasion: not just a metaphorical concept but a physical, actual invasion of people and bodies. Meloni and Salvini choose to represent overflowing boats, endless queues at the hotspots, a concrete siege of human forces: all men and presumably all Africans. This is a very common choice in the characterisation of migrants: for instance, within the last European elections campaign in 2019 the visual representation of migrants as “human flows” deployed by ultranationalist parties (Vox in Spain, Reassemblent Nationale in France, Jobbik in Hungary amongst the others) showed important similarities in this sense. The depiction of human bodies overcrowding in narrow spaces - made even more claustrophobic using perspective, cutting, wide-angle photos - delivers the suffocating sensation of the approaching danger this crowd brings within. The images of boats and places filled to bursting point with men are usually accompanied by supporting data, textual elements, and slogans.

As digital images are by nature ubiquitous and immediately reproducible on a global scale - in a world that shows decreasing mnemonic and analytical capacities – the viewers/spectators on social networks do not know where and when the photos were taken (it could also be stock images, as far as they know), nor if their description fits the real context of the images; but in the scenario of emotional communication, reality and rationality do not feature as relevant elements. What matters is the overexposure of bodies. The web cards reproduced in Figure 2 precisely serve this purpose: it is impossible to see the end of these manly crowds – again, also because of the image cutting: the fact of being able to see only a part of the original picture makes it impossible to define contours, sizes, and

measures of the flow – and that makes the viewer feel helpless, overwhelmed by the endless crowd approaching. The textual elements within the cards sustain this theory through a sensationalist tone and terms that refer to the semantic framework of the invasion. On the left, the headline of the conservative journal “Il Giornale” quoted in Giorgia Meloni’s tweet says «Locked down regions and open ports. Migrants invade Sicily», while on the right, Matteo Salvini opts for a more “clickbait” approach: «Insane! 901 clandestine immigrants landed in a day».

**Figure 2.** On the left, a webcard shared by Giorgia Meloni<sup>18</sup> (November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020). On the right, a webcard by Matteo Salvini<sup>19</sup> (July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020).



Source: Twitter.

The semantic framework of invasive otherness relies both on powerful pictures, as the one shown above, and on verbal imagery - an evocative, ferocious language that conveys raw and intense sensations, according to the communicative strategies of the *political fear* genre (Novelli, 2019) that rely on the fear incitement in the public by politicians and institutional representatives to achieve their goals through emotional bias.

<sup>18</sup> <https://twitter.com/GiorgiaMeloni/status/1324665441860673536>

<sup>19</sup> <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1282646359364046849/photo/1>.

It is the case of another tweet by Salvini of November 17th, 2020, in which the photo of a multitude of African men, barefoot and stacked on the hull of a motorboat, is accompanied by his description of immigration:

Never-ending landings, hotspots about to collapse, terrorists who landed and then escaped to cut throats and behead people, Covid-19 positives on the run through the whole country, fights, food thrown away because it's no buono, receptive structures destroyed and burned down

There are specific references to Italian and international chronicles, as the case of Brahim Aouissaoui, the Tunisian citizen who landed in Lampedusa, Sicily, in September and stabbed three people to death in the Notre-Dame Cathedral in Nice on 29th October 2020 (Calandri & Ziniti, 2020) or the arson of the central pavilion of the Pozzallo hotspot (again, Sicily) allegedly organised by Tunisian migrants to escape quarantine after their arrival. Journalistic sources and news media – real facts, with names, dates, and events - are nevertheless used to sustain stereotypes and hostile declarations based on dangerous generalisations. Here, in fact, Salvini does not refer to a specific case of violence. Rather, he talks about “terrorists” using the portrayal of black men, and leverages on feelings of frustration and anger pointing to the ungratefulness of migrants, who destroy the places the Italian government – by extension, the Italians – have built for them and refuse the food they are given (where “no buono” perilously sounds like an imitation of immigrants speaking simplified Italian).

### ***5.3 The security threat: fear of violence and criminality***

The securitisation of migration involves the social, political, and symbolic construction of the phenomenon within the framework of security: in this regard, the issues related to migration - especially to undocumented, “illegal” immigrants – are all artificially related and brought back to the semiotic frame of danger for the local population.

In this sense, migration is connected and understood in terms of societal security (Waever, 1993), as a threat to the identity and to the cultural equilibrium of societies and to their ability to persist in their essential characters. As a result of the intertwining of such different, yet related, security logics, migration has thus been constructed as a *meta-issue*, that is a phenomenon that can be referred to as the cause of many problems (Huysmans, 2000, p. 761). Hence, the social and political imaginary related to migration is populated by threats and fears which the Nation-State must defend itself from: as in the social depiction

of migratory flows as invasive human movements, also the categorisation of migrants in terms of societal security relies on the evocation of those same feelings of fear and panic. Such emotional communication follows the stereotypical features of *panic discourse*, and under this profile the political communication on social networks does not differ from the traditional mass media storytelling mentioned by Cohen (2002).

The core ingredient of such kind of narration is the elicitation of crimes – especially organised and transnational crime, radicalisation, and terrorism – and acts of violence attributable to migrants. Figure 3 provides two examples of this kind of narration: again, a partial view from above of a limitless number of floating boats – most likely, a graphical recreation – delivers the sensation of a never-ending flow of people landing in Italian ports, while the headline says «Lampedusa is collapsing, 831 migrants were relocated in Augusta<sup>20</sup>. The landings continue, 60 tested positive. Italian intelligence: *IS risk* (highlighted in yellow)». The numbers, the choice of words, the images, all convey a concrete perception of danger: migrants are endless (again, the visual references to invasion) and terrorists are among them. Our reception measures are not strong enough because the size of migratory flows is disproportionate: the caption below the picture reads «Italy cannot become a giant reception centre. We need to stop clandestine immigration».

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<sup>20</sup> Port town located on the South-Eastern coast of Sicily, a few kilometres from Syracuse



**Figure 3.** On the left, a web card by Giorgia Meloni on the risk of terrorism and radicalisation<sup>21</sup> (March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021). On the right, Matteo Salvini's web card on a murder committed by a migrant<sup>22</sup> (September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020).



Source: Twitter.

The notions of “clandestinity” and “clandestine immigrants” are widely used in anti-immigration political messages. The definition of undocumented migrants as “clandestine” is directly associated with illegality: this term implies that the entire human being marked as clandestine is unlawful, hence, to be criminalised. The “clandestine person” loses by consequence rights and dignity, since it ceases to be narrated and represented as a human being: the whole existence of these subjects is to be reconducted to the ontological status of *sans-papiers* (Perrone, 2005).

Another interesting aspect of the *political fear* approach to communication is the prefiguration of an insidious kind of danger, that is capable of sneaking, unseen, into the solid, united democratic society. «Islamic extremism among us»: with these exact words

<sup>21</sup> <https://twitter.com/GiorgiaMeloni/status/1366290672580444160/photo/1>

<sup>22</sup> <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1305793929930043392?lang=ar-x-fm>



Salvini, in a tweet of March 8th<sup>23</sup>2021 calls for more rigorous control of landings, bearing as evidence the case of Athmane Touami, arrested in Bari, Southern Italy, on suspicion of being involved in the terroristic attacks at the Bataclan in Paris on November 13th, 2015. A much more evident danger in terms of security is related to migrants' - and migrants only - criminal conduct: drug dealing, raping, street violence and fights.

Salvini seems to be able to cover any migrants' violence-related news and through his pervasive and famous propaganda machine - a whole team of communicators and social media managers known as "The Beast" (Saporiti, 2021) - he repeatedly reports on events regarding migrants. Sharing a report broadcasted by the Tv show *Dritto e Rovescio* on «entire Italian neighbourhoods in clandestine migrants' hands: drug dealing, urban decay and violence» Salvini comments<sup>24</sup> «violence and illegal migrants are out of control in the neighbourhoods of our cities, [while we offer them] cruise ships [referring to quarantine boats] at the expense of the Italians and the many regular and integrated immigrants». The shared video clip shows drunken brawls, physical and verbal threats to passers-by, men sleeping on the streets and even in playgrounds, interviews with local people reporting situations of danger and drug trafficking in broad daylight, footage of human waste on the sidewalks, allegedly produced by the homeless migrants. Again, all the *clandestini* filmed or interviewed - while selling drugs, sleeping outdoors, declaring they have murdered and been imprisoned back in their origin country, threatening the reporter and so on - are African men. This specific portion of the broader human variety composing migratory flows becomes the only one that matters for the symbolic representation of migrants conveyed by this kind of narrative.

The second web card we selected in Figure 3 is another example of how communication can elicit feelings of fear and anger. Salvini's web card summarises a murder case that profoundly impacted public opinion: the priest Roberto Malgesini was stabbed to death in Como, northern Italy, by the Tunisian citizen Ridha Mahmoudi. The web card shows the precise choice of displaying raw, shocking images (the headline says «Horror in Como»): the murder weapon covered in blood held by some forensic technician, the priest corpse under

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<sup>23</sup> <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1368899573318619143>

<sup>24</sup> <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1306191394722263040>

the typical, easily recognisable drapes, the crime scene. By contrast, leveraging on empathy and identification with the victim, a close-up of the smiling priest, near the caption «Priest stabbed to death in front of his church by an illegal migrant». Mahmoudi was a regular immigrant due to his marriage with an Italian citizen but after his separation, he received six expulsion decrees which were never carried out (IlMessaggero.it, 2021). Going beyond the specificities of this tragedy, the objective of linking a case of extreme violence – even more shocking, because acted against an exponent of the Catholic church – to the status of “illegal immigrant” is quite evident – again, no names, no identity, just “clandestine”.

The *panic frame* exacerbates the illegal conducts and acts of violence committed by migrants, while political communication strategies serve this specific purpose. Single events are amplified and become generalising and abstract exemplification of how all the migrants, by extension, behave. Individual actions become a sort of iconic summary representing an entire world: in a “part for the whole” logic, single occurrences are transformed into comprehensive referents and micro-events become macro-realities.

#### ***5.4 Urban and social decay. The use of identity asymmetries and physical representations***

The framing process mentioned in the last paragraph, based on representations that leverage feelings such as fear and anger in reaction to migrants’ criminal conducts, is also quite evident in the case of negative political communication and hostile narratives on social and urban decay. Decay is a process of gradual worsening: when migration enters this conceptual framework, it is identified and represented as the primary cause for the disintegration of the social fabric and the deterioration of local living standards.

The threat represented by migrants in terms of decay can be viewed both from a securitarian and identitarian perspective. In the first case, political narrations focus on street crimes and violence (see 5.3), both elements of the worsening of life quality in usually peripheral, working-class districts. These narrations emphasise how newcomers’ social inclusion cannot be reached due to their somehow “natural inclination” to crime and breach of local law. Moreover, the alleged migrants’ attitude toward invasion and abuse of native peoples’ freedom, spaces, and resources - a sort of contemporary and reversed colonisation conducted by migrants at the expense of European citizens - fuels conflict theories exploiting peoples’ discontent in marginalised districts, identifying migrants as the main source of the degenerative process. The identitarian perspective, on its part, revolves around the us/them

dichotomy - also “cosmopolitanism versus nativism” - which accentuates the socio-cultural clash between migrants and the integrated population.

Among the oppositional logics that fuel this perspective within the discourse on migration, the insiders/outsider’s asymmetry is indeed one of the most powerful. The hostile political narrations identified by the analysis, heightening social division and conflict, aim to polarise the needs of each community, both on an ethnic and social level, and to restore an ideal hierarchy within them. To this purpose, negative political communication identifies an enemy, an active subject who affects the homogeneity of native communities and triggers the disintegration of local identities; symbolic constructions of those “enemies” are functional to identitarian asymmetries and their representation.

Many “demonstration actions” by Casa Pound - a sort of political flash mobs - show for instance a strong identity connotation and base their political content on the hierarchical distinction between social categories (legal citizens/illegal migrants, honest workers/terrorists, and criminals). It is the case of a series of demonstrations organised near the Northern Italian border and many landing points in the South: Casa Pound displayed hand-painted banners in various Italian Southern cities reading «Truck drivers get blocked at the Brenner<sup>25</sup> while clandestine migrants and terrorists keep landing», or «You’d better have been illegal immigrants than truck drivers: for you, the borders stay closed»<sup>26</sup>. Giorgia Meloni often resorts to asymmetries and juxtapositions in her political communication, too: in a web card shared on December 5th, 2020<sup>27</sup> she is portrayed giving her speech to the Parliament, with a resolute look and imperious gestures. With evident reference to pandemic restrictions, the textual part of the card reads: «While Italians get locked in their houses, ports remain open; while the entrepreneurs fall into despair, human traffickers are celebrating [...] While Italians can’t move from one municipality to another, immigrants are free to travel from one nation to another».

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<sup>25</sup> The Alpine pass marking the border between Italy and Austria

<sup>26</sup> Respectively <https://twitter.com/CasaPoundItalia/status/1371448990705840130> and <https://twitter.com/CasaPoundItalia/status/1370292505946820609>

<sup>27</sup> <https://twitter.com/GiorgiaMeloni/status/1335167331861925890>

More broadly, the construction and representation of migrants as actors in the process of social disintegration and decay rely on the conceptualisation of migration as forced contamination of the pure, native community - a strong component within the populist discourse (Zanatta, 2013) - that somehow is forced to undergo the settlement of diverse ethnic groups - with far apart and often colliding cultures, identities, religious beliefs, traditions. Against this “imposed melting-pot”, anti-immigration forces usually deploy negative stereotypes and Eurocentric statements that aim at widening the identity gap between “us” and “them”. To this purpose and within the framework of urban and social decay, individual acts of “public indecency” committed by migrants become a comprehensive logical framework to which *all* migrants’ inclinations and tendencies can be traced back. Immigrants - African ones particularly - are deemed to belong to underdeveloped, primitive societies, whose tribalistic customs will never integrate with modern, Western codes of conduct (Chuckwu *et al.*, 2019). This impossible integration, in addition, is not to impute only to migrants’ lack of knowledge of local norms and socially accepted behaviours but a precise intention of neglecting, if not disrespecting native heritage, traditions and habits.

Such interpretation of the underlying and voluntary clash against local identity performed by migrants exploits the cognitive narrative frames mentioned in 1.2, specifically in their features of exaggeration and hostility, that ultimately translate into exasperated styles of communication. It is the case of the headline of the right-wing newspaper *Libero*<sup>28</sup>, reading «MIGRANTS [in capital letters] ate my four puppies». In the article, reported in a tweet by Matteo Salvini, a Lampedusa resident denounced her pets’ missing, declaring the migrants landed on the island to be responsible for such horror: «There’s no limit to the worst».

**Figure 4.** Urban decay and physical representations. From the left, a photo from Giorgia Meloni’s tweet on “the dark side of migrant reception: blocking illegal migration means ending this decay”<sup>29</sup> (May 11th, 2021). At the center, a clip extracted from a video shared by Matteo Salvini<sup>30</sup> (December 8th, 2021) “Naked immigrant in a fountain in Rome. Police

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<sup>28</sup> <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1291759424026161152>

<sup>29</sup> <https://twitter.com/GiorgiaMeloni/status/1392153192700465153>

<sup>30</sup> <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1468547053710356480>

officers enter the water, tensions, and arrest”. On the right, a clip from the video “Decay in Milan: immigrants washing on the streets”<sup>31</sup> (July 29th, 2020).



Source: Twitter.

The images selected in Figure 4 - among the countless clips, photos and webcard collected on the subject of urban blight - exemplify the connection between immigration and decay and illustrate which specific physical representations better serve this purpose. Migration coincides, at the theoretical level, with an abstract conceptualisation of the relation us/them in terms of a millenary clash of civilisations and, at the practical one, with the representation of urban blight due to migrants' presence in the local territories. Decay here matches with behaviours that are considered unacceptable by the local community, disrespectful of urban decor, cultural heritage, and hygienic norms: hence the African migrants filmed while washing in a city park in Milan, or barefoot and piled on a mattress, or climbing naked a monumental fountain in the centre of Rome.

This kind of representation is built on well-defined visual features. It has been already pointed out that the migrants filmed and represented in the analysed political contents are exclusively African, with a clear prevalence of male subjects. Representations of women, elders, children, indeed, would sort the same effect within the narrative framework of the

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<sup>31</sup> <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1288334687375626240>

societal threat migration supposedly constitutes. Moreover, representations of migrants as triggers for urban blight and social decay focus on the *bodies*. The ideal opposition between European citizens and African immigrants expresses the difference from “the other”; in such opposition the black body acquires meaning through visibility. Sexual, aesthetic, and somatic confluences converge on the represented body, that become the container of a “fabricated truth”, as the counter-narrative of the superiority of some bodies over others shows (Sugamele, 2019). Migrants’ bodies are inappropriately naked, showing themselves off in situations, places, and ways they should not, offending common morality and ethics.

Moreover, the physical representations of masculine nudity reinforce the Eurocentric myth of African virility (Sugamele, 2019) made of compulsive sexuality (at the expense of local women) and overflowing physicality (that perfectly matches the violent tendencies of migrants). Many selected visuals follow along this line. Salvini shares a video of immigrants dancing and celebrating on a motorboat<sup>32</sup> allegedly landing in Italy, with the caption «Males excited to come here paying for our pensions» (referring to the thesis of the necessity of immigrant workers in maintaining the Italian pension system) where the statement “excited males” obviously elicits another kind of reference. In another tweet, the League leader shares a video report by *Il Giornale*, a conservative Italian newspaper, dated October 14th, 2020, on «Clandestine migrants and decay in Rome: stalking, rape, theft and assault». As the headline claims, the video portrays migrants lying on the streets, surrounded by garbage and human waste, or caught by surveillance cameras chasing women walking alone at night, while residents are interviewed about the situation they are suffering due to migrants’ presence: «clandestine migrants stealing and raping represent the major danger» (Figure 5). This narration - that blatantly neglects the phenomenon of gender-based violence committed by Italian men, often within the familiar or intimate context, as expression of still rooted and widespread “ownership” practices and culture in Italy (Dente & Cagnolati, 2019) - immediately recalls the fascist propaganda conveyed, among the others, by a well-known Italian poster dating back to 1944, that has been interestingly reproduced in a new digital version in 2017 by the neofascist party Forza Nuova. The poster depicts a black American soldier (the foreign invader of the past century, in fascist perspective) about to attack a white Italian woman.

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<sup>32</sup> <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1327572509043150852>

**Figure 5.** On the left, a clip extracted from a video shared by Matteo Salvini (October 14th, 2020)<sup>33</sup>: below the frame of a black man sleeping on the streets, the caption reads «stalking, rape, theft and assault». On the right, the 1944 poster by the fascist Propaganda Unit depicts a rape attempt by a black American soldier. The caption reads «Defend her! She could be your mother, your wife, your sister, your daughter»



Source: Twitter.

In conclusion, the representation of migration as a threat to the native community draws heavily both on the securitisation framework - the decay brought by migration involves the increased insecurity for residents, women, regular workers - and on the identitarian dimension, relying on the symbolic universe of a native purity (the family, the community, the feminine subject) to be preserved and defended from the corruption carried by migratory flows/invasions.

## CONCLUSIONS

The impact of Covid-19 pandemic on people's lives has strongly and deeply varied amongst individuals. In particular, the separation of "nationals" and "migrants" enacted by nation states to fight the spread of the virus, rather strongly showed the deep inequalities that exist amidst nation states (Sharma, 2020), and between different categories of social and political

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<sup>33</sup> <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1316385433098637312>



subjects in the contemporary capitalist society. In this sense, amongst the several political debates which arose within the contextual framework of the Covid-19 pandemic, the relationship between migration and sanitary policies of containment of the virus acquires significant importance as it shows social asymmetries within our society.

While the exceptionality of the moment seemed to justify the exceptionality of certain measures – e.g. closure of borders and ports and prevention of human flows– described as necessary for the greater good of all, restrictions on mobility and the exclusion of certain categories of people did not exceptionally emerge for the first time during the pandemic, yet they have been exacerbated through social representations of migration and political communication about the pandemic and its root causes.

Against this background, the role of political narratives and social representations of migration, indeed, have been crucial and fundamental in sustaining policies of exclusion in the name of security. Anchored to well-known processes of securitisation of migration, the social and political inequalities between categories of people also strongly depended upon erroneous and conflictual narrations of migration. In times of crisis, when the problematic nature of a taken for granted homogeneity within national societies becomes apparent (Lynn-Doty, 1998), the construction of migration as a moral panic seems to offer nationalists a dangerously false sense of security (Sharma, 2020).

In this respect, the case-study of the hostile propaganda of right-wing Italian parties during the pandemic, which this paper has sought to chart, is exemplary of those mechanisms of construction, production, and manipulation of social reality based on social representations which build and produce shared knowledge. Furthermore, the deep simplification of society's complexity carried out by right-wing Italian parties' political narratives, and their hostile assumptions of the presumed connection between the spread of the Covid-19 virus and the phenomenon of migration should also be considered. They represent indeed a dangerous tool for producing and perpetuating politics of exclusion based on a false understanding of society, grounded in nationalist and racist speculations rather than facts, constructing a social idea of migration linked to disorder and disequilibrium (Gianturco & Colella, 2020).

The digital political communication on the theme of migration deployed by the monitored actors has shown the construction of different semiotic frameworks and intertwining



thematic strands. The representation of migrants' diversity, therefore, has been articulated from time to time through fluid social categorisations attributable to the securitarian logic, the Eurocentric myth, and identity asymmetries. These ingredients were included - and somehow gained new strength - under the “umbrella” of the health threat migration represented during the pandemic, as hostile narratives established a causal connection between the first and the latter. Moreover, the figure of the invasive other, so well presented by the analysed political contents, most powerfully show that the language and technologies of invasiveness (e.g., closing borders, quarantine ships) when working together function to sort out who is human and who is not beyond the mere creation of categories, harming human dignity (Ticktin 2017).

If moments of crisis are to be considered as opportunities that things might be otherwise, while struggles could also pave the way to new configurations of societies (Heller, 2020), then the importance of analysing such political narratives lies precisely in the possibility to acknowledge and understand the mechanisms belying underneath such social and political phenomena, to deconstruct them through more authentic and just ways of understanding and shaping society for all.

### **Declaración de autoría**

Eugenia Blasetti; Conceptualización, administración del proyecto, recursos, redacción – original, redacción – revisión y edición.

Emma Garzonio; Curación de datos, administración del proyecto, recursos, redacción – original, redacción – revisión y edición.

### **Financiamiento**

Esta investigación no recibió financiamiento externo.

### **Conflicto de interés**

Las autoras declaran que no existen conflictos de interés.

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