



# italian political science

volume 19 issue 2 2024

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# Why We Can't Help but Call Ourselves (All) 'Sartorians'

Marco Giuliani  
UNIVERSITY OF MILAN

## Abstract

This article, presented at the Annual Conference of the Italian Society of Political Science in 2024, explores the intellectual legacy of Giovanni Sartori and his enduring influence on political science. The author reflects on Sartori's contributions to three key domains: political theory, methodology, and comparative politics. The text highlights Sartori's insistence on theory-driven approaches over purely data-centred methods, as well as his critical stance on the behavioural drift of social sciences. The article also underscores Sartori's dedication to bridging theory and practice, advocating for political science as a tool for addressing real-world challenges. In conclusion, it calls for greater public engagement within the discipline, proposing initiatives like a political science festival to further Sartori's vision of a socially impactful academic field.

The title of my speech “Why We Can't Help but Call Ourselves ‘Sartorians’” paraphrases the title of an essay by one of the authors that Sartori reported he had studied during his Florentine refuge after September 8, 1943, while he was trying to avoid being enlisted in the fascist troops of the Italian Social Republic of Salò (Croce 1942).

On the one hand, this title recognizes the pervasiveness of Sartori's influence in political science, even among those considered his opposites, while on the other, it serves as a sort of personal disclaimer.

All the participants in this round table are either members of the original ‘Florentine school’ (as Sartori himself termed it, listing its members by name) or direct students of that school – second-generation Sartorians, so to speak. I am the only participant who, despite having completed my doctorate in Florence at the Cesare Alfieri Faculty, is neither one nor the other. By saying that, in the end, we are all Sartorians, it's like relieving myself of the embarrassment of not being one 100%, and trying to avoid the feeling of being in the wrong roundtable.

In fact, if this were a strictly scientific conference on Sartori's thought, my speech would probably be out of place. But in this professional setting, on an occasion intended primarily to remember Sartori for the role he played in developing our community and in training all of us, I can perhaps allow myself a slightly different approach, especially since there have been and will be other institutional opportunities when his scientific thought and contributions are remembered by ‘certified Sartorians’.

From this perspective, there is even room for some generational, if not personal, memories.



My doctoral cohort, the third one, was the only one in Italy that had Sartori as a regular professor for more than a month. It was the autumn of 1987, and I remember our first meeting with him in the turret of Villa Fabbricotti in Florence. I recall Sartori climbing the spiral staircase and entering the small classroom with his somewhat gruff demeanour. He was holding a slip of paper that looked like a short shopping list and on which, upon closer inspection, were written obscure sequences of letters and numbers, like TDR 8 or ETP 14.

In fact, these were references to selected chapters of *Elementi di Teoria Politica* (ETP) and *Theory of Democracy Revisited* (TDR), both published in that year (Sartori 1987a, 1987b), and which we doctoral students would have had to present during the lectures.<sup>1</sup> Sartori's classes went in fact like this: it was up to us to introduce the lesson by presenting one of his chapters, then broadening the discussion to other authors and, if possible, criticizing him. Thereafter, he would take charge. I recall we had a couple of lessons per week and were so anxious about having to present Sartori to Sartori that we started preparing our presentations at least a week in advance, also because he was ready to admonish us for every minor logical fallacy or terminological imprecision.

I remember that, in urging our criticisms, he claimed to have no reverential fear of anyone except Karl Deutsch and perhaps Raymond Aron. When he received the IPSA award named after Deutsch in 2009, Sartori recounted an anecdote that seemed to confirm this memory. During a seminar, Sartori had voiced an objection to Deutsch, who responded with a reply full of numbers and statistics, like "a computer, a human computer...", Sartori said. Indeed, after that first occasion, he confessed he never had the courage to argue with him again.<sup>2</sup>

It's something quite difficult to believe, and certainly it was hard for us to believe at the time... so much so that, struck by that memory, as soon as I could I bought Deutsch's *The Nerves of Government* (1963) at a used book stall.

As said, none of us doctoral students who had him as professor almost forty years ago can be called an acolyte of Sartori because of that experience. We have always been very different from each other in terms of interests, approaches and methodologies, and yet I believe that none of us has forgotten those lessons.

And it is not just a matter of personal or generational biography. It is something that has to do with the contribution Sartori made to all of political science, not only to those who had him as a master (the first generation) or as a teacher (my generation).

Sartori described his studies as follows: "My work can be divided into three parts: (a) pure political theory; (b) methodological studies where methodology is understood as the method of *logos*, of reasoning; and (c) comparative politics in the strict sense" (Sartori 2011: 252).

Besides his contributions in the first and third fields (Pasquino 2009), which concern more the specialists in those respective sectors and on which one may agree or disagree, I believe that Sartori's contribution in the second sphere –his teachings on the

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<sup>1</sup> ETP 14 was the chapter in *Elementi di teoria politica* entitled "Tecniche decisionali", and TDR 8 was the one in *Theory of Democracy* dedicated to "A Decision-making *Theory of Democracy*". I remember that well, since I had to present both of them, hoping to take advantage of some familiarity with public choice theories, and of my fortuitous recent reading of the book written by Buchanan and Tullock (1962).

<sup>2</sup> See [http://videolectures.net/ipsa09\\_sartori\\_kdlecture/](http://videolectures.net/ipsa09_sartori_kdlecture/)

method and logic of social sciences – is even more undeniable and, in a certain sense, universal (Collier and Gerring 2009; Sartori 2012).

In this regard, I would like to briefly discuss three main aspects to show how they have travelled far beyond Sartori's students, and are shared even by scholars who certainly cannot be called Sartorians, and who, in some respects, might even be considered diametrically opposed to his thought.

The lessons to which I refer concerned:

- The role of theory
- Comparison as a control method
- The importance of applied knowledge

Let us begin with the importance of theory.

Political science is an empirical science, but this does not mean that it is data-centred. On the contrary, in his well-known autobiographical essay, first published in the volume edited by Hans Daalder (1997), Sartori wrote, "I have always insisted on a 'theory-rich' discipline monitored by a sound training in logic and method ('methodology'); I never believed in a 'superior' quantified science" (Sartori 1997: 96).

Let us now consider the following quote:

"The ruling emperor of social sciences has no clothes. His quantitative garb is largely make-believe (...) 'a form of mass deception'. Our qualitative understanding of social phenomena has expanded beyond recognition, during the last 100 years. It has produced durable results. Yet, social sciences have not become as scientific as this basis would allow them to be, because they have overemphasized descriptive statistical analysis to the detriment of conceptual model building" (236).

This almost seems like a passage taken directly from Sartori himself. It is, in any case, the same critical objective that Sartori pursued when he discussed the behaviourist drift of American political science.

The same author also writes: "In social sciences, (...) unambiguous prediction – that could prove right or wrong [*ed.* here echoing the idea of comparison as a form of control (Sartori 1991: 244)] – was discounted in favor of statistical 'models' that could go this way or that way, depending on what factors one included and which statistical approach one used" (vii).

I'm not sure how many readers have recognized these quotations. Some years ago, the *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica* published an insightful debate on their author (De Sio and Pisati 2010). The extracts are taken from *Making Social Science More Scientific* by Rein Taagepera (2007), who incidentally was awarded by IPSA with the same Karl Deutsch prize that Sartori received only a few years later.

It is hard to imagine anyone more distant from Sartori than Taagepera, ranging from the model of science they had in mind to the type of predictions they sought to make. Sartori favoured a 'science of man', while Taagepera endeavoured to align with the natural sciences. Sartori advocated circumscribing the conditions under which his generalizations applied, whereas Taagepera sought supposedly 'universal' laws. Sartori adhered to the tenets of John Stuart Mill, while Taagepera drew on the toolkit of mathematics and on his past training in physics.

And yet, in some respects, they are precisely what are sometimes called 'strange bedfellows'.

An idea that they shared, and which is apparent in the above quotations, is that of a scientific knowledge that 'walks on two legs', so to speak: a theoretical 'leg', founded on logic and independent of data — 'ignorant,' as Taagepera (2016) sometimes called it — and an empirical 'leg', which serves as a control but is capable of neither generating hypotheses nor providing support for generalizations on its own (Taagepera 2017). It was not by collecting an infinite amount of data on falling bodies that Newton managed to formulate the law of universal gravitation; nor is it by assembling an endless array of values for the fragmentation of party systems that we can better understand their link to electoral systems.

We are speaking not only of the fact that theory is important, but also of the fact that it is considered a priority and a discriminating element in the scientific work of scholars with completely different research characteristics and approaches.

Thus, the divide is not the one that separates qualitative and quantitative approaches; if it were, one would not understand the respect Sartori pays to Deutsch. Rather, it concerns the space and priority given to theory as opposed to empirical data. A qualitative case study does not necessarily leave more room for theory than a quantitative study does; nor, of course, is the opposite true.

A second aspect in terms of which, *mutatis mutandis*, Sartori and Taagepera could paradoxically be grouped together concerns the type of explanation.

Indeed, one might argue that they are both suspicious of additive explanations, preferring combinatory logics. Certainly, the way in which Taagepera mathematically combines his quantities differs from the explanatory configurations used by Sartori; but both remain sceptical of models with many variables where each one additively explains a small part of the phenomenon being analysed.

It is curious that this is also the primary reason why an author like Charles Ragin argues that the comparative method is superior to the statistical method in several respects:

"First", and I am quoting from Ragin's 1987 book devoted to comparative analysis, "the statistical method is not combinatorial; each relevant condition typically is examined in a piecemeal manner" (Ragin 2014); and both Sartori and Taagepera could not agree more.

Ragin then provides other arguments in favour of the comparative method. For instance: "applications of the comparative method produce explanations that account for every instance of a certain phenomenon" (Ragin 2014), where "all exceptions to working hypotheses must be addressed and resolved" (Ragin 2023).

And here, one cannot help but recall Sartori's criticism of Duverger's Laws concerning the relationship between electoral systems and party systems, and of their operationalizations as mere 'frequency laws' unable to account for multiple outliers. Sartori, on the other hand, combines electoral rules and the structuring of party systems to address those 'exceptions' and to reach generalizations with greater explanatory power (Sartori 1994).

Finally, it is again Ragin who writes: "the comparative method does not require the investigator to pretend that he or she has a sample of societies drawn from a particular population so that tests of statistical significance can be used. The boundaries of a

comparative examination are set by the investigator”; an approach that has much to do with scope conditions and Sartori’s rules for defining what is comparable and what is not.

Unlike Taagepera, Ragin does not seem like a ‘strange bedfellow’, given his considerable affinity with Sartori in his approach to the logic of comparison.<sup>3</sup> However, at least judging by their respective bibliographies, Ragin and Sartori do not seem to hold each other in particularly high regard. Ragin never cites Sartori, not even in the re-edition of his *The Comparative Method* (Ragin 2014), nor in the more recent *Analytic Induction for Social Research* (Ragin 2023). And Sartori himself, in his *Comparing and Miscomparing* (Sartori 1991), references Ragin almost solely in a footnote, specifically the one regarding the potential superiority of the comparative method over the statistical one.

One possible reason for this mutual suspicion might be their differing beliefs regarding the purpose of comparison: for Sartori the reason for comparison is control,<sup>4</sup> whereas Ragin explicitly writes that the point is not to test theories or hypotheses but to interpret cases.<sup>5</sup>

Returning to the differences between the comparative method and the statistical method, and the preference for the former over the latter, Arend Lijphart argued precisely the opposite: “there is [...] no clear dividing line between the statistical and comparative methods; the difference depends entirely on the number of cases. [Thus], if at all possible one should generally use the statistical [...] method instead of the weaker comparative method” (Lijphart 1971).

This methodological divergence is not the only difference between Sartori and Lijphart. There is also a substantive one, which concerns the feasibility of Israel’s institutional experiment with the direct election of its prime minister. Lijphart considered it feasible, as a sort of *sui generis* presidentialism sustained by the mutual threat of executive no-confidence and legislative dissolution, while Sartori foresaw the institutional structure stalling and frequent elections occurring (Lijphart 1999; Sartori 1994). As it turned out, Sartori was right, and Lijphart was wrong on this point; and this should at least give pause to anyone considering experimenting with something similar again.

However, there is one point on which Sartori and Lijphart certainly agreed: the importance of applied knowledge. Whether they were discussing the effects of electoral systems, the rigidity of government forms, or the institutional arrangements best suited to challenging contexts, their analyses were never detached from some prescriptive purposes for the real world (Crepaz et al. 2000; Lijphart 2008; Sartori 2011). “Above all, ... my emphasis has always been on the conversion of theory into practice, and thus on ‘operative’ (not operational) science. In my view political scientists are ... required to know (at least better than laymen) how problems can be solved, which reforms are likely to work and, in a nutshell, to have ‘know how’” (Sartori 1997: 96).

Conversely, this was one of the trends that Sartori most deplored in the recent developments of political science, namely, favouring pure research at the expense of the

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Sartori would endorse Ragin’s statement that “the comparative method is based on ‘logical methods’ [...]; it uses two of Mill’s methods of inductive inquiry: the method of agreement and the indirect method of difference” (Ragin 2014: 15).

<sup>4</sup> “One can engage in comparative research for a variety of reasons, but THE reason is control” [of theses, propositions, expectations] (Sartori 2011: 217).

<sup>5</sup> “Many comparativists, especially those who are qualitatively oriented, are not often involved in ‘testing’ theories per se. Rather, they apply theory to cases in order to interpret them” (Ragin 2014: 11).

theory-practice linkage. In his view, it was as though political science had forgotten its original mission, one of the few areas where Sartori thought economists were better than us political scientists.<sup>6</sup>

So, returning to the title that I initially had in mind: if it is hard for Italian political scientists not to be somewhat Sartorian, recognizing the importance of theory and the centrality of comparison, I believe that for many of us, following him in answering the question “a science for what?” has been more challenging.

This is not a specifically Italian shortcoming, since it was recently observed across Europe in the survey of the profession conducted by Giliberto Capano and Luca Verzichelli. The authors dedicated their book on the fate of political science “to the next generations of political scientists. So that they will never forget that being a political scientist does not only mean carrying out excellent research, writing brilliant, original papers, and teaching students; it also means, first and foremost, contributing towards a better, democratically sustainable society” (Capano and Verzichelli 2023).

In Italy, it seems to me that other disciplines are more attentive to this aspect and cultivate their public engagement more systematically. There are, for instance, two major economics festivals, a sociology festival, as well as festivals for philosophy and law. Perhaps it is time to consider a political science festival, independent and separate from our annual conference. I believe this would be yet another way to be Sartorian on this third front as well.

## Acknowledgements

Presentation at the Round Table: “One Hundred Years of Giovanni Sartori,” Annual Conference of the Italian Society of Political Science, Trieste, September 12-14, 2024.

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<sup>6</sup> It is curious that in the latest issue of the Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Alan Blinder, an economist celebrated precisely for his ability to bridge research and public engagement, lamented instead the absence of his own discipline on this front, and recommended that his colleagues reduce the gap between economic theory and political relevance. He concluded his piece with a wonderful quote from a baseball player of Italian descent, Yogi Berra: “In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice, there is.” (Blinder 2024: 13).

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# A multifaceted issue: The coverage and politicization of the climate change issue on Italian television

Guido Legnante  
Margherita Bordignon  
Cecilia Baretto  
Samantha Conte  
Susanna Sassi  
UNIVERSITY OF PAVIA

## Abstract

This article investigates the level and nature of politicization of the climate change coverage in a selection of programmes aired by the main Italian national TV channels, and aims to establish connections between this analysis and public opinion research (also in view of a possible future harmonization of the research tools). Climate change is a multifaceted issue, as it is the assessment of its politicization. This complex nature becomes even more evident when trying to assess whether (and how) its politicization operates at the public opinion and at the media content levels. As to the contents, we observe that the climate change implications are portrayed and framed considering a variety of domains including economic, environmentalist, equality, conservationist, technological, etc. Both media coverage and public opinion research tend to swing from high to low concern, and from high to low politicization. The main RQ can be summarized as follows: 1) Is there a growing coverage of climate change issues?; 2) Is there a growing politicization of climate change issues?; 3) Does the level of politicization vary during the 2022 electoral campaign?; 4) Does the politicization also mirror/reflect conflicting perspectives on climate change issues advocated by political actors holding conflicting stances? We will address our research questions using a novel, hand-coded, dataset of TV news, covering the 2020-2023 period. Data will consider TV coverage both in “ordinary” and “emergency” periods (such as the Emilia Romagna floods in spring 2023), with special attention to the contents voiced by political actors on Television during both ordinary periods and the national 2022 electoral campaign.

## 1. Introduction

The global discourse on environmental issues, particularly climate change, has undergone significant evolution over the past decades. While public concerns about environmental degradation and pollution date back to at least the 1970s, the narrative has recently taken a sharper turn, focusing on the imminent threats of climate change. In recent years, several key factors have contributed to this shift. Grassroots climate movements such as *Fridays for Future* (FFF) and the unprecedented global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic have played a prominent role in revitalizing public attention. Additionally, global and regional efforts have been pivotal in shaping both public discourse and political agendas. International climate negotiations, such as the COP



conferences, have underscored the urgency of global action: the Paris Agreement from COP21 (2015) placed climate change at the forefront of policy discussions, garnering media attention and increasing pressure on governments and industries to act. Regionally, the European Green Deal (2019) aims for climate neutrality by 2050, sparking debate and pushing sustainability into economic and political agendas. The EU's Recovery and Resilience Plan (2021) further ties post-pandemic recovery to green transitions, solidifying climate goals in policymaking. Moreover, the rising frequency of extreme weather events like wildfires and floods has made the effects of climate change more visible, intensifying media coverage and public discourse on resilience and adaptation. Indeed, despite the delayed politicization of climate change in Italy compared to other European nations, the interplay between grassroots movements and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on political priorities suggests a changing landscape, especially during the most recent National Election Campaign.

This paper delves into the representation of climate change in the Italian media, focusing on primetime newscasts. By examining a three-year span that includes the COVID-19 pandemic, the study addresses critical research questions regarding the coverage, politicization, and framing of climate change in the media landscape. This paper offers a novel contribution to the field by examining the representation of climate change in Italian primetime television newscasts, a medium that has been relatively underexplored in existing research on climate change communication. While most studies have focused on print, digital media, or social media platforms, the role of television – particularly in countries like Italy, where it remains a dominant source of information for a significant portion of the population – has been largely overlooked. By addressing this gap, this study provides critical insights into how climate change is framed and politicized in a format that reaches millions of viewers daily. Understanding this dynamic is crucial, as television news continues to shape public opinion and inform policy debates, especially on a complex and urgent issue like climate change.

First, the following sections will present a detailed literature review and the development of our research questions; next, we will address data and results, shedding light on the evolving dynamics of climate change discourse in the Italian media landscape. The analysis involves a meticulous examination of news items aired by seven Italian national TV channels, considering variables such as cabinet composition, electoral campaign stages, and framing strategies. Among the other results, we find that the coverage of climate change is still very limited and mainly contingent on external events, i.e., International Earth Day. Furthermore, we find that while the majority of actors (including experts and activists) mostly deal with climate change in very general terms, politicians and parties are more likely to make policy proposals when dealing with it.

## 2. Background & Research Questions

Attentiveness to environmental issues is far from recent, as public awareness began emerging as early as the late 1960s, when concerns about the earth's limits and ecological degradation first surfaced. Early mobilizations focused on pollution, workers' protests, the destruction of green spaces, and overpopulation. Two key publications from this era played significant roles in raising awareness. Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968) introduced the demographic element into the environmental debate, emphasizing the planet's

finite capacity to sustain human civilization, which sparked global discourse on population growth and resource scarcity. Barry Commoner's *The Closing Circle* (1971) added a critical perspective on the environmental impact of technological and industrial processes. Commoner argued that the disruption of natural ecological cycles by modern technology, such as the widespread use of synthetic chemicals and pollution from industrial processes, was driving the earth's life-supporting systems towards collapse. He underscored the interconnectedness of all ecological systems, famously stating "Everything is connected to everything else", highlighting the profound consequences of environmental disruption.

At the global level, the 1972 Stockholm Conference, officially known as the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, was a pivotal moment in shaping international environmental governance. This was the first major international gathering to address global environmental issues, bringing together representatives from 113 countries, as well as civil society and environmental experts. The Conference marked the beginning of global environmental diplomacy and set the stage for future international agreements on climate and environmental issues, leading to the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and formally acknowledging the need for international cooperation in tackling environmental degradation. The *Stockholm Declaration*, which emerged from the conference, outlined 26 principles on environmental management, emphasizing the importance of sustainable development and the balance between environmental protection and economic growth.

In Italy, specific events such as the Seveso disaster of 1976, battles against nuclear power, and campaigns to eliminate asbestos marked critical turning points in environmental discourse. The Seveso disaster was a chemical accident that occurred in a small town in northern Italy when a toxic cloud of dioxin was released from a factory. The event exposed thousands of people to dangerous levels of toxins and led to widespread health concerns, environmental damage, and the long-term contamination of land. This disaster prompted greater public awareness about industrial risks and environmental safety, leading to stricter regulations in Italy and across Europe. The European Union's *Seveso Directive* (1982) was named after the event, setting high safety standards for industrial facilities handling dangerous substances. Similarly, Italy's battles against nuclear power became another significant focus of environmental activism. After the Chernobyl disaster in 1986, the Italian public grew increasingly wary of the risks associated with nuclear energy. This culminated in a national referendum in 1987, in which a large majority voted to abandon nuclear energy, leading to the closure of Italy's nuclear power plants. This event reinforced the role of grassroots environmental movements in influencing national policy and set a precedent for Italy's energy sources debate. Another key moment was the campaign against asbestos, a harmful material used extensively in construction and manufacturing throughout the twentieth century. Asbestos exposure was linked to severe health risks, including lung diseases and cancer. After years of activism by environmental and health organizations, Italy became one of the first countries to ban the production and use of asbestos in 1992.

Noteworthy milestones, including most countries signing the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 to combat climate change and the cultural impact of Al Gore's documentary, "An Inconvenient Truth" (Gore, 2006), heightened public awareness about the urgent realities of climate change, influencing its transformation into a widespread and known public

matter. Thus, gradually, climate change has transcended scientific discourse, becoming a politically relevant and disputed issue.

With respect to the perception of climate change in public opinion, Inglehart (1977) identifies a substantial shift in public values over time, transitioning from materialist values focused on basic needs and economic security to post-materialist values prioritizing quality of life, self-expression and opportunities, determining a change in the issues that could have a significant impact on public opinion and, consequently, political mobilization. Therefore, environmental issues have progressively transformed the political landscape, having an impact not only on the emergence of Green parties but also on the mobilization strategies of their competitors. Though not a new cleavage (Lijphart, 1990; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Bartolini, 1990), the ‘green’ issue has significantly affected party competition (Carter, 2013; Spoon et al., 2014). At the same time, climate change operates both as a valence issue, where there is general agreement on the desired outcome but differing perceptions of competency, and as a position issue, where parties take clear stances (Schworer, 2024; Canes-Wrone et al., 2019).

Nonetheless, assessing the politicization of the climate change issue in the media is not a straightforward task (Anderson, 2019). Both media coverage and public opinion research tend to fluctuate between high and low concern, and between high and low politicization. Political actors play a pivotal role in shaping the discourse around climate change, with their conflicting stances significantly contributing to its politicization. In general terms, ‘politicization’ means giving a political (and adversarial) character to sectors which normally have nothing to do with politics (McCright and Dunlap, 2011). As D’Albergo and Moini (2019) explain, this concept covers several historical, social and economic processes established in the 1990s that have had consequences on our society. These processes were, for instance, the issues, discourses and interests of private actors which took on a political nature because they replaced states’ regulatory action and led to social changes.

It is important to remember that the concept of politicization is strongly connected to that of depoliticization, which means the removal of political character: in other words, something that is no longer influenced or controlled by politics. The dynamics of politicization and depoliticization can be activated in three ways (D’Albergo and Moini, 2019): proactive (social practices that tend to occupy areas previously occupied by public actions), reactive (social practices that are activated in response to requests, choices or decisions linked to the desire of political actors to depoliticize political action) or hybrid. The consequences of these dynamics and of the dualism between politicization and depoliticization have effects on issues (the specific point at which social practices and action are carried out), actors (people who give life to these practices), and belief systems (normative and cognitive representations that manifest themselves in the speeches of actors). Moreover, as Schattschneider (1975) considers, the driving force of politics is conflict and, therefore, politicization is “*the expansion of the importance of the conflict*”. As Centemeri (2024) explains, conflict is a public outcry, based on neutral and technical explanations, against activities that maintain or increase inequalities or the illegitimate abuse of power. This requires forms of involvement and discourses that show an alternative status report to the dominant ones. However, building up mobilization is not easy, especially in marginalized areas. On the basis of this, Hutter and Grande (2014) focus on three key dimensions of

politicization: the salience of the issue, the expansion of the actor and the polarization of the actor. Indeed Hutter and Grande (2014) consider the actors to be the main elements in this process and only topics frequently debated in public can be considered politicized: the more actors are involved, the more the topic is politicized. Another important aspect is polarization: as De Wilde (2011) and Hoeglinger (2012) claim, the actors must have different positions and the more the issue is polarized, the more the two groups support totally opposite positions with the same strength. In order to measure politicization Hutter and Grande (2014) propose a 'Politicization Index' which considers all the three dimensions '*salience (actor expansion + polarization)*'. In this framework, salience is a necessary but not sufficient condition, as its effect on politicization depends on its interaction with actor expansion and polarization, with the overall level being determined by their combined influence (Hutter and Grande, 2014).

This shows how politicization tends to lead audiences to rely on the opinions of political elites rather than those of scientists. Indeed, in recent years, the environmental issue has increased in importance, and nowadays transnational actors, diplomacy and intergovernmental institutions are central elements of global environmental policy because they shape public perception through the media (Hale, 2019). Referring specifically to climate change, Gibson et al. (2016) argue for the necessity of engaging journalism in climate science and policy-making, a task hindered by new challenges to the journalistic profession. Traditionally, journalists often applied uncritical professional norms of balance and objectivity in their reporting of climate science, giving climate change deniers 'equal time', a practice that downplays the actual level of scientific consensus (Gibson et al., 2016, p. 420; Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004). In recent years, however, they have reduced coverage of climate skeptics, presenting science in a less controversial light (Gibson et al., 2016, pp. 419-420).

In addition, and connected to the above-mentioned 'Politicization Index', another effect of politicization is that individuals tend to be less concerned about climate change the more polarization they perceive (Linde, 2020). Instead of being a conciliatory valence issue, climate change acts as a 'multiplier' of agreement and disagreement, exacerbating contemporary challenges between both developed and developing countries in international summits and within the population, as well as between liberal and conservative cultures (Pepermans & Maesele, 2016).

In recent years, two main phenomena have contributed to revitalizing public discourse on climate change and environmental issues and, thus, its politicization, as politicians and grassroots movements are more prone to exploit it. On the one hand, new climate movements (such as Fridays for Future) have emerged, emphasizing the urgency of taking immediate action regarding the climate crisis. These movements not only express environmental concerns but also have tangible impacts on shaping policy and media agendas (Hultman et al., 2018). In this respect, youth engagement in environmental issues is particularly relevant to its politicization as it contributes to a broader societal shift, influencing both political mobilization and policy agendas (Blok et al., 2020).

On the other hand, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic presented a new global crisis that, to some extent, diverted public attention and prioritized climate change. The pandemic shifted political priorities, creating a complex relationship between immediate health concerns and long-term environmental challenges (Fuentes et al., 2020). While the re-emergence of war concerns in Western countries may potentially diminish

the priority of climate change for citizens and policymakers (Jacoby et al., 2022), the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 brought environmental issues back into focus. This conflict, closely tied to energy security and a heavy reliance on fossil fuels, has sparked renewed debates on the need to transition to renewable energy sources. The conflict exposed Europe's deep reliance on Russian fossil fuels, particularly natural gas, raising urgent concerns about the geopolitical vulnerabilities associated with energy dependence. As countries scrambled to secure alternative energy sources and reduce their reliance on Russian imports, the war sparked renewed debates on the necessity of accelerating the transition to renewable energy. The invasion has prompted discussions about increasing investments in green technologies, such as wind, solar, and hydrogen, not only to mitigate the economic and political risks associated with fossil fuels but also to meet long-term climate goals (Hosseini, 2022).

Not only that, but it is essential to consider that climate change can exacerbate existing conflicts and create new challenges on the global stage (Burke et al., 2015). Such a close connection between climate issues, pandemics, economic challenges, and geopolitical emergencies is evident in the European Union's Next Generation EU plan, which intertwines economic recovery with climate action, connecting environmental sustainability and economic resilience.

With increased attention from both the public and elite actors – especially the media and political class – *the way* climate change is framed acquires significance as well. As more actors outside of the scientific community deal with the issue, climate change escapes the rigorous communication of experts and enters the day-to-day struggle of political competition. Two aspects are particularly interesting in this regard. The first is the extent to which the issue is presented as *critical* and *urgent*, ranging from an impending catastrophe to a minor issue to be dismissed, a matter particularly relevant to the media. For instance, in a computer-assisted content analysis of climate change articles from major U.S. newspapers between 1985 and 2017, Chinn et al. (2020) find that media representations are both increasingly politicized and polarized. On the other hand, an excessively dramatic representation of climate change and environmental issues reduces the credibility of the source of information, which, in turn, affects the way the public responds to the issue (Feldman & Hart, 2021). As the data on the extreme events map (ISPRA 2024) shows, between 2020 and 2023 a series of extreme phenomena occurred in Italy, often of a serious nature. This multitude of serious events gives an idea of how the continuous use by television of a very exacerbated tone of voice – aimed at impacting the audience's attention – reduces news credibility in the long term. Secondly, it is also pertinent to evaluate how the climate change issue is portrayed in terms of policy, whether presented in broad, abstract terms, as a general call to action, or linked to specific policy proposals.

While Italy has experienced a delayed politicization of climate change and environmental issues compared to other European countries (Beltrame et al., 2017), despite Italians' growing worry about the effects of environmental change (Lorenzoni & Pidgeon, 2006; Antronico et al., 2020), there appears to be a notable shift in recent years. Indeed, the two aforementioned factors – new grassroots green movements and the Covid-19 Pandemic – may have increased public opinion attention on climate change and related issues. On one hand, movements like Fridays for Future have gained

international resonance, suggesting that they may have found fertile ground even in countries where green parties have traditionally performed poorly in elections (Biorcio, 2016). On the other hand, although the politicization of climate change remained limited and largely non-polarized in the 2010s (Ghinoi & Steiner, 2020), the shock of the pandemic, especially pronounced in Italy, may have influenced a shift in its politicization in the most recent national elections (October 2022) and in particular during the electoral campaign.

Recent research, conducted by Osservatorio di Pavia in collaboration with Greenpeace, has analysed the portrayal of climate change in the Italian media. The study focused on newspapers, TV programmes, and social media. Results revealed that climate change is relatively underrepresented in the Italian media, gaining prominence mainly in connection with extreme climate events like floods, fires, or landslides. Moreover, political actors very rarely incorporate climate change into their political agendas. When they do, the discussion often develops along partisan lines, which creates a barrier to discussing policy solutions to the issue and, in some cases, with an ambivalent stance on the climate actions required to address the problem. Moreover, even when climate actions are labelled as a priority on the political agenda, they tend to be discussed in rather general terms (Greenpeace Italy 2022; 2023).

Taking cues from their research, we investigate further how the issue of climate change is represented in the Italian media, and, in particular, on primetime newscasts on television, considering that television is still the main source of information for the Italian public (AGCOM 2024). Although television is the most used means of accessing news in Italy, the hybridization of the media system (Chadwick 2013) has led to the growth of online platforms as a means of information. More precisely, the AGCOM report highlights how in Italy the audiences of the main broadcasters, the main national news outlets and the unique users of general information sites or apps are decreasing. On the increase, instead, are those of platforms that show content produced by their users, including social networks (not only Instagram and TikTok, but also the number of unique Facebook users still appears to be slightly increasing, even if lower than the two former social networks).

In a global setting, even if compared to 2022, all media show a decline in use: social media, however, reveals a growth of 11 percentage points. Television and public radio, even in their online dimensions, appear to be the media in which citizens have even greater trust but in general, the levels of trust in news coming from social media are growing compared to the previous year (Data Reportal 2024; European Union 2023). Platform news consumption is also fragmented and *“videos are becoming a more important source of online news, especially with younger groups”* (Reuters Institute 2024).

In general, we want to investigate how the coverage, politicization, and framing of the climate change issue evolve over a time span of three years and especially in conjunction with the Covid-19 Pandemic. In particular, in the present paper, we address four main research questions: 1) Is there a growing coverage of climate change issues? 2) Is there a growing politicization of climate change issues? 3) Did the level of politicization vary during the 2022 electoral campaign? 4) How does the framing of news content shape the discourse around climate change in terms of a general ‘call to action’ versus specific policy proposals?

### 3. Data and Results

In the following section, we will first provide a descriptive analysis of the data, and we will then confront our research questions more directly.

In order to address our main research questions, we relied on the analysis of news items aired by the prime-time news broadcasts of the seven national public and private Italian channels – Rai1, Rai2, Rai3, Rete4, Canale5, Italia1, and La7. The timeframe ranged from 31 December 2019 to 30 September 2023, thus covering both an initial period before the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in Italy, the whole pandemic period, and the subsequent ‘back to normality’ period. For reasons of data availability and their compatibility with those of the period considered, it was impossible to go further back in time. However, in this way, we were both able to observe some dynamics in action before the explosion of the pandemic and the consequent lockdown (see the discussion in Figure 1), and how for a long time the pandemic obscured attention towards environmental issues (Stoddart *et al.* 2023; Smirnov and Hsieh 2022; Lyytimäki *et al.* 2020; Rauchfleisch *et al.* 2023), which only subsequently returned to the attention of public opinion, in particular in the presence of trigger events (see again Figure 1).

Although the initial selection amounted to 181,793 pieces of news, we reduced it to 5,785 by selecting only those news items whose text contained at least one of a list of keywords<sup>1</sup> related to the climate change issue. Next, we refined the selection further by manually selecting only those news items that mentioned climate change in a meaningful and relevant way for a final dataset of 1235. We then carefully read each piece of news and manually coded them to build the variables of interest (for a general overview of the variables, refer to Table 1).

As presented in Table 1, we coded five variables for each piece of news. *Cabinet*, referring to the Cabinet in office at the time of the airing; *electoral campaign*, meaning the stage of the electoral campaign; *not in campaign*, that is before the fall of Cabinet Draghi; *pre-campaign*, between the fall of Cabinet Draghi and the submitting of the electoral lists; *campaign*, until the day of the national elections; *post-campaign*, from the day of the national elections onward. We also built two variables about the framing of the news; in particular, *Policy*, coding whether the piece of news contained a general call to action or a specific policy proposal and *Urgency*, coding how urgently the issue of climate change is framed. Finally, we also built a Politicization score. We build on the approach developed by Chinn *et al.* (2020) and reprised by Hart *et al.* (2020) to define politicization, i.e. the percentage of political actors mentioned in the news relative to the mentions

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<sup>1</sup> All the following words (including their plural form and adjacent concept) were used to make the selection: ‘più caldo’, ‘più freddo’, ‘climate change’, ‘cambiamento climatico’, ‘fridays for future’, ‘temperature insolite’, ‘cambiamenti climatici’, ‘catastrofe naturale’, ‘temperatura insolita’, ‘temperatura record’, ‘temperatura’, ‘clima’, ‘ultima generazione’, ‘alluvione’, ‘surriscaldamento’, ‘ghiacciaio’, ‘scioglimento dei ghiacci’, ‘antropogenico’, ‘antropocene’, ‘eventi estremi’, ‘evento climatico estremo’, ‘evento estremo’, ‘eventi climatici estremi’, ‘ambiente’, ‘emergenza climatica’, ‘carbon tax’, ‘inquinamento’, ‘gas serra’, ‘CO2’, ‘accordo di parigi’, ‘protocollo di kyoto’, ‘desertificazione’, ‘transizione energetica’, ‘transizione green’, ‘giustizia climatica’, ‘sostenibilità’, ‘sostenibilità ambientale’, ‘ecologia’, ‘eco terrorista’, ‘ecoansia’, ‘negazionista climatico’, ‘attivista per il clima’, ‘fonti rinnovabili’, ‘fonti fossili’, ‘nucleare’, ‘energia green’, ‘energia rinnovabile’, ‘energia verde’, ‘fonti di energia rinnovabile’, ‘emissioni’, ‘crisi climatica’, ‘tutela ambiente’, ‘global warming’, ‘riscaldamento globale’, ‘emissioni climalteranti’, ‘decarbonizzazione’, ‘gretini’, ‘eco-vandali’.

of other actors by date.<sup>2</sup> In particular, we built a ‘Politicization Score’, where we assigned value 1 to every item of news that mentions political actors, activists or citizens in a politicized way; value 0 to items of news mentioning media or other actors; and value -1 to those which mention experts. Thus, a positive score would be associated with higher politicization, while a negative score would be associated with lower politicization.

Thus, we differ partially from Chinn et al. (2020), as activists as well as citizens are included as actors contributing to the politicization of the climate change issue as part of grass-roots political players in shaping the way climate change is framed by newscasts.

As suggested by several researchers (see, among others, *La Crisi climatica nell’informazione italiana*, a comprehensive report on the coverage of climate change issues in the Italian media written by Osservatorio di Pavia, 2020), our study finds that climate change is seldom mentioned in Italian mainstream television newscasts. Indeed, of the 181,793 observations – each corresponding to an item of news – of the initial dataset, we find that only around 0.6% of the total news mentions climate change in a meaningful and relevant way.

Of the three years analysed, climate change was mentioned in at least one news item in 569 occurrences – around once every two days. As shown in Figure 1, there appears to be no significant variation in climate change coverage depending on the Cabinet considered. For instance, the two ‘peaks’, corresponding to 13 news items dedicated to climate change, occurred on two specific occasions that had little to do with partisan political actors. The first was on 31 December 2019, when both the President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, and Pope Francis made explicit references to the environment during their respective end-of-the-year speeches, the second, after quite a long period in which the Covid-19 pandemic monopolized the public debate, on 21 April 2021, during International Earth Day.

The coverage of news related to climate change also varies depending on the channel (see Table 2); in particular, Tg1 was the newscast that dedicated most coverage to climate change issues (accounting for 28% of total news), also due to the fact that this channel is traditionally more attentive to ‘institutional’ voices such as the President of the Republic, or Pope Francis, who often consider climate change in their interventions. Climate change was mentioned by Tg3, Tg5, and Studio Aperto in 17%, 16%, and 16% of the coded occurrences, respectively. Hence, over half of the climate change coverage was by Rai newscasts (56%), 39% by Mediaset channels, and only 5% by Tg La 7 – with the contextual consideration that Rai and Mediaset account for three channels each, while La7 only has one.

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<sup>2</sup> In the [few] cases where more than one actor was mentioned in the piece of news analysed, we considered the more prominent one.

**Table 1.** Overview of the Main Coded Variables

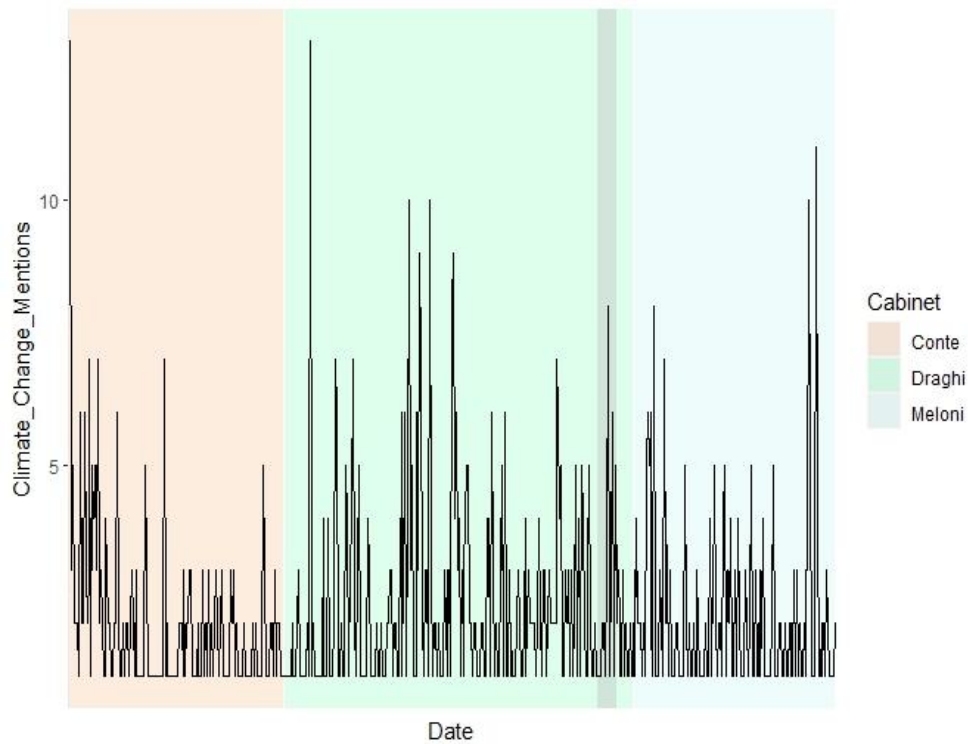
Variables	N	Description	Example
Cabinet	1235	Conte II (31/12/19 - 11/02/2021) 25% Draghi (12/02/2021 - 21/10/22) 49% Meloni (22/10/22 - 30/09/23) 26%	-
Electoral Campaign	1235	Not in Campaign (31/12/19 - 18/07/22) 66% Pre Campaign (19/07/22 - 23/08/22) 4% Campaign (24/08/22 - 25/09/22) 3% Post Campaign (26/09/22 - 30/09/23) 27%	-
Policy	1204	General Call to Action (59%) Neither General nor Specific (25%) Specific Policy Proposal (16%)	"President Mattarella's discourse [...] remarks the importance of protecting the environment" (Tg3, 31/12/19) "Recovery Plan: the objectives [...] recycling, energy, mobility" (Tg La7, 24/04/21) "Milan, to protect the environment, smoking outside will soon be banned" (Tg2, 17/01/20)
Urgency	1046	Climate Change is not an Urgent Issue (2%) Neither Not Urgent nor Urgent (28%) Climate Change is an Urgent Issue (70%)	"[...] Beppe Grillo expresses satisfaction over Mario Draghi's reassurance on climate change" (Tg2, 19/02/21) "Coronavirus: [...] worry over glaciers melting" (Studio Aperto, 23/04/20) "Climate Crisis: significant reduction of fertile soil, study finds" (Tg2, 01/02/20)
Politicization score	-	Range: -3; 12 Unique values: 12 Mean: 0.78 St. Dev: 1.9	-

Source: own elaboration from the dataset

The analysis identified key peaks where the politicization score was 6 or higher, each corresponding to significant events related to political discourse and environmental concerns. Many of these peaks are connected by recurring themes such as international cooperation and political reform. For example, events like the Earth Day climate summit (April 21, 2021) and the COP26 summit (October 31, 2021) reflect heightened political focus on environmental issues. Both saw world leaders, including Italy's Prime Minister Draghi, advocating for urgent climate action. Similarly, youth movements played a prominent role, with Greta Thunberg's activism during the World Economic Forum in Davos (23 January 2020) and the Fridays for Future protests (30 September 2021), emphasizing generational concerns about the climate crisis. Political reform and institutional speeches also drove peaks, such as Nicola Zingaretti's announcement of the PD congress (10 January 2020) and President Mattarella's New Year speech (31 December 2019), where calls for unity, institutional strength, and national identity resonated widely. We observed that political and institutional events, rather than extreme weather occurrences, served as the main catalysts for discussions about climate change. Although heatwaves, floods, and natural disasters may be seen as potential triggers for conversation, they were not the primary drivers of public dialogue during the period we studied. In fact, we see that the

Marmolada tragedy in July 2022 did lead to a significant spike in media attention, but the overall trend during the period we studied shows that political developments, high-profile speeches, and international summits were the main catalysts for the largest increases in climate change discussions.

**Figure 1.** Mentions of Climate Change in the Italian mainstream television newscasts 2020-2023



Source: own elaboration from the dataset

Next, as shown in Table 3, we map which actor was mentioned in the news item. Political actors are mentioned in around 16% of the total news coverage, experts – including scientists, researchers and scientific institutions – are mentioned 14% of the time; ordinary citizens and media actors - individual journalists, publishing houses and other media – are mentioned significantly less, respectively in 3% and 1% of news stories. By comparison, the residual category ‘Other’ is mentioned in more than half of the news items. It is worth noting that many of the ‘light news’ items were classified as Other, i.e. “United Kingdom, environment and nature: in the South Georgia archipelago, blue whales are returning, at the risk of extinction due to hunting and climate change” (Tg1, 26/02/202); “Cinema: Louis Garrel’s film, starring Laetitia Casta, ‘The Crusade,’ will be released in theatres on Wednesday. A film that pits two generations one against the other, parents and children, on environmental conservation” (Tg1, 06/04/2022).

Looking at politicization over time, we observe that the mentions of political actors, activists and ordinary citizens taking a political stance on climate change are particularly relevant during the electoral campaign – around 41% of the news related to climate change in this time frame – compared to other periods, when politics is mentioned in 12% to 15% of the observations. It is worth observing that there was little conflict *between* political actors even during the electoral campaign over climate change issues: the only partial exception is the debate over the possibility

of introducing nuclear plants to diversify the energy supply that took place during the electoral campaign; “[...] [Angelo] Bonelli refutes the proposal of introducing nuclear power plants” (Tg2, 07/09/2022).<sup>3</sup> Generally, politicians and parties criticize or engage with other actors, such as individual activists, experts, or collective groups, i.e. “Florence, the city mayor, Dario Nardella, stops *Last Generation* eco-activists (climate crisis)” (Tg La7, 16/03/2023);<sup>4</sup> “Controversies erupt regarding Roberto Cingolani’s [Minister for Ecological Transition] harsh words on activists, ‘radical chic who do more damage than the climate crisis’” (Tg4, 01/09/2021);<sup>5</sup> “President La Russa invites Eco-activists from Last Generation to go and help with the flood in Emilia-Romagna. The Vandals attack the President.” (Tg5, 19/05/2023).<sup>6</sup>

**Table 2.** Key Dates of Political and Environmental Peaks (Politicization Score  $\geq 6$ )

Peaks Dates	Example
2019-12-31	Discorso di fine anno del Presidente Sergio Mattarella con alti ascolti e visualizzazioni, il richiamo all'identità nazionale, alla fiducia e all'impegno, la crisi occupazionale, il buon funzionamento delle istituzioni, il sostegno ai giovani, e la lotta ai cambiamenti climatici.
2020-01-10	Zingaretti annuncia il congresso del PD dopo il voto in Emilia, rilanciando il partito e aprendo a società civile e movimenti ecologisti.
2020-01-23	Assisi: presentato il Manifesto per il Clima; Davos: Greta Thunberg denuncia l'ignoranza sul clima, mentre l'UE rilancia il piano di investimenti per la transizione ecologica.
2021-04-21	Giornata Mondiale della Terra: vertice sul clima promosso da Biden; Draghi parla delle politiche ambientali e del Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza.
2021-09-16	Vertice EuMed ad Atene: allarme ambientale per il mancato rispetto degli accordi internazionali sul clima. Draghi avverte sui rischi catastrofici.
2021-09-20	76ª Assemblea Generale dell'ONU: Biden discute della collaborazione con l'UE e della necessità di risposte multilaterali alla pandemia e alla crisi climatica.
2021-09-29	Draghi interviene alla Youth 4Climate e ribadisce l'impegno italiano nella lotta ai cambiamenti climatici.
2021-09-30	Milano, manifestazione Fridays for Future: Greta Thunberg e Vanessa Nakate in testa al corteo per la difesa dell'ambiente.
2021-10-31	Cop26 a Glasgow: obiettivo ridurre le emissioni di gas serra. Draghi esorta all'azione ascoltando i giovani, ma si registrano assenze significative (Russia, Cina, Brasile).
2021-11-02	Gran Bretagna: alla Cop26 di Glasgow, banche e società finanziarie si impegnano contro i cambiamenti climatici.
2022-07-04	Tragedia della Marmolada: il ritiro del ghiacciaio a causa dei cambiamenti climatici; rischio crollo dei ghiacciai delle principali vette d'Italia.
2022-11-10	Egitto, Cop27: Biden annuncia nuovi impegni sull'emergenza climatica, con un focus sull'Africa e sui paesi più colpiti dai cambiamenti climatici.
2023-08-02	Giornata Mondiale della Gioventù, Lisbona 2023: papa Francesco incontra i giovani e lancia un appello sull'importanza di agire contro i cambiamenti climatici.

Source: own elaboration from the dataset

<sup>3</sup> In the original: “[...] Bonelli condanna l'ipotesi di ritorno al nucleare” (Tg2, 07/09/2022)

<sup>4</sup> In the original: “Firenze. Il Sindaco Nardella ferma il blitz degli eco-attivisti di Ultima Generazione (crisi climatica).” (Tg La7, 16/03/2023)

<sup>5</sup> In the original: “Polemiche sulle dichiarazioni del ministro Cingolani che si è schierato contro gli ambientalisti ‘radical chic che fanno più danni delle tempeste climatiche’.” (Tg4, 01/09/2021).

<sup>6</sup> In the original: “Il Presidente La Russa invita gli eco-attivisti di Ultima Generazione ad andare in Emilia Romagna ad aiutare a spalare contro i danni dell'alluvione. I vandali attaccano il Presidente La Russa.” (Tg5, 19/05/2023).

**Table 3.** Distribution of News on Climate Change on TV News

Programme	Freq.	Percent
Tg1	346	28%
Tg2	139	11%
Tg3	205	17%
<b>Tot. RAI</b>	<b>690</b>	<b>56%</b>
Tg4	90	7%
Tg5	201	16%
Studio Aperto	194	16%
<b>Tot. Mediaset</b>	<b>485</b>	<b>39%</b>
Tg La7	60	5%
Total	1,235	100%

Source: own elaboration from the dataset

**Table 4.** Distribution of Actors Mentioned in the News 2020-2023

Actors	Freq.	Percent
Activists	152	12%
Citizens	36	3%
Experts	174	14%
Media	13	1%
Others	665	54%
Politicians & Parties	195	16%
Total	1,235	100%

Source: own elaboration from the dataset

Next, one of the most interesting aspects of news about climate change, and particularly relevant to its politicization, is how they are framed. Concerning *Policy* (see Table 1), the vast majority of news (59%) expressed a general plea to take action, while only 16% of the news items referred to concrete actions to be taken. The remaining 25% contained news that was considered a middle ground between very general and a very practical call to action.

As presented in Table 5, interestingly, news items mentioning political actors were the most ‘balanced’ in terms of framing; around 36% were general calls to action against climate change, 34% represented some sort of ‘middle ground’, and, finally, approximately 30% were explicit calls to implement specific policies. News that mentioned all the other actors were mostly general pleas to take action against climate change and its devastating effects. This is particularly enlightening as, even when news mentioned experts, only 10% focused on specific policy actions, while 71% were making very general – and almost normative – pleas. Examples of this latter framing include<sup>7</sup>: “Luca Parmitano [famous Italian astronaut] is back on Earth: the tale of his experience in space and concerns for the environment in his first press conference”

<sup>7</sup> In the original: “Luca Parmitano è rientrato sulla terra: il racconto della sua esperienza nello spazio e la preoccupazione per l’ambiente nella sua prima conferenza stampa” (Tg5, 07/02/2020); “Torino: vigilia dell’apertura dell’edizione del Salone del Libro, intervista allo scrittore indiano Amitav Ghosh da sempre impegnato nella difesa dell’ambiente e nella lotta ai cambiamenti climatici” (Tg3, 17/05/2022); “Meteo: caldo e temperature estive, i dati delle città, numerosi ancora i bagnanti sulle spiagge, commenti anche sui cambiamenti climatici, l’analisi del fisico Pasini” (Tg1, 28/09/2023).

(Tg5, 07/02/2020); “Turin: the day before the launch of Salone del Libro festival, interview with writer Amitav Ghosh, who has always been committed to the protection of the environment and the fight against climate change” (Tg3, 17/05/2022); “The weather: hot and summerlike temperatures [...] comments on climate change, the analysis by physicist, Pasini” (Tg1, 28/09/2023).

The distribution of frames in news stories mentioning climate activists is particularly intriguing. In this context, only 8% of the news focuses on practical policy proposals, while a substantial 77% revolves around general calls to action. Several factors contribute to this somewhat unexpected data. On the one hand, news coverage dedicated to events like roadblocks and Last Generation protests tends to highlight the methods of protest and their consequences – such as police intervention and public opinion – overshadowing the presence of more specific requests by the activists. For instance, proposals like the introduction of a ‘reparation fund’ for damage from extreme climate events, frequently advocated by activists, might not receive adequate attention.

On the other hand, it is essential to note that, even though activists are meticulous in formulating ‘concrete’ proposals to address criticisms of their protest methods, modern environmental activism inherently involves deliberately expressive demonstrations. These demonstrations aim to remind politicians of the urgency of the climate crisis and the importance of heeding expert advice. In the words of Greta Thunberg, “I’m not the one who’s saying these things. I’m not the one we should be listening to. And I say that all the time. We need to listen to the scientists.”

**Table 5.** Actors’ Framing of News on Climate Change in terms of Policy

Actors	Framing		
	General call to action	Middle Ground	Practical policy proposal
Activists	77%	15%	8%
Citizens	75%	19%	6%
Experts	71%	19%	10%
Media	85%	0%	15%
Other	57%	27%	16%
Politicians & Parties	36%	34%	30%
Total	59%	25%	16%

Source: own elaboration from the dataset

Turning to how urgently the climate change issue is framed in the news, we find that 70% considered it urgent, 28% somewhat urgent, and 2% not very urgent. As shown in Table 5, if we take those news items where the climate change issue is ‘not urgent’, more than half (52%) mention politicians and parties.<sup>8</sup> Thus, politicians and parties tend to propose practical policy solutions to the climate change issue but, at the same time, do not frame it as urgently as other players do. Turning our attention more specifically to the research questions outlined earlier – refer to Figure 1 – we find no compelling evidence supporting the notion that coverage of the climate change issue has increased over time. It is crucial to acknowledge the substantial

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that in absolute terms, the number of news broadcasts mentioning political actors and in which the climate change issue is framed as ‘not urgent’ is just 11.

influence of contingent events on the news cycle. As mentioned earlier, the days when mentions of climate change were notably abundant were all tied to particular occurrences.

Next, we analyse in detail the politicization of climate change issues. As discussed in the descriptive part of this section, we build on the approach of Chinn et al. (2020) and reprised by Hart et al. (2020) to define politicization, including activists and ordinary citizens as well as actors contributing to politicization of the climate change issue.

**Table 6.** Actors' Framing of News on Climate Change in terms of Urgency

Actors	Urgency		
	Not Urgent	Somewhat Urgent	Very Urgent
Activists	0%	4%	17%
Citizens	0%	2%	3%
Experts	10%	10%	17%
Media	0%	0%	1%
Other	38%	61%	51%
Politicians & Parties	52%	23%	11%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: own elaboration from the dataset

As shown in Table 6 (Model 1), we do observe a growing politicization of climate change; indeed, with respect to Cabinet Conte II, politicization significantly increases during Cabinets Draghi and Meloni. While there is certainly an increase in politicization, it should also be noted that Cabinet Conte II covered the first phases of the Covid-19 pandemic when experts from every field were often invited to debate the evolution of the crisis. With respect to our second research question, we find that politicization also increases during the electoral campaign compared to any other period considered. While heightened media coverage of politicians during elections is expected, our findings indicate a simultaneous increase in the politicization of climate change-related news. This finding suggests a growing, if not substantial, electoral significance attributed to the climate change issue on the Italian political landscape. We also control for the effects of different broadcasters, but we do not find any significant effect on polarization.

Furthermore, tackling our last research addressing the framing of climate change-related news, we employ two distinct models. This first model aims to explore the overall narrative surrounding climate change, and the extent to which media discourse delves into specific, actionable policy measures, ranging from a general call to action (=0) to a specific policy proposal (=2).

We do find that, compared to Cabinet Conte II, climate change news content is more often associated with specific policy actions during Cabinet Draghi, while there is no effect for the subsequent Cabinet Meloni. Again, while the result is meaningful, it should be noted that Cabinet Draghi was characterized by a heated debate over the reforms and actions to be implemented within the Green New Deal promoted by the European Union. In addition, for the electoral campaign, the items of news broadcast in periods immediately preceding it (Not in Campaign and Pre-Campaign) are more

likely to present actual policy proposals.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, the opposite is true for how urgent the piece of news is relating to the climate change issue. Indeed, during Cabinet Draghi, climate change is framed as a less pressing issue compared to Cabinet Conte II – again, with no significant effect in comparison to Cabinet Meloni. On the other hand, the electoral campaign is marked as the period when the issue is presented as more urgent compared to the two preceding periods.

**Table 6.** Alternative explanations

Variables	Model 1 Politicization <sup>10</sup>	Model 2 Policy	Model 3 Urgency
(Reference: Conte II)			
Draghi	0.362*** (0.135)	0.660*** (0.0500)	-0.528*** (0.0381)
Meloni	1.745*** (0.462)	-0.0483 (0.170)	-0.171 (0.113)
(Reference: Electoral Campaign)			
Not in Campaign	-0.888*** (0.311)	0.371*** (0.114)	-0.376*** (0.0760)
Pre-Campaign	-2.455*** (0.523)	0.753*** (0.192)	-0.264** (0.126)
Post-Campaign	-1.908*** (0.396)	-0.258* (0.146)	0.0376 (0.0987)
(Reference La7)			
RAI	-0.382 (0.257)	-0.533*** (0.0951)	0.0159 (0.0683)
Mediaset	-0.298 (0.252)	-0.479*** (0.0933)	0.0266 (0.0670)
Constant	1.795*** (0.409)	0.299** (0.151)	2.296*** (0.105)
Observations	1,235	1,204	1,046
R-squared	0.035	0.174	0.221

Source: own elaboration from the dataset

## 4. Conclusion

The analysis of climate change representation in the Italian media, particularly in primetime newscasts, reveals nuanced patterns and dynamics that shed light on the evolving discourse surrounding this critical global issue. Our examination spanned a three-year period (January 2020 - September 2023), thus incorporating the challenging

<sup>9</sup> Even if we introduce the variable simply as a control, with respect to RAI and Mediaset, news items on La7 are more likely to include specific policy proposals related to climate change.

<sup>10</sup> All models are linear regression models, thus considering all three dependent variables as numeric for clarity of interpretation, but it should be noted that both ‘Policy’ and ‘Urgency’ could be interpreted as ordinal variables.

backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our study, by means of a qualitative-quantitative approach, explores the media's role in shaping public perceptions of climate change.

While we expected a shift over time, our findings do not strongly support the notion of a consistent increase in climate change coverage over the analysed time frame. While there were notable peaks tied to specific events, such as President Sergio Mattarella and Pope Francis addressing environmental concerns, the overall trend does not depict a consistent upward trajectory. This challenges assumptions about a steady rise in media attention to climate change.

The prevalence of general calls to action in news content (59%) compared to specific policy proposals (16%) indicates a broad, overarching approach to the issue. However, political actors exhibit a balanced framing strategy, with a notable emphasis on specific policy actions (30%). This indicates a potential role for politicians in proposing concrete solutions to climate change while navigating the delicate balance of urgency. The framing analysis also highlights the distinct narrative surrounding climate activists, where a significant majority of news focuses on general calls to action (77%), potentially overshadowing specific policy proposals. This dynamic underscores the challenges activists face in communicating detailed policy recommendations amid expressive demonstrations. Furthermore, the electoral campaign emerges as a period when the urgency of the climate change issue is accentuated, possibly reflecting a strategic alignment with public sentiments during this crucial political phase. Nonetheless, our paper confirms previous findings (among others, Osservatorio di Pavia, Greenpeace) that, in general, political actors dedicate little to no attention to the climate crisis and, even during the campaign, the debate is limited to a few particular cases.

There are important limitations of the study that should be acknowledged when discussing our findings. The focus on primetime newscasts does not capture the entirety of media discourse, ignoring both traditional and social media, and the selective use of keywords could introduce biases.

This study makes a valuable contribution by shifting the focus to primetime television, an under-researched medium in climate change communication. Unlike prior studies that predominantly concentrate on print and digital media, this paper underscores the significant role of television in framing public perceptions of climate change. In Italy, where television remains a primary source of information for a large audience, understanding how climate change is framed in newscasts offers important insights into the broader media landscape. This research may also open the door for further studies into how traditional media can either support or hinder public understanding of environmental issues. Also, future research could explore the evolving role of social media in shaping climate change narratives and further investigate the impact of specific events on media coverage. In conclusion, by dissecting the coverage, politicization, and framing of climate change-related news, we deepen our understanding of how this critical issue is communicated to the public, with implications for broader societal awareness, political mobilization, and policy formulation.

## **Acknowledgements**

We are grateful to Mirella Marchese, Osservatorio di Pavia, for discussing some preliminary aspects of this work and data interpretation with us.

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# Growing Apart: How Italy's Populist Radical Right Electorates Diverged in the 2024 EP Election

Mirko Crulli  
Mattia Gatti  
LUISS UNIVERSITY

## Abstract

A further swing to the right characterised the 2024 European Parliament (EP) election. The Populist Radical Right (PRR) gained ground, becoming the most voted alternative in six European countries. Among these is Italy, where the honeymoon between Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia (Fdi) and its electorate persisted after 20 months of a fully right-wing cabinet comprising another PRR party, the Lega. Leveraging on an original survey conducted by the Italian Centre for Electoral Studies (CISE), we explore the determinants of PRR voting in the 2024 EP election in Italy. We test two classical theories of PRR voting: 'cultural backlash' and 'economic insecurity'. We also assess whether perceived local decline, recently identified as an important predictor of PRR orientations, played a role even in the EP election, an arena where local concerns should count less. Finally, we look at the impact of European issues and the major crises of the early 2020s, notably the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the Israel-Hamas conflict. The takeaway is that the Fdi and Lega electorates have grown apart: while still sharing nativism – a core ideological feature of the PRR family – they differ in other relevant aspects, notably socio-economic class and EU-related positions. The implications of these findings for the broader debate on the demand for PRR politics are discussed in the conclusion.

## 1. Introduction

The 2024 European Parliament (EP) election resulted in the most right-wing EP ever elected. Firstly, the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) confirmed its role as the pivotal EP group. Secondly, populist radical right (PRR) parties (Mudde, 2007) further improved upon their remarkable 2019 electoral performance (Zulianello and Larsen, 2021). For the first time, these parties took part in the EP election as a well-established political family. They had moved out of the political fringe in most European countries by winning national elections, joining coalition governments, or at least becoming *coalitionable* (Albertazzi and Vampa, 2021a). However, although their journey towards the 'mainstream' (Crulli and Albertazzi, 2024) is ongoing, the PRR family remains heterogeneous in terms of the parties' roles in their respective systems and EP group affiliations.

In some countries – most notably Italy – a PRR party is currently leading the cabinet, striking a balance between government credibility and maintaining a radical profile. Other PRR parties are junior partners in coalition governments, thus sharing the cost of governing, albeit with less evident responsibilities. Finally, most PRR parties are in

Published in 2025 under Creative Commons BY-NC-ND license by:  
*Italian Political Science*. ISSN 2420-8434.

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Volume 19, Issue 2, 111–145. Research article: DOI: 10.69101/IPS.2024.19.2.3

Contact Author: Mirko Crulli, Luiss University.

E-mail address: mcrulli@luiss.it



opposition, and a few are still not properly integrated into their party systems (Zulianello, 2020). Regarding their positions within the EP, PRR parties are split between three groups: the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), the new Patriots for Europe (Pfe) – mostly corresponding to the old Identity and Democracy (ID) – and Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN). While all parties in these groups criticise the functioning of the European Union, particularly its migration policy, they have begun to diverge on other issues, such as responses to wars. During the previous legislature, the ECR had been ostensibly more Atlanticist compared to the ID, and so the new Pfe and ESN groups seem less pro-Ukraine compared to the ECR. According to some pundits and academics (Ivaldi and Torner, 2023; Vassallo and Vignati, 2023, chap. 10), a rapprochement between the ECR and the EPP may also be underway, reflecting a ‘symbiotic relationship’ between the traditional centre-right and the radical right already detectable in many national contexts (Bale, 2018; Mudde, 2019).

As the PRR family is internally divided in terms of the parties’ roles in both national and European arenas, as well as their stances on relevant topics, we may also expect voters of different PRR parties to have diverged. Therefore, although PRR voting has already been studied from several angles (Ivarsflaten and Stubager, 2012; Spierings and Zaslove, 2017; Michel et al., 2020; Sipma and Berning, 2021), we deem the following research questions worthy of scholarly attention: [RQ1] What were the drivers of PRR voting in the 2024 EP election? [RQ2] Do classical explanations of PRR success hold, or did other contextual and EU-related issues play a key role? [RQ3] Are the determinants of the vote for different PRR parties the same?

We aim to answer these questions by focusing on an ideal case study: Italy. Following years of political marginalisation, the PRR party Fratelli d’Italia (FdI) rose to power in October 2022 (Chiaramonte and De Sio, 2024). Giorgia Meloni, the party’s leader, became Italy’s first-ever female Prime Minister and one of the most influential leaders across Europe. She leads a fully right-wing cabinet, including another PRR party – the Lega – headed by another well-known leader, Matteo Salvini. Although the two parties have experienced opposite electoral fortunes during the 2020s, both managed to increase their percentages in the 2024 EP election compared to the 2022 general election. The coexistence of two strong PRR parties makes it paramount for them to differentiate from one another (Puleo, Carteny and Piccolino, 2024). Hence, the two parties conducted different electoral campaigns and confirmed their memberships in two distinct groups: FdI is the largest party of the ECR; Lega is one of the largest within the Pfe. Whether such differentiation went hand in hand with the diversification of their demand side (i.e., their electorates) remains to be tested empirically.

To conduct our analysis of PRR voting in the 2024 EP election we rely on an original survey by the Italian Centre for Electoral Studies (CISE), fielded at the beginning of the electoral campaign (De Sio et al., 2025). This survey allows us to test the two most established explanations of PRR voting: ‘cultural backlash’ and ‘economic insecurity’ (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). In addition, thanks to a specific item in the survey, we examine the potential role of perceived local decline. Recent comparative research by Arzheimer et al. (2024) has indeed reaffirmed what previous single-case studies (Arzheimer and Bernemann, 2023; Huijsmans, 2023) had already suggested: place-related evaluations and feelings help explain PRR voting. Does this hold true for the EP election, where local

concerns should play little or no role? Finally, we consider the impact of European issues and the major crises that have shaped the early 2020s: the pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the Israel-Hamas conflict.

We illustrate our quantitative analyses after an overview of PRR performance in the 2024 EP election in both Europe and Italy, and the presentation of the research hypotheses and design. The main findings can be summarised as follows. First, FdI and Lega voters are still characterised by nativist attitudes, or aversion towards immigrants. This corroborates the notion that, of the three pillars of PRR ideology – populism, nativism, and authoritarianism (Rooduijn, 2014) – nativism is the most relevant. However, the similarities between the two electorates stop here. Indeed, FdI and Lega voters have grown apart in terms of socio-economic characteristics and EU-related attitudes. Lower social class and level of education correlate with voting for Lega, but the same is not true for FdI. Furthermore, whereas Lega's electorate is still characterised by hard Euroscepticism, FdI voters are not significantly more (or less) Eurosceptic compared to the Italian electorate at large. Consequently, as a by-product of FdI's massive electoral success, Meloni's voters no longer resemble the stereotypical PRR electorate, i.e., less educated and more economically insecure (Rydgren, 2012). We conclude by expounding on the implications of these results for the broader debate on the current state of the European PRR family.

## 2. The populist radical right navigating the 2024 EP election

Cas Mudde introduced his 2007 masterpiece 'Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe' as 'yet another book' on 'the *only successful new party family* in Europe' (Mudde, 2007, p. 1; our emphasis). At that time, PRR parties, understood as a sub-family of the 'far-right' (Rooduijn et al., 2023) characterized by acceptance of democratic rules while adopting a populist<sup>1</sup>, nativist<sup>2</sup>, and authoritarian<sup>3</sup> ideology, were central players in only a handful of European countries. In addition, the legislative strength of the PRR in the EP was very limited. As reported by Zulianello and Larsen (2021), PRR parties gained only 3.1 percent of seats in the 2004 EP election. Therefore, describing the PRR family as truly successful at that time was probably exaggerated.

Almost twenty years later, however, the PRR family appears not only successful but also strongly embedded in European politics and institutions. Therefore, discussions on the potential – or already achieved – 'mainstreaming' of the PRR have spread over the last few years (Akkerman, De Lange and Rooduijn, 2016; Mudde, 2019; Vampa and

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<sup>1</sup> Although we are aware that the scholarly debate on the true meaning of 'populism' is open (and probably never-ending), we ultimately subscribe to the definition provided by the 'ideational approach'. Based on this definition, populism can be understood as 'an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people' (Mudde, 2004, p. 543).

<sup>2</sup> We adhere to the definition of 'nativism' provided by Cas Mudde (2007, p. 19), who conceptualised it as 'the idea that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ('the nation') and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state'.

<sup>3</sup> We adhere to the definition of 'authoritarianism' provided by Cas Mudde (2007, p. 23), who conceptualised it as 'the belief in a strictly ordered society, in which infringements of authority are to be punished severely'.

Albertazzi, 2021). Commentators seem to take for granted that PRR parties have ‘gone mainstream’ at least in some countries (e.g. Zulianello, 2022). In this regard, Crulli and Albertazzi (2024) took a more critical stance by emphasising that the PRR family can be seen as ‘established but not mainstream’ in Europe. What they mean is that PRR parties can, in fact, be considered ‘established’ in European politics, as they have alternated between government and opposition in as many as 15 countries until now. On the other hand, the ideas they propagate, especially nativist and authoritarian ones, are still only shared by a minority of Europeans, making PRR voters different from the European electorate at large.

### **2.1. Another step out of the fringe**

Regardless of the extent to which PRR parties are ‘mainstream’, the 2024 EP election marked another step out of the political fringe for them. Their average vote share grew from 11.9% in 2019 to 13.3% in 2024 (Tab. 1). Consequently, the number of EP seats won by PRR parties has now reached its historical maximum. In the previous legislature, PRR parties occupied 138 seats (19.6% of the total EP seats). In the 10th legislature, this number has grown to 167 seats (23.2% of the total EP seats).

**Table 1.** Electoral performance and seats of PRR parties: comparison between the 2019 and 2024 EP elections.

Country	Party name	Acronym	Group	% 2024	Δ votes (24-19)	Seats 2024	Δ seats (24-19)
Austria	Freedom Party of Austria	FPÖ	ID→Pfe	25.36	8.16	6	3
Belgium	People's Party	PP	/	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
	Flemish Interest	VB	ID→Pfe	14.5	2.4	3	0
Bulgaria	Attack	Ataka	/	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
	National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria	NFSB	/	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
	Bulgarian National Movement	IMRO	ECR	2.09	-5.31	0	-2
	Volya	Volya	/	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
Croatia	Revival	Revival	NI→ESN	13.98	12.94	3	3
	Homeland Movement	DP	New(ECR)	8.82	8.82	1	1
	Croatian Sovereignists	HS	ECR	4.01	-4.51	0	-1
Czechia	Freedom and Direct Democracy Tomio Okamura	SPD & Trikolóra	ID→ESN	5.73	-3.37	1	-1
Denmark	Danish People's Party	DF	ID→Pfe	6.37	-4.43	1	0
	Denmark Democrats	DD	New(ECR)	7.39	7.39	1	1
Estonia	Conservative People's Party of Estonia	EKRE	ID→ECR	14.8	2.1	1	0
Finland	True Finns / Finns Party	PS	ID→ECR	7.6	-6.2	1	-1
France	National Rally	RN	ID→Pfe	31.37	8.07	30	8
	Reconquest	REC	New(ECR)	5.47	5.47	5	5
Germany	Alternative for Germany	AfD	ID→ESN	15.9	4.9	15	4
	Greek Solution	EL	ECR	9.3	5.1	2	1
Greece	Popular Orthodox Rally + Patriotic Radical Union	LAOS + PATRIE	/	1.66	0.46	0	0
	Victory	NIKI	New(NI)	4.37	4.37	1	1
Hungary	Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Party + Christian Democratic People's Party	Fidesz+KDNP	EPP→Pfe	44.82	-7.78	11	-2
Italy	Brothers of Italy	Fdi	ECR	28.75	22.35	24	18
	Lega Salvini Premier	Lega	ID→Pfe	8.97	-25.33	8	-21
Latvia	National Alliance	NA/LNNK	ECR	22.07	5.58	2	0
	Latvia First	LPV	New(Pfe)	6.16	6.16	1	1
Netherlands	Forum for Democracy	FvD	ECR→ /	2.49	-8.51	0	-3

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	Party for Freedom	PVV	/→PfE	16.97	13.47	6	6
Poland	Law and Justice	PiS	ECR	36.16	-9.24	20	-6
Portugal	Chega	Chega!	/→PfE	9.99	8.49	2	2
Romania	Alliance for the Union of Romanians	AUR	New(ECR)	14.93	14.93	6	6
	S.O.S. Romania	SOS RO	New(NI)	5.03	5.03	2	2
Slovakia	Slovak National Party	SNS	/	1.9	-2.2	0	0
	We are family - Boris Kollár	SR	/	N.A.	-3.2	N.A.	0
Slovenia	Slovenian Democratic Party + Slovenian People's Party	SDS + SLS	EPP	37.8	11.5	4	1
	Slovenian National Party	SNS	/	N.A.	-4	N.A.	0
	New Slovenia – Christian Democrats	N.Si	EPP	7.68	-3.42	1	0
Spain	Vox	Vox	ECR→PfE	9.63	3.43	6	3
Sweden	Sweden Democrats	SD	ECR	13.17	-2.13	3	0
<b>Avg/Total</b>				13.3	2.04	167	0.88

Notes: PRR parties were identified by referring to the PopuList (Rooduijn et al., 2023). Specifically, we classified as PRR parties those that the PopuList categorises as 'populist' and 'far right'. As Crulli and Albertazzi (2024, pp. 12-15) recently observed, 'Close examination of the definitions employed in the expert survey reveals that the label "far right" is actually applied to parties that fit Mudde's (2007) conceptualisation of the radical right, that is, parties that are nativist and authoritarian. Therefore, the PopuList labels as "populist" and "far right" those parties that Mudde originally described as populist radical right.' Table 1 also includes some recently established small parties that were not included in the latest iteration of the PopuList and/or whose classification as PRR is still debated among scholars (e.g., Niki in Greece and S.O.S. Romania). We decided to include these parties in the table based on relevant news articles and web sources. Membership in an EP group refers to the constitutive session of each legislative term. ECR = European Conservatives and Reformists; EPP = European People's Party; ESN = Europe of Sovereign Nations; ID = Identity and Democracy; NI = Non-inscrits; PfE = Patriots for Europe; / = no EP group.

A PRR party gained the relative majority of votes cast in as many as six countries: Austria, Belgium, France, Italy, Hungary, and Slovenia. Two women stood out as the big winners of the 2024 EP election: Marine Le Pen in France and Giorgia Meloni in Italy. The RN's victory in France (from 23.3% of the national votes in 2019 to 31.4% in 2024) led to unexpected and dramatic consequences, as President Emmanuel Macron immediately announced the breakup of the French Parliament and called for new legislative elections. FdI's surge, on the other hand (from 6.4% of the national votes cast in 2019 to 28.8% in 2024), confirmed what surveys had already been suggesting during the previous months: the honeymoon between the prime minister and her 'people' is lasting much longer than expected.

The fact that these two big winners belong to two distinct groups, with the RN being the major party within the new PFE and FdI the major within the ECR, is emblematic of the PRR's trajectory within European institutions. As thoroughly explained by McDonnell and Werner (2020), the history of PRR parties within the EP is one of 'non-cooperation'. Traditionally, PRR parties have either 'been isolated and/or shunned one another' (McDonnell and Werner, 2020, p. 12). The pattern of 'non-cooperation' is confirmed even now that PRR parties are a major force across the whole of Europe. A hypothetical group formed by all parties that scholars classify as 'PRR' (Rooduijn et al., 2023) would rank as second, after the EPP, in terms of seats. Nonetheless, the PRR family is split between two main groups, the PFE and the ECR, with the more extreme PRR parties gathered in a third group, the ESN launched by the *Alternative für Deutschland*. Finally, some PRR parties are also found in the EPP group (in Slovenia) and others do not belong to any group. Rather than joining forces, the PFE (mostly corresponding to the old ID with the addition of Orbán's Fidesz party) and the ECR seemed to have tilted in opposite directions in the months preceding the 2024 EP election. This was due to a mix of reasons, including different strategic opportunities for different PRR parties and international crises. For example, PRR parties have taken divergent positions on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as reported by Ivaldi and Zankina (2023). Hence, in the future, a rapprochement between the ECR and the EPP may be even more probable (or as probable as) PRR parties eventually forming a joint EP group.

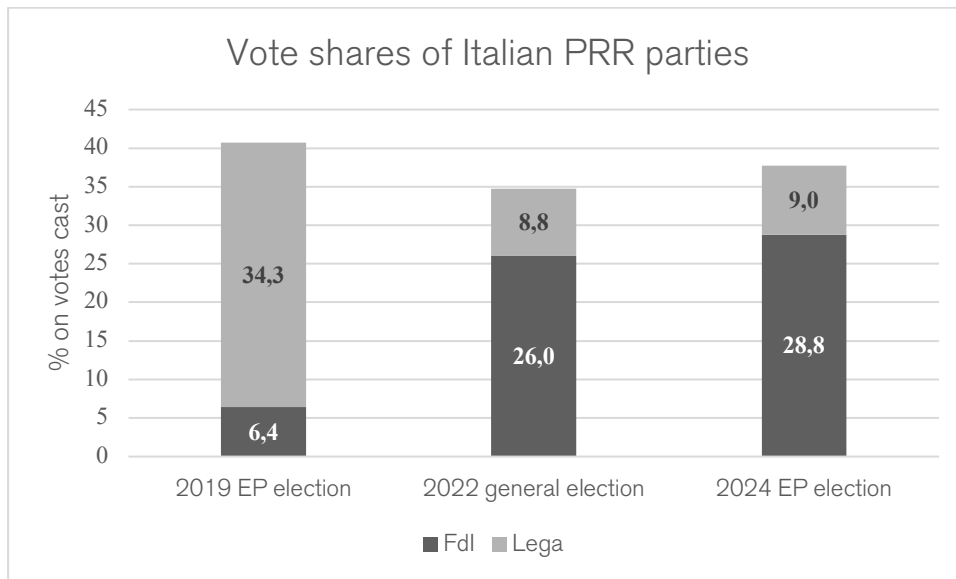
## 2.2. The paradigmatic Italian case

Nowhere in the EU is this dynamic of 'growth without cooperation' clearer than in Italy. The two Italian PRR parties, Lega and FdI, are now perfectly established in both the national and European political systems, albeit with different EP affiliations. Despite having also completely different legacies<sup>4</sup>, Lega and FdI are commonly deemed to be among the most relevant representatives of the European PRR (Rooduijn et al., 2023). Only the classification of FdI is occasionally contested, for example, by those emphasising that the party does not constitute a menace to liberal democracy due to its alleged recent moderation (Vassallo and Vignati, 2023).

Accepting the labelling of both parties as 'PRR' leads to the observation that, for three consecutive times, a PRR party – Lega in 2019, FdI in 2022 and 2024 – has won elections in Italy (Fig. 1). Therefore, Italy appears to be the new promised land for the PRR family.

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<sup>4</sup> Lega was born as a regionalist populist party (Albertazzi and Vampa, 2021b). Only when Matteo Salvini became party leader did it evolve into a more canonical PRR party (Albertazzi, Giovannini and Seddone, 2018). FdI, on the other hand, is the 'heir' of the Movimento Sociale Italiano, a neo-fascist party of post-WWII Italy (Vampa, 2023; Vassallo and Vignati, 2023). Despite maintaining some continuity with this inconvenient past, Giorgia Meloni has managed to largely rid the party of its fascist legacy, and we tend to agree with those labelling the party as 'PRR' (Puleo and Piccolino, 2022).

**Figure 1.** Vote shares of Italian PRR parties over the last five years

Source: authors' elaboration of Italy's Ministry of the Interior data.

This contradicts the idea that Southern European countries should be less vulnerable to the diffusion of radical right sentiments and politics as they have experienced authoritarianism in a relatively recent past (Hutter, Kriesi and Vidal, 2018; Hutter and Kriesi, 2019). In fact, a convergence of these countries and the rest of Europe towards similarly high levels of support for PRR alternatives has been underway over the past decade (Crulli and Viviani, 2022).

Italy thus constitutes an overcrowded environment for the PRR (Puleo, Carteny and Piccolino, 2024). This has made it increasingly necessary for Lega and FdI to distinguish themselves from each other. Not only have the two parties renewed their affiliations to different EP groups, but they also adopted different strategies during the electoral campaign. Lega has tried to position itself to the right of FdI, in an attempt to attract former FdI voters who now see Meloni as no longer radical. FdI, on the other hand, has endeavoured to present itself as a credible and responsible government party, led by an internationally recognised strong leader. The opening slogans of the respective manifestos echo such distinct strategies. The title of Lega's manifesto was 'More Italy, less Europe', which recalls a classic nationalist and Eurosceptic stance typical of PRR parties across the continent. The title of FdI's manifesto was 'With Giorgia Italy changes Europe', suggesting the objective of a more proactive and influential role for the party's leader within the EU.

In addition to Euroscepticism and ethno-nationalism – which are found in Lega's manifesto with calls for the EU to do less and reaffirm Christianity against Islam – Lega took different positions from FdI with respect to ongoing international crises. Above all, Lega displayed lukewarm support for Ukraine's efforts (Biancalana, 2023).

In short, while both are de facto established parties (Crulli and Albertazzi, 2024), Lega still tries to depict itself as an outsider party challenging the EU, whereas FdI's manifesto and campaign reflected its role as a governing party. Therefore, beyond still playing the same nativist card, i.e., targeting those voters who are primarily against immigration, the two parties needed and tried to differentiate their profiles. Whether such differentiation in the supply side of these parties went hand in hand with the diversification of their demand side (i.e., their electorates) remains to be tested empirically. Recent research by Seddone and Zulianello (2023) has provided some initial clues on this issue. Using descriptive statistics, they found that, 'while nativist attitudes show minimal differences' (Seddone and Zulianello, 2024, p. 511) between the respective voters, 'substantial differences emerge in the realm of authoritarianism'. They also revealed that Lega's electorate regards FdI as a threat to democracy but the opposite does not occur. By adopting a multivariate perspective, we test for a broader diversification of the two electorates in the core part of the paper, after spelling out our research hypotheses.

### 3. Analysing populist radical right voting behaviour in the 2024 EP election: classic theories and contextual explanations

The two probably best-known theories of PRR voting are the ‘economic insecurity’ and ‘cultural backlash’ theses (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Both can be seen as updates of the ‘modernisation theory’ originally advanced by Inglehart (1977), and as resuming some tentative explanations on the rise of new right-wing parties already formulated in the 1990s (Ignazi, 1992). The ‘economic insecurity’ perspective emphasises the consequences on electoral behaviour of the profound economic changes that have affected advanced post-industrial societies. According to this perspective, an increase in inequalities and material insecurity has pushed the weakest and ‘left behind’ social strata to turn their vote towards the PRR. The logic behind this theory is that ‘the feeling that survival is insecure leads to ethnocentric solidarity against outsiders and internal solidarity behind authoritarian leaders’ (Inglehart, 2018, p. 10).

The ‘cultural backlash’ perspective focuses on the new value orientations that spread during the transition from materialist to post-materialist societies. According to this second perspective, PRR voting reflects a rejection of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism – values that became shared by Europeans following the Silent Revolution (Inglehart, 1977) and the rise in education levels (Bornschiefer, 2010). The proliferation of post-materialist values – the theory argues – has ended up clashing with the views of those who remained tied to traditional and nationalist values, leading them to tilt towards PRR parties. The cultural backlash thesis has much in common with ‘neo-cleavage’ theory (Marks et al., 2021), which postulates the emergence of a new value-based cleavage (Kriesi, 2010) as an outgrowth of globalisation, pitting green-alternative-libertarian against traditional-authoritarian-nationalist parties and voters (Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Crulli and Emanuele, 2025).

Put simply, based on the ‘economic insecurity’ theory, we should expect ‘economically insecure’ people – unemployed, lower-class, those with lower living standards, or who perceive their economic situation as worsening – to vote for PRR parties more. Conversely, based on the ‘cultural backlash’ theory, we should expect ‘culturally insecure’ people – those ill at ease with societal changes brought about by cosmopolitan, multicultural, and progressive beliefs – to vote for PRR parties more. Although the ‘cultural backlash’ interpretation has received more confirmation than the ‘economic insecurity’ one, Inglehart and Norris themselves underline how the two theses are just two sides of the same coin. Therefore, our first two hypotheses are as follows.

H1 (‘cultural backlash’): ‘Culturally insecure’ voters were more likely to vote for Italian PRR parties in the 2024 EP election.

H2 (‘economic insecurity’): ‘Economically insecure’ voters were more likely to vote for Italian PRR parties in the 2024 EP election.

As the PRR has kept on growing in different countries, other explanations of its success have entered the scholarly debate. It has been noted that PRR parties tend to be much more successful in areas often referred to as places ‘that don’t matter’ (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018) or ‘left-behind’ (Pike et al., 2023). Hence, the geography of the PRR has flourished over the last few years as a very promising sub-strand of research. To be truthful, already in 2019 Jennings and Stoker had stressed the potentially relevant role that ‘the place’ was playing in the PRR surge:

There has been substantial debate recently as to whether the rise of populism, and the Brexit vote, can be attributed to ‘cultural backlash’ (...) or ‘economic insecurity’ (...). We consider this a false dichotomy, and believe that place allows us to better understand the intersection of economic change and cultural values. Our central argument is that places that have experienced relative decline have become more ‘closed’ on the ‘open-closed’, or ‘cosmopolitan-communitarian’, dimension (Jennings and Stoker, 2019, p. 159).

More recent contributions on the topic have underlined how both objective contextual conditions (e.g. Crulli & Pinto, 2025; Patana, 2022) and subjective place-related feelings (e.g. Arzheimer and Bernemann, 2023; Huijsmans, 2023) matter in understanding why the PRR is stronger in certain areas than in others. Summarising the main findings of studies on PRR’s geography, there is now a certain consensus that PRR

parties usually perform better in more remote rural areas (Crulli, 2024) and where the perception of ‘local decline’ is higher (Arzheimer et al., 2024). Therefore, our third hypothesis is that:

H3 (‘local context’): Rural dwellers and those who perceived that their neighbourhood’s conditions had worsened were more likely to vote for Italian PRR parties in the 2024 EP election.

In addition to now-classic and more recent theories of PRR voting, we cannot neglect that what we aim to explain here is voting in a specific type of election: the 2024 *EP election*. Therefore, it is fair to assume that EU-related issues were relevant. The PopuList classifies most European PRR parties, including the two Italian ones, as Eurosceptic (Rooduijn et al., 2023). Indeed, PRR parties usually embrace an ‘alt-European’ programme (McMahon, 2022), whereby Europe is ideally seen as a community of independent sovereign states. For most PRR parties, EU integration should not be pushed further, and intergovernmental cooperation between member states should be based on shared principles such as conservatism and nativism (against non-EU people). Hence, nativism and nationalism may well go hand in hand with Euroscepticism in the vision of PRR parties (Mazzoleni and Ivaldi, 2023). In addition, it has been shown by individual-level analyses that Euroscepticism is a relevant predictor of PRR voting (Werts, Scheepers and Lubbers, 2013; Arzheimer, 2018; Vasilopoulou and Zur, 2024). Hence, previous research points to an overall positive correlation between Euroscepticism and PRR voting in EP elections.

Nonetheless, Sofia Vasilopoulou (2009) already warned us not to take for granted that (all) PRR parties are equally Eurosceptic. This appears to be even truer in the current Italian context. FdI seemed to have softened its Euroscepticism even before the 2022 general election. Once in government, its position towards the EU has become even more pragmatic and ‘responsible’, as also evidenced by the constructive relationship established by von der Leyen and Meloni. Of course, we cannot rule out that the softening of FdI’s critiques towards the EU is temporary and instrumental, i.e., necessary ‘for the party’s attempt to strengthen its influence in the EU and for the smooth management of the NextGenerationEU funds’ (Baldini, 2024, p. 7). Nonetheless, the current moderation of FdI’s Euroscepticism – at least compared to the Lega, which has instead maintained quite unchanged its tone towards the EU – suggests formulating different expectations for voters of the two parties. Therefore, our fourth hypothesis is as follows.

H4 (‘EU issues’): the probability of voting for Italian PRR parties in the 2024 EP election was influenced by voter preferences on the EU; Eurosceptic positions were correlated with voting for the Lega more than FdI.

The 2024 EP election was also the first EP election taking place after – or in the midst of – three dramatic crises characterising the early 2020s, namely the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the Israel-Hamas conflict. All these events inevitably forced PRR parties to take a stance on issues that escape their usual political offer and rhetoric, such as healthcare and foreign policy (Bar-On and Molas, 2020; Ivaldi and Zankina, 2023). Therefore, it is consequential to assume that voter visions on these topics might have influenced their vote in the 2024 EP election. However, we might anticipate different effects of these crises on voting for the Lega or FdI. As regards the pandemic crisis, FdI was the only party constantly in opposition during the emergency, whereas Lega participated in Draghi’s cabinet. Concerning the Russia-Ukraine war, although FdI’s stances towards Russia used to be controversial, the Lega and Salvini himself had much closer ties to Putin before the Russia-Ukraine war intensified. Since 2022, Salvini has attempted to shed such a reputation, but still, his support for Ukraine appears to be weaker compared to Meloni’s (Biancalana, 2023). Finally, FdI has been characterised by stronger and undisputed Atlanticism compared to the Lega. This is also reflected in FdI’s good relationships with Netanyahu’s Likud (Vassallo and Vignati, 2023). Taken all together, these considerations lead us to formulate our last hypothesis.

H5 (‘2020s crises’): the probability of voting for Italian PRR parties in the 2024 EP election was influenced by voters’ views of the 2020s crises: the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the Israel-Hamas conflict. However, correlations between such views and voting were different for FdI and Lega.

## 4. Data and methods

Our analysis is based on individual-level survey data. Specifically, we draw on an original pre-electoral survey conducted by the CISE in May 2024 (De Sio et al., 2025). The number of observations is 1,204. In conducting our analyses, we weighted the sample by education level, combination of age and gender, geographical area and recall of the vote cast in the previous 2022 general election<sup>5</sup>.

Our first dependent variable (section 5.1) is a dichotomous variable distinguishing between respondents who declared an intention to vote for FdI and all the others. Our second dependent variable (section 5.2) is another dichotomous variable distinguishing respondents who declared an intention to vote for the Lega from all the others. The ‘others’ category comprises voters of other parties, abstainers and those who cast blank or spoiled ballots<sup>6</sup>.

As our dependent variables are binary, we ran a series of logistic regression models. First, we tested all our hypotheses through separate regression models. Secondly, we also ran full models, comprising all the independent variables previously utilised to test each hypothesis separately. This serves to give us a clearer idea of what factors were truly decisive in explaining voting for Italian PRR parties. All the models include the following controls: age, gender, education, left-right self-placement<sup>7</sup>, and the importance the respondent attributes to religion.

To test the ‘cultural backlash’ hypothesis, we selected three survey items. The first one regards the respondent’s nativism. The second one is a proxy for the respondent’s position towards abortion. The third one relates to the priority assigned by the respondent to combating violence against women. Therefore, the first independent variable in this model aims to capture a core pillar of PRR ideology, aversion towards migrants, whereas the other two are more broadly related to a ‘traditionalist-libertarian’ divide.

To test the ‘economic insecurity’ hypothesis, we considered a series of items regarding the respondent’s objective and subjective economic conditions. Specifically, we looked at the respondent’s occupational status and social class, their household living standards, as well as their retrospective and prospective economic evaluations (i.e., whether they think their household’s economic situation has worsened and/or will worsen).

To test the ‘local context’ hypothesis, we relied on two questions. The first reports the respondent’s type of residency, on a sliding scale from ‘a rural area or small village’ to ‘the centre of a big city’. The second question was meant to capture perceived local decline. Hence, respondents were asked whether they thought conditions in their residential area over the previous year had worsened, improved, or stayed the same.

To test the ‘EU issues’ hypothesis, we had four EU-related items available. The first is the classic question on ‘hard Euroscepticism’ (i.e., whether or not the country should leave the EU). The second asks the respondent’s opinion on the creation of a common EU army. A third one asks whether the respondent agrees with the statement that Italy should count more within the EU. A final, more original item enquires whether the respondent prefers to have another ‘grand coalition’ leading the EU commission, or rather an unprecedented clearly left- or right-wing coalition.

To test the ‘2020s crises’ hypothesis, we counted on a distinct question for each crisis. The first asks the respondent how Covid impacted their life prospects. The second considers what the respondent favours between pushing Israel to stop the war in Gaza and supporting the Israeli army’s intervention in Gaza. The third asks what the respondent thinks should be prioritised, between leading Ukraine and Russia to negotiate and supporting Ukraine up to the reconquest of its entire territory.

Table 1a reports the exact items’ wordings and scales, while Table 2a presents the descriptive statistics for all our variables and controls.

<sup>5</sup> We repeated the analyses by weighting the data using the actual vote percentages gained by Italian parties in the 2024 EP election. Results do not change substantially.

<sup>6</sup> We repeated the analyses by treating abstainers and those who cast blank or spoiled ballots as missing. Results were substantially unaltered. The results are presented in Tables 5a and 6a in Appendix II.

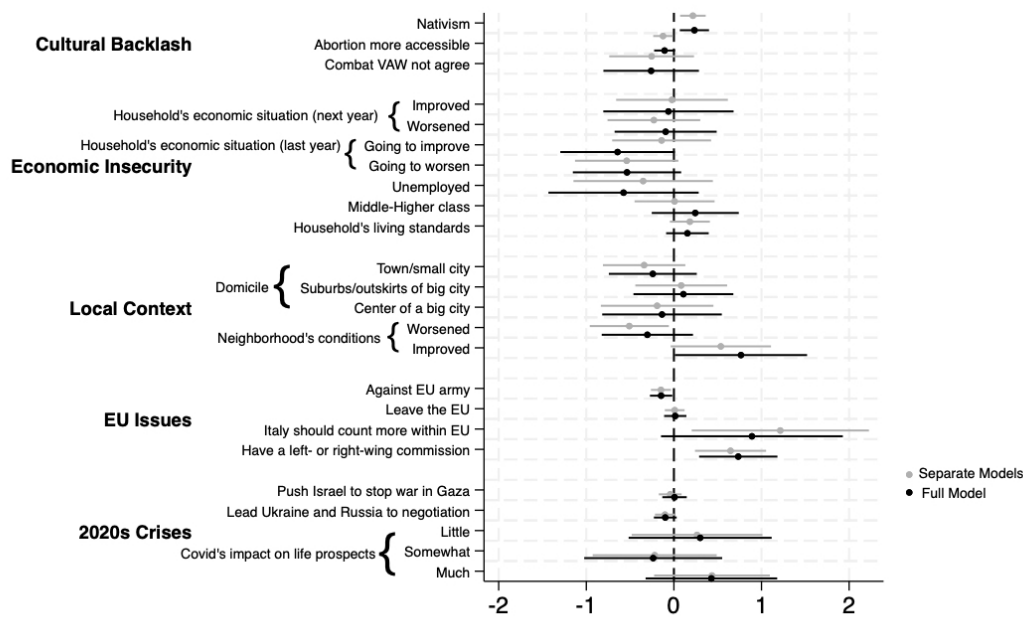
<sup>7</sup> We did not include left-right self-placement as a control in the Lega’s models because none of Lega’s voters in our sample positioned themselves on the left.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Voting for Fdl in the 2024 EP election

Figure 2 shows the results of our logistic regression models predicting the intention to vote for Meloni’s party in the 2024 EP election. Starting from the separate regression models, the first noteworthy result is that nativism is, as expected, a relevant predictor. Those thinking that Italy should limit the arrival of immigrants are clearly more likely to cast a vote for FdI. The ‘cultural backlash’ hypothesis is also supported by the statistically significant coefficient of abortion. The proxy we used to measure respondents’ attitudes towards abortion was asking whether they thought pro-life groups should be allowed to access abortion clinics. This became a public issue in Italy in the months preceding the EP election, as Italy’s Senate passed legislation allowing pro-life groups to have access to women considering abortion at public clinics<sup>8</sup>. Our regression model reveals that individuals who support pro-life groups informing women about to undergo an abortion were more likely to vote for FdI. Hence, we may conclude that being against making abortion more easily accessible increased the probability of voting for Meloni. This is not surprising, as Italy’s prime minister herself has spoken out in favour of this measure and has notoriously reiterated her pride in being ‘a Christian’ and ‘a mother’.

**Figure 2.** Coefficient plots of logistic regression models predicting intention to vote for Fdl in the 2024 EP election.



Notes: Coefficients of both the distinct models run to test each hypothesis separately and the combined full model are shown for each variable. All the models control for age, gender, education, left-right self-placement, and the importance the respondent attributes to religion. 10-90 CIs displayed. See Table 3a in Appendix 2 for the complete regression outputs.

Our second model, the one testing the ‘economic insecurity’ hypothesis, gave us ‘non-findings’. In other words, none of the variables aimed at gauging whether the respondent was ‘economically insecure’ turned out to be statistically significant. Therefore, the takeaway here is that FdI’s 2024 electorate did not appear to be economically connoted. Of the two classic theories of PRR voting, only the ‘cultural backlash’ one held in explaining FdI’s support in 2024.

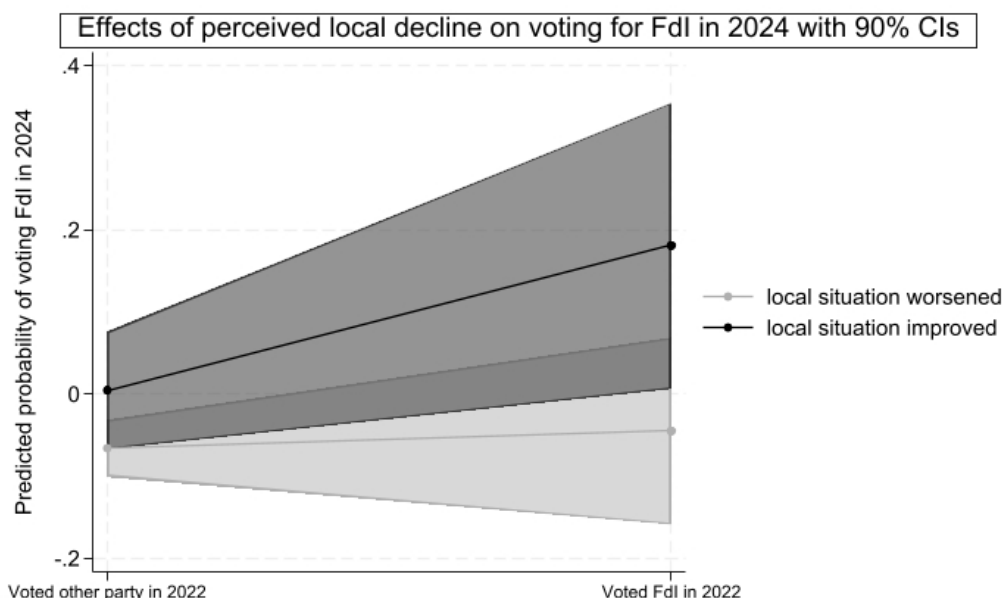
Two other unexpected findings came from our third model, which assessed the ‘local context’ hypothesis. First, voting for FdI appears to be unrelated to the respondent’s type of residency. This contradicts post-electoral analyses, which revealed a clear geographical pattern. FdI was stronger in smaller Italian towns (Emanuele, 2024), thus re-confirming its ‘village-oriented’ characterisation (Chiaramonte et al.,

<sup>8</sup> See: <https://www.euronews.com/health/2024/04/24/italy-passes-law-allowing-pro-life-groups-access-to-abortion-clinics>

2022). However, our analysis suggests that, once other individual-level socio-demographic factors (i.e., our controls) are taken into account, the place itself is not relevant in predicting a vote for FdI.

The second unexpected outcome was that higher perceived local decline predicts less likelihood of voting for Meloni's party. This finding contradicts recent related literature (Arzheimer et al., 2024), which has convincingly demonstrated that perceived local decline fosters PRR voting through the spread of nativist and populist attitudes. Therefore, we deemed this result worthy of more scrupulous examination. One factor Arzheimer and colleagues did not consider in their comparative research was whether the PRR was leading the country's government. Indeed, Italy is the only Western European country to be governed by the leader of a strong PRR party (Baldini, 2024). We hypothesised that the evaluation of one's local context was dependent on the more general evaluation of Meloni's government, or affiliation with her party<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, we ran our regression model regarding the local context again, this time by interacting the variable on perceived local decline with a dichotomous variable asking whether people voted for FdI in the previous 2022 general election.

**Figure 3.** Interaction between perceived local decline and vote for FdI in the previous 2022 Italian general election.



Source: Plot extrapolated from models in Table 3a (Appendix 2).

The result of this interaction term confirmed our additional hypothesis. As Figure 3 bears out, the feeling that the local situation has improved increases the probability of voting for FdI only among those who had already voted for the party in 2022. The idea that perceived local decline was conditional on a more general evaluation of Meloni was also confirmed by the observation that the majority of those who perceived their neighbourhood's conditions as having worsened (circa 72%) or remained the same (circa 58%) judged the outcomes of Meloni's cabinet as negative. Conversely, the majority of those who perceived the neighbourhood's conditions to have improved (circa 64%) judged the outcomes of Meloni's cabinet as positive. Although they must be interpreted with caution and cannot be generalised, these findings suggest that the explanatory power of perceived local decline on PRR voting may depend on whether the PRR party in question is ruling the country.

Other interesting remarks are inspired by our fourth model, which concerns EU-related issues. First, 'hard Euroscepticism', or the belief that Italy should leave the EU, is not related to voting for FdI. This corroborates the findings of recent related research by Puleo and colleagues (2024) and reflects the fact that,

<sup>9</sup> As the Lega is also part of the government, the same argument may apply to Salvini's party. However, the key ministries are all controlled by FdI, with Salvini himself relegated to the Ministry of Infrastructure instead of the much-desired Ministry of the Interior. This may explain why evaluations of the local context do not correlate with voting for the Lega.

since being in government, Meloni has ostensibly moderated her previous well-known Euroscepticism. Secondly, those who were against the creation of a common EU army were also less likely to vote for FdI in 2024. This result may be *prima facie* surprising, but it aligns well with the party's undisputed Atlanticism (Vassallo and Vignati, 2023). The last two variables in this model also turned out to be statistically significant and substantively related to FdI voting. Hence, both the idea that Italy should count more within the EU and the preference for a future clearly left- or right-wing Commission instead of a 'grand coalition' were evidently correlated with higher chances of voting for Meloni's party. This suggests that FdI's voters were asking for (and believing in) a more proactive and leading role of the party within the EU. Once again, this aligns with the electoral campaign conducted by Meloni and FdI's manifesto, as briefly illustrated in section 2.2.

Finally, none of the variables in our last model, regarding the 2020s crises, achieved statistical significance. Hence, considerations about the pandemic and the ongoing wars in Ukraine and the Middle East may have played a limited and non-influential role in pushing people to vote for FdI.

In conclusion, what variables were more decisive in voting for Meloni's party in the 2024 EP election? In other words, what variables maintained their statistical significance in the full model? By glancing at Figure 2 again, we can conclude that nativism, positive evaluation of one's local context<sup>10</sup>, being in favour of a common EU army, as well as supporting a clearly left- or right-wing EU Commission, were important drivers of the FdI vote. Except for nativism, the other predictors are certainly not among those usually deemed relevant in explaining PRR voting behaviour.

## 5.2. Voting for the Lega in the 2024 EP election

We repeated the same analyses using the intention to vote for the Lega as dependent variable. This helped us detect commonalities and differences in voting for the two Italian PRR parties. A first look at Figure 4 confirms that nativism is a key predictor of the Lega vote as well. The coefficient is even larger compared to the one observed in FdI's model, suggesting that Salvini's voters are even more opposed to the arrival of new immigrants. In fact, although the nativist variable ranges between 0 and 6, with 6 indicating the most nativist position, none of the declared Lega voters score below 3. Furthermore, the average score of Lega voters is approximately 5.6, while the average score of FdI voters is 5.2. In contrast, the average score of all other respondents in the sample is 3.7. In short, anti-immigrant sentiments still set Italian PRR voters apart from others, with Lega's supporters standing out as the most nativist. However, the other two variables in the 'cultural backlash' model do not reach the customary levels for statistical significance. Hence, more than broader traditionalist values, voting for the Lega appears to be mainly driven by strong aversion towards non-natives.

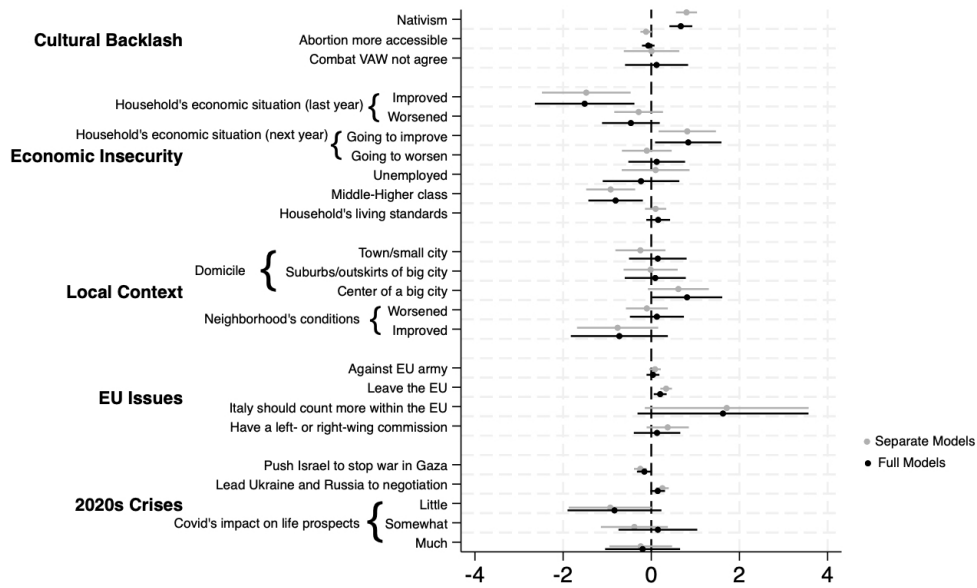
Differently from what was observed for FdI, the 'economic insecurity' model provides compelling evidence of the economic predictors of the Lega vote. First, those viewing themselves as belonging to the middle or higher social class appear less likely to vote for Salvini's party compared to those describing themselves as working class or lower class. Hence, economically insecure people appear to be more willing to turn their vote to the Lega. This interpretation is confirmed by the coefficient of another variable in the model. Those thinking that their household's economic situation has improved over the last year are also much less likely to vote for the Lega. The opposite applies to the variable relating to the prospective economic evaluation of respondents. Those believing that their household's economic situation is going to improve are significantly more likely to cast a vote in favour of the Lega. Therefore, Salvini's party seems to attract support from an economically peculiar type of voter: insecure and dissatisfied, but also hopeful about future economic possibilities.

The model concerning 'local context' does not yield any significant findings. However, similar to what was expounded upon regarding FdI, we know that the Lega also performed better in smaller Italian towns (Emanuele, 2024), as it has throughout its history. Therefore, the role of place in predicting Lega votes is probably absorbed by our control variables.

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<sup>10</sup> At least among those who had already voted FdI in 2022.

**Figure 4.** Coefficient plots of logistic regression models predicting intention to vote for the Lega in the 2024 EP election.



Notes: Coefficients of both the distinct models run to test each hypothesis separately and the combined full model are shown for each variable. All the models control for age, gender, education, left-right self-placement, and the importance the respondent attributes to religion. 10-90 CIs displayed. See Table 4a in Appendix 2 for the complete regression outputs.

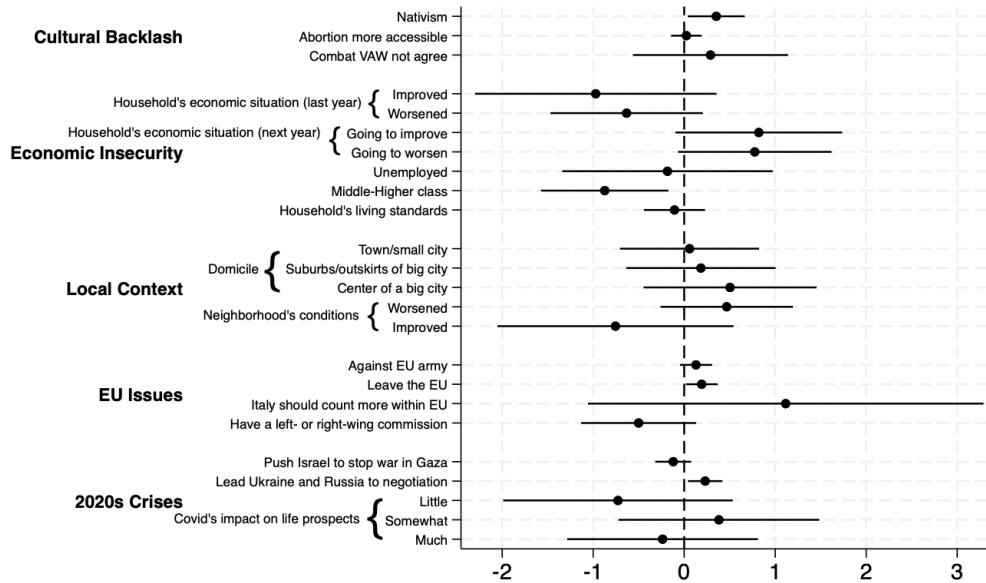
A clear indication emerges from our model on EU issues: Lega voters are still unequivocally Eurosceptic. The intention to leave the EU increases the probability of voting for Lega to a statistically significant and substantial extent. Instead, the other variables in this model are not statistically significant. All in all, this model seems to suggest that Lega voters care more about stopping the EU integration process than the role their party might hold within EU institutions.

Finally, and again differently from what was observed in the previous section, respondents' opinions about ongoing wars appear to explain voting for the Lega in the 2024 EP election. Specifically, a more 'pacifist' stance regarding the Israel-Hamas conflict correlates with lower chances of voting for Salvini's party. The opposite applies to the Russia-Ukraine war. Those believing that priority should be given to conducting Ukraine and Russia towards negotiation are more likely to vote for the Lega. Whether such correlation derives from pro-Russia sentiments we cannot say based on our survey analysis. Nonetheless, this seems to reflect the Lega's unenthusiastic solidarity with Ukraine. What we can claim is that, with respect to the evaluation of ongoing international crises, FdI and Lega voters seem to be motivated by different considerations.

However, these two variables regarding the respondent's position towards international crises are the only ones losing their statistical significance when running the combined full model. Based on the latter, we can therefore reaffirm that the typical Lega voter in 2024 was nativist, Eurosceptic, and economically fragile.

Table 2 and Figure 5 help us move towards the conclusions. Table 2 summarises the outcomes of our research hypotheses. Figure 5 displays the results of a multinomial logistic regression, which we performed as a last step to properly gauge which factors make people vote for the Lega instead of FdI. All the dissimilarities between FdI and Lega voters that we already underlined are confirmed by this final model. Belonging to lower social classes, as well as being more nativist, Eurosceptic and less supportive of Ukraine's military efforts, enhances the probability of voting for the Lega instead of FdI.

**Figure 5.** Coefficient plot of a multinomial logistic regression model predicting intention to vote for the Lega instead of Fdl in the 2024 EP election.



Notes: For the sake of conciseness, we only show the comparison between Fdl and the Lega, although the model uses voting intentions for all Italian parties as the dependent variable, thus comparing Fdl (the baseline category) with all Italian parties. The model controls for age, gender, education, left-right self-placement, and the importance the respondent attributes to religion. 10-90 CIs displayed. See Table 7a in Appendix 2 for the complete regression outputs.

**Table 2.** Outcome of research hypotheses

Hypothesis	Outcome	
	Fdl	Lega
H1 ('cultural backlash')	Overall confirmed	
H2 ('economic insecurity')	Rejected	Confirmed
H3 ('local context')	Rejected (those who perceived that the conditions in their neighbourhood had worsened were actually less likely to vote for Fdl; however, perceived local decline was conditional on having voted for Fdl and evaluation of Meloni's government)	
H4 ('EU issues')	Confirmed	
H5 ('2020s crises')	Rejected	Overall confirmed

## 6. Discussion and conclusions

This paper examined voting for the two Italian PRR parties during the 2024 EP election, which witnessed yet another surge for the European PRR family. We questioned whether the FdI and Lega electorates still share those characteristics that the literature has recognised as typical of PRR voters: nativist, traditionalist, economically insecure, Eurosceptic, and discontented with their living conditions.

Our response to this question would be a justified 'yes but'. FdI and Lega voters still form a typical PRR electorate insofar as both are nativist. Although Lega voters in 2024 appear to be even more against immigrants compared to FdI voters, both share opposition to the arrival of non-natives in their country. This finding corroborates what the literature on the PRR has been stressing for almost twenty years: despite populism, authoritarianism, and nativism all forming the ideological core of PRR parties, the latter remains the

most relevant element of the three (Mudde, 2007; Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart, 2022). Furthermore, on the demand side, anti-immigration attitudes are crucial in differentiating PRR voters from the rest of the electorate (Ivarsflaten, 2008; Crulli and Albertazzi, 2024). This held true in the context of the 2024 EP election in Italy, which also suggests that the ‘cultural backlash’ perspective on PRR voting is overall still valid (Tab. 2).

However, this represents the only common ground between the two electorates<sup>11</sup>. Lega voters appear to be economically insecure, while FdI’s do not. Belonging to the middle or higher social classes – instead of the working or lower ones – is associated with a lower probability of voting for Lega, but not FdI. The two electorates have also grown apart in terms of their stances towards the EU. Euroscepticism – and weaker support for Ukraine – characterise Lega voters, whereas FdI voters do not appear significantly more Eurosceptic compared to the others. This finding is not entirely unexpected, as Puleo, Carteny and Piccolino (2024, p. 8) recently showed that ‘the link between the vote for FdI and evaluations of Italy’s EU membership is weak and lacks consistency’. Not finding an association between Euroscepticism and voting for FdI might also reflect the evident moderation of Meloni’s tone towards EU institutions. Hence, our research reaffirms the need to assess the role of partisan cues in shaping political attitudes.

Finally, some of the most interesting divergences between the FdI and Lega electorates emerge in terms of the control variables, which we have not commented upon thus far. FdI voters tend to be older (especially in the 55-64 age group), while the association between age and vote for the Lega is less clear. In addition, assigning high importance to religion predicted voting for the Lega but not for FdI. Finally, even more interesting is that those with a high level of education were less inclined to vote for the Lega, but this was not true for FdI. This last result is surprising for two reasons. First, the literature on PRR voting has always presented the level of education as arguably the most crucial predictor of PRR voting (e.g. Ivarsflaten and Stubager, 2012). Secondly, related research on voting for FdI in the 2022 general election still found a negative – although not very strong – correlation between higher levels of education and voting for Meloni’s party (Angelucci, Baldini and Soare, 2024). Therefore, our study is among the first to suggest that such an association between education and voting for FdI may be disappearing. This would be another inevitable consequence of the party enlarging its shares of supporters well beyond its original ‘*class gardée*’.

In conclusion, not only does the Lega currently represent ‘a noisy (and more radical) ally’ to the right of FdI (Baldini, 2024, p. 408), but Lega voters also appear more radical compared to the (much larger) electorate of Meloni’s party. This aligns with recent research highlighting relevant attitudinal differences between the two Italian PRR electorates (Seddone and Zulianello, 2023). Therefore, our findings raise the question of whether FdI’s affiliation with the PRR family ought to be re-evaluated. We concur with Mair and Mudde (1998) in deeming the nature of a party’s present electorate an ill-suited criterion to (re)classify parties into party families. Nonetheless, as Mair and Mudde themselves acknowledge, from Lipset and Rokkan (1967) onwards, the sociology of parties has been considered a key element for their inclusion in specific party families. In this sense, the fact that voters of FdI and Lega are tilting in different directions calls into question the changing social bases of PRR parties across Europe, particularly in contexts such as the Italian one, where a PRR party has succeeded in gathering and reconfirming widespread popular support.

While we do not aim to advance a different classification for FdI here, we can still offer some tentative insights into why and how FdI and Lega may no longer be placed under the same umbrella. We have noted how Meloni’s electoral campaign reflected the need for the party to differentiate itself from its fellow PRR competitor by presenting a more responsible image in light of its now-governing status. Our study conveys the idea that greater moderation on the supply side has coincided with greater moderation on the demand side of the party, at least compared to the Lega electorate. However, future research should analyse the ideological-programmatic and sociological features of the parties in conjunction, rather than separately, to have the final say on FdI’s current nature. In this regard, FdI’s ideological-programmatic positioning, as well as its continued affiliation within the PRR family, will (also) depend on the challenge coming from its right. The extent to which the Lega will continue being a relevant, noisy PRR ally of FdI will likely inform Meloni’s decision on whether to move to the centre by embracing a more typical conservative profile. As noted by

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<sup>11</sup> In addition to left-right self-placement, as both FdI and Lega voters strongly positioned themselves to the right.

Baldini, Tronconi, and Angelucci (2022), while being a ‘rooted newcomer,’ FdI has already accomplished a major ideological rebranding by foregoing its post-fascist traditions. Time and scholarly attention will tell us whether the new competition environment will result in the party’s further gradual rebranding or whether it will still be appropriate to safely place FdI in the PRR party family, together with the Lega.

## Acknowledgements

A previous version of this article was presented at the SISE Post-Electoral Seminar (University of Florence, 5 July 2024). We are grateful to the participants in this event, especially Claudia Mariotti, Matteo Boldrini, and Paolo Natale, for their suggestions. The survey data on which the article is based were collected as part of the GISE-Telescope project. We thank all the people working within it: Roberto D’Alimonte, Lorenzo De Sio, Vincenzo Emanuele, Elisabetta Mannoni, Matteo Boldrini, Matteo Cataldi, Alessandro Riggio. Finally, we thank the anonymous reviewers whose thorough observations have helped us improve the article. The usual disclaimer applies.

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## 7. Appendix

### 7.1. Survey items and descriptives

**Table 1a.** Survey items

Dependent Variables	Question	Scale
Vote for Fdl (2024 EP election)	'If you were to vote in the European election tomorrow, which party would you vote for?'	Recoded into a dummy variable. 0 = Other parties, blank or spoilt ballot, abstainers; 1 = Fratelli d'Italia.
Vote for Lega (2024 EP election)	'If you were to vote in the European election tomorrow, which party would you vote for?'	Recoded into a dummy variable. 0 = Other parties, blank or spoilt ballot, abstainers; 1 = Lega.
<b>Independent Variables</b>		
Nativism	'What should be done?'	Coded into a 1-6 scale. 1 = Continue to accept immigrants as now; 6 = Limit the arrival of immigrants.
Abortion more accessible	'What should be done?'	Coded into a 1-6 scale. 1 = Allow pro-life movements to enter abortion clinics; 6 = Deny pro-life movements' entry into abortion clinics.
Combat violence against women (VAW)	'Combat violence against women and femicide. Do you agree that this goal should be realised?'. Originally coded 1 = Very much; 2 = Somewhat; 3 = Slightly; 4 = Not at all.	Recoded into a dummy variable (1=1; 2 3 4=2). 1 = Very much agree; 2 = Not agree
Household's economic situation (last year)	'Over the past year, has your family's economic situation...'. Originally coded 1 = Much improved; 2 = Somewhat improved; 3 = Remained the same; 4 = Somewhat worsened; 5 = Much worsened; 6 = I don't know	Recoded into a variable with three categories (1 2=1; 3=2; 4 5=3; 6=missing). 1 = Improved; 2 = Remained the same; 3 = Worsened.
Household's economic situation (next year)	'And in the next 12 months, what do you think your family's economic situation will be like? It will be...'. Originally coded 1 = Much improved; 2 = Somewhat improved; 3 = Remain the same; 4 = Somewhat worsened; 5 = Much worsened; 6 = I don't know	Recoded into a variable with three categories (1 2=1; 3=2; 4 5=3; 6=missing). 1 = Going to Improve; 2 = Remain the same; 3 = Going to Worsen.
Unemployed	'What is your current employment status? Please choose only one of the following options:' Originally coded 1=Self-employed; 2=Employee; 4=Unemployed; 5=Student; 6=Working in the household; 7=Retired; 66=Others.	Recoded into a dummy variable (1 2 5 6 7 66=0; 4=1). 0 = Self-employed, Employee, Working in the household, Retired, Others; 1 = Unemployed
Social class	'If you were asked to choose one of these five labels for your social class, which one would you say you belong to - lower class, lower-middle class, middle class, upper-middle class, or upper class? Please choose only one of the following options:'. Originally coded 1=Lower class; 2=Working class; 3=Lower-Middle class; 4=Middle class; 5=Higher-Middle class; 6=Higher class; 77=Refuse to be classified.	Recoded into a dummy variable (1 2 3=1; 4 5 6=2; 77=missing). 1 = Lower-Middle class; 2 = Middle-Higher class.
Household's living standards	'Considering all aspects, where would you place approximately, your	Coded into a 1-7 scale. 1 = Poor household; 7 = Rich household.

	household's standard of living? Imagine a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 means a poor household, 7 a rich household, and the other numbers the positions in between, where would you place your household?'	
Domicile	'Would you say you live in ... ?'	Coded into a 1-4 scale. 1 = Rural area/small village; 2 = Town/small city; 3 = Suburbs/outskirts of big city; 4 = Centre of a big city.
Neighbourhood conditions	'Over the past year, the living conditions in the area where you live have:'. Originally coded 1 =Much improved; 2= Somewhat improved; 3= Remained the same; 4= Somewhat worsened; 5=Much worsened.	Recoded into a variable with three categories (4 5= 1; 3=2; 2 1=3). 1 = Worsened; 2 = Remained the same; 3 = Improved.
Against EU army	'What should be done?'	Coded into a 1-6 scale. 1 = Create a common European army; 6 = Do not create a common European army.
Euroscepticism	'What should be done?'. Originally coded 1=Leave the EU; 2 3 4 5; 6=Remain in the EU.	Recoded (1=6; 2=5; 3=4; 4=3; 5=2; 6=1). 1 = Remain in the EU; 6 = Leave the EU.
Italy should count more within the EU	'Making Italy count more in Europe. Do you agree that this goal should be realised?'. Originally coded 1 = Very much; 2 = Somewhat; 3 = Slightly; 4 =Not at all.	Recoded into a dummy variable (3 4 =0; 1 2=1). 0 = Don't agree; 2 =Agree.
Have a left- or right-wing EU Commission	'The European Commission has always been supported by a 'grand coalition' majority, with the left, centre and right in it. In your opinion, for the new European Commission to be formed after the June elections, we should:'. Originally coded 1=Continue with a 'grand coalition' majority so as to have moderate and prudent decisions that avoid conflict and extremism; 2= Have a clearly left-wing or clearly right-wing majority so that we have clear decisions that five years later voters can reward or punish; 3= I don't know	Recoded into a dummy variable (1=0; 2=1; 3=missing). 0 = Keep the Grand Coalition; 1 = Have a left- or right-wing EU Commission.
Push Israel to stop war in Gaza	'What should be done?'	Coded into a 1-6 scale. 1= Support the Israeli army's intervention in Gaza, necessary for Israel's security from terrorism; 6=Pushing Israel to stop military intervention in Gaza, which is resulting in genocide.
Lead Ukraine and Russia to negotiation	'What should be done?'	Coded into a 1-6 scale. 1 = Support Ukraine until its entire territory is reconquered, also by increasing military support; 6 = Lead Ukraine and Russia to a peace negotiation, recognising Russia's occupied territories.
Covid's impact on life prospects	'For each of the following crises, can you indicate how much each has contributed to changing the way you look at your future? The Covid-19 pandemic'.	Coded into a 1-4 scale. 1 = Not at all; 2 = Little; 3 = Somewhat; 4 = Much.

Vote for Fdl (2022 national election)	'Can you tell us which party you voted for in 2022?'	Recoded into a dummy variable. 0 = Other parties, blank or spoilt ballot, abstainers; 1 = Fratelli d'Italia.
<b>Control Variables</b>		
Age	'In what year were you born?'	Recoded into a 1-5 scale. 1 = 18-29; 2 = 30-44; 3 = 45-54; 4 = 55-64; 5 = 65+.
Gender	'Are you...?'	Coded into a dummy variable. 0 = Male; 1 = Female.
Education	'What is the highest level of education you have completed?' Originally coded 1=Nessuno; 2=Licenza di scuola elementare; 3=Licenza di scuola media inferiore; 4=Abilitazione professionale (2-3 anni); 5=Diploma di scuola media superiore (4-5 anni); 6=Laurea triennale di I livello; 7=Laurea specialistica di II livello/laurea vecchio ordinamento/laurea magistrale; 8=Master o scuola di specializzazione post-laurea; 9=Dottorato di ricerca; 77=Rifiuta; 88=Non so.	Recoded into a variable with three categories (1 2 3=0; 4 5=1; 6 7 8 9=2; 77 88=missing). 0 = Low education; 1 = Medium education; 2 =High education.
Left-Right self-placement	'Many people when talking about politics use the terms 'left' and 'right.' What is your position? Could you indicate your position on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means 'left' and 10 means 'right'?'.	Recoded into a variable ranging from 1 to 4 (0 1 2 3=1; 4 5 6=2; 7 8 9 10=3; 98=4; 99=missing). 1 = Left; 2 = Centre; 3 = Right; 4 = Refuse to place.
Religion	'What place does religion have in your life?'	Coded into a 1-4 scale. 1 = Not at all important; 2 = Slightly important; 3 = Moderately important; 4 = Very important.

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Note: Translation from Italian to English by the authors.

**Table 2a.** Descriptive statistics

<b>Variables</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>
Vote for Fdl (2024 EP election)	1204	0.15	0.36	0	1
Vote for Lega (2024 EP election)	1204	0.07	0.25	0	1
Age	1204	3.33	1.40	1	5
Gender	1204	0.51	0.50	0	1
Education	1201	0.92	0.72	0	2
Left-Right self-placement	1181	2.42	1.12	1	4
Religion	1137	2.37	1.05	1	4
Nativism	1200	4.07	1.73	1	6
Abortion more accessible	1204	4.38	1.73	1	6
Combat violence against women (VAW)	1204	1.16	0.37	1	2
Household's economic situation (last year)	1197	2.27	0.62	1	3
Household's economic situation (next year)	1153	2.22	0.63	1	3
Unemployed	1198	0.09	0.28	0	1
Social class	1169	1.47	0.50	1	2
Household's living standards	1204	3.72	1.06	1	7
Domicile	1204	2.27	0.99	1	4
Neighborhood conditions	1204	1.77	0.60	1	3
Against EU army	1204	3.47	1.81	1	6
Euroscepticism	1204	2.72	1.88	1	6
Italy should count more within the EU	1204	0.92	0.28	0	1
Have a left- or right-wing EU Commission	960	0.41	0.49	0	1
Push Israel to stop war in Gaza	1204	4.88	1.43	1	6
Lead Ukraine and Russia to negotiation	1204	4.13	1.69	1	6
Covid's impact on life prospects	1177	3.09	0.94	1	4
Vote for Fdl (2022 national election)	1204	0.17	0.38	0	1

7.2. Regression analysis

**Table 3a.** Logistic regression models predicting vote for Fdl in the 2024 EP election

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M4a	M5	M6	M7
	Controls	Cultural Backlash	Economic Insecurity	Local Context	Interaction Model	EU Issues	2020s crises	Full model
<b>Age</b>								
<b>30-44</b>	-0.151 (0.471)	-0.154 (0.486)	0.00432 (0.493)	-0.0109 (0.481)	-0.288 (0.577)	-0.0742 (0.481)	-0.116 (0.474)	0.233 (0.528)
<b>45-54</b>	0.754* (0.446)	0.744 (0.465)	0.921** (0.465)	1.045** (0.466)	0.753 (0.560)	0.739 (0.456)	0.662 (0.452)	0.978* (0.515)
<b>55-64</b>	1.189*** (0.451)	1.116** (0.467)	1.331*** (0.468)	1.432*** (0.471)	0.843 (0.567)	1.178** (0.463)	1.114** (0.454)	1.321** (0.516)
<b>65+</b>	1.064** (0.424)	0.982** (0.444)	1.089** (0.444)	1.243*** (0.443)	0.994* (0.528)	0.912** (0.435)	0.943** (0.426)	0.823* (0.494)
<b>Gender (Female)</b>	-0.261 (0.226)	-0.207 (0.232)	-0.171 (0.231)	-0.216 (0.232)	-0.0963 (0.280)	-0.111 (0.235)	-0.296 (0.231)	0.00681 (0.255)
<b>Education</b>								
<b>Medium</b>	0.205 (0.250)	0.212 (0.252)	0.128 (0.267)	0.236 (0.256)	0.148 (0.307)	0.115 (0.258)	0.258 (0.254)	0.0520 (0.289)
<b>High</b>	0.433 (0.346)	0.532 (0.360)	0.300 (0.363)	0.367 (0.353)	0.371 (0.417)	0.509 (0.357)	0.424 (0.351)	0.340 (0.397)
<b>Left-Right self-placement</b>								
<b>Centre</b>	3.687*** (1.302)	3.349** (1.307)	3.644*** (1.304)	3.651*** (1.303)	3.160** (1.326)	3.697*** (1.305)	3.614*** (1.304)	3.316** (1.318)
<b>Right</b>	5.892*** (1.288)	5.337*** (1.300)	5.820*** (1.291)	5.833*** (1.289)	4.655*** (1.311)	5.832*** (1.292)	5.862*** (1.291)	5.283*** (1.314)
<b>Refuse self-placement</b>	3.148** (1.348)	2.758** (1.355)	3.146** (1.350)	3.112** (1.349)	2.704** (1.374)	3.232** (1.352)	3.142** (1.349)	2.924** (1.370)
<b>Religion</b>								
<b>Slightly important</b>	0.317 (0.322)	0.233 (0.328)	0.316 (0.330)	0.252 (0.330)	0.0900 (0.396)	0.159 (0.336)	0.319 (0.328)	0.161 (0.370)
<b>Moderately important</b>	-0.118 (0.317)	-0.235 (0.331)	-0.116 (0.323)	-0.151 (0.324)	-0.266 (0.392)	-0.197 (0.328)	-0.138 (0.328)	-0.210 (0.370)
<b>Very important</b>	-0.315 (0.361)	-0.467 (0.374)	-0.348 (0.369)	-0.399 (0.370)	-0.451 (0.444)	-0.398 (0.371)	-0.328 (0.366)	-0.558 (0.408)
<b>Nativism</b>		0.217** (0.0887)						0.234** (0.101)
<b>Abortion more accessible</b>		-0.124* (0.0678)						-0.106 (0.0725)
<b>Combat violence against women (Not agree)</b>		-0.254 (0.294)						-0.260 (0.332)
<b>Household's economic situation (last year)</b>								
<b>Improved</b>			-0.0217 (0.388)					-0.0622 (0.452)
<b>Worsened</b>			-0.228 (0.322)					-0.0941 (0.354)
<b>Household's economic situation (next year)</b>								
<b>Going to improve</b>			-0.140 (0.343)					-0.643 (0.397)
<b>Going to worsen</b>			-0.539 (0.358)					-0.535 (0.376)
<b>Unemployed</b>			-0.351 (0.484)					-0.575 (0.522)
<b>Middle-Higher class</b>			0.00787 (0.278)					0.244 (0.302)
<b>Household's living standards</b>			0.183 (0.139)					0.155 (0.148)
<b>Domicile</b>								
<b>Town/small city</b>				-0.340 (0.286)	-0.409 (0.354)			-0.241 (0.305)
<b>Suburbs/outskirts of big city</b>				0.0837 (0.319)	0.332 (0.399)			0.109 (0.347)
<b>Centre of a big city</b>				-0.191 (0.390)	-0.136 (0.454)			-0.135 (0.415)
<b>Neighbourhood conditions</b>								
<b>Worsened</b>				-0.509* (0.274)	-1.402** (0.587)			-0.303 (0.317)

Improved					0.536 (0.348)	0.0637 (0.575)		0.766* (0.459)
Neighbourhood conditions* Vote choice in 2022								
Worsened*Brothers of Italy						1.111 (0.740)		
Improved*Brothers of Italy						1.148 (0.926)		
Against EU army							-0.148** (0.0694)	-0.146* (0.0774)
Leave the EU							0.00944 (0.0684)	0.0155 (0.0773)
Italy should count more within the EU (Agree)							1.215** (0.615)	0.891 (0.631)
Have a left- or right-wing EU Commis- sion							0.647*** (0.247)	0.735*** (0.272)
Push Israel to stop war in Gaza								-0.0420 (0.0789)
Lead Ukraine and Russia to negotia- tion								0.00755 (0.0848)
Covid's impact on life prospects								
Little								-0.102 (0.0695)
Somewhat								0.264 (0.453)
Much								0.300 (0.496)
Constant	-6.786*** (1.359)	-6.727*** (1.433)	-7.302*** (1.492)	-6.722*** (1.383)	-6.385*** (1.434)	-7.691*** (1.500)	-6.246*** (1.475)	-7.889*** (1.858)
Pseudo R2	0.314	0.329	0.331	0.328	0.502	0.336	0.326	0.386
Observations	874	874	874	874	874	874	874	874

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. \* p < 0.1, \*\* p < 0.05, \*\*\* p < 0.01

**Table 4a.** Logistic regression models predicting vote for Lega in the 2024 EP election

	M1 Controls	M2 Cultural Backlash	M3 Economic Insecurity	M4 Local Context	M5 EU Is- sues	M6 2020s' crises	M7 Full Model
<b>Age</b>							
<b>30-44</b>	1.703** (0.714)	1.080 (0.745)	1.765** (0.729)	1.690** (0.722)	1.460** (0.734)	1.620** (0.723)	1.159 (0.822)
<b>45-54</b>	1.161 (0.734)	0.661 (0.761)	1.007 (0.748)	1.061 (0.741)	0.970 (0.749)	1.176 (0.742)	0.585 (0.838)
<b>55-64</b>	1.324* (0.730)	0.787 (0.757)	1.303* (0.742)	1.212 (0.739)	1.214 (0.747)	1.426* (0.738)	0.856 (0.830)
<b>65+</b>	1.156 (0.709)	0.726 (0.739)	1.140 (0.727)	1.092 (0.716)	1.256* (0.727)	1.143 (0.717)	0.808 (0.824)
<b>Gender (Female)</b>	0.200 (0.262)	0.272 (0.281)	0.184 (0.271)	0.153 (0.265)	0.0966 (0.277)	0.200 (0.269)	0.176 (0.320)
<b>Education</b>							
<b>Medium</b>	-0.448 (0.282)	-0.347 (0.292)	-0.346 (0.299)	-0.479* (0.287)	-0.338 (0.293)	-0.458 (0.285)	-0.371 (0.334)
<b>High</b>	- 1.358*** (0.509)	-0.740 (0.534)	-1.157** (0.537)	-1.433*** (0.516)	-0.991* (0.526)	-1.236** (0.515)	-0.570 (0.604)
<b>Religion</b>							
<b>Slightly important</b>	1.060** (0.446)	0.846* (0.463)	1.124** (0.455)	1.085** (0.453)	1.034** (0.462)	0.863* (0.454)	1.088** (0.516)
<b>Moderately important</b>	0.960** (0.438)	0.768* (0.462)	1.012** (0.446)	0.990** (0.443)	0.956** (0.453)	0.748* (0.449)	0.839 (0.519)
<b>Very important</b>	1.401*** (0.455)	1.102** (0.482)	1.569*** (0.467)	1.548*** (0.465)	1.398*** (0.475)	1.219*** (0.465)	1.370** (0.540)
<b>Nativism</b>		0.800*** (0.145)					0.671*** (0.158)
<b>Abortion more accessible</b>		-0.118 (0.0779)					-0.0685 (0.0867)
<b>Combat violence against women (Not agree)</b>		0.00622 (0.383)					0.121 (0.435)
<b>Household's economic situation (last year)</b>							
<b>Improved</b>			-1.475** (0.611)				-1.512** (0.687)
<b>Worsened</b>			-0.287 (0.336)				-0.462 (0.398)
<b>Household's economic situation (next year)</b>							
<b>Going to improve</b>			0.816** (0.395)				0.839* (0.458)
<b>Going to worsen</b>			-0.102 (0.343)				0.124 (0.391)
<b>Unemployed</b>			0.0986 (0.468)				-0.233 (0.528)
<b>Middle-Higher class</b>			-0.921*** (0.338)				-0.809** (0.376)
<b>Household's living standards</b>			0.0985 (0.146)				0.156 (0.164)
<b>Domicile</b>							
<b>Town/small city</b>				-0.247 (0.345)			0.148 (0.397)
<b>Suburbs/outskirts of big city</b>				-0.0147 (0.373)			0.0907 (0.421)
<b>Centre of a big city</b>				0.615 (0.420)			0.812* (0.485)
<b>Neighbourhood conditions</b>							
<b>Worsened</b>				-0.0996 (0.289)			0.128 (0.372)
<b>Improved</b>				-0.763 (0.560)			-0.725 (0.669)
<b>Against EU army</b>					0.0853 (0.0792)		0.0381 (0.0887)
<b>Leave the EU</b>					0.338*** (0.0799)		0.202** (0.0887)
<b>Italy should count more within the EU (Agree)</b>					1.711 (1.130)		1.627 (1.179)
<b>Have a left- or right-wing EU Commission</b>					0.373 (0.291)		0.131 (0.321)
<b>Push Israel to stop war in Gaza</b>						-0.248***	-0.156

						(0.0877)	(0.102)
<b>Lead Ukraine and Russia to negotiation</b>						0.253***	0.146
						(0.0870)	(0.100)
<b>Covid's impact on life prospects</b>							
<b>Little</b>						-0.930	-0.835
						(0.573)	(0.648)
<b>Somewhat</b>						-0.384	0.150
						(0.462)	(0.543)
<b>Much</b>						-0.240	-0.196
						(0.432)	(0.517)
<b>Constant</b>							
	4.286***	-7.251***	-4.281***	-4.129***	7.507***	-3.715***	-9.525***
	(0.774)	(1.182)	(0.986)	(0.811)	(1.410)	(0.989)	(2.110)
<b>Pseudo R2</b>	0.0683	0.189	0.106	0.0822	0.152	0.107	0.273
<b>Observations</b>	877	877	877	877	877	877	877

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. \* p < 0.1, \*\* p < 0.05, \*\*\* p < 0.01

**Table 5a.** Logistic regression models predicting vote for Fdl in the 2024 EP election with abstainers and those who cast blank or spoiled ballots treated as missing values

	M1 Controls	M2 Cultural Backlash	M3 Economic Insecurity	M4 Local Context	M4a Interaction Model	M5 EU Is- sues	M6 2020s cri- ses	M7 Full model
<b>Age</b>								
<b>30-44</b>	-0.248 (0.511)	-0.236 (0.532)	-0.179 (0.542)	-0.0751 (0.535)	-0.484 (0.656)	-0.192 (0.522)	-0.110 (0.518)	0.0387 (0.594)
<b>45-54</b>	0.675 (0.489)	0.704 (0.510)	0.722 (0.518)	0.945* (0.522)	0.514 (0.639)	0.703 (0.496)	0.648 (0.497)	0.870 (0.571)
<b>55-64</b>	0.988** (0.493)	0.998* (0.512)	1.084** (0.519)	1.211** (0.524)	0.559 (0.639)	1.028** (0.503)	1.057** (0.498)	1.287** (0.573)
<b>65+</b>	0.631 (0.457)	0.605 (0.477)	0.544 (0.491)	0.771 (0.492)	0.537 (0.597)	0.523 (0.465)	0.588 (0.459)	0.419 (0.549)
<b>Gender (Female)</b>	-0.196 (0.241)	-0.152 (0.247)	-0.113 (0.248)	-0.149 (0.248)	-0.0555 (0.302)	-0.0937 (0.250)	-0.171 (0.248)	0.0558 (0.274)
<b>Education</b>								
<b>Medium</b>	0.269 (0.266)	0.242 (0.268)	0.201 (0.284)	0.336 (0.272)	0.368 (0.332)	0.184 (0.273)	0.342 (0.273)	0.216 (0.308)
<b>High</b>	0.558 (0.374)	0.676* (0.393)	0.346 (0.398)	0.547 (0.383)	0.662 (0.452)	0.647* (0.387)	0.565 (0.380)	0.451 (0.447)
<b>Left-Right self-placement</b>								
<b>Centre</b>	3.832*** (1.305)	3.505*** (1.311)	3.851*** (1.307)	3.822*** (1.306)	3.274** (1.326)	3.777*** (1.308)	3.749*** (1.307)	3.465*** (1.326)
<b>Right</b>	6.011*** (1.291)	5.468*** (1.307)	6.000*** (1.295)	5.963*** (1.292)	4.718*** (1.308)	5.919*** (1.297)	6.043*** (1.295)	5.523*** (1.329)
<b>Refuse self-placement</b>	3.934*** (1.355)	3.665*** (1.361)	4.022*** (1.362)	3.922*** (1.356)	3.488** (1.379)	3.945*** (1.361)	4.011*** (1.358)	3.941*** (1.392)
<b>Religion</b>								
<b>Slightly important</b>	0.348 (0.347)	0.264 (0.355)	0.371 (0.359)	0.207 (0.360)	0.100 (0.439)	0.259 (0.360)	0.313 (0.356)	0.201 (0.409)
<b>Moderately important</b>	-0.0964 (0.339)	-0.214 (0.351)	-0.0702 (0.348)	-0.172 (0.349)	-0.197 (0.424)	-0.113 (0.350)	-0.119 (0.353)	-0.117 (0.405)
<b>Very important</b>	-0.281 (0.383)	-0.403 (0.396)	-0.336 (0.393)	-0.421 (0.397)	-0.454 (0.481)	-0.217 (0.396)	-0.384 (0.390)	-0.494 (0.442)
<b>Nativism</b>		0.188** (0.0957)						0.187* (0.109)
<b>Abortion more accessible</b>		-0.144** (0.0704)						-0.132* (0.0766)
<b>Combat violence against women (Not agree)</b>		-0.154 (0.320)						-0.143 (0.362)
<b>Household's economic situation (last year)</b>								
<b>Improved</b>			-0.00478 (0.414)					-0.0336 (0.473)
<b>Worsened</b>			-0.122 (0.347)					0.0704 (0.392)
<b>Household's economic situation (next year)</b>								
<b>Going to improve</b>			-0.457 (0.368)					-0.926** (0.418)
<b>Going to worsen</b>			-0.685* (0.384)					-0.723* (0.409)
<b>Unemployed</b>			-0.0551 (0.516)					-0.311 (0.561)
<b>Middle-Higher class</b>			0.0158 (0.303)					0.303 (0.333)
<b>Household's living standards</b>			0.251* (0.150)					0.196 (0.160)
<b>Domicile</b>								
<b>Town/small city</b>				-0.428 (0.304)	-0.310 (0.381)			-0.411 (0.329)
<b>Suburbs/outskirts of big city</b>				0.130	0.322			0.0550

				(0.348)	(0.439)			(0.374)
<b>Centre of a big city</b>				-0.406	-0.370			-0.352
				(0.413)	(0.494)			(0.446)
<b>Neighbourhood conditions</b>								
<b>Worsened</b>				-0.433	-1.310**			-0.0700
				(0.291)	(0.598)			(0.353)
<b>Improved</b>				0.431	-0.0867			0.781
				(0.374)	(0.601)			(0.482)
<b>Neighbourhood conditions*</b>								
<b>Vote choice in 2022</b>								
<b>Worsened*Brothers of Italy</b>					0.866			
					(0.782)			
<b>Improved*Brothers of Italy</b>					1.682			
					(1.194)			
<b>Against EU army</b>						-0.160**		-0.127
						(0.0734)		(0.0827)
<b>Leave the EU</b>						0.0452		0.0616
						(0.0717)		(0.0830)
<b>Italy should count more within the EU</b>						0.775		0.398
<b>(Agree)</b>						(0.675)		(0.685)
<b>Have a left- or right-wing EU Commission</b>						0.552**		0.657**
						(0.261)		(0.290)
<b>Push Israel to stop war in Gaza</b>							-0.00911	0.0591
							(0.0827)	(0.0905)
<b>Lead Ukraine and Russia to negotiation</b>							-0.135*	-0.165*
							(0.0741)	(0.0866)
<b>Covid's impact on life prospects</b>								
<b>Little</b>							-0.263	-0.0846
							(0.508)	(0.560)
<b>Somewhat</b>							-0.837*	-0.753
							(0.482)	(0.531)
<b>Much</b>							-0.0419	0.103
							(0.455)	(0.507)
<b>Constant</b>	-6.450***	-6.246***	-7.162***	-6.311***	-6.009***	-7.009***	-5.580***	-6.838***
	(1.377)	(1.457)	(1.543)	(1.407)	(1.455)	(1.547)	(1.511)	(1.993)
<b>Pseudo R2</b>	0.323	0.337	0.344	0.336	0.513	0.341	0.340	0.399
<b>Observations</b>	677	677	677	677	677	677	677	677

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. \* p < 0.1, \*\* p < 0.05, \*\*\* p < 0.01

**Table 6a.** Logistic regression models predicting vote for the Lega in the 2024 EP election with abstainers and those who cast blank or spoilt ballots treated as missing values

	M1 Controls	M2 Cultural Backlash	M3 Economic Insecurity	M4 Local Context	M5 EU Issues	M6 2020s' crises	M7 Full Model
<b>Age</b>							
<b>30-44</b>	1.696** (0.728)	1.084 (0.767)	1.692** (0.750)	1.735** (0.745)	1.253* (0.754)	1.569** (0.747)	0.723 (0.865)
<b>45-54</b>	1.030 (0.748)	0.535 (0.781)	0.807 (0.779)	0.966 (0.763)	0.726 (0.769)	0.963 (0.763)	0.269 (0.873)
<b>55-64</b>	1.055 (0.741)	0.582 (0.773)	0.985 (0.768)	0.963 (0.755)	0.813 (0.760)	1.044 (0.756)	0.348 (0.861)
<b>65+</b>	0.720 (0.718)	0.311 (0.751)	0.551 (0.756)	0.670 (0.733)	0.684 (0.737)	0.592 (0.733)	0.110 (0.852)
<b>Gender (Female)</b>	0.207 (0.269)	0.320 (0.291)	0.221 (0.280)	0.145 (0.275)	0.0505 (0.293)	0.228 (0.279)	0.195 (0.346)
<b>Education</b>							
<b>Medium</b>	-0.361 (0.293)	-0.373 (0.308)	-0.297 (0.312)	-0.397 (0.298)	-0.281 (0.313)	-0.412 (0.300)	-0.524 (0.368)
<b>High</b>	-1.356*** (0.519)	-0.688 (0.547)	-1.132** (0.554)	-1.470*** (0.529)	-0.925* (0.548)	-1.168** (0.528)	-0.580 (0.634)
<b>Religion</b>							
<b>Slightly important</b>	1.016** (0.453)	0.832* (0.475)	1.046** (0.464)	1.038** (0.463)	1.054** (0.476)	0.910* (0.465)	1.217** (0.556)
<b>Moderately important</b>	1.031** (0.446)	0.832* (0.468)	1.057** (0.457)	1.053** (0.453)	1.045** (0.465)	0.917** (0.459)	0.966* (0.550)
<b>Very important</b>	1.389*** (0.463)	1.194** (0.498)	1.604*** (0.479)	1.544*** (0.479)	1.559*** (0.497)	1.302*** (0.476)	1.604*** (0.589)
<b>Nativism</b>		0.804*** (0.148)					0.682*** (0.169)
<b>Abortion more accessible</b>		-0.119 (0.0799)					-0.0832 (0.0918)
<b>Combat violence against women (Not agree)</b>		0.0768 (0.402)					0.696 (0.463)
<b>Household's economic situation (last year)</b>							
<b>Improved</b>			-1.493** (0.622)				-1.862** (0.752)
<b>Worsened</b>			-0.444 (0.364)				-0.617 (0.449)
<b>Household's economic situation (next year)</b>							
<b>Going to improve</b>			0.630 (0.411)				0.561 (0.513)
<b>Going to worsen</b>			-0.106 (0.362)				0.127 (0.429)
<b>Unemployed</b>			-0.156 (0.492)				-0.422 (0.558)
<b>Middle-Higher class</b>			-1.071*** (0.344)				-0.841** (0.393)
<b>Household's living standards</b>			0.0461 (0.150)				0.102 (0.173)
<b>Domicile</b>							
<b>Town/small city</b>				-0.450 (0.356)			-0.0405 (0.427)
<b>Suburbs/outskirts of big city</b>				-0.0545 (0.386)			0.331 (0.457)
<b>Centre of a big city</b>				0.498 (0.435)			0.798 (0.539)
<b>Neighbourhood conditions</b>							
<b>Worsened</b>				-0.107 (0.302)			0.343 (0.413)
<b>Improved</b>				-0.881 (0.574)			-0.370 (0.701)
<b>Against EU army</b>					0.116		0.0701

					(0.0814)	(0.0935)	
<b>Leave the EU</b>					0.425***	0.315***	
					(0.0827)	(0.0959)	
<b>Italy should count more within the EU (Agree)</b>					1.662	1.921	
					(1.167)	(1.269)	
<b>Have a left- or right-wing EU Commission</b>					0.135	-0.249	
					(0.309)	(0.354)	
<b>Push Israel to stop war in Gaza</b>					-0.223**	-0.131	
					(0.0883)	(0.107)	
<b>Lead Ukraine and Russia to negotiation</b>					0.264***	0.173	
					(0.0875)	(0.108)	
<b>Covid's impact on life prospects</b>							
<b>Little</b>					-1.209**	-0.830	
					(0.598)	(0.713)	
<b>Somewhat</b>					-0.509	0.134	
					(0.488)	(0.605)	
<b>Much</b>					-0.447	-0.332	
					(0.458)	(0.582)	
<b>Constant</b>	-3.758***	-6.775***	-3.278***	-3.497***	-7.064***	-3.160***	-9.277***
	(0.800)	(1.203)	(1.053)	(0.851)	(1.466)	(1.026)	(2.265)
<b>Pseudo R2</b>	0.0757	0.209	0.126	0.0944	0.190	0.123	0.325
<b>Observations</b>	679	679	679	679	679	679	679

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. \*  $p < 0.1$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

**Table 7a.** Multinomial logistic regression model predicting vote for the Lega instead of Fdl in the 2024 EP election

	Vote for Lega vs Fdl
Ref. category: Fratelli d'Italia	
<b>Age</b>	
30-44	1.185 (0.958)
45-54	0.00364 (0.972)
55-64	0.0870 (0.958)
65+	0.230 (0.939)
<b>Gender (Female)</b>	0.0743 (0.382)
<b>Education</b>	
Medium	-0.251 (0.408)
High	-0.590 (0.669)
<b>Left-Right self-placement</b>	
Centre	14.36 (1960.2)
Right	13.24 (1960.2)
Refuse self-placement	14.08 (1960.2)
<b>Religion</b>	
Slightly important	0.703 (0.599)
Moderately important	0.840 (0.606)
Very important	1.343** (0.635)
<b>Nativism</b>	0.353* (0.190)
<b>Abortion more accessible</b>	0.0239 (0.103)
<b>Combat violence against women (Not agree)</b>	0.289 (0.518)
<b>Household's economic situation (last year)</b>	
Improved	-0.972 (0.807)
Worsened	-0.633 (0.509)
<b>Household's economic situation (next year)</b>	
Going to improve	0.820 (0.557)
Going to worsen	0.776 (0.512)
<b>Unemployed</b>	-0.184 (0.703)
<b>Middle-Higher class</b>	-0.873** (0.426)
<b>Household's living standards</b>	-0.106 (0.204)
<b>Domicile</b>	
Town/small city	0.0591 (0.465)
Suburbs/outskirts of big city	0.184 (0.499)
Centre of a big city	0.504 (0.578)

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<b>Neighbourhood conditions</b>	
<b>Worsened</b>	0.467 (0.442)
<b>Improved</b>	-0.755 (0.789)
<b>Against EU army</b>	0.130 (0.107)
<b>Leave the EU</b>	0.192* (0.106)
<b>Italy should count more within the EU (Agree)</b>	1.115 (1.321)
<b>Have a left- or right-wing EU Commission</b>	-0.500 (0.384)
<b>Push Israel to stop war in Gaza</b>	-0.120 (0.120)
<b>Lead Ukraine and Russia to negotiation</b>	0.230** (0.115)
<b>Covid's impact on life prospects</b>	
<b>Little</b>	-0.727 (0.767)
<b>Somewhat</b>	0.382 (0.671)
<b>Much</b>	-0.237 (0.637)
<b>Constant</b>	-18.98 (1960.2)
<b>Pseudo R2</b>	0.415
<b>Observations</b>	874

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Notes: For the sake of conciseness, we only show the comparison between Fdl and the Lega, although the model uses voting intentions for all Italian parties as the dependent variable, thus comparing Fdl (the baseline category) with all Italian parties. Standard errors in parentheses. \*  $p < 0.1$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

# Cities in Transition: a Practical Approach to Understanding and Conceptualizing Cross-Border Cooperation in Gorizia-Nova Gorica

Elisabetta Nadalutti  
FORWARD COLLEGE

## Abstract

This paper explores cross-border cooperation (CBC) through the lens of Practice Theory, focusing on the case study of Gorizia-Nova Gorica on the Italian-Slovenian border. The central question is: what makes cross-border regional spaces emerge and hang together? The study argues that traditional economic evaluations overlook the complex socio-cultural interactions that are crucial for genuine integration. By emphasizing 'communities of practice', the research highlights how shared practices and collective identities shape cross-border regions. The originality of this research lies in adopting a humanistic practice approach, providing a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between socio-cultural and economic factors in EU integration efforts, especially under contemporary socio-political crises. The main findings indicate that the formation and maintenance of these regions are deeply influenced by everyday practices and the collaborative efforts of local communities, suggesting pathways for enhancing integration through cultural and social engagement alongside economic strategies.

## 1. Introduction

Geographers have pioneered investigations into cross-border cooperation (CBC) in cross-border regions (CBRs) (van Houtum, 2000; Paasi, 1986). However, the last twenty years have seen a significant intensification of analyses focusing on cross-border region building, and CBC activities linked to security issues. These topics have become increasingly prominent within the disciplines of European integration and, more recently, International Relations (Song, Sun, Liu, 2022; Nadalutti, Rüländ, 2024). While geographers focus more on how spaces are politically and economically structured, and the impacts of these structures on societal relations and policies (Plangger, 2019; Jessop, 2016; van Houtum, 2000), political scientists focus on governance, sovereignty and security, along with identity shaping and changing (Nadalutti, 2020; Böhm, 2023).

CBRs are conceptualized as socio-territorial zones along borders where socio-economic, ethnic, and territorial agents – both private and public – from two or more neighbouring countries operate due to the inherently connected character of these areas. Despite their proximity, the extent of interaction between these zones can vary significantly – from active collaboration to minimal contact – depending on the prevailing border dynamics (author's reformulation of Perkmann and Sum, 2002).

The regional policy department of the European Commission DGXVI, and now the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO), which is currently



responsible for CBC issues within the EU, understands CBC through a liberalist lens. Hence, CBC actions are a set of activities where cross-border actors, as dynamic agents, work together to address collective and common problems thereby facilitating cooperation and integration for the common good. The main aim of CBC is to strengthen economic, social, and territorial cohesion by improving regional environments, encouraging economic growth, and reducing socio-economic disparities between regions. This includes managing the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) programme, also known as Interreg, which is dedicated to fostering cross-border, transnational, and interregional cooperation (CoR, 2021).

Today, it is common to refer to cross-border regions as ‘laboratories’ where EU integration strategies and the processes of building European identity are tested. (Nadalutti, 2012; Palermo, 2012; EU Commission, 2021). Though the concept of ‘laboratories’ will be better explained in this analysis, it is worth remembering here that the Oxford Dictionary defines a laboratory as a ‘site or centre of development, production, or experimentation’. Hence, it is justifiable to argue that ‘cross-border regions’ are spaces where socio-economic and political cross-border practices and experiences are critically evaluated. This evaluation aims to cultivate specialized knowledge (European Commission, 2021) regarding effective and ineffective practices, which can be adapted to other governmental and non-governmental levels to enhance integration.

Yet, these testing grounds for European cohesion do not simply materialize without context: they are the product of concerted efforts and historical developments. That is why this article aims to address one fundamental question: ‘*What makes cross-border regional spaces emerge and hang together?*’ This is a relevant question to ask when socio-economic and political territorial integration is considered. This study is particularly relevant nowadays when social, economic and political crises (migration, pandemics, the euro and the Schengen regime crises, and the rise of populist movements hostile to European integration) are putting at stake the EU integration process (Böhm, 2021).

That is why it is crucial to study the role played by ‘communities of practice’ (CoP), understood as groups of people who share a common interest and are engaged in collective practices that can be renegotiated by its members (Wenger, 1998). As will be clarified in the theoretical section, this is not purely a ‘people approach’ (van Houtum, 2000) to CBRs and CBC, which considers human agency as shaping the spatial and social landscapes, underscoring borders as processes that continually define and redefine identities and spaces.

The ‘community of practice’ approach shifts the focus from individual and social identity dynamics to the *routine practices and everyday experiences that constitute and sustain the functions of communities*, including those that cross borders. Hence, there is a foundational difference between these two distinct, although overlapping, analytical perspectives. The CoP approach foregrounds the systematic practices over individual and social identity dynamics, providing a structured method to analyse how these practices contribute to the cohesion and functionality of cross-border regions. Thus, while van Houtum’s framework (2000) delineates borders as dynamic constructs continually reshaped by individual interactions, the CoP approach focuses on the recurrent and collective activities that stabilize and define the boundaries of cross-border communities over time.

This study operationalizes the theoretical framework along the Italian-Slovenian border, specifically focusing on the interlinked cities of Gorizia and Nova Gorica. It aims to unpack the complex socio-political interactions and the role of everyday practices in shaping the cross-border region, highlighting how these practices contribute to regional cohesion and community development. The selection of Gorizia and Nova Gorica extends beyond historical interest: as European Capital of Culture for 2025, these cities exemplify the potential for cultural and socio-economic revival through European integration. This case uniquely mirrors the Cold War divisions akin to Berlin, providing critical insights into the dynamics of reconciliation and co-development in border regions within the EU. Finally, acknowledging that the Gorizia-Nova Gorica border presents a limited sample, this article prioritises theoretical innovation over empirical breadth, employing socio-cultural practices to critically reframe CBC, thus broadening the analytical lens applied to these phenomena.

The study begins by introducing the methodological framework used. It will then critically evaluate the EU's concept of territorial 'integration' linked to cross-border activities, questioning the practical implications of such policies for border regions. It thus introduces Practice Theory and the idea of Community of Practices as tools to further dissect the operationalization of these EU policies within the specific case study. The subsequent section provides an in-depth historical exploration of the designated cross-border area, meticulously tracing its evolution and explicitly connecting its development to the overarching narrative of European Union (EU) integration. The article advances by summarizing these findings, delineating the complex and often contradictory outcomes of EU integration efforts in the borderlands.

## **2. Case study approach, data and methods**

The methodology adopted for this study employs a qualitative research approach (Yin, 2009). Although a historical overview of the territory is provided from the end of World War II, and CBC activities are delineated from 2007 – when territorial cooperation became an objective of the European Union – the analysis specifically considers the relations between Gorizia and Nova Gorica from 2011 onwards, when the EGTC-GO was founded.

Empirical data for this research was collected through an analysis of border and cross-border regional activities, including newspaper articles. An extensive review was conducted of official EU, national, and regional planning reports and policy documents. These documents were selected for their relevance in elucidating several CBC aspects: the principles that underpin CBC activities; the rationale behind considering CBRs as laboratories for EU integration; the objectives of such cooperation; the roles played by cross-border communities; the identities and actions of these communities, and the type of integration being pursued.

In parallel to the examination of primary sources, twenty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted with a range of institutional actors. These included politicians, socio-economic representatives from cross-border cities, private entities, cross-border agencies, and regional development agency representatives at the European level (DGs Commissioners, CoR representatives), national level (Italian and Slovenian administrative staff engaged in CBC), and regional/communal level (Italian and Slovenian mayors,

GECT-GO administrative staff), as well as ambassadors and CBC stakeholders engaged on other European borders. The interviews were subjected to critical discourse analysis, which aimed to isolate social practices that shape ideas, values, and norms (Caldas-Coulthard et al. 2003) within CBRs.

The selection of actors to be interviewed was based on a two-step procedure. First, actors were identified for the role they play within cross-border cities and in EU institutional bodies that deal with CBC issues. For this step, I relied both on official documentation and my previous research network. I participated in several conferences held on the Gorizia-Nova Gorica border leading up to their tenure as the 2025 European Capitals of Culture. A second set of interviews was conducted following a snowball sampling technique. At the end of each interview, actors were asked to nominate a few prominent stakeholders in the field of CBC, and if it was possible to establish contact with them. During the interviews, actors were requested to elaborate on the conceptualization of ‘cross-border cities’, ‘border community’, ‘border identity’, ‘community’, and practices and experiences that can help to integrate the territory. I invited my interviewees to discuss joint activities developed in cross-border cities, the planning vision of the cross-border zone, the long-term vision of the socio-economic, political, and territorial development of these zones, the obstacles encountered, and their understanding of European and national integration values.

### **3. From Lockean Liberalism to Normative Practice: a Theoretical Debate on CBC**

Cross-border cooperation (CBC) involves collaboration between local government and non-government organizations situated near national borders to implement initiatives that cross these boundaries (Nadalutti and Rüländ, 2024). Cross-border regions, the places where CBC occurs, are seen as micro-level political laboratories where national and supranational policy arenas intersect, fostering transnational governance (Knippenberg, 2004; Blatter, 2003; Nadalutti, 2022).

These regions exemplify European Union strategies in institution-building and policy cooperation (Hall, 2008). Central to this endeavour, CBC is designed to strengthen partnerships and spearhead joint projects among EU states through two strategies. Firstly, the enhancement of CBC is firmly rooted in experiential learning. The analysis of the EU document (2017) ‘Boosting Growth and Cohesion in EU Border Regions’ is a clear example of this strategy. It underscores a Lockean liberal emphasis on drawing from practical experiences to confront persistent challenges such as mobility, healthcare, and emergency services coordination, aiming to transcend mere economic growth towards fostering comprehensive socio-administrative cohesion. Secondly, linked to the initial strategy, is the deepening of ties through fostering a shared cultural and social identity, celebrating common historical roots (Nadalutti, 2024). I suggest here that both strategies are grounded in two principal concepts that are interlinked to one another: experiential learning and the practice-as-experience approach.

Building on the principles outlined, the practical implementation of EU CBC exemplifies the dynamic interaction between local initiatives and overarching EU strategies. This relationship underscores a practice-as-experience approach, where local agents – including regional governments and NGOs – play pivotal roles in interpreting and

applying EU policies to meet the specific challenges of border communities. These local experiences not only respond to EU strategies but also shape them. Influential bodies like the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR), through initiatives such as b-solutions, are instrumental in this process, advocating for changes that reflect ground realities in EU policymaking. This interplay aligns with John Locke's distinction between simple and complex ideas: simple ideas emerge from the everyday experiences of border residents, while complex ideas involve broader strategies like the Interreg programmes, which aim to enhance regional integration. Thus, the Lockean framework illuminates how local practices inform and influence broader EU policy directions, fostering a more holistic approach to governance that is sensitive to the nuances of local contexts.

To better capture the dynamic interplay between human behaviour and societal structures, the necessity is suggested here to pivot towards a 'Practice Theory' oriented approach. This strategic shift allows us to more deeply explore the activities and role of 'cross-border communities' to foster substantial, non-material connections in CBRs. Practice Theory enhances our understanding by emphasizing the significance of everyday activities and social practices as the bedrock for developing a unique, specific cross-border space. Focusing on the habitual and often overlooked practices of individuals and communities offers a pathway to a more holistic grasp of societal wellbeing. This approach not only aligns with but also enriches the EU's overarching goals of fostering a more cohesive, inclusive, and resilient European community.

Whereas the Lockean framework primarily accentuates individual experiences as sources of knowledge, Practice Theory brings to the forefront the collective and iterative nature of these experiences within social contexts. It underscores how practices are not merely repeated actions but are embedded in a fabric of cultural and historical significance, thereby shaping and being shaped by the societal structures. As stated by an interviewee, "Thus, even if investments are made across the border, the socio-economic repercussions are felt by 'our' fellow citizens. In cooperation, the impact on the border cannot be avoided! It benefits the 'border population'. However, with a nationalist perspective, one fails to see what lies beyond" (interview, 10 July, 2024). Clearly, the 'effects' here are the outcome of these evolving practices, where CBC leads to tangible impacts on the community through altering social and economic routines. In this light, Practice Theory provides a more robust framework for understanding and integrating the nuanced realities of cross-border interactions, which are crucial for effective EU integration strategies.

In subsequent sections, I will delve into a comprehensive view of Practice Theory and the Community of Practice, detailing how these frameworks can profoundly inform European territorial integration strategies. Before this, however, a brief overview of the state of the art in cross-border processes and principles that underpin CBC agreements will be provided to set the stage for discussion.

#### **4. State of the art of cross-border bordering/debordering processes: a theoretical analysis**

Cross-border cooperation within the European Union, rooted in principles such as subsidiarity (Article 5, 3 TEU), proportionality (Article 5, 4 TEU), and partnership,

significantly promotes harmonious regional integration and effective governance. The principle of subsidiarity ensures that decisions are made closely with the affected citizenry, aligning actions directly with objectives to foster local economic, social and political empowerment (Böhm, 2023; Bache, 2010). The principle of proportionality in EU cross-border cooperation ensures that actions are appropriately scaled to their objectives, preventing excessive regulatory intervention. It supports balanced governance by aligning the scope of actions with their intended outcomes, facilitating effective and harmonious regional integration. Partnership emphasizes the importance of multi-level collaboration across various stakeholders, including public, private, and civil sectors, enhancing policy relevance and adaptability through inclusive governance (Perkmann, 2003; Knippenberg, 2004; Börzel, 2007).

This governance model not only preserves administrative functionality but also fosters social cohesion, creating a collective identity and mutual interdependence across European regions, thus embodying the EU's commitment to engaging all governance levels in addressing transnational challenges (Palermo, 2007; AEBR, 2006). Such frameworks are vital for sustainable development in border regions, where economic, social, and cultural coherence is essential (Nadalutti, 2015; Perkmann, 2003).

Recognizing the established benefits and the institutional foundations laid by governance frameworks like those discussed, it is crucial to also consider contemporary challenges and the evolving roles of CBC as highlighted in recent studies such as Böhm's analysis. In this respect, Böhm (2023) outlines CBC's multifaceted roles in addressing the re-bordering tendencies heightened by crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. By illustrating CBC as not merely a governance mechanism but also a vital instrument for regional development, paradiplomacy, and reconciliation, Böhm highlights its pivotal role in sustaining border regions amidst nationalistic retrenchment. His critique is pointed, noting that unilateral national actions during the pandemic not only undermined the seamless integration facilitated by CBC but also jeopardized the socio-economic interdependencies that benefit border communities.

Böhm challenges the peripheralization of border areas, advocating recognition of their unique socio-economic contexts, which are often overlooked by centralized policies that fail to capture the lived realities of these regions. His analysis calls for a resilient CBC framework that can withstand the pressures of nationalistic policies, ensuring that border areas remain vibrant zones of dual identities and solutions, rather than being marginalized by one-size-fits-all approaches.

Böhm's analysis is supported also by this research. Despite being regarded as peripheral zones compared to their core capitals (Interview with an official from the intergovernmental commission on cooperation and border issues, 2024<sup>1</sup>), cross-border zones are *sui-generis* because they are characterized by a specific kind of social, community life that is of a cross-border nature:

“There is an identity that is cross-border. This means that there is a cross-border perspective that is tied to the territory. When you live in a border area like X, you know that there is another possibility on the other Y side of the border. Thus,

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<sup>1</sup> Interview, 10 July 2024.

there is a dual brain. Whatever the problem is, there are two solutions (interview with a governmental officer who works at the CBC level, 2024).”

As pointed out by Jessop, interests are not merely reflections of subjective identities but are shaped by the broad socio-economic and territorial contexts in which actors operate (Jessop, 2016: 93-94). This reasoning justifies why several interviewees in this research talk about ‘a community that acts as *one* although it is divided by a border’ (interview with a representative of the European Territorial Cooperation, 9 July 2024; emphasis added). Cross-border areas exemplify a dynamic, interdependent relationship between borders, states, and societies (Anderson and Liam, 1999), marked by their unique territorial traits, governance models shaped by local actors’ intentions and values (Nadalutti, 2015), and distinct political structures that directly impact economic and social policies.

As an interviewee stated:

“When national actors involved in European lobbying believe that the cooperation benefits those from another state more, there are concerns. When this cooperation is managed from the capital, colleagues think we (the actors who focus on CBC issues) are conceding too much to our neighbours. *This is about developing the cross-border region. With cross-border cooperation, we are not just aiding our neighbours; we are helping our own citizens living on the frontier* (interview with the author, 10 July 2024; emphasis added).”

Following Paasi’s analytical framework on territorial identity (1991; 1996), it can be said that the interview underscores the dichotomy between two distinct practices within the realm of CBC. On one side, nationalist practices, rooted in a strong sense of national identity, advocate for maintaining rigid borders, reflecting a protective stance towards national interests. On the other, cross-border practices champion the development of a transnational region, emphasizing cooperation and mutual benefits. These practices not only aim to assist neighbouring states but also serve the local population residing in border areas, challenging the traditional notions of borders as barriers and redefining them as zones of potential synergy and collective growth. This contrast encapsulates the ongoing tension and negotiation between sovereignty and integration, which are central to understanding the dynamics at play in cross-border cooperation.

This research employs Practice Theory to scrutinize cross-border cities – conceptually referred to as ‘double cities’ or ‘twin cities’ – a domain markedly underexplored through this theoretical lens. This deliberate analytical choice to pivot from a broader regional focus to the nuanced interplay at the city level emerges from a critical gap identified in existing scholarly discourse. As shown so far, Practice Theory offers a robust framework for understanding the dynamic interrelations and socio-economic negotiations inherent to these urban cross-border spaces. By adopting this lens, the study innovatively explores how these cities, as delineated in interviews and official documents (ESPON, 2018), cultivate distinct socio-political identities and negotiate their interconnectedness through everyday practices. This approach not only advances our theoretical grasp of cross-border phenomena but also reinforces the argument for more granular studies of borderland dynamics, positioning this research at the forefront of contemporary geographical and political analyses.

In the next section I will introduce the theoretical framework.

## 5. Critical Analysis of Practice Theory and Communities of Practice: Insights and Implications for Cross-Border Cooperation

Practice Theory emphasizes the significance of routinized behaviours, known as practices, which are composed of interconnected elements: material, competence, and meaning (Adler and Pouliot, 2011).

*Material* refers to the physical objects and technologies involved in a practice, such as the infrastructure and economic tools used in CBC in Europe, like bridges and communication networks that facilitate integration. *Competence* involves the skills and knowledge required to carry out these practices, exemplified by the expertise needed to navigate and implement cross-border policies and initiatives effectively. *Meaning* pertains to the shared understanding and significance attributed to these practices, which in the context of European cooperation includes the collective identity and values that underpin and motivate collaborative efforts across national boundaries. This triad of elements highlights how practices are embedded in tangible *resources*, *skilled performances*, and *shared interpretations*, crucial for fostering and sustaining cross-border cooperation in Europe (idem.).

Furthermore, Practice Theory facilitates a *longue durée* approach, enabling a nuanced historical analysis of cross-border cooperation practices. This perspective is particularly relevant for contextualizing the enduring cross-border interactions between Gorizia and Nova Gorica, where past events have significantly shaped current practices. By examining these practices over an extended period, we gain insight into how historical legacies influence present-day cooperative efforts and help sustain them despite evolving socio-political dynamics. This historical lens not only enriches our understanding of material, competence, and meaning within cross-border contexts but is essential for a comprehensive analysis that appreciates the depth and persistence of these interactions.

From what has been said, it comes to the fore how this theoretical lens is particularly useful for understanding EU cohesion policy and CBC. By focusing on practices, we can analyse the shared knowledge, cultural codes, and systems of symbols that are conceptualized, elaborated, and produced by cross-border communities. These practices shape their actions and constitute their social cross-border life (Reckwitz, 2002). Practices such as social actions and relationships produce and shape spaces (Soja, 1985).

Embracing a reflexivist approach rooted in constructivism, it is crucial to emphasize the advanced nature of using ‘practice theory’ to analyse borders. Unlike Sohn and Scott (2020), who interpret borders primarily as ‘semic’ elements – dynamic and constantly reshaped by human activities – this approach prioritises the practices over symbols that define and redefine border spaces. While Sohn and Scott’s analysis provides insights into symbolic interpretations, the shift towards practices offers a more direct engagement with the mechanisms that actively shape and alter the contours of borders.

Sohn and Scott (2020) argue that borders, even when made invisible or functionally irrelevant, still retain a potent symbolic presence that shapes regional identity and social dynamics. This focus on the symbolic aspects partially neglects how material and everyday practices construct social realities. Accordingly, by concentrating on the symbolic significance of borders, Sohn and Scott may overlook day-to-day practices that actively

construct and reconstruct these borders. I suggest that these practices, linked to the Lockean conceptualization of ‘experiences’, ranging from daily commutes across borders to the enforcement routines of border control agencies, embed borders deeply in the social and material fabric of life, beyond merely their symbolic interpretations. Hence cross-border symbolic meanings are themselves outcomes of specific practices. For instance, the way people interact with borders in their daily lives – be it through commuting, shopping, or working across them – might influence how these borders are symbolized and understood politically and socially.

Cross-border integration cannot be fully grasped without considering practices that force us to engage ‘with the relationship between agency and the social and natural environments, with both material and discursive factors, and with the simultaneous processes of stability and change’ (Adler and Pouliot, 2011). It is a fact that bordering processes do not only concern physical realities but communities’ actions and border groups mobilization that conceptualize, form, develop and understand borders through ideologies, symbols and discourses (Paasi, 1986; van Houtum, 2005). Within these practices, it is important to consider debordering and rebordering processes.

Anssi Paasi’s (1986) conceptual framework delineates how bordering and re-bordering processes are not merely marginal or peripheral adjustments but central to the institutionalization of regions, transforming abstract socio-spatial identities into recognized administrative entities. His framework posits that this transformation occurs through a dynamic interplay between individual agency and broader structural contexts – key tenets of Practice Theory as discussed by Adler and Pouliot in 2011. According to Paasi (1986: 121), the institutionalization of a region unfolds in four stages: (1) the emergence of regional consciousness; (2) the development of a regional identity through socio-spatial processes; (3) the establishment of institutional frameworks to support that identity; and (4) the eventual recognition of the region as a functional administrative entity.

As this identity solidifies, institutional frameworks are established to support and formalize cross-border collaboration, ensuring that policies and administrative practices reflect the region’s unique binational character. An example is the EGTC-GO established between Gorizia, Nova Gorica and Sempeter on the Italian-Slovenian border in 2011 to streamline collaboration and unified urban planning, addressing the unique challenges faced by this CBR (Nadalutti, 2020). As stated by a local politician: ‘Certainly, before the establishment of the EGTC, Gorizia and Nova Gorica were quite marginal in relation to their national cores. However, these cities have successfully capitalized on their cooperation’ (Italian Politician, 20 July 2022). Indeed ‘The EGTC-GO functions more like a laboratory: being composed of local municipalities, it facilitates easier interactions. Cross-border actors convene almost daily’ (interview with an officer of the EGTC-GO, 28 July 2022). Another actor shares the same view: ‘We as EGTC have a single administration made up of people who come from both sides of the border, we speak daily with people from all three municipalities, and this produces new ideas, new projects. Hence our vision of the area as a unicum: for us it is ‘the territory’” (30 March 2023). This interview shows that ‘ideas’ and ‘projects’ emerge from the practice of meeting regularly and not vice versa.

Eventually, this constant interaction leads to the transformation of the area into a recognized, functional and social administrative entity that transcends the mere geographical union, embodying a model of integrated European urban development (interview, 23 June 2023).

An administrative official of the EGTC-GO stated in an interview given to the Osservatorio Balcani (2023):

“With Slovenia’s entry into the Euro area, every barrier dissolved, and there was no longer any tangible sign of the border, except in the memory of people and those who had lived through more complicated times. But young people no longer say, ‘I’m going there’; if anything, I go to that particular place, I go to that certain shop: they say the name of the place, not ‘in Italy’ or ‘in Slovenia’<sup>2</sup>.”

This statement is indeed in line with Practice Theory since it highlights how daily activities and interactions, fundamental elements of PT, are redefined and shaped by broader economic and political changes, embedding new social practices within the community. These practices are carried out by ‘communities of practice’ that include state leaders, expert panels, investors, development professionals, and societal groups.

To sum up, Practice Theory highlights the interplay between individual agency and structural contexts, the importance of routinized practices, and the role of collective knowledge in shaping and transforming cross-border spaces. This perspective is crucial for developing sustainable and effective cross-border policies and practices within the EU (CEI, 2023; EC, 2023). Moreover, this analytical approach complements the Paasi and van Houtum's analysis that focuses on a people approach, since Practice Theory dives deeper into how everyday interactions and routines actively shape CBRs. Additionally, this approach illuminates the enduring influence of historically ingrained practices that shape these regions over the *longue durée*, offering a nuanced understanding of how deeply embedded social patterns inform contemporary cross-border dynamics. In the following section, this theoretical framework will be operationalized in the Gorizia-Nova Gorica case study, which has been chosen for its emblematic geopolitical role after WWII, and nowadays as European Capital of Culture 2025.

## 6. The case study in context: The History of the Slovenian-Italian Border

The history of the Slovenian-Italian border is characterized by significant political, social, and ethnic changes that reflect the broader European historical context. The border’s origins can be traced back to the sixteenth century when the Treaty of Worms established a boundary between the Republic of Venice and the Hapsburg Empire. This delineation remained largely unchanged until the twentieth century, illustrating the relatively stable nature of European borders during this period (Bufon, 1993).

The conclusion of World War I brought dramatic changes to the border’s configuration. The Treaty of Rapallo in 1920 significantly altered the region, incorporating the Slovenian territories of Görz, most of Carniola, and the Karstic littoral into the Kingdom of Italy. This incorporation brought approximately 300,000 Slovenes, about a quarter of

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<sup>2</sup>Available at : <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/aree/Italia/Gorizia-Nova-Gorica-l-utopia-concreta-e-rivoluzionaria-di-Gect-GO-223817>

the Slovene population, under Italian rule. While the treaty required Yugoslavia to protect minority groups within its borders, it did not impose similar obligations on Italy regarding its newly acquired Slovenian population, reflecting the unequal power dynamics of the time (Bufon & Minghi, 2000; Sluga, 1994).

The interwar period and the rise of Fascism in Italy had a profound impact on the Slovenian minority. Mussolini's regime embarked on an aggressive Italianization campaign, which sought to assimilate Slovenes through policies that suppressed their language, culture, and identity. This campaign was driven by a belief in the superiority of Italian 'civiltà' and 'patria' (superiority of Italian civilization and homeland), and it involved both legislative measures and violent actions aimed at eradicating the Slovene cultural presence (Šabec, 2005; Sluga, 2001). The Fascist period thus left a legacy of fear, mistrust and ethnic tension that would persist for decades afterwards.

World War II and its aftermath further complicated border dynamics. In 1941, Fascist Italy invaded Yugoslavia, incorporating Dalmatia and occupying Slovenia up to Ljubljana. The end of the war saw the liberation of Trieste by Yugoslav resistance forces and the subsequent diplomatic struggle over the territory. During the brief Yugoslav occupation of Trieste in 1945, an unknown number of civilians were killed, and a significant exodus of Italians from the Slovene Littoral and Istria occurred as they fled Tito's repressive regime. These tragic events are part of the broader historical context known as the 'Foibe Massacres', which involved the execution and disposal of victims into natural sinkholes called 'foibe' during and after World War II. The violence was part of the ethnic and territorial conflicts in the region, reflecting the complex interplay of nationalistic and political tensions (Bufon & Minghi, 2000; Šabec, 2005).

The immediate post-war years saw the establishment of the Free Territory of Trieste, divided into Zone A, administered by the Allied Military Government, and Zone B, under Yugoslav administration. This arrangement was formalized in 1954 by the London Memorandum, which granted Zone A to Italy and Zone B to Yugoslavia. Despite these political resolutions, the region remained a point of contention and symbolic of the broader Cold War divisions between the West and the communist East (Sluga, 1994; Bufon & Minghi, 2000).

The 1960s and 1970s marked a period of gradual normalization and cross-border cooperation. The London Memorandum officially recognized the Slovenian community in Trieste and Gorizia, providing for cultural and educational rights and the establishment of institutions to support the Slovene minority. Economic and cultural interactions increased, supported by bilateral agreements and the establishment of organizations like the Slovensko kulturno gospodarska zveza (SKGZ: Slovenian Cultural-Economic Association) and the political party Slovenska skupnost (SSK: Slovene Union), which played crucial roles in fostering cross-border relationships and economic development (Šabec, 2005).

In 1975, the Treaty of Osimo further solidified the border arrangements and established comprehensive minority protections. This treaty facilitated extensive cross-border economic and cultural cooperation, although the political will to fully implement these measures was often lacking on both sides. Nonetheless, the provisions of the Osimo Treaty, including language rights and the support of minority organizations, represented significant progress in minority protection and cross-border relations (Šabec, 2005).

The dissolution of Yugoslavia and Slovenia's subsequent independence in 1991 marked another turning point. Slovenia's independence brought economic changes rather than political upheaval for the Italian minority, as their rights were already established under the Yugoslav constitution. The new Slovenian state continued to guarantee these rights, reflecting a continuity in minority protection despite the dramatic political changes (Šabec, 2005). However, representatives of the Italian minority community in Slovenia have indicated that rights, although established on paper, often remain unimplemented in practice (interviews with high representatives of the Italian minority community in Slovenia, 2008; 2024).

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the European Union's influence became increasingly significant in shaping cross-border cooperation. EU initiatives like Interreg and Phare promoted economic integration, infrastructure development, and cultural exchange, although initial efforts often faced challenges due to differing administrative systems and levels of experience between Italy and Slovenia. Over time, however, these programmes facilitated greater cooperation and the development of joint projects, highlighting the EU's role in transforming the border from a site of conflict to one of collaboration (Panteia, 2009).

In this prolonged historical context, Practice Theory offers a critical lens for understanding the enduring socio-political practices that have shaped the Slovenian-Italian border. Centuries of power dynamics, cultural exchanges, and identity struggles have solidified into long-lasting social practices, each layer building upon the sediment of the past. By incorporating the *longue durée* perspective, it becomes clear that contemporary cross-border dynamics are not merely products of recent political decisions or economic changes but are deeply rooted in these historical practices. These practices, though continuously evolving, maintain a core derived from historical contexts, providing a foundation for the resilience and adaptability of cross-border interactions today. Recognizing these deep-seated practices is essential for comprehensively understanding the border's modern-day governance and CBC.

## **7. Communities of Practice Across the Border: The Gorizia-Nova Gorica Experience**

Utilizing Practice Theory, the section examines how local actors, including municipal leaders and community members, actively shape cross-border practices and identities in the cross-border space of Gorizia-Nova Gorica.

In their analysis Paasi (1986) and van Houtum (2005) have critically examined how nation-states engage in deliberate practices aimed at strengthening their borders. These practices are not merely administrative or security measures but are deeply intertwined with the state's pursuit to affirm its sovereignty and identity. Through such processes, borders become active instruments in the political and cultural maintenance of space, underscoring the state's interest in delineating clear territorial boundaries that reinforce national cohesion and control.

Clearly, the ongoing use of borders as tools for statecraft and identity formation, as discussed by Paasi and van Houtum, is reflected in the experiences of communities directly impacted by these boundaries. The example from the Gorizia and Nova Gorica

border area vividly illustrates how borders can be re-envisioned not only as barriers but as opportunities for collaboration and unity.

As an interviewee put it, ‘The territory encompassing Gorizia, Nova Gorica and the surrounding areas was historically a unified region under a single state during the Habsburg rule until World War I. During this period, there were no borders or divisions. However, over the past century, we have found ourselves divided by a border, *a condition that does not reflect our intrinsic nature*. The EGTC-GO offers not only a retrospective step in a positive sense but also enables us to become actively involved in joint planning efforts. Our aim is to transcend the physical boundaries and barriers imposed by differences in legal systems, languages, and other administrative, linguistic, and social challenges that have been institutionalized. We hope to overcome these obstacles and re-establish fruitful dialogue among ourselves’ (interview with an Italian municipal councillor in charge of cooperation, 25 October 2018). This enduring context of cooperation underscores a *longue durée* of cross-border interaction and integration that is pivotal to understanding these phenomena. This interview shows that through the EGTC-GO, the physical boundary can be transformed into a shared space (material), community leaders enhance their CBC skills (competence), and both cities cultivate a unified identity (meaning), distinctly illustrating the convergence of these critical elements.

Moreover, this interview clarifies that the resilience and capability to form cross-border practices reveal the profound agency of local communities in shaping their own social landscapes and governance structures, often producing a counter-narrative to the national interests prescribed by state policies. It highlights the inherent capacity of border communities to create spaces of cooperation that navigate and sometimes transcend the divisive nature of physical and political boundaries.

In the context of the European Capital of Culture Nova Gorica 2025, there is a notable interplay between formal and informal communities of practice. The formal entities, such as the ‘GO! 2025’ team and the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation, along with designated officials from Gorizia, Nova Gorica, and Šempeter-Vrtojba, are tasked with delivering a structured, top-down cultural programme aligned with strategic objectives. This approach leverages political and institutional roles to enhance visibility and manage cross-border cultural initiatives, supporting the overarching ‘borderless’ narrative (Nova Gorica Second Monitoring Report, 2023).

Hence, as emerges from the analysis of the Second Monitoring Report (EU Commission 2023), the EGTC-GO is clearly trying to respond to the principles of CBC as subsidiarity and partnership. For instance, the joint announcement by the Mayors of Nova Gorica and Gorizia, coupled with the Slovenian Government’s financial commitment, and endorsement from Italian institutions at various levels, implicitly demonstrate the principle of subsidiarity and partnership, ensuring that decisions supporting the ECoC 2025 project are made collaboratively across multiple layers of government to directly benefit the communities involved (European Commission, 2023: 5-6).

On the other hand there are ‘informal’ communities, comprising local artists, cross-border citizens, and volunteers. For instance, educators from schools in both Gorizia and Nova Gorica collaborate on educational programmes that serve students from both cities, promoting joint cultural exchanges (interviews with the author, 2022-2024).

This community of practice give importance to shared interests in both learning and performing that link together individuals. They are not just interested in theoretical knowledge; they also put what they know into practice.

This engagement is crucial, as it transforms the community into a living, evolving space where members learn from each other, improve their skills, and collectively push the boundaries of their domain. A concrete example that elucidates this is an awarded project under the b-solutions' initiative, which aims to tackle hurdles that hinder cross-border cooperation between EU regions: 'Cross-border Bike Sharing' (b-solutions, 2021). This project aimed to integrate existing bike-sharing systems between the two cross-border cities of Gorizia and Nova Gorica. The goal was to establish a functional, integrated bike-sharing system managed by GECT-GO before the European Capital of Culture event in 2025 (<https://euro-go.eu/en/notizie-ed-eventi/news/le-bici-go2go-diventano-borderless/>). The Assistant Director of the EGTC- GO stated in an interview for the Osservatorio Balcani:

“I think of what we have achieved with 'bike sharing' in the city (of Gorizia and Nova Gorica): you can pick up a bike in the Slovenian part and return it in the Italian part, a single card, a single tariff, all bypassing the complications that would have arisen having two managements [of] different and separate nationalities. For me, this represents what we could achieve for other services by applying real cross-border cooperation: my dream is to be able to achieve joint cross-border public services, with a single manager covering the territory, on both sides of the border (2023).”

This initiative exemplifies the *material* aspect that is represented by the physical infrastructure of the bike-sharing stations, the bicycles themselves, and the technological systems used for bike management and customer service, all of which are essential for the practical implementation of the project. This initiative thus embodies a community of practice in which regional stakeholders collectively learn, adapt, and integrate resources to promote a shared goal of improved cross-border mobility and sustainability.

*Meaning* is fostered by a shared understanding of sustainable transportation and environmental consciousness across the Italian-Slovenian border, reflecting a collective identity focused on ecological responsibility and cross-border connectivity. *Competence* is demonstrated through the collaborative efforts of both countries to develop and manage a unified bike-sharing system, which involves navigating and harmonizing diverse administrative and operational challenges inherent to cross-border initiatives.

Civic organizations and cultural groups engage in continuous collaborative efforts driven by shared goals and mutual interests. Another emblematic example cited by the AEBR's b-solutions' initiative (<https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/institutional-cooperation>) is the re-development of Piazzale della Transalpina/Trg Evrope, which exemplifies the integration of Practice Theory and the concept of a community of practice into urban transformation (GO2025; Il Sole 24, 2024). This project, coordinated by the GECT-GO, reflects a communal endeavour where shared goals, mutual interests, and common values are paramount (Slovenian municipal officer, 30.03.2023).

The urban transformation is not merely physical but also symbolic, fostering a participatory culture among stakeholders. As another interviewee put it:

“An important project involves the collaboration between the public green spaces of Gorizia and Nova Gorica, aiming to unify the landscaping of the two cities through distinctive garden arrangements. This endeavour seeks to beautify

the cities in a unique manner. These steps are leading us towards the creation of a *single, cohesive city*, an initiative made possible by our participation as a European Capital of Culture (interview with a regional stakeholder, 2023; emphasis added).”

This redevelopment serves as a purported exemplar of how cross-border practices can be integrated into urban transformation. However, a critical examination raises several concerns about the depth and authenticity of these claims.

Firstly, the project’s *material* aspect involves the aesthetic unification of the landscapes between Gorizia and Nova Gorica, aiming to create a single, cohesive urban environment. While this endeavour may alter physical appearances and potentially enhance the visual appeal of the area, one must question the extent to which such material changes foster genuine *social* integration. The risk here is that the transformation may prioritize physical unification over substantive, interactive connections between the cities’ residents, potentially overlooking deeper socio-economic and cultural divisions that might persist beneath the surface.

Secondly, the *competence* of the EGTC-GO in managing such a complex transformation is crucial. The organization’s ability to integrate diverse community perspectives and navigate local cultural dynamics is vital for the project’s success. The initiative’s effectiveness hinges not only on urban planning expertise but also on the profound engagement with the community’s actual needs and values. There remains a critical gap in understanding whether the stakeholders have addressed these issues by involving the border population. Hence, it is questionable whether this redevelopment is merely a top-down imposition rather than a true reflection of communal aspirations.

Lastly, the symbolic *meaning* attached to the project as a step towards creating a unified city is compelling yet warrants scepticism. The narrative of unity and shared cultural identity, reinforced by the area’s status as a European Capital of Culture, presents an idealized vision of what urban transformation can achieve. However, the imposition of a new urban identity might mask unresolved issues or force a superficial sense of community without addressing underlying tensions. This corresponds to the statement of one interviewee:

“The guiding theme of our Bid Book<sup>3</sup> is ‘go-borderless’, meaning the fact of breaking down this border that is not there on the land but still exists in people’s minds. And this was an interesting theme for the European Commission, because Nova Gorica, which was the official candidate, connected with Gorizia (interview with a regional stakeholder, 2024).”

While the potential of this territory to foster integration through active practices and the involvement of Communities of Practice is significant, it is important to reiterate the array of challenges that persistently obstruct the formation of a cohesive community. There are cultural and socio-political challenges that complicate integration and cooperation across this border as well as administrative, legal, and fiscal barriers.

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<sup>3</sup> The Bid Book is a detailed document that outlines the vision, objectives, cultural programme, and planned projects for Nova Gorica and Gorizia as they prepare to hold the title of European Capital of Culture. This bid was crucial in their candidacy and showcased how these twin cities aim to use the ECOC opportunity to foster cultural growth, enhance cross-border cooperation, and boost local and regional development.

For instance, on the Italy-Slovenia border, the Interreg V Management Authority (2014–2020) in Trieste, along with the founders and promoters of EGTC-GO, initially promoted the novelty of the EGTC-GO as the sole recipient of EU funds. This set-up meant that a single entity would operate across the border. However, this arrangement faced practical challenges. An interviewee (13 February 2024) reported that when the EGTC-GO was recognized as the institutional body that coordinates and manages the cultural programmes and initiatives for the Gorizia-Nova Gorica European Capital of Culture event, a significant issue arose concerning the management of the funding from the Slovenian Ministry of Culture in Ljubljana. The Slovenian government objected to directly allocating Slovenian funds to an entity governed by Italian law. Consequently, to ensure proper traceability of funds, it was necessary to establish the Javni Zavod (GO! 2025) on the Slovenian side, a public institute tasked with carrying forward the projects of the European Capital of Culture.

The creation of this additional structure, while seemingly at odds with the goal of unified cross-border governance, addresses a pragmatic need within the legal frameworks that currently govern international financial transactions. This divergence from the EGTC's ideal of seamless, borderless cooperation underlines the complex interplay between national laws and international collaboration objectives. The situation partially challenges the fundamental principles of joint CBC action and the overarching purpose of EGTCs. However, the necessity for Javni Zavod emerges as a practical, albeit imperfect, resolution to adhere to legal constraints and advance the projects' objectives.

## 8. Conclusion

I highlighted that the core objective of this research was to explore the question: 'What practices contribute to the emergence and coherence of cross-border regional spaces?'. This was done within the theoretical framework of Practice Theory which, by focusing on 'practices', emphasizes how the everyday practices within these regions actively shape perceptions and construct new symbols, thus modifying the symbolic landscapes in which they operate.

This analysis suggests that while there is an identity that is linked to the border, the community refers to itself not through a shared regional or national identity but through *functional, collaborative networks that overcome traditional boundaries*. The real operational concept at borders like Gorizia and Nova Gorica is that of a 'functional community'. These communities are characterized by practical collaborations on economic and infrastructural projects that foster a sense of unity, irrespective of the national identities on either side of the border.

It has been shown that the operationalization of Practice Theory through cross-border communities' activities differs from the 'people approach' as theorized by van Houtum. The former provides a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of how and why regional identities and communities through cross-border practical engagements (or the lack of them), through their repetitiveness and ordinariness, sustain existing structures and/or transform and negotiate societal norms. Hence, Practice Theory provides a deeper, more dynamic insight into how cross-border interactions contribute to the ongoing process of community and identity formation.

The analysis of the Gorizia-Nova Gorica case, as ECoC, highlighted that integration is not solely the product of political and economic imperatives. The establishment of the EGTC-GO, while intended to foster a harmonious integration of Italian and Slovenian cultural and administrative practices, demands a more rigorous evaluation. The initiative, celebrated for its innovative approach to CBC, indeed exemplifies the potential for border areas to serve as dynamic spaces for socio-economic and cultural integration. However, the outcomes of such integration appear less transformative than the model might suggest.

Critically examining the EGTC-GO through the lens of Practice Theory – considering the dimensions of material, competence, and meaning – reveals several shortcomings. *Materially*, while infrastructure projects such as the interconnected urban spaces between Gorizia and Nova Gorica demonstrate a tangible commitment to integration, these efforts often result in superficial connectivity that fails to significantly impact the daily lives and economic realities of the border populations. This suggests a discrepancy between the physical manifestations of cooperation and their practical utility.

In terms of *competence*, the administrative bodies involved in the EGTC-GO, although well-intentioned, have encountered significant challenges in aligning policies and practices across diverse bureaucratic cultures and legal systems. This misalignment raises questions about the actual capabilities of these bodies to enact policies that effectively address and reconcile the complex needs of the cross-border community.

The *meaning* attributed to these cross-border initiatives, while rich in symbolic value – promoting a sense of shared identity and community – often does not translate into deeper socio-economic integration. The celebrated ‘cultural blending’ and small-scale projects may foster a temporary sense of community and cooperation but lack the depth needed to effect lasting socio-economic change. The narrative of integration is thus more emblematic than substantive, pointing to a need for a re-evaluation of how these practices contribute to, or fall short of, realizing the broader objectives of European integration and genuine cross-border unity. Hence, the examination of the legacy of these activities warrants a thorough analysis, which is beyond the scope of this article and presents an opportunity for future research.

Finally, due to spatial constraints, specific choices have been made in selecting the practices and communities of practice to be analysed here. Priority was accorded to those practices actively involved in integrating Gorizia and Nova Gorica into a unified city for the European Capital of Culture event. This focus reflected the aim to examine communities directly contributing to achieving this cohesion through the EGTC-GO.

Although it would have been intriguing to analyse ethnic national minorities’ practices, this aspect has been not emphasized here. A profound dissatisfaction was expressed regarding the absence of initiatives promoting ethnic cooperation, compounded by a general lack of enthusiasm and cultural engagement expected of such a significant event. These findings highlight the complexity of minority inclusion, suggesting a need for future research that probes not only top-down institutional strategies but also the extent to which there is a dynamic willingness among minority groups themselves to engage collaboratively and inclusively, both within their own groups and across other minority and majority communities. This future investigation aims to unravel

whether systemic issues in inclusion are due to the absence of such multi-directional engagement.

To conclude, while the EGTC-GO establishes a significant precedent in cross-border cooperation, the actual outcomes call for critical reassessment to ensure that these practices not only represent, but genuinely achieve sustainable, meaningful integration to address fundamental socio-economic and cultural disparities.

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### **List of interviewees (cited in the text)**

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- European Territorial Cooperation representative, 9 July 2024 (Brussels). Governmental officer, 10 July 2024 (Paris).
- Italian municipal councillor in charge of cooperation, 25 October 2018 (Gorizia). Italian Politician, 20 July 2022 (Gorizia).
- Italian spokesman of the Italian minority in Slovenia, 2008; 28 August, 2024 (Koper).
- Slovenian Staff member of a consulting group that specializes in European projects, 13 February, 2024 (Trieste).
- Slovenian spokesman of the Slovenian minority in Italy, 2008; 16 August, 2024 (Trieste).
- Slovenian municipal officer, 30.03.2023 (Nove Gorica).
- Slovenian municipal representative, 21 November 2024 (Sempeter). Slovenina national representative, 25 June 2023 (Nova Gorica).

# New Conflicts' Mapping in the age of Globalization (NEWCOMING)

Vincenzo Emanuele, Mirko Crulli, Elisabetta Mannoni LIUSS GUIDO CARLI  
 Manuela Moschella, Mattia Lupi UNIVERSITY OF BOLOGNA  
 Alessandro Chiamonte, Anna Bosco, Aldo Paparo, Gianluca Piccolino,  
 Sorina Cristina Soare UNIVERSITY OF FLORENCE  
 Bruno Marino UNIVERSITY OF PADUA  
 Mattia Guidi, Luca Verzichelli, Gabriella Sesti Osseo,  
 Marco Improta UNIVERSITY OF SIENA  
 Federico Trastulli UNIVERSITY OF VERONA

## Abstract

The theory advanced by Seymour Lipset and Stein Rokkan on social cleavages, considered foundational to the formation of political parties, remains one of the most influential frameworks in political science. Over time, various studies have sought to examine the extent to which this theory still explains voting behavior and whether new globalization-related cleavages have emerged. The purpose of the NEWCOMING project (New Conflicts' Mapping in the Age of Globalization) is to provide an in-depth comprehension of these phenomena by collecting original cross-sectional survey data in seven Western European countries: France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Through quantitative analyses of these surveys, NEWCOMING will explore the relevance of both traditional and alleged new cleavages, seeking to understand whether Western Europe is characterized by an overarching 'globalization' cleavage, or a multitude of less-structured conflicts. Hence, NEWCOMING's survey relies on specific items capturing the key characteristics of social conflicts: people's positions in them, their salience, their identity-producing capacity, and finally, political parties' ability to represent them. Additionally, NEWCOMING aims to trace the causes of rising voters' political disengagement, detecting whether this trend is also related to people's specific positions in social conflicts. To this end, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with citizens who feel alienated from politics. Therefore, NEWCOMING ultimately aims to provide insights into both the evolution of cleavage politics and wider transformations in the democratic functioning of Western European countries.

Project ID	2022BFN5KR
Funding Body/Budget	Italian Government - PRIN scheme / Total budget: €225K
Principal investigator	Vincenzo Emanuele
Starting/End date	01/10/2023 - 30/09/2025
Duration	2 years
Website project	<a href="https://newcomingproject.weebly.com/">https://newcomingproject.weebly.com/</a>
Research entities and members	Luiss Rome, University of Siena, University of Florence, University of Bologna

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*Italian Political Science*. ISSN 2420-8434.

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Volume 19, Issue 2, 168–190. *Research Project Articles*. DOI: 10.69101/IPS.2024.19.2.5

Contact Author: Vincenzo Emanuele, Luiss Guido Carli.

E-mail address: [vemanuele@luiss.it](mailto:vemanuele@luiss.it)



## 1. Introduction

In 1967, Seymour Lipset and Stein Rokkan introduced a prominent analytical framework to study historically determined societal divides. The authors identified four rifts that characterized 19th-century Western European societies, structuring national party systems and citizens' voting behavior: center vs. periphery, State vs. church, urban vs. rural and owners vs. workers. This conceptual device, named 'cleavage', gained prominence within Comparative Politics due to its versatility, applicability to both theoretical and empirical research, and relevance in understanding the dynamics and long-term stability of politics and party systems.

In recent times, renewed scholarly attention has been dedicated to the study of cleavages and their politicization. Some authors have discussed the decline of traditional Rokkanian cleavages, arguing that they no longer adequately capture the evolving socio-political landscape of contemporary Western societies, which appear as 'less frozen' than those described by Lipset and Rokkan (Bornschier and Kriesi, 2012; Dalton, 1984; Emanuele, 2023; 2024; Ford and Jennings, 2020; Franklin, 1992; Goldberg, 2020; Oesch and Rennwald, 2018). In fact, starting from the 1970s, the emergence of parties not aligned with traditional cleavages – all those based on post-materialist concerns, such as green parties – raised several questions about the suitability of the original theory to fully account the underlying dynamics of political competition. These shifts in the structure of Western societies became particularly evident after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the advent of the globalization era (Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Kriesi et al., 2006, 2008, 2012).

Structural changes – such as trade liberalization, increased capital mobility, post-industrialization, European integration, shifting gender roles and class structures, secularization – alongside various socio-economic crises, have prompted academic interest in the emergence of potential new conflicts or even cleavages in Western Europe (Borbáth et al., 2023; Inglehart, 1997; Kitschelt, 1994; Knutsen, 1997; Marks et al., 2021). Some researchers have highlighted the structuring of a new divide between 'winners' and 'losers' of globalization/transnationalism (Bornschier, 2010; Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Kriesi et al., 2006), politicized by radical right and green/left-libertarian parties. However, the claim that contemporary European societies and politics are predominantly defined by an overarching division between 'winners' and 'losers' must be open to critical examination, as it seems overly simplistic – and eventually unrealistic.

This led to the development of a project titled 'New Conflicts' Mapping in the age of globalization (NEWCOMING)'. The goal of NEWCOMING is to better identify the multifaceted landscape of new conflicts emerging in the age of globalization, the groups involved in these conflicts, the trajectories of their political mobilization, and the impact of these processes on democracy. The project focuses on seven Western European countries: France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

After a positive assessment, the proposed two-years project was funded and started its activities in October 2023, involving four research units (Luiss Rome, University of Siena, University of Florence, University of Bologna), with Vincenzo Emanuele as Principal Investigator.

NEWCOMING has several analytical aims: to map the emerging conflicts characterizing Western European societies by examining contemporary relevant economic,

social, and cultural shifts and their impact on different groups; to identify the groups arising from these conflicts, particularly focusing on their socio-demographic features, shared values and beliefs, and the existence of overlapping or cross-cutting identities; and, finally, to trace the potential mobilization of these groups, both in terms of political participation patterns and exclusion from the political circuit. NEWCOMING also has an assessment aim: to investigate the consequences of these processes for the proper functioning of democratic systems. Different patterns of political translation could produce two alternative outcomes: integration or alienation of citizens. While the former involves citizens' involvement in the political system, the latter points to the development of sentiments of distrust and apathy due to political actors' inability to address citizens' demands. Lastly, NEWCOMING has the proactive goal of identifying solutions to boost citizens' involvement in the democratic process, with a particular focus on alienated groups, providing operative roadmaps to political actors, civil society organizations, and citizens.

This research note provides an overview of the project in terms of its scope, objectives, methodology, expected results, and their dissemination. The first section is dedicated to a review of the current state of the literature on socio-political conflicts and cleavage politics. The second section focuses on the project objectives. The third section concerns the methods, while the fourth outlines the expected results and planned dissemination.

## **2. State of the art**

Recently, comparative politics scholars have shown renewed interest in cleavages and their consequences. While the persistence of the cleavage-based model proposed by Lipset and Rokkan (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967) has been lengthily debated (Rose and Urwin, 1970; Bartolini and Mair, 1990; Franklin et al., 1992), recent studies (Clark and Lipset, 2001; Dalton, 2002; Knutsen, 2018; Goldberg, 2020; Emanuele, 2021) overwhelmingly highlight a crisis of traditional cleavages. Along with this decline, some argue that the 'age of globalization' has led to the emergence and structuring of a new overarching cleavage.

According to many authors (Kriesi et al. 2006, 2008; Bornschier, 2010; De Vries, 2018; Hooghe and Marks, 2018), this proposed new 'demarcation-integration' cleavage would divide society between 'winners' and 'losers' of globalization. Emerging after a series of critical junctures that created a globalized society, this cleavage would have gained a prominent position in national political systems, often replacing traditional cleavages and dividing the electorate and party system between pro-market cosmopolitans and protectionists/nationalists (Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Emanuele et al., 2020; Jackson and Jolly, 2021). From a partly different perspective, Piketty's school emphasizes the 'education cleavage', which opposes a 'Brahmin left' – supported by highly educated voters – and a 'merchant right' – backed by affluent citizens (Gethin et al., 2022).

This body of literature has undoubtedly revitalized the importance of looking at the political consequences of societal divisions. However, it suffers from two critical shortcomings – one theoretical and one empirical. First, the idea that, in 21st century Western Europe, society and politics can still be crossed by a generalized, overarching division between winners and losers seems too simplistic. Indeed, a globalized society is inevitably

characterized by several economic, social, and cultural conflicts that are likely to generate multiple, fragmented groups with cross-cutting identities and allegiances rather than a straightforward dichotomy of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’. Furthermore, the progressive liberalization of trade and capital flows, alongside the rise of global value chains (Baccini et al., 2018, Kim and Osgood, 2019), has enabled multinational firms to organize production globally. Consequently, only the largest and most productive firms benefit from international trade, and even the most globalized countries are now witnessing a substantial backlash against it (Baccini et al., 2022). In addition, new socio-cultural conflicts have also emerged, centered on issues such as intergenerational equity (Emery, 2012), women and LGBTQ+ rights (Flanagan and Lee, 2003), and immigration (Grande et al., 2019).

Moreover, the political translation of such different conflicts should not be taken for granted: only a few social demands are able to enter the ‘black box’ of the political system (Easton, 1953). Here, groups’ grievances must find feasible support among political entrepreneurs, through ‘conventional’ or ‘unconventional’ mobilization (Dalton, 1988), namely, via parties or social movements. If this process is successful, citizens’ Voice’ (Hirschman, 1970) enters the political system, and citizens develop feelings of integration and democratic legitimacy (Verba and Nie, 1972). However, if the ‘political opportunity structure’ (Tarrow, 1994) is unfavorable to the political translation of societal demands and citizens opt for an ‘Exit’ strategy (Hirschman, 1970), they will progressively detach themselves from the circuit of representation and even develop feelings of alienation and distrust towards democracy (Aberbach, 1969; Blais, 2006).

Second, the literature on the new overarching globalization-cleavage has employed many heterogeneous tools (newspaper content analysis, party manifesto analysis, expert surveys) and primarily focused on the cleavage’s supply-side, thus neglecting socio-demographic characteristics, attitudes, and behavior of the conflicting groups of citizens involved. Conversely, survey data are widely used by scholars of class voting, although they usually rely on standardized batteries in cross-national datasets, focusing on profession and the position of individuals in the economic structure (e.g., the schemes by Erikson et al., 1979 or Oesch, 2006). However, such batteries cannot fully map the interaction of socio-demographic characteristics with political attitudes nor capture individuals’ integration into the electoral circuit and democratic process. To overcome these limitations in previous related studies, the central tenet of NEWCOMING is to adopt an original survey design and data collection strategy.

Therefore, we consider ‘neo-cleavage’ theory (Marks et al., 2021) as the starting point to pore over – along with the four traditional, Rokkanian conflicts – the rising of new globalization-related conflicts in Western Europe. Such conflicts may or not develop into a fully-fledged ‘cleavage’ depending on both their social and political structuring. Among the types of conflicts that have been created or reinforced with the advent of globalization, we consider the following four: skilled vs. unskilled workers, cosmopolitans vs. ethnonationalists, traditionalism vs. LGBTQ+ rights, economic growth vs. environmental sustainability.

### **3. Project objectives**

Based on the puzzle highlighted in the 'State of the Art' section, NEWCOMING aims to explore the political consequences of new societal conflicts, including their repercussions on democratic systems. To do so, NEWCOMING has outlined five main objectives, summarized in Figure 1. The first objective is to map emerging conflicts in Western European societies by answering the following research question (RQ): What are the most relevant economic, social, and cultural conflicts in today's globalized world?

Accordingly, the project examines the key economic characteristics of contemporary globalization that began in the late 1970s and gained momentum after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. This phase of globalization has been shaped by the free movement of capital, ongoing trade liberalization, and the rise of global value chains. These dynamics, driven both by political decisions and market forces, allow capital to flow to regions with higher potential returns, whether for investment or speculation, and foster competition that increasingly favors large multinational corporations over local small and medium enterprises. As multinationals capitalize on liberalized capital and trade flows, they often relocate production to regions with lower labor costs.

In advanced economies, particularly in Western Europe, these shifts have led to significant economic and social impacts. Industrial production has generally declined due to offshoring and intensified global competition, which often renders domestic firms unprofitable. Technological advancements have added pressure on labor costs through automation and modular production. As a result, economies are increasingly dependent on the service sector, with firms clustering in major urban hubs.

This transformation has also driven increased migration flows, directed primarily to advanced economies, reshaping the economic landscape. Furthermore, economic globalization has coincided with the emergence of post-materialist values, which are reflected in calls for expanded civil rights for women and LGBTQ+ people, as well as an increasing emphasis on environmental issues. All these trends define current advanced polities: as more people see their basic needs met, there is a growing emphasis on self-realization and freedom of expression.

Concurrently, we observe an emerging conflict between low- and high-skilled workers (Polk and Rosén, 2024). Globalization, with its adverse effects on industries that produce low value-added goods, has had a negative impact on low-skilled labor, while it has largely benefited high-skilled workers, particularly those with higher education and digital skills, who can navigate a global job market. At the same time, low-skilled workers face intensified competition due to the increased availability of cheaper foreign labor.

In addition, the shift from industrial to service sectors has increased the economic centrality of large urban areas, deepening divides between these hubs and peripheral/remote regions. Cities, which often stand out in terms of economic diversity and cultural tolerance, appear in tension with less culturally diverse - and often more nativist - rural areas (Crulli, 2024).

Moreover, the combination of increased civil rights and multiculturalism occasionally generates friction between those who embrace multiculturalism and others who hold traditional values. For some, immigration and post-materialist agendas represent a

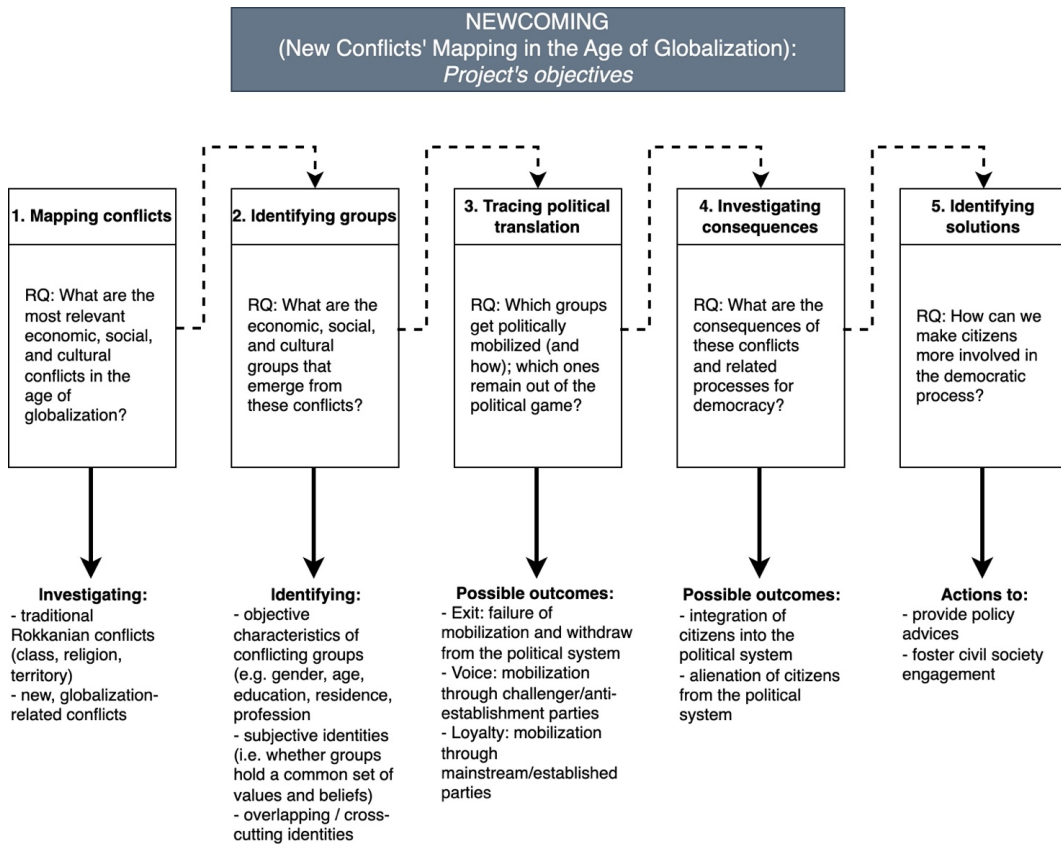
cultural threat, prompting them to defend traditional societal structures (a stance sometimes reinforced by religious views).

In tracing these conflicts, NEWCOMING will examine their variations across countries and interactions with traditional Rokkanian cleavages such as territory, religion, and class. Since these conflicts arise from distinct economic and cultural shifts, their expressions are expected to differ across European countries, potentially reinvigorating or cutting across established socio-political divides.

The second objective of NEWCOMING is to identify the economic, social and cultural groups emerging from each conflict. Unlike mainstream research on social cleavages, which emphasizes the idea of a generalized, overarching conflict that divides the whole society into two opposing groups (e.g., working class vs. bourgeoisie; losers vs. winners of globalization), we argue that today's society is far more fragmented. In the 21st century, it is unrealistic to conceptualize society as divided into two large, opposing camps, as multiple intersecting conflicts create a mosaic of smaller, diverse groups, which will be examined through the collection of original individual-level survey data. This project seeks not only to examine the socio-demographic characteristics of these groups (such as gender, age, education, residence, and profession), but primarily to investigate whether groups emerging from social conflicts share a common set of values and beliefs that provide them with a sense of collective identity. NEWCOMING aims to assess whether these group identities overlap or diverge from each other.

The third objective of NEWCOMING is to trace the patterns of political expressions of conflicts by answering the following questions: which conflicting groups get politically mobilized (and through what means) and which ones remain outside of the political game? Recognizing that only some social demands can enter the political system's 'black box' to avoid an overload crisis, we expect that not all conflicts will receive political attention. Particularly with new conflicts, it is likely that only some groups will successfully capture the political system's focus while others see their demands ignored. Taking our cue from Hirschman's schema, we identify three patterns of political translation of conflicts. The 'Conventional Voice' refers to the classical model of political mobilization through interactions between groups and political parties: this is what arguably happened with Rokkanian cleavages in the past century. The 'Unconventional Voice' is observed when groups, finding their demands unmet through traditional, established channels, turn to challenger/anti-establishment social movements or parties to voice their concerns. Lastly, the 'Exit' phenomenon arises when social demands go unaddressed, leading groups to withdraw from the electoral process, either by abstaining from elections or disengaging from the democratic system. NEWCOMING aims to study the political preferences of these conflicting groups and analyze the strength and diversity of conflict translation patterns across Western European countries.

**Figure 1.** NEWCOMING's Objectives



The fourth objective of NEWCOMING is to investigate the democratic implications of these processes. The way conflicts are politically expressed can shape democratic systems, leading to two main scenarios: integration and alienation. In the first scenario, citizens engage with the political system, participate in elections and trust institutions. In contrast, the alienation scenario involves citizens distancing themselves from the system, resulting in lower electoral participation and trust. When conflicts receive a 'Conventional Voice', mobilization by political parties can foster loyalty among citizens, engaging them in the political landscape. Conversely, if conflicts remain unaddressed ('Exit'), citizens may disengage, developing feelings of alienation. For conflicts with an 'Unconventional Voice', the outcome depends on the extent of initial mobilization. If challenger social movements or parties gain political traction, citizens are likely to re-engage into the system; if not, they may experience greater alienation.

The fifth and final objective of NEWCOMING is to identify potential solutions to enhance citizen participation in the democratic process by answering the question: How can citizens become more involved in the democratic process? This objective seeks to provide an actionable roadmap for political actors, civil society organizations, and ordinary citizens, helping them navigate the previously identified transformations and conflicts. Starting from the results achieved by fulfilling the previous objectives, a series of short- and long-term policy recommendations will be proposed to address the multiple risks faced by contemporary democracies.

These objectives will be pursued primarily through a comparative analysis of transformations and conflicts based on cross-national surveys and interviews aiming to measure voters' positions within these conflicts, political preferences, and attitudes towards democracy. Therefore, the following section describes in greater detail the project's methodology.

## 4. Methodology

The above-mentioned objectives will be carried out through two main methodological tools: original cross-national survey data and in-depth qualitative interviews. A preliminary step before conducting our surveys was to undertake a conceptual and comparative longitudinal analysis of the economic, social, and cultural transformations and conflicts in post-1989 Western Europe. This entailed a literature review and the collection of existing secondary data. We considered both aggregate data from various databases (e.g., OECD, World Bank, IMF, V-DEM, Comparative Political Data Set) and survey repositories (e.g., Eurobarometer, European Social Survey). This effort allowed us to identify emerging conflicts and formulate expectations about the opposing groups involved in such conflicts.

Objectives 1-4 ('Mapping Conflicts', 'Identifying Groups', 'Tracing Political Translation', and 'Investigating Consequences') will be primarily addressed through original cross-national, individual-level survey data. Indeed, as existing surveys either completely overlook new conflicts or lack the level of detail to effectively address our research questions, the collection of original survey data is essential for the NEWCOMING project. Specifically, the surveys were administered through CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing) in seven Western European countries: Italy, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Data collection started on March 15 and concluded on May 31, 2024. Respondents in each country were selected through quota samples, with sample sizes in each country of around 1,500. The total number of observations of the final pooled sample is 10,701. Each country's sample is representative of the voting-age population based on education, a combination of gender and age, and another combination for geographical area and municipality size. Data were collected by the Italian polling company Demetra opinioni.net in close collaboration with the LUISS unit of the project. We also relied on the expertise of country specialists for the harmonization and fine-tuning of the survey questionnaires across the different countries involved in the project.

The primary objective of the questionnaire was to identify the underlying basis of each conflict in terms of (1) socio-structural, (2) normative, and (3) organizational-behavioral dimensions (Bartolini and Mair 1990). To achieve this, we first developed a question for each conflict to capture respondents' positions on them. This approach asked participants to align themselves with one of two opposing sides in each specified conflict. For instance, Table 1 presents the question used to determine the respondent's stance on the conflict between traditionalism and LGBTQ+ rights. Additionally, three follow-up questions were crafted to assess: (1) the perceived importance of each conflict, (2) whether the conflict contributes to identity formation among the relevant social groups, and (3) the extent to which certain political parties are seen as particularly credible in representing the interests of these groups.

As for the in-depth qualitative interviews, they will concern the Italian case and will primarily focus on citizens who adopt an 'Exit' strategy, specifically those who abstained in the most recent general elections or who are considering doing so in the future. Abstentionism has become a significant phenomenon in this country, which has seen a consistent decline in turnout over the past twenty years (Chiaramonte et al. 2022; Marini and Piccolino 2022). The purpose of the interviews is to reconstruct the mechanisms underlying political disaffection. Our interview guide is focused on two main topics.

First, we aim to study whether this disaffection is directed against the functioning of politics and democracy in the country or toward liberal democracy per se. The second topic, which links this part of the project with previous ones, aims to explore the salience of conflicts within this segment of citizens. To strengthen the connection with other parts of the project, we have chosen to prioritize respondents to our survey as interviewees. Specifically, we asked those interested in a more in-depth interview to leave an email address at the end of the survey, through which they were contacted with the interview offer on these topics.

Finally, Objective 5 ('Identifying Solutions') will be addressed by using a variety of actions and measures to reach citizens and civil society organizations. This final objective aims to provide an operative roadmap for political actors, civil society organizations, and ordinary citizens to help them cope with the previously identified transformations and conflicts. Hence, a series of short- and long-term policy recommendations will be provided to address the multiple risks faced by contemporary democracies. This specific output will be developed as part of a policy report on the Italian case, which will be fully discussed and amended in collaboration with civil society organizations and research centers that already operate to support democracy and democratic practices. The repertoire of deliverables may include: a dedicated webpage on the project website, a webinar and podcast series, and public lectures for secondary schools

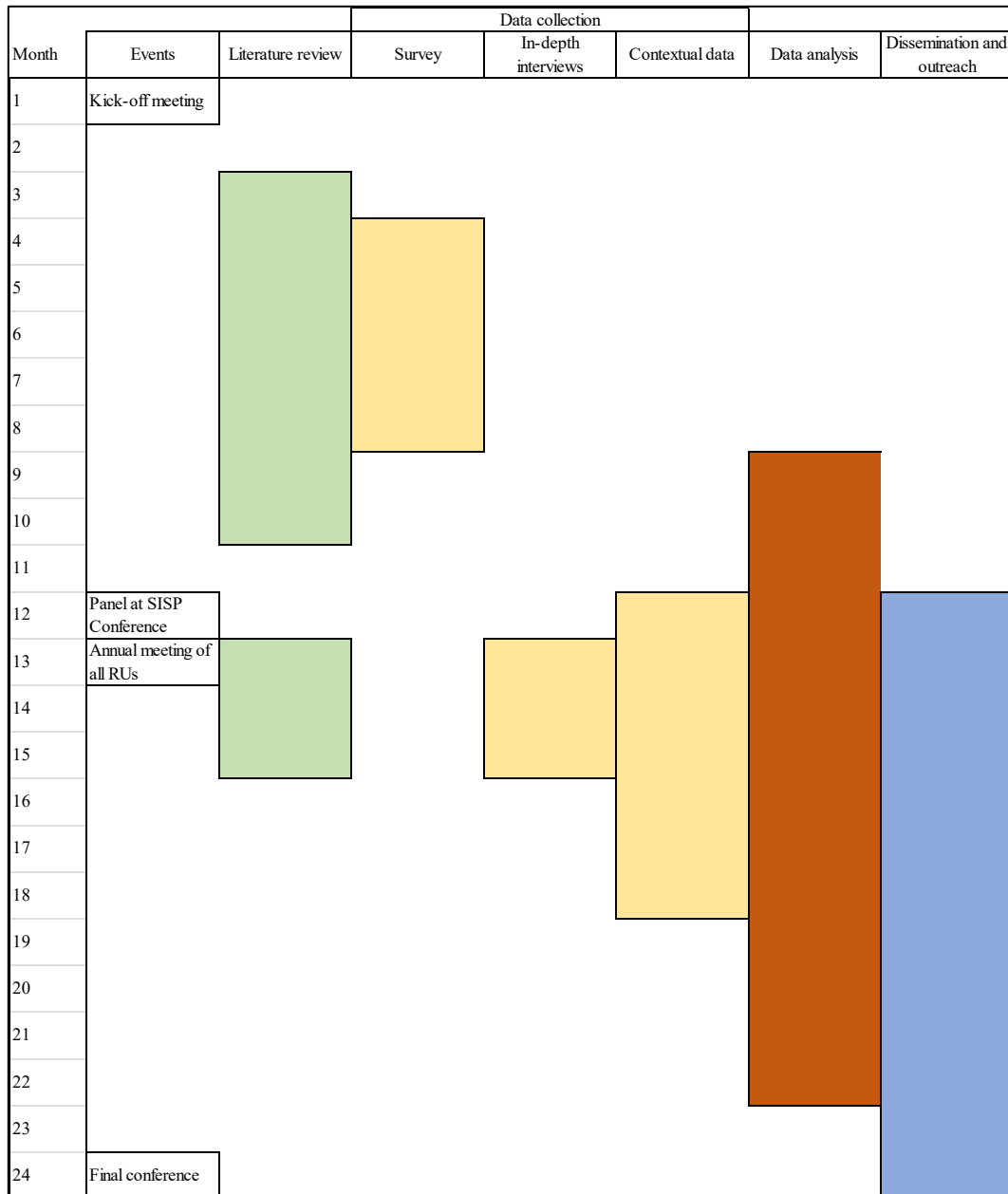
**Table 1.** Survey items used to assess respondents' positions on conflicts and evaluate their salience, identity-forming capacity, and politicization by distinct party families

Element	Question	Scale
<i>Position (e.g. on the conflict between traditionalism and LGBTQ+ rights)</i>	Many believe that in [country] there is a conflict between those who support traditional family values and those who support the rights of the LGBTQ+ community (e.g. homosexuals, bisexuals, transsexuals). Considering this conflict, how would you place your views on this scale, where 1 means you are completely in favor of traditional family values and 6 means you are completely in favor of the rights of the LGBTQ+ community?	1 = Traditional family values  6 = Rights of the LGBTQ+ community
<i>Salience</i>	How important is this conflict for you?	0 = Not at all important 10 = Very important
<i>Identification</i>	Thinking about [chosen group*], how close do you feel to this group? By 'how close' we mean how much you feel you have in common in terms of identity, values, and interests.	0 = I don't identify with this group at all 10 = I identify with this group a lot
<i>Politicization</i>	Thinking about [chosen group*], in your opinion, which political party is more credible to represent their interests? You can select up to 3 parties.	List of parties that were polling at least 1% by the time the survey was conducted + 'No party is credible' option

## 5. Expected results and dissemination

NEWCOMING's ultimate goal is to advance academic knowledge in the field of comparative politics by updating Lipset and Rokkan's conceptual framework to reflect contemporary conflicts and the resulting economic and cultural socio-political groups in contemporary Western Europe.

**Figure 2.** NEWCOMING's Objectives



We aim to accomplish this through a fine-grained examination of the multiple conflicts that have recently emerged, their patterns of political translation, and their related impact on democracy. The timeline of the project and its milestones are summarized in

Figure 2. The project unfolds over a two-year lifespan as required by the PRIN scheme but the team's research effort may yield results well beyond the duration of the project.

We expect NEWCOMING's findings to have a non-negligible social impact. Firstly, the results of this research will help policymakers reinvigorate the political participation of alienated groups and improve their ability to manage the consequences of globalization. Secondly, NEWCOMING's recommendations will provide a foundation for discussion with civil society, and especially the younger generations, aiming to make them critically reflect on complex political phenomena and empower their agency and motivation to actively participate in the democratic process. Finally, in terms of dissemination, NEWCOMING will produce an in-depth analysis focused on the Italian case, outlining policy strategies to engage citizens and limit their alienation.

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