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## **The Conspiracy Theory of the Great Replacement and the Italian Far-right**

**The endorsement of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory in the Italian far-right political sphere: a critical discourse analysis of the social media of Fratelli d'Italia**

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the narrative surrounding immigration in Italian politics, particularly focusing on the approach of Fratelli d'Italia (FdI), the main parliamentary far-right party, towards the Great Replacement conspiracy theory. Employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study examines social media posts by key FdI figures to identify implicit or explicit references to the conspiracy theory. The analysis covers the historical and ideological evolution of the Italian far-right landscape, contextualising FdI's rise as a far-right party. Despite a shift towards a more institutional approach following electoral success, implicit references to the Great Replacement theory persist within FdI's narrative. This research reveals how FdI members conceal conspiratorial, racist, and anti-immigration stances under the guise of respect for international standards and civic values. While explicit endorsements of the theory have become rare, the discourse surrounding immigration often revolves around notions closely linked to the Great Replacement, posing a risk of overlooking FdI's radical stances on the issue.

This essay aims at deepening a topical issue of Italian and European political discourses, namely narratives concerning immigration. It delves into the relationship between Fratelli d'Italia (FdI), the main Italian parliamentary far-right party, and the Great Replacement conspiracy theory. This study utilises Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a research method in order to examine social media posts by key FdI exponents, including current Prime Minister (PM) Giorgia Meloni, and identify possible references to the conspiracy theory.

After briefly outlining the methodological approach adopted for this analysis, the second part of the essay reviews the historical and ideological development of the Italian far-right landscape and explores the evolution of anti-immigration discourse in Italy. The literature review also serves to contextualise the rise of FdI as a far-right party. Subsequently, the analysis explores the shift in FdI party members' discourse on immigration following its electoral success in September 2022. In most cases, a highly institutional approach, detached from conspiratorial views, has been adopted. Nonetheless, even as explicit endorsements have become very rare, the analysis highlights a persistence of implicit references to the Great Replacement theory within FdI's narrative.

### **Methodological Notes**

This research aims at investigating the presence of themes associated with the Great Replacement conspiracy theory in the Italian far-right environment. The analysis is carried out through CDA, employed for a qualitative examination of the posts published on social media by Italian far-right politicians. CDA studies “the way social-power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context,” and examines “how specific discourse structures are deployed in the reproduction of social

dominance.”<sup>1</sup> In this case, CDA centres on how anti-immigration, xenophobic, and racist discourses are voiced through implicit or explicit references to the Great Replacement theory on social media.

This research focuses on FdI party members, as this is the main Italian parliamentary party considered to be in the far-right political sphere. The analysis is carried out via two social media platforms, X (formerly known as Twitter) and Facebook. The profiles reviewed include the following, although not all of them will be analysed in the paper: PM Giorgia Meloni; Minister for Relations with Parliament, Luca Ciriani; Minister for Civil Protection and Maritime Policies, Nello Musumeci; Minister for European Affairs, Raffaele Fitto; Minister of Defence (MoD) Guido Crosetto; Minister for Business and Made in Italy, Adolfo Urso; Minister of Agriculture, Francesco Lollobrigida; Minister of Tourism, Daniela Garnero Santanché.

The official social media accounts of FdI were not included, as the aim was to study the heterogeneous beliefs and attitudes of single politicians, and FdI accounts would probably conceal the ‘latent ideology’ of individual party representatives.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the research was carried out relatively to the timeframe starting from September 25th, 2022, which corresponds to the date of the last parliamentary election in Italy, until December 2023.

### **Terms and definitions**

Despite the wide range of terminologies used to describe radical/neo-fascist/far-right parties, this essay will adopt the term ‘far-right,’ as other options are perceived to yield a definition that is too broad or imprecise. For example, the ‘radical right’ can also include violent movements.<sup>3</sup> The term ‘neo-fascist’ is still deeply debated and considered to be unfit when

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<sup>1</sup> Teun A. Van Dijk, “Critical Discourse Analysis,” in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, ed. Deborah Tannen, Heidi E. Hamilton, and Deborah Schiffrin, vol. 2 (John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 468.

<sup>2</sup> Marianna Griffini, “Civic Discourse: Representing Immigrants in the Italian Far Right,” in *Approaches to Migration, Language and Identity*, ed. Anita Auer and Jennifer Thorburn (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2021), 135.

<sup>3</sup> Piero Ignazi, *Extreme Right Parties in Western Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 28.

referring to parties that do not embrace all fascist features, such as violence and typical symbolism.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the sole term ‘populist’ is inaccurate as it is historically linked to a diversified range of political environments.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the adopted formulation stems from Griffini’s illustration of far-right as “encompassing extreme right parties completely hostile to democracy and exhibiting some vestiges of fascist nostalgia as well as populist radical right parties criticising democracy but operating within a democratic system, better capturing the complex ideology of the Lega and the FdI.”<sup>6</sup>

As previously highlighted, this essay focuses on references made by FdI representatives to concepts associated with the Great Replacement conspiracy. The latter can be defined as “the idea that ethnically homogeneous populations in European nations are being ‘replaced’ by people of non-European origin.”<sup>7</sup>

This theory gained relevance with the publication of the book *Le Grand Remplacement* by the French theorist Renaud Camus,<sup>8</sup> who belonged to the far-right ‘identitarian’ movement.<sup>9</sup> While the book focuses on France, it tackles the consequences of mass immigration supposedly degrading European society and replacing French and European native people, due to immigrants’ higher birth rates. The author even stresses that contemporary migrants, particularly Muslims, are carrying out a ‘counter-colonisation’ in France, thus creating a parallel between

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<sup>4</sup> Olivier Doubre, “Mutations of Fascism: An Interview with Enzo Traverso,” web log, *Verso Books* (blog), February 28, 2017, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/3112-mutations-of-fascism-an-interview-with-enzo-traverso>.

<sup>5</sup> Manuela Caiani and Donatella della Porta, “The Elitist Populism of the Extreme Right: A Frame Analysis of Extreme Right-Wing Discourses in Italy and Germany,” *Acta Politica* 46, no. 2 (March 28, 2011): 181, <https://doi.org/10.1057/ap.2010.28>.

<sup>6</sup> Griffini, “Civic Discourse: Representing Immigrants in the Italian Far Right,” 138.

<sup>7</sup> Mattias Ekman, “The Great Replacement: Strategic Mainstreaming of Far-Right Conspiracy Claims,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 28, no. 4 (May 6, 2022): 1127, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221091983>.

<sup>8</sup> Renaud Camus, *Le Grand Remplacement* (Editions David Reinhard, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Eirikur Bergmann, “The Eurabia Conspiracy Theory,” in *Europe: Continent of Conspiracies* ed. Andreas Önnarfors and André Krouwel (Abingdon/Oxon: Routledge, 2021), 37.

Western colonialism and contemporary immigration flows. Since then, this theory has widely spread across Europe in both intellectual and political spheres.

The following section aims to give a brief overview of the main scholarly approaches to the classification of Italian far-right parties, and their historical and ideological development. In particular, this section will be dedicated to contextualising the Italian discourse on immigration in relation to the political use of the Great Replacement conspiracy.

### **Literature Review**

#### *The Italian far-right until the 2020s*

As emphasised by Mudde in his conceptualisation and categorisation of far-right parties, the Italian political landscape has featured the presence of such parties since the post-World War II period.<sup>10</sup> However, in contrast to the current political context, the second half of the 20th century witnessed the emergence of what Mudde refers to as “nonpopulist radical right” parties.<sup>11</sup> The main one was the fascism-inspired Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) which, despite having deeply influenced contemporary populist extreme right parties, mainly featured old-fashioned, antidemocratic, and elitist traits.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, while Alleanza Nazionale (AN), the ‘heir’ to the MSI founded in the 1990s, is considered to be conservative, it did not adopt nativist nor populist approaches.<sup>13</sup> During this period, the only party classified as ‘populist radical right’ was the Movimento Sociale Fiamma Tricolore (MS-FT), which explicitly embraced fascist heritage along with nativist discourses.

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<sup>10</sup> Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 55-56.

<sup>11</sup> See note above, 46.

<sup>12</sup> Leonardo Puleo and Gianluca Piccolino, “Back to the Post-Fascist Past or Landing in the Populist Radical Right? The Brothers of Italy between Continuity and Change,” *South European Society and Politics* 27, no. 4 (September 26, 2022): 362, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2022.2126247>.

<sup>13</sup> Ignazi, *Extreme Right Parties in Western Europe*, 50; Marco Tarchi, “The Political Culture of the Alleanza Nazionale: An Analysis of the Party’s Programmatic Documents (1995–2002),” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 8, no. 2 (2003): 177-78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571032000078248>.

Nonetheless, the MS-FT did not succeed significantly compared to the MSI and AN. Mudde classifies the latter as “borderline cases,” representing “political parties that defy unequivocal classification in terms of the populist radical right.”<sup>14</sup>

To address more recent developments in Italian party politics, Zulianello adopted the ‘ideational’ approach to classify European populist parties. He identified FdI and Lega as ‘populist radical right’ parties.<sup>15</sup> Drawing on prior literature,<sup>16</sup> the author examines those parties that insist on the stark contrast between the ‘pure people’ and the ‘corrupt elite,’ and identifies those that do not “occasionally adopt populist rhetoric” but “for which populism represents a core ideological concept.”<sup>17</sup> Zulianello also highlights how populist parties in Italy and Europe are not at the margins of the political landscape anymore, yet continue to embrace this narrative by emphasising their anti-establishment nature.

Over the past two to five years, various scholars employing different methods have identified FdI as one of the primary far-right parties on the rise, not only in Italy but also at the European level.<sup>18</sup> In September 2022, FdI won the national parliamentary elections, resulting in the formation of a government led for the first time by a woman, current PM Giorgia Meloni, and composed of two populist radical right parties controlling almost 80% of the votes in support of the governing coalition.<sup>19</sup> For the purpose of this research, this essay will exclusively focus on

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<sup>14</sup> Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, 53.

<sup>15</sup> Mattia Zulianello, “Varieties of Populist Parties and Party Systems in Europe: From State-of-The-Art to the Application of a Novel Classification Scheme to 66 Parties in 33 Countries,” *Government and Opposition* 55, no. 2 (July 24, 2019): 328–29, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2019.21>.

<sup>16</sup> Kirk Andrew Hawkins et al., *The Ideational Approach to Populism: Concept, Theory, and Analysis* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, Ny: Routledge, 2019).; Cas Mudde, “Populism: An Ideational Approach,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 27–47.

<sup>17</sup> Zulianello, “Varieties of Populist Parties,” 328.

<sup>18</sup> Alessia Donà, “The Rise of the Radical Right in Italy: The Case of Fratelli D’Italia,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 27, no. 5 (August 31, 2022): 775, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571x.2022.2113216>; Puleo and Piccolino, “Back to the Post-Fascist Past.”

<sup>19</sup> Diego Garzia, “The Italian Parliamentary Election of 2022: The Populist Radical Right Takes Charge,” *West European Politics* 46, no. 5 (November 24, 2022): 1046, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2022.2148603>.



the main governing party, FdI. It will not delve into Lega, despite acknowledging it as another parliamentary far-right party.

*Political discourse on immigration and the Great Replacement Theory in Italy*

The references –both implicit and explicit– made by Italian politicians to the Great Replacement conspiracy theory can be considered a logical development of the attitude towards immigration embraced by Italian right-wing parties since the 1990s. This approach has seen a “discursive construction of the immigrant, who is problematised, differentiated, criminalised, and inferiorised.”<sup>20</sup>

Until the early 1990s, Italian far-right parties did not exhibit xenophobic attitudes. However, in the last few decades, the adoption of nationalistic and nativist discourse has led to a securitising approach to immigration. This was at first embraced by PM Silvio Berlusconi (Forza Italia, FI), elected in 1994, and other far-right-wing parties such as Lega. The narrative of the immigrant as a threat has increasingly been adopted to instil fear towards this group, who are depicted as ‘the other.’ This has led to the perception of a native Italian ‘in-group,’ juxtaposed against an immigrant ‘out-group.’<sup>21</sup>

Literature has also highlighted how Italian far-right politicians have rejected and stigmatised immigration on the basis of alleged humanitarian issues, claiming that the country lacks the ability to host the number of migrants arriving in Italy.<sup>22</sup> Building on this argument, they further denigrate ‘illegal migrants,’ who are pinpointed as the source of all ills regarding immigration. Finally, far-right parties heavily criminalise immigrants, linking them to high crime

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<sup>20</sup> Griffini, “Civic Discourse,” 133.

<sup>21</sup> Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (London: SAGE Publications, 2015), 90.

<sup>22</sup> Griffini, “Civic Discourse”, 148.

rates and to the “crime of invasion.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, they have been pointing to a general degradation that is occurring within Italian society as the result of increasing multiculturalism.

Since the turn of the century, Western politics have been constructing Muslim people as the enemy, a xenophobic and racist narrative that Italian politicians have leveraged in the process of securitisation of immigration.<sup>24</sup> Far-right parties in Italy and across Europe have capitalised on the notion of the “Muslim takeover of Europe,”<sup>25</sup> rooted in the ungrounded supposition that the Muslim population is expanding at a faster rate than the European one.<sup>26</sup> In recent years, the Great Replacement conspiracy has propagated throughout Europe, especially in environments close to the far-right, such as in Viktor Orbán’s Hungary and Robert Fico’s Slovakia.<sup>27</sup> In Italy, this theory has successfully entered the political narrative, perpetuating the securitisation and negative politicisation of immigration.

### Analysis

This section will first delve into the analysis of PM Meloni’s approach to the theory of the Great Replacement on her social media accounts, and subsequently shift the focus to other FdI party members, particularly those appointed as ministers in the current government.

Giorgia Meloni has been described as the first European PM to have explicitly endorsed and promoted the Great Replacement conspiracy theory.<sup>28</sup> In fact, before the 2022 elections, she

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<sup>23</sup> Griffini, “Civic Discourse,” 151.

<sup>24</sup> Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, and Jaap De Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 1998), 4.

<sup>25</sup> Griffini, “Civic Discourse,” 154.

<sup>26</sup> Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, *National Populism: The Revolt against Liberal Democracy* (Penguin UK, 2018), 5.

<sup>27</sup> Tore Bjørgo and Jacob Aasland Ravndal, policy brief, *Extreme-Right Violence and Terrorism: Concepts, Patterns, and Responses* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - ICCT, September 23, 2019) <https://www.icct.nl/publication/extreme-right-violence-and-terrorism-concepts-patterns-and-responses>.

<sup>28</sup> Simone Alliva, “Lollobrigida Invoca Il Pericolo Della Sostituzione Etnica. Uno Slogan Ricorrente Del Governo Meloni,” *L’Espresso*, April 18, 2023, <https://lespresso.it/c/politica/2023/4/18/lollobrigida-invoca-il-pericolo-della-sostituzione-etnica-uno-slogan-ricorrente-del-governo-meloni/4103>.

expressed her belief in a “planned ethnic replacement”<sup>29</sup> on multiple occasions, primarily at public events. Additionally, she articulated these views via her social media accounts, including X. In early 2017, she accused the EU of being the “accomplice to uncontrolled immigration and to the project of ethnic replacement.”<sup>30</sup> On the same platform in 2018, she accused George Soros, a figure who is often associated with conspiracy theories, of financing worldwide “mass immigration and the plan of ethnic replacement.”<sup>31</sup>

The analysis of Meloni’s main social media accounts, conducted since the September 2022 elections, reveals a significant shift in her approach. In fact, following her electoral victory, she has refrained from making any reference to the Great Replacement theory. The language and narrative employed on her social media instead reflect the adoption of a strictly institutional attitude. While maintaining a right-wing approach to migration management, she has detached herself from the heavily accusatory language she used to employ.

Since 2022, she adopted an attitude, as described by Griffini,<sup>32</sup> which sees far-right exponents using xenophobic and anti-immigration rhetoric hidden in discourses supporting the respect of civic values, such as security, human rights, and solidarity, and, in this case, international standards. Meloni often mentions the need to abide by international law, which does not accept ‘illegal migrants’: “we need to stop illegal mass immigration, focus on the protection of borders, not on the distribution of migrants [among EU member states].”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Giorgia Meloni @GiorgiaMeloni, “#ItalianiAllEstero: In Italia prove generali sostituzione etnica, perché non espatriano incompetenti che ci governano?” X, 6 October 2016, 4:57pm, <https://x.com/GiorgiaMeloni/status/784044952124743682>.

<sup>30</sup> Giorgia Meloni @GiorgiaMeloni, “La #Ue è complice dell’#immigrazione incontrollata e del progetto di sostituzione etnica voluti dal grande capitale #mogherinidimettiti,” X, 3 February 2017, 3:59pm, <https://x.com/GiorgiaMeloni/status/827531927653646337?s=20>.

<sup>31</sup> Giorgia Meloni (@GiorgiaMeloni), “Ma guarda un po’! Chi ha scritto un pezzo del programma sugli immigrati del M5S? Gli emissari di Soros, il finanziere che sostiene e finanzia in tutto il mondo,” X, 9 January 2018, 5:15pm, <https://x.com/GiorgiaMeloni/status/950762919683350528?s=20>.

<sup>32</sup> Griffini, “Civic Discourse,” 155.

<sup>33</sup> Giorgia Meloni @GiorgiaMeloni, “La mia intervista di questa sera a “Cinque Minuti”, su Rai 1,” X, 13 September 2023, 9:05pm, <https://x.com/GiorgiaMeloni/status/1702035704690127151?s=20>.

Furthermore, these efforts are often tied to misleading information. A strategy commonly used by the Italian PM is citing unfounded data related to the alleged number of migrants reaching Italy and the EU. For instance, she claims, “instability in the Sahel could lead *tens of millions* of people to leave their country to [reach] Europe, which cannot host them.”<sup>34</sup> While recent regime changes and shifts in geopolitical balances are likely to affect migration flows towards Europe, instabilities in the Sahel are primarily leading to an increase in Internally Displaced People (IDPs) and refugees within the region.<sup>35</sup>

Between January and September 2023, EU Member States received 130,270 asylum applications from 50 sub-Saharan African countries, constituting 16.2% of all applications received. This marked a 27.5% increase compared to 2022, which is widely attributed to secondary movements due to worsening conditions in North African countries.<sup>36</sup> Thus, notwithstanding the centrality of addressing recent increases in migration flows, the manner in which Meloni has shared these figures is inaccurate and misleading.

Although she maintains a securitising approach on her social media accounts, she avoids delving into conspiratorial ideas. For instance, she states that Italy “cannot merely ignore the problem, [as] today the migratory issue is a security matter, not only for how unregulated immigration has impacted our society.”<sup>37</sup> She proposes as a solution to “stop the flows before they reach European soil, with the aim of defending the security of our nations and national

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<sup>34</sup> Giorgia Meloni @GiorgiaMeloni, “La mia intervista di questa sera a “Cinque Minuti”, su Rai 1,” X, 13 September 2023, 9:05pm, <https://x.com/GiorgiaMeloni/status/1702035704690127151?s=20>.

<sup>35</sup> UNHCR, “Sahel Situation,” UNHCR, 2024, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/sahel-situation.>; Julien Brachet, “The Sahel, Europe’s ‘Frontier Zone’ for African Migrants,” *ISPI*, February 15, 2021, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/sahel-europes-frontier-zone-african-migrants-29307>.

<sup>36</sup> International Centre for Migration Policy Development, *Migration Outlook. Ten Migration Issues to Look out for in 2024* (Vienna: International Centre for Migration Policy Development, January 21, 2024) <https://www.icmpd.org/about-us/icmpd-migration-outlook>.

<sup>37</sup> Giorgia Meloni @GiorgiaMeloni, “Vi ripropongo la mia intervista andata in onda poco fa a Dritto e Rovescio. Buona serata,” X, 2 February 2023, 10:36pm, <https://x.com/GiorgiaMeloni/status/1621261398633226240?s=20>.

interests.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, while Meloni’s posts on social media still define immigration as a security issue, since September 2022, she has not made any reference to the conspiracy theory of the Great Replacement.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting a post from November 2023 depicting Meloni meeting with Santiago Abascal, the president of the Spanish party VOX.<sup>39</sup> The latter shares similar positions with FDI on migration, and does not shy away from explicitly endorsing the Great Replacement conspiracy.<sup>40</sup>

Meanwhile, an analysis of the social media activity of the ministers in the Meloni government has shown varied results. Since September 2022, most of the analysed accounts have adopted a strictly institutional approach, primarily addressing issues relevant to their positions. For instance, this can be observed in the activity of the Minister for Civil Protection and Maritime Policies, Nello Musumeci, and the Minister for Business and Made in Italy, Adolfo Urso. Nevertheless, like PM Meloni, in some cases previous endorsements of the Great Replacement theory are visible.

This trend is particularly noticeable in the social media engagement of MoD Guido Crosetto. Currently, his posts on X and Facebook focus exclusively on diplomatic activities and matters related to Italian, European, and transatlantic defence. Since the 2022 elections, there has been no mention of topics related to immigration or migration management. Still, before the studied timeframe, Crosetto shared insights on immigration, displaying very radical stances on

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<sup>38</sup> Giorgia Meloni @GiorgiaMeloni, “Varsavia, il mio intervento alla conferenza organizzata da ECR - Conservatori e Riformisti Europei,” X, 5 July 2023, 3:57pm, <https://twitter.com/GiorgiaMeloni/status/1676591109642829827?s=20>.

<sup>39</sup> Giorgia Meloni @GiorgiaMeloni, “Due popoli fratelli per un’Europa unita di nazioni libere e sovrane. Grazie @Santi\_ABASCAL per la tua gradita visita. Adelante juntos!” X, 17 November 2023, 11:20pm, <https://twitter.com/GiorgiaMeloni/status/1725639988220485961?s=20>.

<sup>40</sup> Alberto Monroy Trujillo, “Between Inclusion and Exclusion: The Representations of Illegal Immigrants and Refugees on Spanish Party VOX’s Instagram during the First Year of the War in Ukraine,” *Ethnopolitics* (2023): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2023.2285108>.

the matter and implicit references to the Great Replacement. In 2016, on his X account, he asked “is there really anyone who thinks that the falling birth rate is positive, because it can create space for mass immigration?”<sup>41</sup> This text clearly points to the alleged risks highlighted by the Great Replacement conspiracy theory. The institutional shift of the majority of FdI ministries has facilitated a detachment from such controversial stances, which now appear to be hidden in the past.

Nevertheless, not all FdI ministries have embraced this attitude since September 2022. For instance, the Minister for Relations with Parliament, Luca Ciriani, has continued to employ the same narrative and language concerning migration as he did prior to the elections. He primarily espouses a nationalistic discourse, with a highly securitising approach, emphasising the need to manage--and halt--migration with the sole purpose of guaranteeing the safety of the Italian people.

Some implicit references to the Great Replacement theory were observed in his posts, often used in conjunction with a narrative aimed at instilling fear of ‘the other’ in the population. One example was a post shared in October 2023, in which Ciriani stated, “It is necessary to defend the borders of the European Union. They want to continue the assault against our freedom, our way of life. They want us to be afraid and ready to give up our daily lives, and our response in Europe must be strong and unequivocal. They won’t succeed.”<sup>42</sup> While this is not an explicit endorsement of the theory, a key feature of the latter is the fear that immigrants, intended

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<sup>41</sup> Guido Crosetto @GuidoCrosetto, “C’è veramente qualcuno che pensa che la denatalità sia un bene perché così si possono creare spazi per l’immigrazione di massa?” X, 11 June 2016, 7:17 pm, <https://x.com/GuidoCrosetto/status/741680682578153472?s=20>.

<sup>42</sup> Luca Ciriani (Luca Ciriani), “Necessario difendere i confini dell’Unione Europea. Vogliono tornare a colpire la nostra libertà, il nostro stile di vita,” Facebook, 25 October 2023, 4:54pm, <https://www.facebook.com/L.Ciriani/posts/pfbid0EnbYhCVRLSuGsNORQXeEcX2U9i7iVWCfM6THWjfzRSfsLEesNOyeJzWO8pfGiUg3l>.

as ‘the others,’ are attacking not only the nation’s ‘pure ethnic’ composition but also its socio-cultural standards, which is clearly expressed in the mentioned post.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the case of the Minister of Agriculture, Francesco Lollobrigida. During a congress in April 2023, the latter stated that “we cannot give in to the idea of ethnic substitution: well, Italians have fewer children, let’s replace them with someone else. That’s not the way forward.”<sup>43</sup> This intervention gained huge media attention, as an FdI exponent made such an explicit mention in support of a conspiracy theory since the elections.<sup>44</sup> Following this statement, Lollobrigida posted a video on Facebook in which he does not distance himself from his support of the conspiracy theory, instead blaming “the left” for accusing him of racism. He further attempts to explain that the falling birth rate poses a threat to the disappearance of the Italian “ethnicity.”<sup>45</sup>

### Conclusion

This research provided evidence of the presence of mostly implicit references to the Great Replacement theory on FdI members’ social media accounts since the 2022 elections. It also confirms the implementation of the political strategy by members of this party as proposed by Griffini, which involves using xenophobic rhetoric while claiming to advocate for civic values and international standards.<sup>46</sup>

In fact, in regard to immigration, FdI ministers have concealed their conspiracist, racist, and anti-immigration stances under the guise of respect for the mentioned values. Since the

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<sup>43</sup> Carlo Canepa, “Tutte Le Volte Che Meloni E Salvini Hanno Parlato Di ‘Sostituzione Etnica,’” *Pagella Politica*, April 19, 2023, <https://pagellapolitica.it/articoli/meloni-salvini-sostituzione-etnica>.

<sup>44</sup> Google Trends, “Interest over Time on Google Trends for the Great Replacement - Italy, 9/25/22 - 1/12/24 - ,” September 25, 2022, <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore/TIMESERIES/1705076400?hl=en-US&tz=-60&date=2022-09-25+2024-01-12&geo=IT&hl=en&q=%2Fg%2F11bbsws11q&sni=3>.

<sup>45</sup> Francesco Lollobrigida (Francesco Lollobrigida), “Una sinistra priva d’argomenti solleva il solito polverone, ma l’immigrazione non è la soluzione al calo demografico,” Facebook, 18 April 2023, 6:03pm, <https://www.facebook.com/share/v/p4Xtgb2Esox7Y5VW/>.

<sup>46</sup> Griffini, “Civic Discourse.”

elections held on September 25, 2022, there have been very few cases of explicit endorsement of the Great Replacement. Nonetheless, the discourse surrounding migration often revolves around notions closely linked to this theory, such as the perception of being ‘attacked’ by migratory inflows. Even though implicit, references to this conspiracy by FdI ministers cannot be disregarded when examining FdI’s political discourse on immigration, as this risks whitewashing FdI’s radical stances on this issue.



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