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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

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**If you cannot rule them, misinform them! Communication strategies of Italian radical right-wing populist parties during the pandemic**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The present research investigates the extent of misinformation and conspiracy theories in radical right-wing populist parties (RRPPs) in light of the pandemic. As the Covid-19 emergency progressively gave way to an 'infodemic' within the EU's domestic political systems, RRPPs made regular use of misinformation as a political tool to build consensus and to polarise the public debate. This strategy is further maximised within the realm of social media, which disintermediates communication and allows political actors to directly reach their preferred audience with personalised content. Relying on an original dataset based on fact-checked statements from politicians, our study conducts a descriptive mapping of the discursive tactics employed by the League and Brothers of Italy within the Italian political scenario throughout 2020.*

**KEYWORDS:** Fake News; Media; Misinformation; Conspiracy Theories; Populism.

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## 1. Introduction

On 6 January 2021, as the joint session of the U.S. Congress was certifying the votes from the Electoral College, thousands of Donald Trump supporters gathered in Washington D.C. to protest an election they viewed as tainted by electoral fraud. Despite non-existing evidence to support those claims, the former President called on the thousands who attended the rally to “fight like Hell” in order to prevent an allegedly illegitimate result from being enforced.<sup>1</sup> Prompted in many ways by his speech, a mob of extremists eventually managed to break into the Capitol building. The unprecedented nature of this event clearly shows the true extent of the threat posed to contemporary democracies by the political exploitation of post-truth, alternative facts, and conspiracy theories (Brennen 2017).

In this sense, recent studies highlight how mis-, disinformation, and conspiracies have become ever-increasingly associated with a wide array of right-wing actors. Specifically, so-called ‘fake news’ has been incorporated in populist communication strategies (Waisbord 2018) to rail against the ‘corrupt elites’ who supposedly seek to undermine the ‘pure people’ (Jagers & Walgrave 2007). These arguments are especially relevant when it comes to the ‘infodemic’ (World Health Organization 2020) generated by the outbreak of Covid-19, with an “overabundance of information – some accurate and some not” plaguing the public debate around the pandemic. In this regard, populist actors have recurrently acted as misinformation transmitters, confusing and misleading the public by downplaying the seriousness of Covid-19 (Hatcher 2020).

At present, the amount of knowledge on the relationship between populism and misinformation is still under heavy academic scrutiny. Given these parameters, our study does inquire about the extent of the use of fake news and conspiracy theories by radical right-wing populists within the Italian political scenario. Relying on eight fact-checking organisations, we investigate the misinformative statements of the main Italian RRPPs, namely the League and Brothers of Italy (FdI), throughout 2020.

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<sup>1</sup> For the full transcript of the speech, URL: <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/10/966396848/read-trumps-jan-6-speech-a-key-part-of-impeachment-trial?t=1621430152187>.

These come mostly in the form of social media posts from the official accounts of the parties, their leaders (Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni), and other political representatives, as well as public declarations from newspapers, TV, and radio interviews. Our goal is to provide an exploratory analysis of the topical elements that characterised radical right-wing populist communication tactics in light of the health emergency.

## **2. Misinformation and conspiracy theories: the state of the art**

The proliferation of hoaxes can hardly be considered a new phenomenon. However, while the conscious spread of misinformation was initially restricted to parody and political satire, it is now routinely used to mislead rather than to entertain the audience (for more, see Tandoc et al. 2018). In particular, researchers tend to distinguish between misinformation, which is propagated without damaging intent, and disinformation, which instead is characterised by the deliberate intent to harm. To avoid speculation about the intention behind any given inaccurate statement, our investigation shall generally speak of misinformation. In the same vein, misinformation and fake news will be used interchangeably, albeit acknowledging that the latter concept is somewhat controversial and often weaponised by misinformation transmitters to accuse their opponents of bias (McNair 2017).

Regardless of these theoretical peculiarities, it is now commonly assumed among scholars that the advent of information and communication technologies enormously changed the potential outreach of hoaxes. Social media and digital outlets allowed this fringe phenomenon to enter the mainstream, providing a channel for those willing to exploit misinformation for economic, political, and personal reasons (Brummette et al. 2018). This liberalisation process ultimately made (online) media more susceptible to conveying inaccuracies, also because the growing competition for audience attention demands that actors constantly ride the wave of virality and sensationalism (Mullainathan & Shleifer 2005).

In this context, actors can directly produce content for their audience without being bound by editorial guidelines or deontological principles of good

journalism, often resulting in a lack of objectivity and fact-checking. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) highlighted how false and misleading news tend to drive more attention than actual information produced by mainstream media. In the past decade, scholars have also registered a negative attitudinal shift towards mainstream media (Esser et al. 2016; Mihailidis & Viotty 2017), as large sections of the citizenry discard genuine news in favour of products that are closer to their socio-political worldview (Pennycook & Rand 2019). Conspiracy theories lean on similar communication strategies (Uscinski & Parent 2014), psychological characteristics (Douglas et al. 2017), and partisan identities (Miller et al. 2016), although misinformation and conspiracies are to be understood as separate entities (for more, see Keeley 1999). As individuals tend to fill the gaps in their knowledge with information that confirms their beliefs, this process of drawing social inferences from one's surroundings potentially offers a breeding ground for false information (Nyhan & Reifler 2010).

In this regard, political misinformation is particularly sensitive due to its impact on short-term collective decision-making and long-term disruption of institutional stability (Bennett & Livingston 2018). From the initial breakthrough during the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, these tactics have expanded their length to the entirety of Europe (for more, see Bergmann 2020). However, the relative novelty of the phenomenon also implies that academic interest in the connection between misinformation and politics is still somewhat tentative. As discussed in the next section, most of the existing literature focused on the strategic employment of misinformation by populist parties within the public arena.

### **3. Misinformation and populist communication strategies**

In their publication on online news consumption, Pierri et al. (2020) show that belief-reinforcing tendencies favour the creation of closed communities. In particular, the formation of 'filter bubbles' (Pariser 2011) around audience-driving issues ultimately decreases one's tolerance of alternative attitudes and increases the likelihood to accept ideologically oriented news (Mihailidis & Viotty 2017), thus fostering polarisation and extremism (Gerbaudo 2018). Given these parameters, it is of little

surprise that online platforms ended up boosting populist appeals (Blassnig et al. 2019).

According to the ideational approach (Mudde 2004), the populist *Weltanschauung* is centred around the conception of the sovereign people as inherently virtuous. Within this framework, the people's authority is constantly undermined by self-serving elite personalities and groups such as the political establishment, certain intellectuals, and specific media outlets (for more, see Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2013a; Mudde 2017). When it comes to the radical right, this framework assumes an even more exclusionary connotation by including those who are perceived as 'aliens' (Stanley 2008; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2013b). This specific vision of politics and society finds fertile ground within the online public debate (Krämer 2018), where populists bolster conflictual narratives that rely on drama and controversy. The result is a Manichean struggle that relies on "the emotionally driven recontextualization of certain, pre-existing, meanings of a people and its enemies" (Kissas 2020, p. 269), while dismissing or circumventing political correctness and empirical evidence. In other words, populism constantly needs information – and misinformation – to corroborate its people-centric and anti-elitist axioms.

Regarding Italy, it can be seen how the League extensively employed this strategy. In particular, its leader Matteo Salvini strongly relied on emotionally charged messages to reinforce his nationalist rhetoric and personally attack or undermine individuals, their ideas, and their group of affiliation (Berti 2021; Berti & Loner 2021). In terms of nationalist discourses and *ad hominem* attacks, his communication style shares certain traits with Brothers of Italy's leader, although Giorgia Meloni's populist appeal seems to be somewhat more moderate (Mazzoleni & Bracciale 2018). Regardless, both parties have often seized the opportunity to employ misinformation to polarise the electorate, delegitimise their opponents, and pursue their political agenda (Caldarelli et al. 2021).

Although the above political actors' utilization of conspiracy theories remains somewhat of an uncharted territory, the similarities that the latter seems to share with the broader populist framework hint at a potential interaction between the

two. On this topic, Castanho Silva et al. (2017) highlighted that both seem to embrace the notion that a small group of individuals controls and manipulates world events to the detriment of the public. Despite the aforementioned parallelisms between populism and some aspects of conspiratorial beliefs, the above scholars also evidenced the marginality of conspiracies in the public sphere compared to the widespread circulation of populism, thus proving that their overlap only goes so far.

Notwithstanding the type of misinformation, it is undeniable that fake news and conspiracy theories have become quite a strategic asset in the hands of populist actors for generating political polarisation, sowing dissent, and blurring the boundaries that separate opinions from facts. This type of political engagement can assume many forms, ranging from voters' mobilisation regarding specific issues up to potentially influencing the electoral process of certain countries, as was the case during the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017).

In this regard, the outbreak of Covid-19 added another volatile element to the equation, triggering a surge in false and inaccurate information due to its global geographic outreach and a thematic spillover that eventually included all aspects of societal life. In a brief review that is by no means exhaustive by the time of our writing, research on virus-related misinformation has mainly focused on the infodemic's frames (Posetti & Bontcheva 2020). While certain studies tackled the type, narratives, and diffusion of fake news at large (Brennen et al. 2020), others addressed Covid-19 conspiracies and their behavioural effects (Uscinski et al. 2020), the role of social media (Caldarelli et al. 2021), and the actors transmitting and amplifying these contents (Jamieson & Albarracín 2020).

Given the recent nature of the health emergency, relatively little research has been produced on the effects of false information regarding the pandemic within the partisan landscape at large, let alone for radical right-wing populist parties. Therefore, the following sections are dedicated to the provision of an initial assessment of this under-investigated topic.

#### 4. Research design and methodology

Previous studies showed how conservatives have specific psychological traits that make them more susceptible to accepting fake news (Guess et al. 2019) and conspiracy theories (Oliver & Rahn 2016). *Ça va sans dire*, this also prompted researchers to investigate the connection between misinformation and the political actors that seem to attract these kinds of voters. Of course, right-leaning parties are not alone in engaging in misinformation within the Italian political context. However, recent studies (Mancosu et al. 2017; Van Kessel et al. 2020) demonstrated that supporters of right-wing populist parties are prone to showing higher levels of exposure to political misinformation. Therefore, our study draws from the above literature to set the stage for its analysis on the communication tactics of the League and FdI in 2020.<sup>2</sup> Aside from being recently characterised as both right-wing and populist (for more, see Akkerman et al. 2016; Chiaramonte et al. 2018), the two actors also stood in opposition to the Conte II cabinet (2019 – 2021). This is no second-order issue, for their parliamentary stance allowed them to scrutinize the executive's actions while being free from the necessary compromises that elected officials in government were required to make.

All the arguments presented on the connection between misinformation and RRPPs find some degree of confirmation within the Italian case, making it a suitable candidate for our investigation. Indeed, RRP leaders systematically accused the government of mismanaging the health emergency. As the 2020 crisis unfolded, the state-directed implementation of strict containment measures to curb the virality of the pandemic inevitably went at odds with the preferences of the public at large. In this regard, Italy was also among the first countries to be hit by Covid-19, as well as the first one to enforce a nationwide lockdown. This unfortunate primacy provided somewhat of a 'test bench' for political forces to react without being able to look at

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<sup>2</sup> Of the 295 statements by politicians that Pagella Politica fact-checked in 2020, 98 debunked (33%) originated from FdI and the League, with the latter being the most fact-checked party in Italy. Moreover, League's leader Matteo Salvini stands out as the most fact-checked politician, while FdI's leader Giorgia Meloni comes in third, *Pagella Politica*, 29/12/2020, URL: <https://pagellapolitica.it/blog/show/892/il-2020-di-pagella-politica-in-oltre-300-fact-checking>.

fellow actors across Europe for behavioural cues. Through the dissemination of false and inaccurate information aimed at challenging common-sense views on Covid-19, RRPPs instrumentally encouraged this dissonance by channelling and nurturing public resentment while providing alternative guidelines to understand the world. Eventually, this contributed to instil suspicion towards the authorities and reinforce the perception of the system as not being up to the task.

Although the pandemic constituted a novel and unique challenge to the Italian domestic political system, the aforementioned limited knowledge concerning the relation between unverified content and RRPPs ultimately prevented us from formulating a specific set of hypotheses. Instead, our study decided to follow the path traced by Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018) by presenting a tentative framework based on three research questions (RQs). This will serve as the main backdrop for our investigation, allowing us to exemplify a series of objectives and lay the groundwork for the next section's descriptive evidence:

- RQ1: What are the most widespread misinformative narratives prompted by RPPs in the framework of Covid-19?
- RQ2: Who are recurrent targets of the misinformation and, accordingly, what is the desired outcome that the misinformation is trying to achieve?
- RQ3: How does the fact-checked misinformation present itself?

To provide an accurate explanation to these RQs, we employ an original dataset based on 199 debunked statements from various members<sup>3</sup> of the aforementioned RRPPs during 2020. For our research, we opted to draw from the existing literature by defining radical right-wing populist parties as political formations that

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<sup>3</sup> Although this topic will be addressed in Figure 4, a few clarifications are in order. When we refer to 'members', we indicate: the leaders of both parties (Matteo Salvini for the League and Giorgia Meloni for FdI); politicians elected in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate (MPs); supranational representatives (MEPs); and sub-national officeholders (regional presidents, municipal mayors, members of regional/municipal executives/councils). We also include statements from the official accounts of both parties, as well as other less prominent figures (i.e. Figure 4's 'Other').



are non-centrist in their most important ideological stances and have a people-centric appeal (Akkerman et al. 2016).

The data is drawn from monitoring eight fact-checking websites and online news outlets with a dedicated fact-checking section,<sup>4</sup> which were then qualitatively scrutinised and coded by relying on a content analysis schema. In particular, this approach was used when dealing with most of the variables in our investigation (people-centrism, anti-elitism, conspiracy message, tone of the statement, narrative, target, and misinformation typology), while the remaining ones (platforms and transmitters) did not need any additional work. Concerning the validity of our sources, it ought to be highlighted that three of them (i.e. Facta, Pagella Politica, and Open.online) are active verified signatories of the International Fact-Checking Network's (IFCN) Code of Principles.<sup>5</sup> Signatory organisations commit their activity to non-partisanship and fairness, transparency of sources, funding, and methodology, as well as to an open corrections policy. These fundamental requirements for news verification are also followed by the other five outlets considered, making them eligible references in the Italian fact-checking ecosystem.

Of course, the statements in our analysis cannot cover the entirety of fake news and conspiracy theories manufactured and propagated by RRPPs, as the time-consuming process of tracking deceptive information leads fact-checkers to operate on the basis of selective criteria. That said, relying on debunkers can be a suitable proxy for random selection, which provides an exhaustive overview of how RRPPs use misinformation to foster their agenda and pursue their political goals.

Furthermore, this strategy allows us to bypass the potential shortcomings stemming from the adoption of a specific definition of fake news (for more, see Egelhofer & Lecheler 2019) and conspiracy theories (for more, see Bergmann 2018), which might open the flank to potential criticisms. Nonetheless, we decided to offer a more adapted exploration of RRPPs' use of misinformation by coding a variable

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<sup>4</sup> These are: Butac, Bufale.net, Facta, Giornalettismo, Next Quotidiano, Open.online, Pagella Politica, and Smask.

<sup>5</sup> The IFCN Code of Principles website, URL: <https://ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org/>.

that relies on Wardle's (2017) seven-point typology. Similarly, we also produced a dummy variable aimed at investigating the effective presence of conspiracy messages, i.e. suspecting that an influential and powerful group is plotting a covert operation for an unlawful or harmful purpose, consequently causing damage to the community (coded as 1 if present).

Rather than embarking on a lengthy discussion on the nature of populism, we scrutinised every one of the 199 statements in our dataset for indications of its main core attributes: people-centrism and anti-elitism. Our approach aligns with the broader ideational approach, which essentially considers populism as a set of ideas (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2013a; Mudde 2017). While we are aware of the ongoing debates concerning the most appropriate conceptualization of populism, we also feel compelled to point out that these scholarly arguments are often "[...] of secondary importance for many research questions [...]" (Mudde 2017, p. 47). Although the current theoretical debate has not reached a consensus regarding populism's nature and its measurement, the employment of an ideational approach does not necessarily prevent our investigation from analysing its more discursive elements (Pauwels 2011). Several ideational scholars effectively relied on different methodologies to observe populist attitudes in specific instances (i.e. Jagers & Walgrave 2007; Rooduijn & Akkerman 2017), while still regarding the latter as either a thin-centred ideology or – more broadly – as a set of ideas. In view of that, we created two separate dichotomous variables tracking the presence of people-centric and anti-elite messages.

The dataset was further complemented by: the negative, neutral, or positive tone of the statement; the platform where the statement first appeared (i.e. social media, newspapers, TV, etc.); the name of the actors transmitting the message; the actors' partisan allegiance; the main narrative of the statement (i.e. Covid-19, migration, economic issues, etc.); and the message's target (i.e. a specific party, the national government, a foreign country, etc.). In addition to the debunks presented in the next section, a more detailed explanation of how our qualitative analysis was conducted is provided in Appendix A, where we include examples of fact-checked statements for each category of the most relevant variables in our dataset.

## 5. RRPPs, fake news, conspiracies, and COVID-19: a descriptive empirical framework

At first sight, our data already provides a first major piece of evidence, namely the disproportionality that characterises the overall amount of false content propagated by the two Italian RRPPs throughout 2020. More specifically, Table 1 shows that the League is responsible for a total of 171 (86%) misinformative assertions, as opposed to the 28 that were spread by FdI (14%). As for the other variables described in the table, the differences between the two political formations appear to be much less pronounced.

When considering the extent of populism in RRPPs, it is possible to discern how both parties heavily rely on forms of communication that entail either an anti-elite or people-centrist rhetoric, which respectively account for 67.3% and 30.6% of the total. For instance, in December 2020, Matteo Salvini tweeted: “I believe that wanting to upset Christmas traditions is the umpteenth act by this government against the identity and history of the Italian People”.<sup>6</sup> The statement is both anti-elitist and people-centric, as it misrepresents curfew policies relative to the Midnight Mass while portraying the government as acting against the ‘people’ (capitalized), which *per contra* is seen as the keeper of national identity. In this sense, our dataset pictures a specific preference in terms of transmission strategies, as both actors are far more likely to rail against the elite rather than emphasise the inner virtues of the citizenry.

It should be highlighted that Brothers of Italy appears to be slightly less prone to populist discourses: only 25% of FdI’s statements are people-centric, as opposed to the League’s 31.6%, while anti-elite frames are roughly similar. On the one hand, this particular finding might be ascribed to the ongoing debate concerning FdI’s populist status (see Tarchi 2015). On the other, these results seemingly confirm previous evidence highlighted by Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018) concerning the somewhat more moderate populist stance of Meloni’s party. Given the tentative nature of

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<sup>6</sup> Matteo Salvini makes an inaccurate statement concerning the Midnight Mass, *Smask*, 8/12/2020, URL: <https://smask.online/dio-e-patria/quali-tradizioni-non-esiste-attualmente-alcuna-messa-di-mezzanotte/>.

our work, further research is advised in order to present a more clear-cut explanation of these particular findings.

**Table 1 – Percentages of Italian RRPPs statements concerning populism, conspiracy, and tone (2020).**

Party	People-centrism		Anti-Elitism		Conspiracy message		Tone of the statement			Total
	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Negative	Neutral	Positive	
League	68.4	31.6	32.2	67.8	89.5	10.5	74.3	15.8	9.9	86
FdI	75	25	35.7	64.3	92.9	7.1	78.6	7.1	14.3	14
Total	69.4	30.6	32.7	67.3	90	10	74.9	14.6	10.5	100

*N = 199*

*Source: authors' elaboration*

When dealing with the thematic narratives that characterise each observation, Table 2 pictures how the plurality of RRP discourses is centred around the very occurrence of the pandemic. More specifically, the necessity to pass a series of restrictions to contain the virus granted RRPPs the possibility to admonish and criticise the actions of Giuseppe Conte's second cabinet. Their primary narrative involves harsh criticism over the government's alleged failure to provide reasonable and effective measures to face the challenges posed by Covid-19, which delayed the reopening of businesses and other facilities.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Italian RRPPs blame the cabinet for not bringing much-needed relief to the financially struggling citizenry, an effort that is supposedly hampered by the overly bureaucratic processes that characterise the functioning of both the executive and the public administration.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, RRPPs have often made use of unscientific sources to downplay the virality of the pandemic,

<sup>7</sup> Matteo Salvini equates the containment measures imposed by the government to a terror strategy, *Smask*, 14/11/2020, URL: <https://smask.online/famiglia-e-ordine/covid-e-visite-mediche-a-domicilio-i-dati-smentiscono-la-provocazione-della-bestia/>.

<sup>8</sup> Giorgia Meloni shares an article titled 'It's forbidden to drown', *Bufale.net*, 13/05/2020, URL: <https://www.bufale.net/divieto-di-annegare-e-di-respirazione-bocca-a-bocca-cosa-dice-il-documento-iss-e-inail/>.

while suggesting the alleged presence of medicinal solutions that were voluntarily side-lined by the government.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 2 – Narratives of Italian RRPPs statements (2020).**

Party	COVID-19	Economy	Migration	Nationalism	Attacks & Mismanagement	Endorsements	Other
League	29.2	14	22.8	5.9	17.5	7	3.5
FdI	28.6	17.9	10.7	10.7	21.4	7.1	3.6
Total	29.1	14.6	21.1	6.5	18.1	7	3.5

*N* = 151

*Source: authors' elaboration*

Here lies the fundamental difference between fake news and full-fledged conspiracies. To illustrate this, in May 2020, League parliamentarian (MP) Paolo Grimaldi tweeted a video from December 2019, where the founder of the Five Star Movement (M5S) Beppe Grillo was pictured wearing a face mask.<sup>10</sup> The caption suggested that the former comedian was allegedly protecting himself from “the virus”, but fact-checkers ultimately figured out this statement as a mere provocation towards reporters (i.e. journalism being equated to a virus). The episode had nothing to do with Covid-19, and the tweet could be simply marked as misleading. However, Grimaldi’s post was also questioning whether or not the M5S founder knew “[...] things that Italians and the world were not told [...]”, hinting at Grillo’s previous visit to the Chinese embassy. This suggestion can undoubtedly be marked as conspiratorial, for it implies that a prominent figure of the senior party in government was warned of the upcoming pandemic but opted to conceal this information from the public. But

<sup>9</sup> Matteo Salvini defends plasma-therapy as a cure to Covid-19, *Smask*, 30/11/2020, URL: <https://smask.online/famiglia-e-ordine/il-plasma-iperimmune-e-ancora-una-terapia-sperimentale/>.

<sup>10</sup> Paolo Grimaldi accuses Beppe Grillo of being tipped off by the Chinese about Covid-19, *Facta*, 4/05/2020, URL: <https://facta.news/fuori-contesto/2020/05/04/non-e-vero-che-a-dicembre-2019-beppe-grillo-indossava-la-mascherina-perche-avvisato-dai-cinesi-dellemergenza-covid-19/>.

while the presence of conspiracy-related messages among Italian RRPPs is undeniable, their diffusion appears to be limited, as only 10% of the 199 assertions of our dataset effectively embraced purely conspiratorial rhetoric, with residual intra-party differences (Table 1).

So far, the overall communication strategies envisage a situation in which both political actors systematically praise their members and allies while at the same time lashing out against all those who are perceived as opponents on topics related (but not limited) to the pandemic. Through the exploitation of this extensively adversarial and hostile frame (Table 1, Tone of the statement, Negative: 74.9%), the League and FdI have also chastised the government for its management of the economy (14.6%), including the longstanding debate on the European Stability Mechanism.<sup>11</sup> Migration-related instances were also emphasised (21.1%), focusing on the danger allegedly posed by migrants in relation to the virus, or arguing that they were treated better than Italian citizens.<sup>12</sup> In other words, our findings on RRPPs' communication strategies depict a relatively homogeneous agenda, although different priorities seem to emerge as well. This is particularly evident for migration-related statements, where the League (22.8% as opposed to FdI's 10.7%) has traditionally held a dominant position (Gianfreda 2018), while Brothers of Italy is a stronger advocate for nationalist issues (10.7% as opposed to the League's 5.9%).

Although our single-country data does not allow us to estimate the level of ideological convergence with other European RRPPs, we can at least recognise that certain narratives were 'imported' from abroad. In particular, the unproven assertion that Covid-19 was manufactured in a Wuhan laboratory,<sup>13</sup> and the fabricated claim

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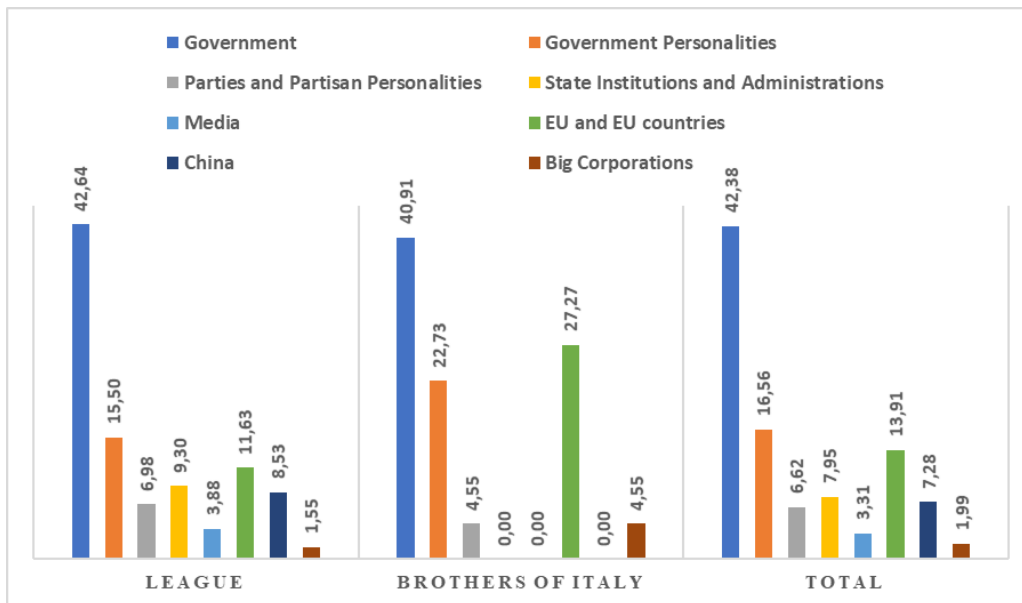
<sup>11</sup> Giorgia Meloni accuses the Minister of Economy of signing the European Stability Mechanism, *Pagella Politica*, 10/04/2020, URL: <https://pagellapolitica.it/dichiarazioni/8573/meloni-sbaglia-litalia-non-ha-firmato-per-attivare-il-mes>.

<sup>12</sup> The League claims migrants were quarantined on a luxury cruise ship, *Facta*, 21/04/2020, URL: <https://facta.news/fuori-contesto/2020/04/21/alcuni-migranti-salvati-nel-mediterraneo-trascorreranno-la-quarantena-su-un-traghetto-tirrenia-ma-senza-alcun-comfort/>.

<sup>13</sup> Matteo Salvini states in the Senate that Covid-19 came from a Wuhan laboratory while the WHO was either absent or complicit, *Giornalettismo*, 16/12/2020, URL: <https://www.giornalettismo.com/salvini-e-il-virus-nel-laboratorio-cinese/>.

that voter fraud occurred during the 2020 U.S. elections<sup>14</sup> did not originate within the Italian public sphere.

**Figure 1. Targets of Italian RRPPs statements (2020).**



*N* = 199

Source: authors' elaboration

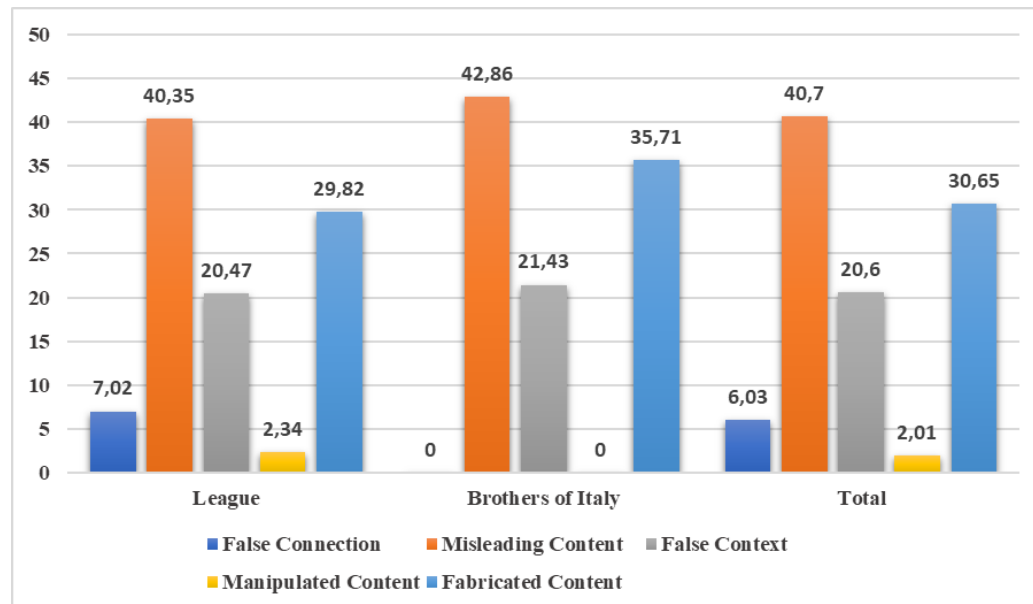
In light of the previous paragraphs, the main targets of the misinformation pushed by both RRPPs (Figure 1) can be identified with the executive at large (42.4%), its single personalities (16.6%), as well as actors and individuals of the Italian partisan landscape (6.6%). This particular tactic is ascribable to the populists' broader strategy of enemy vilification, which relies on the constant need for a scapegoat that ends up becoming an epitome of the 'corrupt elite'. Aside from notable institutional figures of the then cabinet (i.e. Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, Minister of the Interior Luciana Lamorgese, Minister of Foreign Affairs Luigi Di Maio, etc.), ideological opponents are also portrayed as enemies, with specific attacks targeting the political

<sup>14</sup> Matteo Salvini says that in some U.S. counties there were more ballots than voters, *Pagella Politica*, 6/11/2020, URL: <https://pagellapolitica.it/dichiarazioni/8754/salvini-ha-fatto-disinformazione-sui-brogli-elettorali-negli-stati-uniti>.

formations that supported the executive at the time (i.e. the Democratic Party, the Five Star Movement, and Italia Viva).

A closer look at intra-party differences reiterates the assessments on the two RRPPs' respective niches. Indeed, FdI relied on misinformation tactics to blame both the EU and its Member states more than twice when compared to the League (27.3% as opposed to 11.6%). On the contrary, the latter used false information as a means for highlighting the alleged Chinese responsibilities with respect to the pandemic (8.5%), as well as accusing both the mainstream media (3.9%) and other state institutions (9.3%) of bias and corruption.

**Figure 2. Types of misinformation of Italian RRPPs (2020).**



*N* = 199

*Source: authors' elaboration*

Moreover, it is crucial to understand how misinformation is propagated and what types of inaccuracies have been diffused. In this respect, we rely on the framework proposed by Wardle (2017) to classify misinformation (Figure 2). The scenario that emerges from our descriptive analysis underlines the absence of any satirical or parodic content, thus reinforcing the evidence provided by the literature. Conversely,



most of the fact-checked information consists of misleading content (40.7%), namely the ambiguous association of unrelated issues to lead the audience to an inevitable premeditated conclusion. Our dataset also registers the widespread use of genuine information with an incorrect or decontextualised background (20.6%). An example, in this sense, can be provided by Salvini and Meloni's exploitation of a video from a 2015 show (Tg Leonardo on Rai 3) in which the theory that Chinese scientists had created "a super-virus from bats and mice" was openly explored.<sup>15</sup>

Brothers of Italy also fostered a relatively high number of fabricated claims (i.e. unscientific claims that the prolonged use of masks causes hypercapnia).<sup>16</sup> Conversely, the League presented a more diversified array of misinformation typologies, including hoaxes with a highly visual impact such as false connection (7%) and manipulated content (2.3%), which are completely absent in FdI's political discourse. For example, the photo of a Brazilian school where students sat on the ground using chairs as desks was instrumentalised to blame then Minister of Education Lucia Azolina, thus creating a mismatch between the caption and the actual visual.<sup>17</sup> As for content manipulation used to attack political opponents, the League misquoted then Vice-minister of Economy Laura Castelli, whose recommendation for restaurant owners to develop new skills to overcome the ongoing crisis was reported as an invitation to change jobs altogether.<sup>18</sup>

Moving on to the way in which misinformative messages are propagated (Figure 3), Facebook chiefly appears to be the preferred dissemination medium (53.6% for FdI, 45.6% for the League). The reasons behind the platform's success,

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<sup>15</sup> Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni revive a TV show that talks about Chinese lab-made viruses, *Facta*, 30/03/2020, URL: <https://facta.news/notizia-vera/2020/03/30/il-tg-leonardo-del-2015-e-vero-ma-non-dimostra-che-il-virus-del-covid-19-sia-nato-in-laboratorio/>.

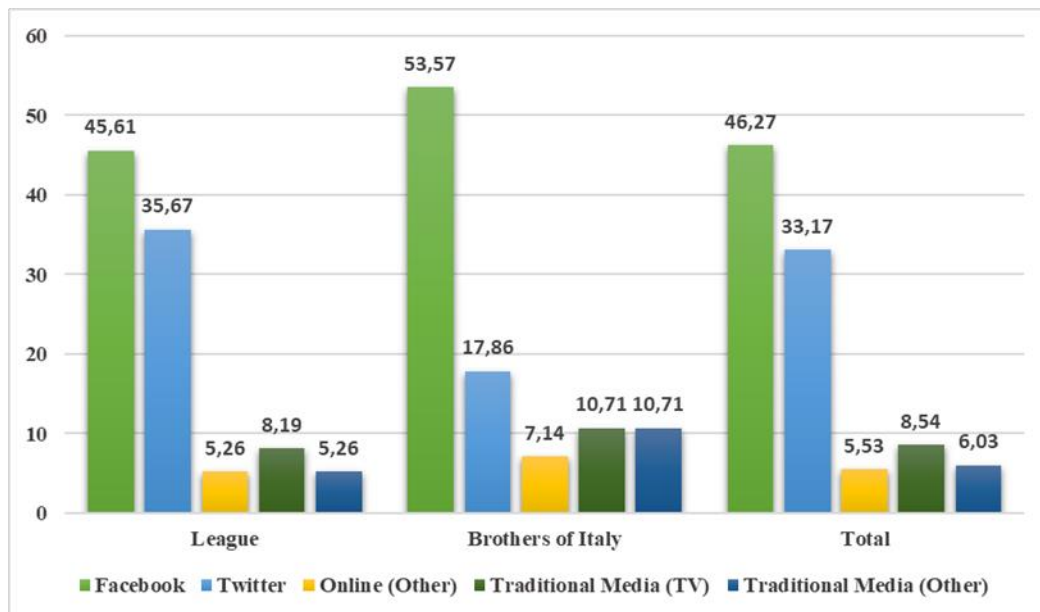
<sup>16</sup> Brothers of Italy parliamentarian (MP) Federico Mollicone claims that masks cause respiratory problems, *Giornalettismo*, 26/05/2020, URL: <https://www.giornalettismo.com/iper-capnia-e-mascherine-mollicone-fdi/>.

<sup>17</sup> Matteo Salvini uses a photo of Brazilian students sitting on the ground to blame the Minister of Education, *Open.online*, 20/09/2020, URL: <https://www.open.online/2020/09/20/accusano-salvini-di-bufala-creando-una-bufala-la-foto-delle-studentesse-sedute-a-terra-non-e-del-brasile/>.

<sup>18</sup> Matteo Salvini misquotes Vice-Minister Laura Castelli, *Smask*, 02/08/2020, URL: <https://smask.online/abbasso-le-tasse-viva-le-spese/come-la-bestia-ha-modificato-le-parole-di-laura-castelli-sulla-crisi-dei-ristoratori/>.

in turn, can be explained by its ability to fulfil one’s need for belonging and self-representation (Nadkarni & Hofmann 2012). Needless to say, this tendency to forge an in-group identity through these outlets is of great relevance to political communication. Unlike other notable social networks, Facebook also lacks a strict character limit, which allows for a more diversified way for the audience to engage with content through the posts’ reactions and comments. At the same time, however, Twitter’s concise messages allow parties and politicians to use social media as some sort of press office, through which tailor-make their own press releases for media professionals. For those reasons, Twitter has been deemed by scholars as a good predictor of party campaigns (De Sio & Weber 2020). In this sense, the evidence emerging from our descriptive analysis seems to support Twitter’s overall importance, with the platform coming in as a strong second (33.2%). This, in turn, contributes to cement the two main social media platforms as the primary recipients of misinformative content.

**Figure 3. Platforms of Italian RRPPs (2020).**

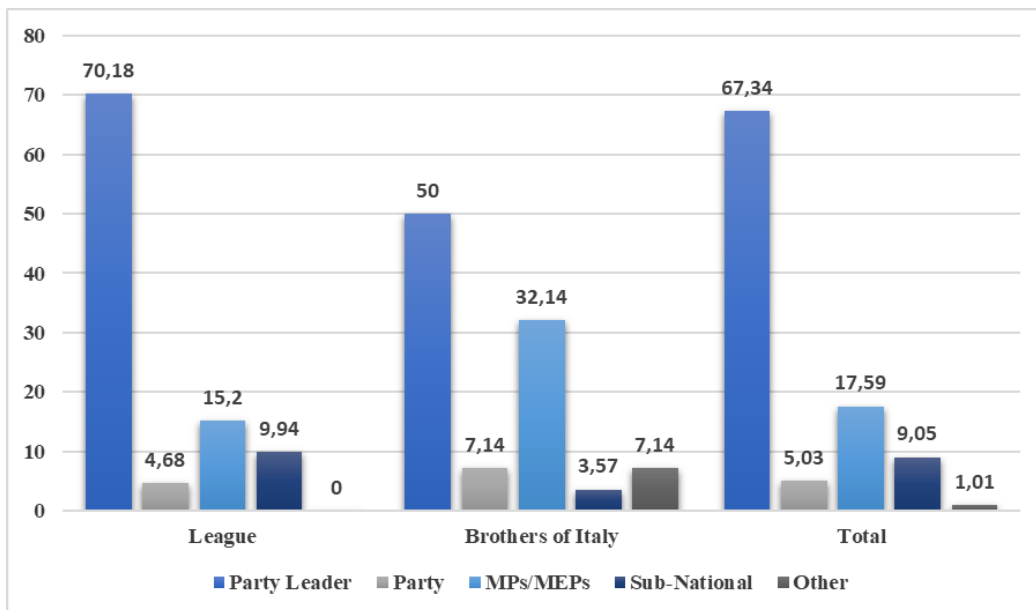


*N* = 199

*Source: authors' elaboration*

The remaining items that can be observed in Figure 3 are scattered around a wide plethora of outlets, ranging from traditional media (i.e. radio, TV, and newspapers) up to YouTube and other news websites. This does offer an interesting insight into the effective utilization of false content within political communication. Misinformation is propagated to a much lesser extent on newspapers and news websites, most likely due to the presence of editorial guidelines regarding news verification. Alternatively, it might be argued that social media do incentivise an overproduction of content when compared to more traditional sources. Despite the low percentage of televised misinformation, it can also be seen how TV still retains a significant outreach, making it a powerful tool for spreading false information across the public.

**Figure 4. Transmitters of Italian RRPPs (2020).**



$N = 199$

Source: authors' elaboration

Finally, the last part of our analysis looks at the statements' transmitters. Given the direct relation that leaders try to maintain with their supporters within contemporary politics, the presence of a charismatic figure that is able to mobilise the masses is of paramount importance for populists (Mudde 2004), especially on the

right of the political spectrum (Van der Brug & Mughan 2007). This assumption finds confirmation in Figure 4, where it can be seen that roughly two-thirds of the observed statements in our dataset were produced by party leaders (67.3%), respectively Matteo Salvini (70.2%) and Giorgia Meloni (50%). Yet, the higher political exposure that party leaders possess nowadays might have also put them under the stricter scrutiny of fact-checkers.

In general, the number of collected statements appears to be proportional to the transmitter's level of visibility.<sup>19</sup> Aside from party leaders, the politicians propagating notable levels of misinformation come from the national and supranational sphere (17.6%), while sub-national officeholders account for a comparatively smaller percentage (9%). A separate argument should be made for the residual position held by official party accounts, perhaps due to the different outreach of these channels.<sup>20</sup> Another possibility can be traced back to the more immediate connection provided by the personal page of the leaders and their base, which allows politicians to offer a different and more 'unsanctioned' type of communication to their followers. Nevertheless, these topics ought to be further researched in order to go beyond mere speculation.

## **6. Discussion**

The rise of the Internet represented a massive development for the realm of politics. However, while the enablement of new forms of democratic participation was initially met with relative optimism, the evolution of events in recent years significantly tempered those views. Nowadays, a wide plethora of political parties and personalities successfully harnessed the power of the new media to bypass traditional channels and propagate whatever information was deemed necessary to achieve their goals. As the world attempted to cope with the unprecedented challenge posed by Covid-19, relying on technology to remain informed and connected ultimately turned

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<sup>19</sup> While the transmitter is responsible for fabricating misinformation in 66% of the cases, in the other 34% the content was either quoted or reposted from a third party.

<sup>20</sup> Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni's official Facebook pages respectively have 5 and 2.3 million followers, compared to the 1.1 million of 'Lega – Salvini Premier' and the 409.000 of 'Fratelli d'Italia'.

this health crisis into an ‘infodemic’. In other words, large sections of the public became constantly exposed to and/or actively consumed all kinds of information – and misinformation – concerning the pandemic.

Within this framework, our study sought to draw a tentative picture of this brand-new phenomenon by observing the discursive tactics of two RRPPs in the Italian political scenario. More specifically, we were interested to know how the League and Brothers of Italy managed to structure misinformation in their online communication, the style in which both parties articulated their narratives, the main targets of their messages, and how this ultimately shaped their political strategy. By limiting the scope of our inquiry to 2020, we wished to properly assess the overall impact of the pandemic within the public debate.

In view of this, our results (RQ1) show how the outbreak and subsequent management of Covid-19 granted Italian RRPPs the possibility to frame the health emergency to advance their own interests, bolstering their anti-elite positions by accusing mainstream actors to work against the people’s best interests. Both parties did not shy away from occasionally employing conspiracy narratives to oppose state-led containment measures, challenge the effective threat posed by the virus, and make unsubstantiated claims about its origins. This relevant but limited presence suggests that parties are willing to tap into specific sections of their online audience, although they do not seek to alienate potential voters by overemphasising such views. Despite their communication being mostly pandemic-related, evidence shows how RRPPs still managed to foster their most salient topics, ranging from the customary criticism of migration policies to the detrimental state of the economy and up to more nationalist tones.

In terms of targets and desired outcomes (RQ2), RRPPs actively relied on misinformation to systematically criticise a wide array of subjects, from political formations to partisan personalities and from government officials to other state institutions. In other terms, both the League and FdI resorted to any means necessary to sow dissent by presenting the behaviour of said actors in an inherently negative fashion. By undermining the credibility and the legitimacy of those they perceived as

‘elites’, both parties sought to enhance their visibility and present themselves as a viable alternative. Despite their shared goals, it is also noteworthy to acknowledge the presence of specific differences between the two parties. Specifically, Brothers of Italy showed a substantially lower tendency to resort to fake news and conspiracy theories to pursue its political agenda. Furthermore, our findings were able to confirm existing findings on FdI’s attention to conventionally nationalist issues. In comparison, the League employed a more leader-driven variety of misinformative messages, with its focus being centred around the subject of migration. Furthermore, the latter’s usage of conspiracy theories appears to be slightly more pronounced, especially regarding China’s involvement in the pandemic.

When it comes to misinformation (RQ3), our data indicate that Italian RRPPs widely exploited the main social media (i.e. Facebook and Twitter) to convey willingly deceptive strategies that mostly entail the decontextualisation of genuine information, as well as the misleading presentation of facts to serve their own frames. The two parties extensively characterised their misinformation according to traditionally populist narratives, as proven both by the remarkably high level of anti-elitism in their communication and the substantial (but minoritarian) presence of people-centric messages. This combination of elements – often found within the same statement – is typically accompanied by a disintermediated dynamic, with party leaders establishing a direct line of communication with their audience. At the same time, our data also managed to provide additional support to the notion that FdI is somewhat more moderate than the League when it comes to the implementation of a full-fledged populist discourse.

Despite the evidence presented, the explanatory power of our analysis remains quite limited. Given the novelty of both the misinformative phenomenon and the pandemic outbreak, the focus of our investigation was not set on an explicitly empirical venture. Our objective was merely to provide a first look at the peculiarities, similarities, and discrepancies that might exist between different RRPPs at a critical juncture. Hopefully, this preliminary outline might potentially set the ground for future endeavours, which ought to further expand the topic both in breadth and depth

by including other (radical right-wing populist) parties across the political spectrum from one or more EU countries.

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