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Mobilizing against ‘the invasion’: Far right protest and the ‘refugee crisis’ in Italy

by Pietro Castelli Gattinara*

Introduction

While in recent years Italy has faced some of the most difficult challenges in its republican history, including an enduring economic crisis, the collapse of the bi-polar system that marked its politics since the 1990s, and the contested implementation of austerity policies by grand coalition governments, the emergence of a ‘refugees’ or ‘migrant’ crisis in recent years seems to have reshuffled the cards. According to a recent Pew Research Center survey, by 2016 a broad majority of Italians believe that refugees leaving from countries like Iraq and Syria represent a major threat. While 60% are concerned that refugees will increase domestic terrorism, 65% say that they will have a negative economic impact, and no less than 47% believe that they are more to blame for crime than other groups in their nation, a figure that is 15% higher than the European median (Pew Research Centre, 2016).

In Italy like in most other European countries, furthermore, people on the ideological right express more concerns about refugees, and more negative attitudes towards Muslims and minorities, which comes as little surprise, considering that the recent surge of refugees into Europe has featured prominently in anti-immigrant propaganda by far right political actors. Indeed, as reported by Mudde (2016), the recent inflow of asylum seekers has

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changed far right politics in both qualitative and quantitative ways, increasing the amount of anti-immigrant demonstrations, and differentiating the types of groups involved in street protest across Europe. The recent rise in far-right street politics, however, has not been matched by a significant increase in the scholarly interest for non-party organisations and grassroots politics (but see Busher, 2015; Caiani Della Porta and Wagemann, 2012, for exceptions). Moreover, while some studies have examined how immigration is framed in general (Helbling, 2014; Castelli Gattinara, 2016), hardly any research has investigated the predominant themes and narratives of anti-refugee and asylum campaigns.

To help rectify this, the present paper overviews the development of anti-refugee mobilization in Italy, focusing on the repertoires of protest and on the main interpretations of the ‘crisis’ that are provided by activists. More precisely, the paper sets out to investigate anti-refugee protest in Italy in the wake of what has been defined the ‘European migration crisis’ (c.f. New Keywords Collective, 2016), using original data from in-depth interviews with anti-refugee activists, and quantitative content analysis of newspaper reports of far-right mobilization. While mobilization is approached quantitatively by means of Political Claims Analysis (Pca, Koopmans and Statham, 1999), anti-refugee discourse is addressed in terms of the main themes that at the core of mobilization narratives. By these means, this paper strives to present a more nuanced understanding of how far right actors conceive and represent migration and refugee issues in Italy, which in turn allows to better appreciate how public debates on immigration have unfolded.

First, the paper overviews the practices of mobilization in the wake of the ‘long summer of migration’ (Kasperek and Speer, 2017), asking whether, to what extent, and how, the current situation marked a shift away from party politics and conventional channels of mobilization for the far right (Mudde 2016; Busher 2015; Caiani, Della Porta and Wagemann, 2012). Second, the paper addresses the idea that contemporary right-wing movements construct their identities on new ‘civic’ values, and justify the exclusion of migrants from European societies based on cultural incompatibility with Western liberalism (Halikiopoulou, Mock and Vasilopoulou, 2013; Copsey, 2015; Busher, 2015; Froio, 2016). Third, the paper offers original data from in-depth interviews with activists, and insider empirical information on the workings of anti-refugee protests, thus making a significant

step forward in the direction of an ‘internalist’ approach to the study of the far right (Goodwin, 2006: 348).

To this end, the paper starts by outlining three avenues of research that have been evidently neglected by scholars of far-right politics, and discuss how the approach proposed here can advance the scholarly understanding of contemporary far right politics. After presenting the analytical framework, case selection and data of this study, I move on to the quantitative empirical analysis of the patterns of mobilization against refugees, as well as the qualitative investigation of the most prominent themes in the discourse against migration and asylum. In doing so, the article sketches out the crucial features that have come to characterise grassroots activism against refugees over the long summer of migration in Italy, which, I argue, must be further explored comparatively if we are to gain a more nuanced understanding of far-right politics and its implications in the context of humanitarian crises in contemporary Europe.

1. The far right, protest and the ‘refugee crisis’

In its populist, radical, and extreme variants¹, the far right constitutes one of the most successful areas of enquiry in political science (e.g. Mudde, 2007; 2016)². From ‘supply-side’ factors such as their ideological features,

1. Over the past three decades of research, there has been much conceptual and analytical disagreement concerning the definition and characteristics of European organizations of the far right (Mudde, 1996). This impasse has been partly resolved by differentiating between ‘extreme’ and ‘radical’ right organizations: while the first openly oppose the democratic constitutional order, radical groups are simply hostile towards its liberal democratic principles. In the present paper, I address both types of organizations, placing them under the broader umbrella of ‘far right’ politics.
2. Scholars agree on a minimum definition of the far right encompassing three main ideological features: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Mudde, 2007). Nativism holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by natives, for alien persons or ideas pose a threat to the homogeneity of the nation state (Minkenberg, 1998). Authoritarianism refers to the belief in a strictly ordered society based on authority. This is commonly articulated through ‘law and order’ narratives, at times including antidemocratic or militaristic inclinations.

to ‘demand-side’ factors such as the behaviour of their electorates, nearly every aspect of far-right politics has been covered (e.g. Norris, 2005; Mudde, 2007). Still, there are several relevant elements that have been evidently overlooked in extant research. Next to offering original empirical material concerning a relevant topic in contemporary European politics, this paper aims to contribute to far-right literature by addressing at least three of these lacunae.

First, extant scholarship overwhelmingly reads far right politics through party-political dynamics, with little attention to the mobilisation efforts of far-right actors in the protest arena (see, however, Blee, 2007; Caiani, Della Porta and Wagemann, 2012). On the other hand, social movement scholars have paid remarkably little attention to the unfolding of dynamics within the right-wing galaxy, and to the interaction between electoral and protest politics on the issues of immigration and globalisation (Hutter, 2014). This is rather surprising considering that previous research has recognised that the far right diversifies into political parties geared towards elections and public offices, social movements or ‘networks of networks’ that aim to mobilise public opinion, and a conglomeration of groups within the subcultural environment (Minkenberg, 2003; Kitschelt, 2006). While the dynamics accounting for the interaction between these different spheres of action are still largely unexplored, the unfolding of the European crises, and most notably ongoing controversies on ethnic relations, migration and asylum, makes it even more urgent that researchers focus on how the far right combines activities in the electoral and protest arenas. Indeed, while the far right has long been described as bridging the conceptual space between movements and parties (Gunther and Diamond, 2003: 188), up to now only a few scholars have studied far right street politics empirically. By looking at mobilization against refugees in Italy, thus, this paper addresses timely issues of economic, cultural and social sources of far right collective action,

Lastly, populism, understood as an ideological feature rather than only a political style, considers societies as being divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’. While this may refer to an ‘idealized heartland’ (Taggart, 2000), it may also hold an idea of politics as an expression of the *volonté générale* against the interests of the corrupt elites (e.g. Betz, 1994; Mudde, 2004).

focusing on whether the ‘migrant crisis’ led to new forms of political mobilization in the electoral and protest arena.

Second, by looking at predominant understandings in anti-refugee protest in Italy, I investigate the role of ‘civic’ values in mobilization against refugees in Italy (Halikiopoulou, Mock and Vasilopoulou, 2013; Halikiopoulou and Vasilopoulou, 2010). Scholars of political extremism agree that the far right inherently builds its identity by singling out a set of enemies, and that the core of its identity is delineated *ex negativo* by distinguishing between friends and foes (see e.g. Minkenberg, 2011). If the recurring targets for the traditional far right have been defined in terms of racial differences (e.g. the Jews) and racial superiority, a turning point in the self-understanding of this party family consisted in the shift of focus from ‘inferiority’ to ‘incompatibility’. This shift substantially marked the transition from classical to new racism; from biological to cultural racism (Barker, 1981); and ultimately from old extreme-right discourse to contemporary right-wing radicalism. On the one hand, funnelled by the law and order mood that ensued the 9/11 attacks (Bjørklund and Andersen, 2002; Guibernau, 2010), the far right presented itself as a bulwark of traditional (Judeo-Christian) European values and came to appraise Islam as inherently incompatible with the European culture (Betz, 2004; Skenderovic, 2007). On the other, it used liberal – or ‘civic’ – values to claim the incompatibility between Western liberalism and the cultural identities of some groups of migrants, thus campaigning on the threat to liberal values (Halikiopoulou, Mock and Vasilopoulou, 2013; Mudde, 2004). According to Betz and Meret (2009), this turn does not merely result from strategic considerations, but rather from shifting ideological positions resulting from the progressive combination of immigration, Islamization and identity issues in the programmatic agendas of the far right. As a result, this ‘liberalism turned inward’ (Akkerman, 2005) allows even the most radical nativist organizations to put themselves forward as defenders of liberal values and democracy, rejecting the demands by Muslim immigrants for basic rights, while calling for the respect of gender equality and women’s rights among ethnic minorities. The qualitative part of the study thus investigates this discursive transition in the wake of the ‘crisis’, assessing the relative weigh of traditional law and order and xenophobic issues vis-à-vis exclusionist discourses based on liberal values.

Third, this paper addresses a long-neglected avenue of research in the study of the radical, extremist and populist right: the individuals active in these groups (Goodwin, 2006). In this respect, in-depth studies on the far right have been rare and mostly based on secondary data (Blee, 2007; Avanza, 2008). The continued lack of knowledge on this crucial aspect of far-right politics has led to renewed calls for ‘internalist’ studies of the far right (Goodwin, 2006). Indeed, Klandermans and Mayer (2006, preface) report that one crucial deficiency of extant literature is that it is often ‘full of pictures from afar that tell us about big structures and grand processes but little about people’. Examining anti-refugee campaigns through the eyes and words of those involved in the protests will not only provide a richer understanding of the dynamics of mobilization and the rationales of opposition to migration in Italy, but will also pave the way for a more accurate insight of the nature of contemporary far right politics in Europe.

2. Data and Methods

Acknowledging that the anti-refugee milieu is composed of a variety of different actors, groups and organizations, the account presented here is based on a triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis, which is intended to offer a differentiated view of various aspects and features of the phenomenon at stake. Accordingly, the quantitative data focuses on the nature and evolution of mobilization promoted by far-right groups. Focusing on the most visible organizations of this political area, it looks at their claims reported in the media, and at the arena of engagement where mobilization takes place. Complementing for the information provided in there, the qualitative analysis focuses on the issues at the core of mobilization, rather than on the actors promoting protest. Hence, it addresses the narratives promoted by different type of actors, including grassroots assemblies, political movements, as well as mayors and local representatives from established political parties.

The quantitative analysis measures the mobilization of far-right organizations by means of a Political Claims Analysis (Pca) of news stories extracted from the daily broadsheet *Il Corriere della Sera*, retrieved from the Factiva digital archive (1996-2015). Claims-making as a form of political behaviour implies «the purposive and public articulation of political de-

mands, calls to action, proposals, criticisms, or physical attacks, which, actually or potentially, affect the interests or integrity of the claimants and/or other collective actors (Koopmans *et al.*, 2005: 254). Newspaper articles were selected using a dedicated search string intended to capture all articles that contain implicit or explicit reference to the most visible organisations of the grassroots far right in Italy: *Forza Nuova*, *CasaPound Italia* and *Movimento Sociale-Fiamma Tricolore*³.

While I acknowledge that not all forms of political action are publicly visible in newspaper reports, this method has been used consistently in social movement research to assess the amount and features of collective action systematically and comparatively (Koopmans and Statham, 1999; Hutter, 2014). This data will be used to contextualize far right claims-making in Italy. By looking at visible patterns, I can thus offer a first overview of the development of far-right mobilisation, differentiating by type of action and focusing specifically on political actions and interventions dwelling with migration and refugee issues. Claims were coded to report information on the time and location of each public intervention, the claimant and form of action, and the substantive issue that was addressed⁴. I classified forms of actions in three broader categories, corresponding to conventional strategies of contention (such as electoral campaigning, rallies, petitions), protest actions (demonstrations, blockades and occupations, including violent actions), and public statements (such as verbal actions, declarations and press conferences).

The interpretation of the quantitative data is then integrated with qualitative information from 13 semi-structured interviews conducted between

3. While these groups cannot be considered representative of the highly-fragmented panorama of the Italian far right as a whole, they can offer at least an illustrative overview of the general trends of mobilization, especially with regards to grassroots politics. Put differently, while it is likely that claims-making is underrepresented in the sample (which does not include sizable political parties of this area, such as *Lega Nord* and in more recent years *Fratelli d'Italia*), there is no evidence suggesting that the evolution and characteristics of protest would be different had I considered a broader range of political actors.
4. The full codebook is available upon request. In the present study, I am only interested in assessing the relative importance of migration within the overall mobilization of the far right. Hence, I simply distinguish the claims that focus on issues connected to immigration and the integration of migrant residents, from claims on all other issue areas and topics.

January and March 2017 in four Italian cities. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with far-right activists belonging to six organisations or groups that had promoted initiatives against refugees over the previous months. To integrate the information provided by means of Pca, I addressed not only social movement organisations engaged primarily (albeit not exclusively) in grassroots politics (*Forza Nuova*), but also local representatives of far right political parties regularly involved in routinized and conventional politics (*Lega Nord*). In addition, interviews were also conducted with unaffiliated members of citizen assemblies challenging local politics of refugee settlement and management (in the province of Rome, Milan, Treviso and Ferrara).

Interviewees were contacted by phone or email using information retrieved from mass media reports of anti-immigration protests in Italy in the summer and fall of 2015, and previous knowledge about the network of mobilization against refugees in Europe. Unaffiliated activists were then contacted through other participants, the groups engaged in local initiatives, and personal contacts. All interviews but two were conducted face-to-face and recorded. While not all interviewees agreed to share their biographic and professional details, they varied considerably in terms of employment status, level of education and age (ranging from early twenties to more than fifty years old). All participants were males⁵. Even if participants were left free to discuss the aspects of the issue that they deemed most relevant, they were explicitly asked to reconstruct the mobilization against refugees that they staged or took part into, to define their personal involvement in the initiatives, and to discuss the relationship between their group and other actors, be that political opponents or allies. In addition, the interview aimed at emphasising the political view and understandings of migration promoted by the organizations, also in relation to how the mass media and mainstream politicians dealt with the issue of asylum.

5. Even though there is evidence that women took part in organizing and promoting the protests, my access to the field was negotiated with the organizations, which means that I did not have direct control to select participants based on gender. Instead, the people in charge of the campaigns, the local cadres of the organizations, and the activists I was put in touch with, were all men. Considering the small number of participants, and the non-representative nature of my observations, I cannot draw broader conclusions about this, and have to refer to existing research on gender in anti-immigration and far-right movements (e.g. Scrinzi, 2017; Köttig, Bitzan and Petö, 2017).

3. Repertoires and narratives of anti-refugee protest in Italy

3.1. Repertoires of action

Before addressing anti-refugee protest in the wake of the 2015 summer, it is useful to contextualize far right mobilization in Italy historically. Fig. 1 below reports the number of political claims promoted by far-right organizations, on a yearly basis from 1996 to 2015. Fig. 2, instead, disaggregates the information by type of action, differentiating verbal forms of claims-making from conventional and protest action. While the figures – reporting information in absolute terms – can say little about the overall relevance of far-right claims-making in the Italian public sphere, they provide at least three crucial insights concerning mobilization patterns. First, far right mobilization is punctuated, with peaks during electoral years (2001; 2006; 2008; 2013) suggesting that the observed organizations benefited of available electoral opportunities to increase their visibility. Second, fig. 1 shows that far right claims-making is on the rise in recent years, with increased visibility of far-right organizations in the period 2012-2015. Third, fig. 2 indicates that while verbal statements and conventional actions account for the peaks in claims-making in electoral years (2001, 2006 and 2008), far-right visibility in recent years is primarily due to increased activism in the protest arena.

Fig. 1 - Far right claims-making over time (1996-2015)

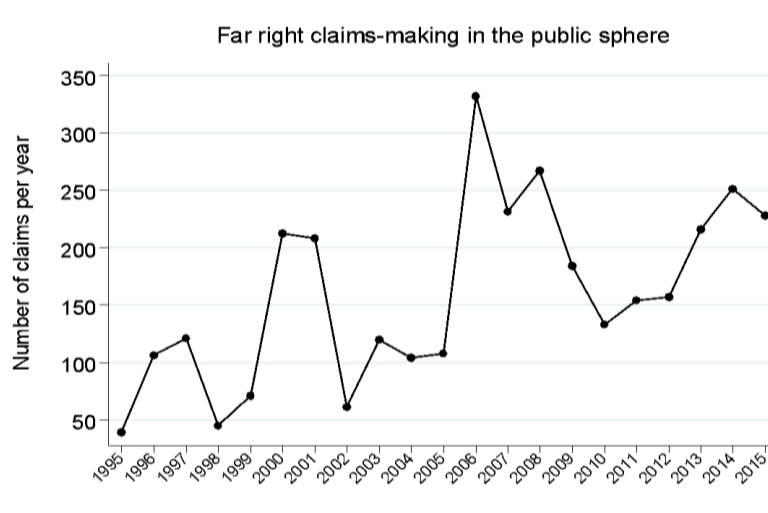


Fig. 2 - Action forms of far-right claims-making (1996-2015)

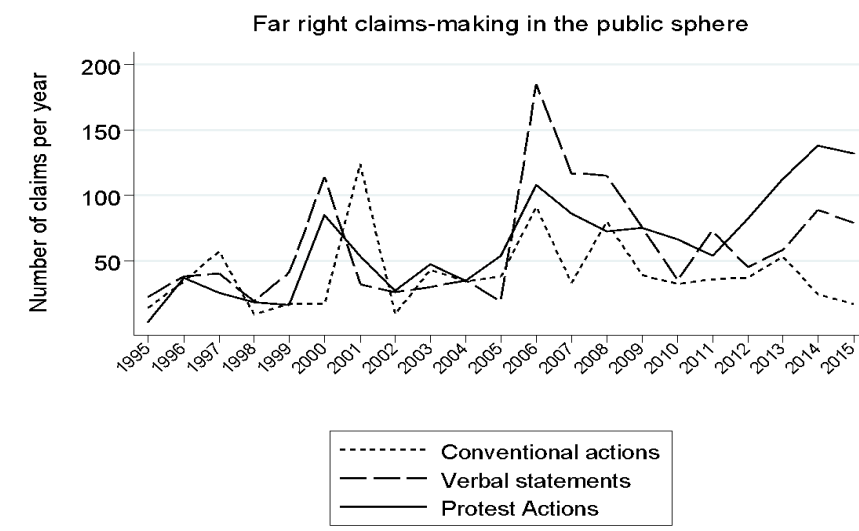


Fig. 3 - Far right claims-making by focus of claim (1996-2015)

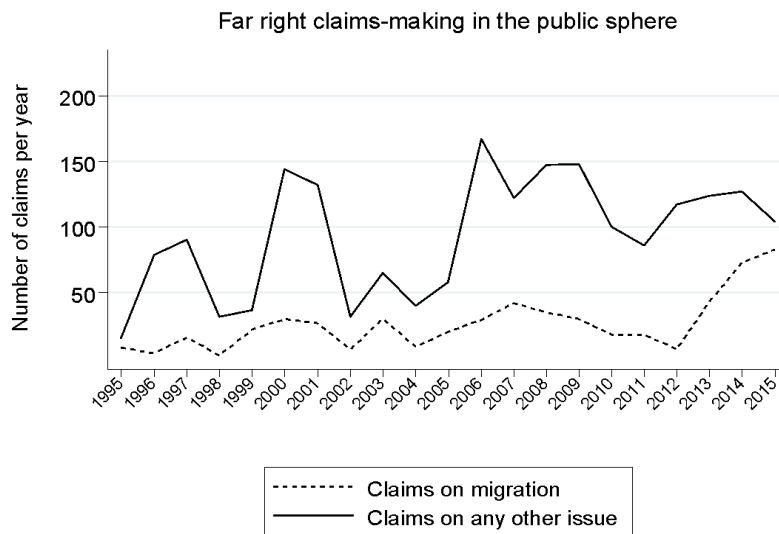
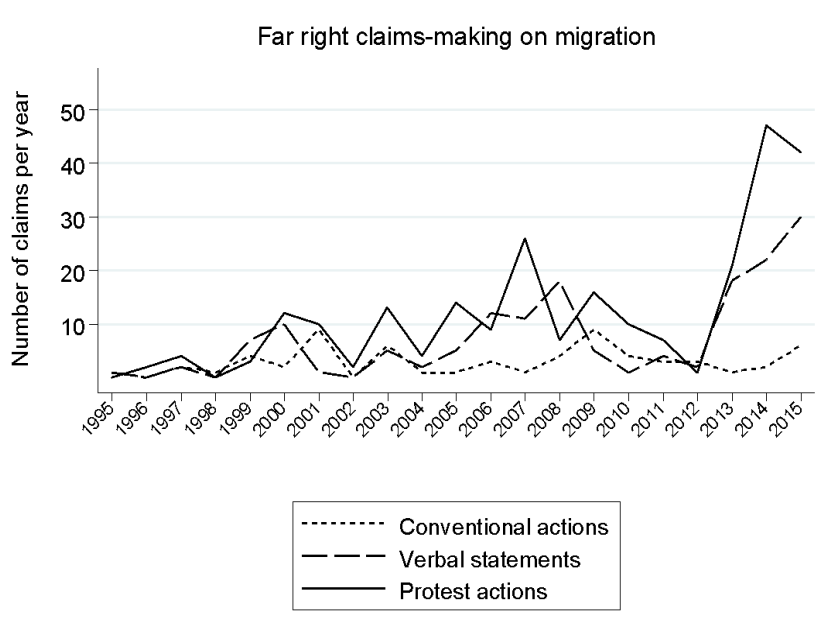


Fig. 4 - Action forms of far-right claims-making on migration (1996-2015)



The data provided so far – however – illustrates far right mobilization on all policy areas, rather than specifically on the issue of interest in this paper: migration. To account for this, Figg. 3 and 4 report the same type of information differentiating claims-making focusing on migration from political claims addressing any other topic or issue. While Fig. 3 shows that migration represents a sizable portion of the overall claims-making of the Italian far right (corresponding to about 20% of the total claims, over the whole period), it also crucially illustrates that political interventions on migration have grown at a much faster rate compared to other policy areas in recent years. In other words, from 2013 the relative attention to migration seems to be on the rise in the political agenda of the far right. Fig. 4 complements this finding showing that it is above all protest action that have characterised the recent engagement of far-right actors on issues related to migration. While conventional repertoires of action have remained largely in line with the figures of previous years, unconventional forms of protest have increased fivefold after 2013.

Even if only illustratively, the analysis of claims-making suggests that far right mobilization has both increased and radicalised in recent years. As it appears, this has largely to do with the increased salience of issues related to migration, which seem to provide the far right with renewed opportunities to mobilized and enhanced visibility in the media. This is further confirmed by qualitative information on the predominant forms of engagement in anti-refugee mobilization. In this respect, the interviews set out to explore modes, targets and repertoires of political action among far-right militants and activists. As it appears, mobilization took on a variety of different forms: while the most common mode of action reported by the interviewees was street protest concerning the opening of refugee centres in local villages and towns in Italy, other types of repertoires also emerged.

3.2. Narratives of anti-refugee mobilization

Since the beginning of the long summer of migration, in fact, the main actors promoting anti-refugee and anti-immigration protest have been engaged in efforts to distance their mobilization from the traditional far right politics, and to reject claims that the committees are either racist or violent. Similar claims are often reproduced by grassroots activists, irrespective of their belonging to organized political parties of the far right at the local, regional or even national level. Disenfranchised activists always stress that the demonstrations emanate from the concerns of ordinary citizens, and that the protests cannot be considered as either left-wing or right-wing. Similarly, while local party leaders have been keen to ensure that no recognizable symbols or flags are shown to the media, far right militants consistently underline that the local branches of established national groups provided logistic support, information and personnel to the various committees, as these were principally composed of citizens with little, if any, prior experience with active politics.

Accordingly, the rationales for action advanced in the interviews combined ideological stances articulating opposition to immigration, emotional attitudes generated by the perception of potential individual and collective threats, as well as pragmatic arguments concerning the management of the 'crisis' by local and national authorities. With respect to the identification of political allies and opponents, most interviewees acknowledge that con-

cealing the symbols of recognizable far right organizations, and presenting the movement as ‘grassroots’ and ‘bottom-up’ was an efficient way to drive the sympathy of the media. Hence, mobilization is understood as a direct intervention against an immediate threat – in most occasion linked with the transfer of refugees in nearby areas, or associated with security and health issues concerning the management of refugee centres. Anti-refugee committees are described as get-togethers of average citizens defending their local territory from an external menace, and are thus open (at least in theory) to everyone, including resident migrants and people with left-wing ideological leanings. By strategically blurring the distinction between opposition to immigration as a global phenomenon, and opposition to some of its specific consequences over local territories, most groups within the anti-refugee movement benefited of a solid network of relationships, including mainstream and local parties, public administrators, grassroots far right movements, and citizens’ associations.

One consequence of this is that, despite the traditional fragmentation of the Italian far right milieu, anti-refugee mobilization combined conventional activity in the institutional arena, with grassroots protest by citizen assemblies and confrontational street protest by social movements organisations. In a village in the north-east of Italy, the mobilization originally started from a citizen assembly that was formed when it was announced that a group of refugees would be hosted in a nearby abandoned building. Gathering support via Facebook, the citizens called on a first mobilization to block the arrival of trucks bringing the furnishing for the temporary camp, and were joined by militants of local far right organisations (*Forza Nuova*), as well as by the mayor and local administration, belonging to the radical right *Lega Nord*. While in a first place, the different groups joined efforts in forming a preside over the front of the building, so that the refugees couldn’t access the centre, they subsequently apportioned labour to increase the chances of efficacy of the protest:

And here we start to move in two ways: *Forza Nuova* takes responsibility of presiding the territory, together with the citizens. They set up tents outside of the entrance, and asked citizens to sleep there for three or four days. Of course, the *Lega Nord* did not do the same thing, they took care of the more institutional side of it: they organised the monitoring by local health authority, and tried to put pressure taking advantage of their position within the institutions (Luca, int. 1).

In most circumstances, thus, there is a coordination between various actors, including mayors or members of local councils from right-wing parties, grassroots associations and movements, and self-organized groups of citizens, which allowed for the simultaneous implementation of different forms of protest. As with other contemporary protest movements, anti-refugee activists with diverse social and political backgrounds coalesce based on a shared discourse through which they try to construct and articulate their common grievances (Jasper, 1997; Melucci, 1980). By providing a set of concepts that relate to activists collectively, this shared discourse enables movement supporters to produce and reconfigure a common identity (Busher, 2015; Castelli Gattinara and Froio, 2014). Here, I outline the four main themes that have emerged in the discourse of anti-refugee activists, and that have provided the core concepts around which the activists have mobilised.

A first theme characterizing anti-refugee mobilization in Italy is the explicit rejection of biological racism and the language of the traditional far right. Rather than referring to racial and ethnic superiority, anti-refugee activists have sought to adopt a more contemporary and politically acceptable language, invading the linguistic territory of their opponents, and dealing with the need to respect the human rights of refugees themselves. The idea is that refugee aid organizations pretend to act in the name of solidarity, but then host refugees in highly degraded structures that do not conform to hygiene and sanitary standards, which is risky for both Italians and refugees. With the goal of inhibiting the settlement of refugee centres, members of political parties, local authorities and mayors engaged in institutional politics, by means of administrative acts and political questioning addressing law-enforcement agencies and national political actors. This included formal procedures to inhibit the use of allegedly ‘dangerous’ or unstable structures designed to host refugees, as well as legal initiatives against the cooperatives in charge of the hosting facilities. Most notably, institutional actions addressed local health authorities, with the goal of certifying that refugee centres are unhealthy or sanitarily unsuited to host refugees. In this respect, opposition to the settlement of refugees is mainly articulated in terms of human rights.

While we brought the issue in the regional council, I went to visit the building that hosted the refugees with a group of journalists. I believe it was unfit for

habitation, not even for animals. Indeed, no one from the village had ever met them, because they were locked in the house, and they lived like non-people. When we came in, we saw that there were women and children who stayed in a flooded and humid apartment. After we brought up the issue, now the house has been whitewashed, they put on tents and a boiler. I find it annoying that whenever we denounce this system we are accused of being racists, but our protests are also about raising awareness on the living conditions of these people (Andrea, int. 8)

Following on from the issue of fake solidarity by NGOs, a second theme associates the humanitarian emergency to corruption in the third sector and to the interests of private organizations operating with refugees. Accordingly, individual activists and grassroots groups promote actions intended to denounce malpractice by refugee aid organizations, which contribute to creating insecurity and illegality. Targeting primarily national and local media, these actions include the production of small documentaries, or amateur journalistic reportages, denouncing the degradation, criminality and illegality concerning the workings of refugee hubs. The material is then circulated via social media and local news agencies, with the goal of coalescing dissent and possibly triggering the intervention of law enforcement agencies. In this perspective, immigration has become a business, and the crisis is the result of the “business of hospitality” (*Accoglienza business* in Italian). While some activists claim that this is part of a conspiracy aimed at destroying Europe and its culture, most of them agree that refugee aid organizations are not interested in the quality of the hosting structures, but only in making profit out of European tenders.

We obviously do not mobilize to divide or based on the colour of the skin. We are against the business of hospitality. We are convinced that someone is making money off this situation. First, of course, there is the European Community, which manages the funds and moves the pawns; and then there are the cooperatives who win tenders for million of euros to host these refugees, or alleged refugees. [...] It is a form of exploitation of human beings. The basic point is this: these people are exploited; they are used for an economic business. Whoever pretends not to realize what is going on, is an accomplice (Luca, int. 1)

A third theme that contributes to the construction of discursive alliances between ordinary citizens, local administrators and grassroots far right actors concerns the critique of the concept of the ‘refugee crisis’. In the insti-

tutional arena, this takes place by conventional means, such as interpellations to ministries, regional governors, and provincial mayors, challenging the idea that Italy is facing a humanitarian crisis, and underlining the political responsibilities of the government in the mismanagement of the inflow of migrants. In the protest arena, the far right mainly resorted to showcase events aimed at attracting the attention of the media and of the citizenry, mobilizing on the claim that asylum seekers hosted in refugee shelters and hospitality centres in Italy, rather than being ‘real refugees’ are instead irregular economic migrants. Overall, the idea is that corrupt NGOs, the mass media, and multiculturalist elites have strategically constructed the concept of ‘refugee crisis’ to generate a moral panic, softening public opinion and legitimizing the ‘invasion’ of Italy by economic migrants.

We must create awareness that what we are facing is not a crisis. It is an invasion. We can’t call it an emergency either, it has been lasting for too long. Every day there are new arrivals. And they don’t come from war-ridden countries. Unless there is a war in Ivory Coast... (Matteo, int. 4).

It is not a crisis. It is a system; it is a project to destroy Europe, the old continent, and its traditions of Christianity and Greek and Roman culture. They want to overturn 2000 years of history. And it is not by chance that the countries that have been most hit are Greece – the homeland of philosophy – and Italy, the country of Roman Law and Christianity (Filippo, int. 9)

When I see the newscast, they show docking boats filled with men in their 20s and 30s; there are only a few women, and even fewer children. Yet, oddly, when there is a shipwreck they say that 20 women, 10 children and only 5 men died. But I see the footage from the Navy, and most them are men; women and children are less than 5%. And when they sink they are all women and children, how strange is that! (Tommaso, int. 6).

Finally, a fourth prominent theme characterizing anti-refugee campaigns is that citizens have no other choice than to protest. The rationale for action is thus a call on unity of all ordinary citizens, which is crucial to understand the way in which the movement presents itself to the outside world. Rather than being directly sponsored by far-right organizations, most protests were in fact officially promoted by grassroots citizen associations with loose links to established far-right parties, such as in the case of *Brescia ai Bresciani* (Brescia to the Brescians), *Roma ai Romani* and many others. Partic-

ipants in fact share the perception that citizens are about to revolt against the injustice that they are subject to by state authorities, and that anger against the establishing – especially politicians and courts – is mounting out of control. While this might partly be related with the composition of citizen assemblies against refugees, political strategy by far-right organizations played a role too. The activists that we interviewed use examples from previous mobilizations to argue that only showcase protests by ‘the citizenry’ can preserve local areas from the arrival of migrants and impinge the transfer of refugees.

Today, politics is all about gaining visibility and getting media coverage to reach a political goal. We made a different choice. We focused on getting territorial space, to reach our goal thanks to the support of the people, their mobilization and their militancy. When we succeeded, it was because there were popular revolts (Pietro, int. 13).

Those who took the streets were people of good will, they wanted to help and they wanted to get engaged. And if this was the case in my village, I guess it can also be the case in Rome. People mobilized to build a secure future for their children, their relatives and themselves. I’ve seen people who care about their territory, its culture and traditions, but also its social characteristics and identity. They didn’t want their land to be denaturalized in this way. It was a feeling of belonging beyond one’s political ideals. It united everyone under the same flag (Giovanni, int. 2).

We put aside our symbols and took the streets trying to involve as much as possible the citizens on the issue of immigration. Therefore, we created specific organizations [...] that prevent that citizens are identified as *Forza Nuova* members, and thus charged with the usual labels of being Fascist or Nazi. Instead, this way we give them the opportunity to take the streets as ordinary citizens, as inhabitants of the city. [...] In fact, we don’t try to make a change by going to TV shows or by participating in public debates. It is only with the barricades, by taking the streets and by pacifically blocking this situation, that we can force the regions, the government and the prefects to change their politics (Tommaso, int. 6).

Conclusive remarks

Protest on issues associated to immigration and refugee politics is an important and growing form of social movement activity. While scholars have devoted increasing attention to the political participation of refugees and migrants, as well as to the unfolding of solidarity movements, they have been considerably less attentive to the study of grassroots far right politics in general, and anti-refugee protest in particular. Using original data from in-depth interviews with anti-refugee activists, and quantitative content analysis of newspaper reports of far-right mobilization, the present paper overviews the development of anti-refugee mobilization in Italy, focusing on the repertoires and narratives of anti-refugee protest in the wake of what has generally been addressed as ‘European migration crisis’.

I started this article by outlining two substantive avenues of research on the contemporary far right politics that could benefit from an in-depth investigation of anti-refugee mobilization in Italy. To begin with, I engaged with the expectation that the crisis would be associated to an increased amount of anti-immigrant demonstrations, and differentiation in the types of groups involved in protest. The quantitative analysis indicated that far-right activism has intensified in recent years, and that it has simultaneously shifted from institutional and conventional forms of action, to street protest. While the available data could not ultimately assess whether this is a symptom of a long-term trend, or rather a strategy responding to current circumstances, the analysis showed that recent years also display increased attention to the issue of migration by the far right. In this sense, it seems that far-right actors successfully seized the opportunity made available with the beginning of the ‘refugee crisis’. In addition, the qualitative analysis showed that the new scenario, rather than polarizing activism in the institutional and in the protest arena, it triggered interaction between actors primarily engaged in conventional and unconventional forms of protest. As a result, anti-refugee mobilization took on a variety of different forms, ranging from direct confrontational actions challenging the opening of refugee centres in local towns, to institutional activities by established representative political organizations, and grassroots activities aimed at raising awareness and mobilization among the citizenry.

In addition, by looking at predominant understandings in anti-refugee protest, I could identify at least four main themes characterizing ongoing

mobilization against immigration. Most notably, the far right mobilizes on a critique of the concept of the ‘refugee crisis’, denouncing the corruption of the asylum and immigrant reception system, while being careful in taking a distance from biological racism and the language of the traditional far right. In doing so, the movement understands, and presents, itself as a collective revolt of ordinary citizens against the establishment. The most prominent theme can be located within the broader process of backlash against multiculturalism (Vertovec and Wessendorf, 2010; Alexander, 2013) that has characterized western Europe for many years, so that discursive coherence was primarily achieved by focusing on individual and collective threats connected to irregular migration. Whilst the narrative about the ‘invasion’ provided a focal point for mobilization, several other themes were woven into the anti-refugee discourse, including the corruption of the political system – especially targeting left-wing multiculturalism and refugee aid organizations –, the need to return to traditional values and ways of life, and the discouragement of ordinary citizens that felt abandoned by the establishment and mainstream politics. The breadth of this discourse thus enables anti-refugee protests to vehicle an array of grievances, ranging from everyday security concerns to the demise of European culture. In this respect, a crucial element has been the way that activists have strategically distanced themselves from the traditional far right. This took place not only in terms of discursive choices, through the explicit rejection of the language of racial superiority, but also in terms of the choices of repertoires of action, through the call to unity to the citizenry and the disguising of contested political symbols and banners. Taking advantage of a composite combination of local administrators, citizens assemblies and far right political actors, and through the strategic imagination of a revolt of citizens against the ruling elites, anti-refugee activists sought to appear as a wide popular uprising against the ‘invasion’ and the politics of migration in Italy.

Future research on anti-immigration politics and far-right exclusionism might come to terms with at least some of the limitations of the present study. As this paper set out to look at prevalent discourse, and forms of mobilization, of the Italian far right, it could only speculate on the success of these strategies in shaping public opinion, and permeating the political mainstream, as suggested in previous studies (Vertovec and Wessendorf, 2010; Van Spanje, 2010). What is more, the dynamics outlined here are inevitably biased by the specificity of the Italian context within the Europe-

an migration route. In line with the remits of this special issue, future comparative research might thus further explore in this direction in order to gain a broader understanding of the implications of the ‘refugee crisis’ on far-right politics in a cross-national perspective. While acknowledging these limitations, the study further illustrates the process by which the far right has transformed its exclusionary narrative by incorporating liberal democratic values. In defining the boundaries of national identity, liberal values are not only used to substantiate the alleged incompatibility between Western and ‘foreign’ traditions, but also mobilized strategically to incorporate notions of respect for human rights. In so doing, the far right thus tries to discredit solidarity movements, while increasing the legitimacy of its calls among broader audiences. This has certainly enabled the movement to penetrate at the local level, and to shape public discourse on international solidarity, as demonstrated by the issuing of Italy’s code of conduct for NGOs, involved in migrant rescue operations in August 2017. Still, future research ought to investigate whether this type of far-right strategies would be as successful in times of decreased media attention, and in absence of the moral panic surrounding immigration characterizing contemporary Italian politics.

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Mobilizing against ‘the invasion’: Far right protest and the ‘refugee crisis’ in Italy

Abstract: While far right politics have long been considered exclusively a party phenomenon, the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ acted as a catalyst for far-right street protest, triggering a diffusion of extra-parliamentary initiatives against migrants and asylum-seekers throughout Western Europe. Based on new empirical data from face-to-face interviews with anti-immigration activists, and a quantitative content analysis of far-right mobilization over the last two decades, the paper pro-

vides an empirical account of the rationale, nature and form of far-right mobilization on migration in Italy. Quantitatively, I use Political Claim Analysis to trace the major characteristics of far-right protest until 2015-2016. Qualitatively, I draw on 13 face-to-face interviews with activists engaged in different forms of anti-immigration protest, to explore the meaning that they attribute to their initiatives and political mobilization. The findings indicate that the emergence of the 'refugee crisis' changed anti-immigration protest in both quantitative and qualitative terms. Not only far-right activism has intensified in recent years, but it also simultaneously shifted from institutional and conventional forms of action, to street protest. The far right successfully seized the opportunities made available by public debates on the crisis, engaging in direct confrontational actions as well as grassroots activities aimed at raising awareness among the citizenry. In this respect, whilst the predominant themes in anti-refugee mobilization discourse was the threat of an 'invasion' by migrants, anti-refugee propaganda mixed several themes that are highly embedded in the Italian political context, such the corruption of the political system, and the disillusionment of ordinary citizens with the establishment and mainstream politics.

Keywords: far right, immigration, refugee crisis, Italy, social movements, political parties.