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FORZA NUOVA AND THE SECURITY WALKS

Squadristo and extreme-right vigilantism in Italy

Pietro Castelli Gattinara

Introduction

If we define vigilantism as a response to the perceived inability of the state to enforce security and the rule of law within its territory, Italy can arguably be considered a particularly ripe context for the emergence of such practices. On the one hand, the legitimacy of state executive agencies has been eroded by years of political crises, and especially so since the beginning of the Great Recession. On the other, perceived insecurity and ethnic competition have been on the rise in concomitance with the so-called European migration crisis, and the related moral panic that this caused in the Italian public debate since 2015 (Castelli Gattinara, 2017). As we shall outline in this chapter, however, these circumstances built on pre-existing factors delimiting the opportunities for vigilante mobilization in Italy, especially under the initiative of extremist right-wing actors. In particular, we focus on political and cultural factors, focusing on the discursive and legal framework regulating urban security and vigilantism in Italy, as well as the historical heritage of Italian fascism and the *squadristo* movement (cf. e.g. De Felice, 1969; Gentile, 2011).

This chapter analyses vigilantism looking at the case of one of the actors that have engaged the most in anti-refugee mobilization in Italy: the extreme right party *Forza Nuova* (New Force, FN). FN was first formed as a grassroots branch of pre-existing extreme right political parties, and subsequently splintered to pursue a more organic collaboration with political and subcultural groups of the neo-fascist right in Italy (including skinhead organizations). As will be discussed, the party's ideology is ultra-nationalist and conservative, and it is articulated primarily in opposition to immigration, globalization and Islam. For several years, FN has organized the so-called 'security walks' (*Passeggiate della sicurezza*), which are considered here as a paradigmatic case of vigilante mobilization. Indeed, they are promoted to ensure street security 'in response to demands by Italians that do not feel

safe at home' (Forza Nuova, 2016). The basic rationale is one in which FN militants take the responsibility of patrolling local areas considered dangerous, thus serving a function that the decaying Italian state is unable – or unwilling – to fulfil. Vigilantism is thus framed not only as a response to criminality brought about by immigration, but also as a reaction to the inefficiency of state authorities (Forza Nuova, 2017a).

The empirical analysis is based on the investigation of the repertoires of protest of Forza Nuova, with a special focus on the activities of street patrolling promoted in the wake of the refugee crisis. While anti-refugee mobilization in Italy integrates different types of actors, including unaffiliated citizen assemblies, far-right political parties, as well as social movement organizations engaged primarily in grassroots politics. We focus here on organized collective actors only, which includes several groups mobilizing on migration and security, such as the *Lega Nord*, the radical right *Fratelli d'Italia*, as well as more extremist groups like *Forza Nuova* and *Casa-Pound Italia*. While *Lega Nord* were the first to introduce citizen squads patrolling the streets in northern Italy, many other groups followed suit in the late 1990s and 2000s. Our choice to focus on Forza Nuova is motivated by the fact that this is the group that invested the most in promoting and diffusing vigilantism in Italy in recent years. To the contrary, other organizations, most notably *CasaPound*, have long neglected the issue of migration and this specific repertoire of action in their agenda of contention, at least until recently (Albanese, Bulli, Castelli Gattinara, & Froio, 2014).

More specifically, we investigate the nature of their vigilante activism, in terms of organization, purposes and self-proclaimed values. To this goal, we use original data from five in-depth interviews with Forza Nuova activists, which we triangulate with the analysis of the content of newspaper reports on their mobilization. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in early 2017. We identified interviewees by snowball sampling to ensure variety in the location, starting from grassroots organizations that had promoted highly mediatized initiatives against refugees over the previous months in Italy (Castelli Gattinara, 2018). Prior to the interviews, we established a rapport with participants through regular contact via telephone and email. The interviews were then conducted in public settings such as bars, shops and restaurants. Albeit the interviews included questions about strategies of opposition to migration, most of the interview relied on an unstructured format intended to generate unsolicited narratives.

We integrate this data with information from media reports of Forza Nuova's vigilante actions, retrieved from news stories extracted from the daily broadsheet *Il Corriere della Sera*, retrieved from the Factiva digital archive (1996–2015). Newspaper articles were selected using a search string intended to capture all articles that contain implicit or explicit reference to the security walks, the main vigilante campaign promoted by the group. Finally, additional sources – such as written, photographic, and audio-visual material produced by the group – were used to contextualize this information.

The chapter is structured as follows, first, we will provide a general overview of the context in which these vigilante activities developed, focusing on economic and political circumstances, with special attention to the opportunities for far-right mobilization that have been triggered by public debates on migration with the beginning of the refugee crisis. We will then introduce the case of Forza Nuova, contextualizing its political worldview and value system in the Italian extreme right milieu. Building upon this framework, we shall illustrate how favourable political opportunities have incentivized the development of vigilante activities throughout the Italian territory, and describe their main features in terms of organization, goals and targets. In doing so, the chapter starts to sketch out some of the crucial meanings that have come to characterize grassroots street activism in FN, assessing the extent to which it was successful in spreading the values of its far-right initiators, and underlining the cultural and political factors that have limited its impact on the Italian public sphere.

Opportunity structures: the political, social and legal context

Italy can be considered a suitable case for the study of vigilante groups. As I shall illustrate in the next section, this has much to do with the cultural embeddedness of vigilantism in the history of Italy's fascist direct activism. But there is more to it. There are, in fact, specific political, social and legal factors that make Italy a case of special interest to observe the emergence and development of vigilantism in Europe. I shall focus here on the main political crises that Italy had to face in its recent history, which are likely to have produced favourable circumstances for the emergence of vigilante groups, and then address more specifically national political opportunities for far-right mobilization in Italy, as well as the legal framework regulating vigilante activities in the country.

To begin with, the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, resulting in at least two full years of recession (2013–2015), heavily affected Italy's economy. Although Italy is considered to have recovered from recession, the growth is still below both the Italian Government's expectations and the Eurozone average. Besides, the Great Recession had a profound impact on the country's political system, with dramatic consequences in terms of the legitimacy of representative institutions and government. The perceived lack of progress on the economic front has progressively eroded the popularity of the large coalition governments since 2011 (Monti; Letta; Renzi; Gentiloni), allowing the main challengers of Italy's mainstream parties, the populist Five Star Movement and the far-right Lega Nord, to take on the anti-establishment mantle and gain much public support. Most indicators on the level of trust in institutions tend to confirm that. According to recent surveys, political trust in public institutions is in a steep decline compared to few years ago: in the period 2010–2016, trust in the judiciary system declined by 12%, and trust in the Italian State by 10 percentage points. As of 2016, only 22% of Italians declared to have at least some trust in the State, and only 10% expressed trust in the parliament (Diamanti, 2016). While people express a much higher level of confidence in law

enforcement agencies, the scores for Italy are still considerably lower than the European average: 68% vs 75% (European Commission, 2017). Most strikingly, if in 2005 the aggregate trust in political institutions in Italy was over 40%, by 2016 this figure had fallen to 26%, after reaching a minimum of 21% in 2014 (Diamanti, 2016).

The public perception of state institutions as either weak or absent was only aggravated with the beginning of the so-called refugee crisis in 2015. Of the one million refugees that crossed the Mediterranean in 2015 alone, 154,000 landed in Italy, resulting in a 31 percentage-point increase in annual asylum application rates (EASO 2016). While holding a position of crucial importance in the Mediterranean migration route to Europe, however, Italy generally represents a country of transit for most asylum seekers. As a result, most political and humanitarian tensions emerged at the borders, since the EU treaties on asylum issues require refugees to stay in the country of first arrival. This had profound humanitarian consequences in the north of the country, as migrants waiting for opportunities to pass into France, Austria, and Switzerland concentrated in border towns lacking appropriate structures to accommodate them, while neighbouring countries strengthened the controls at their borders. The EU government's unwillingness to relax the strict principles of the Dublin treaty, combined with the long-lasting unpreparedness of the Italian authorities in coping with migrant reception, triggered the emergence of a series of small reproductions of the Calais Jungle across the country, especially in border towns and around the train stations of major cities (cf. the Chapter on France in this volume). This provided many opportunities to far-right actors to campaign on law and order. Even though right wing and far political parties have long campaigned on immigration as a source of insecurity, the situation has greatly deteriorated since the beginning of the crisis. If in 2012 'only' 26% of Italians considered immigration a danger for individual security and public order, the amount of people agreeing with this statement reached 33% in 2015 – the year of the 'long summer of migration' – and then further increased to 40% the following year, and reached 46% in 2017 (Demos, 2017).

In terms of political opportunities, right-wing street movements in Italy have regained legitimacy after the so-called 'Years of Lead', and since the mid-2000s they enjoy a rather privileged channel of communication with the electoral arena. In terms of protest and subcultural politics, far-right actors take advantage of the inefficient implementation of anti-racist and anti-fascist sanctions, and mobilize based on a mix of anti-democratic, autocratic, and ultra-nationalist political concepts, mainly borrowed from the ideology of fascist and right-wing authoritarian regimes of the interwar period. In the electoral arena, the right-wing populist Lega Nord and Fratelli d'Italia have long been allied with the political mainstream, and thus receive intensive coverage by the mass media and considerable popularity in opinion polls. In so doing, they enlarge the opportunities for mobilization of other actors in the same area, providing resonance to issues like immigration, security, and opposition to the establishment. Thus, even extremist movements of the far right (such as Forza Nuova) manage every so often to get the attention of the mass media.

The success of the Lega Nord at the local level (in city and regional administrations) and national level (in coalition governments), further increased the political opportunities for vigilantism in Italy. In 2009, the Minister of Internal Affairs in the fourth Berlusconi cabinet – Roberto Maroni, a prominent member of the Lega Nord – took advantage of the public clamour for the access of Bulgaria and Romania to the EU to pass a Security Package. The Package would set urban security at the core of the Italian public agenda, *de facto* legalizing vigilantism. The security package was in reality focused mainly on illegal immigration: it provided new competences to city mayors to intervene in case of urgent security threats, and it was motivated by the allegedly exceptional security circumstances caused by the multiplication of illegal immigrant and Roma camps throughout the territory. A specific clause of the package, moreover, legalized civil patrols, by introducing the possibility to set up citizen committees of volunteers with the goal of patrolling the territory in support of law enforcement and police services in order to relieve situations of urban insecurity and social discomfort. While the measure clarified that these patrols must be activated and coordinated with law enforcement agencies, and that they cannot be equipped with any form of weapon, but only with mobile phones to get in touch with the police and signal episodes of violence to the authorities, it nevertheless elicited much outraged reactions. If opposition parties and left-wing organizations accused the law of facilitating the activities of extremist right-wing organizations, the government insisted that the goal of the measure was precisely that of regulating street patrols, thus integrating civilian citizens in the management of urban security and preventing the diffusion of loose paramilitary groups.

Forza Nuova: ideological profile and background

As illustrated by the debate ensuing the introduction of the security packages outlined above, vigilantism in contemporary Italy cannot be explained without reference to an Italian tradition of considerable political and historical importance: fascist squadristo, i.e. the fascist movement based on armed squads.¹ To date, historians disagree as to whether the historical experience of squadristo can be understood as a distinct and specific category of non-state violence, thus comparable with non-European vigilantism and terrorism. Some address squadristo as a form of ritual violence – promoted by paramilitary groups with the consent of local and economic élites – against trade union leaders and other ‘subversives’ (Clark, 1988). To the contrary, others underline that there is a difference between party-militias, or vigilante groups complementing the legal activities of a political party, and militia-parties understood as self-standing political movements, such as Italian fascism in its ‘blackshirt’ phase (Suzzi Valli, 2000). What matters for the purposes of this chapter, however, is that the myth of squadristo and its revolutionary purity survived the fall of the fascist regime, especially among young fascists. On the one hand, thus, the memory of the fascist action squads is often used to stigmatize right-wing activism and street patrolling, to the extent that the very concept of ‘vigilantism’ bears a pejorative connotation in its Italian use. On the other, the reference to the

blackshirts also works as an internal motivational incentive for mobilization by young right-wing extremist, especially in terms of direct activism (see e.g. Albanese et al., 2014; Froio & Castelli Gattinara, 2017).

The crucial role played by squadristo in Italy's fascist culture can be appraised in terms of the concept of 'fascism-movement' advocated by Renzo De Felice (1969). Accordingly, fascism must be understood in terms in two different streams, distinguishing between a form of revolutionary, anti-capitalist, and overwhelmingly secular movement phase, and the more conservative, institutional fascism of the regime. In the post-war years, the interpretation of fascism-movement came to be identified with radical factions pursuing revolutionary ideals and vitalistic dynamism, while rejecting the decadent democratic system (Ignazi, 2003). Forza Nuova can be located in this stream of Italy's post-war fascism. Its origins, in fact, date back to the 1990s, which marked the transformation of what had once been the most successful extreme right party in Europe – the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI) – into a party of government (Ignazi, 2003; Rao, 2014). Rejecting the moderate turn imposed by the party leadership, a number of prominent members belonging to the 'movement' faction of MSI founded the neo-fascist *Fiamma Tricolore* (Tricolour Flame, FT). At first, Forza Nuova represented the grassroots branch of the newly born party, reproducing the traditional differentiation between street activism and engagement in the institutional arena of the Italian extreme right. In 1997, Forza Nuova officially splintered from FT and set out its own agenda, in direct competition with FT for hegemony over direct activism in the Italian far right milieu.

While a strong portion of Italian post-war fascism was traditionally secularist, a trademark of FN's politics was its strong identification with the Roman Catholic tradition, combining ultra-religious values with the legacy of Italian fascism. Based on the idea that politics should regain its spirituality, this resulted in a series of campaigns on cultural liberalism and civil rights issues, especially with respect to abortion, euthanasia and same-sex marriages. Over the 1990s and early 2000s, FN infiltrated organized soccer clubs to recruit militants and radicalize Italian hooliganism, as well as the subcultural music and skinhead milieu to attract young people towards the movement (Caldiron, 2013). While the interpenetration between extreme right ideology, hooliganism and skinhead culture soon became the trademark of FN, the group also tried to gain legitimacy in the electoral arena. Originally, it did so by collaborating with other splinter groups of this political area. From 2008 onwards, however, FN runs its own independent candidates in national and local elections, generally with little success. Similar to the factions that have characterized Italy's post-war fascism, FN displays a double tendency, seeking respectability as a political party, while claiming to be 'revolutionary' in the protest arena (Campani, 2016). As a street movement, it engaged in protests against globalization and migration, including the storming of demonstrations for gender equality, as well as other political initiatives organized in cooperation with skinhead organizations. From 2008 onwards, however, FN has run its own independent candidates in national and local elections, generally with little success.

Forza Nuova's political proposals are summarized in its eight programmatic points, which largely configure its general ideological worldview. First, the group demands the withdrawal of the Italian legislation on abortion (1), the development of new family policies aimed at demographic growth (2), and the recognition of the Roman Church as the spiritual leader of the nation (3). In addition, it asks that all forms of free masonry and secret societies are abolished (4), and that the national public debt is cancelled (5). While FN understandably opposes the legislation criminalizing fascist organizations in Italy (6), it also demands the introduction of a corporatist system replacing trade unions (7). Still, the issue on which FN mobilizes the most is certainly immigration (8), calling for a total shutdown of Italian borders, alongside the 'humanitarian' repatriation of all migrants currently residing in Italy. Immigration is, in fact, considered a threat to the 'harmonious coexistence among peoples', 'a disturbance to public order' and a source of 'cultural heritage loss'.

Since its origins, FN showed a predilection towards engaging in protest against migrants and immigration, which represent by far the top priority of the group. This only increased with the beginning of the so-called 'refugee crisis', which offered the group new opportunities to mobilize at the local as well as national level, while also being able to set up alliances with grassroots organizations engaged in anti-refugee protest (Castelli Gattinara, 2018). It is in this framework that FN rediscovered the practice of the so-called *Passeggiate della Sicurezza* – 'security walks', which represent the instance of vigilantism that we will address in detail in the next section.

The security walks: Forza Nuova's vigilante activism

The security walks are one of the main political activities promoted by the central organization of Forza Nuova. While, as we have seen, the Italian legal system is rather permissive towards private citizen squads patrolling the streets, the security walks promoted by FN do not qualify as legal for two main reasons. First, the law was meant to legalize already existing groups – specifically the patrols of the Lega Nord in northern regions – whereas it tended to discourage the creation of new ones. The irregular and non-continuous nature of FN's patrols, which emerge at times mainly in response to criminality news stories, could hardly fit this legal framework. Second, patrols must be organized in active cooperation between private citizens, mayors and law enforcement agencies. Also in this respect, FN's walks can hardly meet existing regulations.

There are, in fact, strong promotional motivations behind the organization of the security walks, which FN hopes to use to increment its public image as well as its rooting in local settings. The group differentiates its political action in a set of areas of intervention, each of which is allocated a specific page in the web portal of the organization. We find there FN's international allies (the Alliance for Peace and Freedom), its youth section and the media it uses for internal and external communication, including a web radio, a dedicated magazine, and a website selling clothing, merchandise and accessories of FN. In addition, there are four thematic areas of political intervention: environmental action (e.g. ethical consumerism),

sport activities (gyms and leisure time), solidarity (distribution of food, charity, and support for the disabled and the unemployed) and security. Specifically, the security walks are presented as follows:

Responding to the demands of so many Italians who feel less and less safe at home, Forza Nuova has launched the Security Walks across the areas most at risk of dozens of small and large cities: when the state abandons its citizens, our militants engage in patrolling the most dangerous streets at night. Our goal is to give confidence back to citizens, and to reach the deterrent effect that the absence of institutions fails to guarantee.

(Forza Nuova, 2017b)

Throughout its political life, the FN promoted multiple good-will activities to improve its public image, especially by means of solidarity actions and direct social initiatives addressing Italian citizens only. The security walks are understood as a similar form of engagement. On the one hand, this enables the group to increase its visibility and legitimacy at the local level. On the other, it provides FN with leverage to be used when negative news stories concerning its members and supporters are published, including ones having to do with the security walks. Indeed, while there have been multiple episodes of violence promoted by far-right activists in Italy, there has been little evidence directly connecting the use of physical violence to groups engaged in security walks initiatives. As I shall illustrate, FN appraises security walks as having two combined, and complementary, functions. On the one hand, they offer a ‘concrete’ help to citizens, *de facto* replacing the inefficiency and unresponsiveness of the state and law enforcement agencies. On the other, they are expected to offer an ‘example’ of virtuous behaviour, which citizens ought to follow in view of a mass revolt against the elites.

The security walks were originally launched in the mid-2000s, taking advantage of the opportunities made available by the abovementioned security packages introduced by the government, which legalized the patrolling of streets by private citizens. At that time, in fact, the moral panic that followed the EU enlargement induced other right-wing political entrepreneurs to promote similar initiatives, especially among Northern League mayors and local politicians. Operatively, security walks gather 5 to 15 people, including members of FN and unaffiliated citizens, who meet in allegedly dangerous neighbourhoods, and patrol the streets by walking across the area (Interview IT5). Participants are unarmed and they do not wear specific uniforms. Yet, they are recognizable, as they wear reflective bibs to increase their visibility at night and to mark membership in the patrolling group. The idea is that participants carry with them a mobile phone in order to call the police in case they get across a critical situation, while they are not supposed to intervene directly to restore public order.

The rationale for these actions is that while insecurity and criminality have grown in Italy, the state has given up on its responsibility of punishing deviance. In this respect, a crucial discursive function is played by the notion of ‘dissuasion’, in

that vigilante activism is framed as a form of dissuasion against criminals willing to commit offenses (Interview IT3). Typically, the patrols take place in response to mediatized crime stories and local debates about urban decay and illegality. Participants understand these initiatives as dissuasive of potential criminal offenses and thus complementary to the activities of law enforcement agencies (Interview IT2). Accordingly, the vigilantes involved in security walks do not operate covertly, and generally publicize the initiatives in order to get support from the local citizenry and visibility in the media. At the same time, the security walks are hardly ever organized in coordination with law enforcement agencies and prefectures. To circumvent these restrictions and avoid legal sanctions, FN normally promotes vigilante activities such as distribution of pamphlets by groups of a maximum of three people, so that the group does not have to get prior authorization from the police (Interview IT3).

Territorial branches are thus in charge of setting up the patrolling activities at the local level. Among the self-proclaimed ideological motivations for their engagement, there is the logic of ‘order against chaos’ and the ‘need to defend the people’ (Interview IT4). Since law and order issues represent a core feature of far right political agendas, ideological reasons explain why political practices of street surveillance have represented a constant feature in FN activism from the very early days of the movement. At the same time, strategic reasons connected with the legitimacy of far-right political mobilization explain the varying diffusion and visibility of this form of direct activism over time. In FN’s rhetoric, citizens understand the patrols as a response to the increasing demands for security:

We only go where we are called: every day we receive emails, warnings and calls, from people who want to drag our attention to particular situations of illegality. Yet, these people live there, so they are afraid to get exposed ... because the state gives them no protection. And thus us, Forza Nuova, takes the street. And then, slowly but increasingly, citizens find the bravery and they join us in the security walks.

(Interview IT3)

FN’s vigilantism has escalated in concomitance with favourable political opportunity structures at the national level (e.g. when the security packages were approved), as well as advantageous discursive opportunities at the local level, especially in terms of moral panics over the relocation of asylum seekers and criminality stories involving migrants and ethnic minorities. Indeed, in some circumstances (e.g. following public controversies on the management and location of asylum seekers in Italy), some groups also engaged in guarding specific facilities at the risk of being assigned to host migrants, as well as train stations (Interview IT1 and Interview IT6). The analysis of the media visibility of this form of vigilantism tends to confirm that. Using the FACTIVE database for the mainstream quality newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera*, I identified 146 news stories mentioning FN and the security walks, covering a period ranging from early 2007 to late 2017. The mentions, however, are distributed

unequally over this period, since 93 of these news stories (corresponding to 65 per cent of the total) were published in the last two years only, and in particular from summer 2015, i.e. the beginning of the so-called refugee crisis. Indeed, the news stories on security walks often report claims-making by FN activists and high-rank officials, which promote these initiatives by taking positions on related issues. Accordingly, migration should be stopped because Italy's border towns cannot become the 'dump of Europe'; the citizenship regime based on *Ius Soli* should be rejected because it leads to 'multicultural chaos, Islamic predominance and imported mafias'; and refugees are 'not welcome' because Italy's resources must be devoted to help the citizens who suffered from earthquakes in 2016.²

While officially the target of these initiatives is 'criminality' in general, it has been clear since the beginning that the real targets are migrants, refugees, and the Roma, whose presence in Italian cities and neighbourhood is associated with criminality, illegality and decay. With the beginning of the European migration crisis, moreover, FN has slightly changed the way in which it presents its security walks, declaring that their objective is to stop anyone who commits crimes 'against Italians' (Forza Nuova, 2017c). In a recent call for participation, FN quite straightforwardly appraised the patrols as 'security walks against extra-communitarian criminality', and adding that people must come to the streets to avoid 'the Islamization of our cities and neighbourhoods'. In recent months situation has been deteriorating as public attention to migration, integration and asylum issues has increased. The context of the urban peripheries of Rome is a case in point, as FN has increasingly organized its street patrols in areas that host reception centres and shelter facilities for asylum applicants. Rumours about tensions between native and immigrant residents have acted as triggers for the mobilization of FN, leading first to the organization of vigilante groups, and then to the promotion of demonstrations demanding that the reception centres are shut down.³ In this context, there have been multiple reports of street violence against migrants as well as clashes between the police and FN's militants.⁴ The groups that were originally formed in the framework of FN's vigilante patrols have also been responsible for confrontational actions and violence against asylum centres and the NGOs in charge of hosting migrants.⁵

When the citizens saw the truck with the people from the cooperative approaching, they startled, they took on the street and blocked it. I think we can say it was basically an uprising. [...] There were no clashes with the police. The cooperative workers ran away, and left the camion with the supplies there ... and then someone set on fire the televisions and the mattresses.

(Interview IT1).

As can be noted from the above quotation, the narrative about security walks focuses primarily on the role of 'citizens'. Yet, there are no official numbers on the participants and supporters engaged in the patrols, neither at the local nor at the national level. As of today, FN can count on a few thousand militants throughout

the country (the last official data for 2001 reported little more than 2000 members). Accordingly, we can say little about the specific characteristics and socio-economic background of the people engaging in vigilantism. In our interviews, FN activists declare that the operations of street patrolling at night also helps promoting the visibility of FN in degraded neighbourhood, with the goal of spreading propaganda and possibly attracting new recruits. Yet, FN militants also acknowledge that it is very rare that citizens that are not already politically engaged with FN take part to this type of activities (Interview IT1 and Interview IT2). In September 2017, FN called for a nation-wide set of patrols in all neighbourhoods ‘out of control’, and where the elderly and women are considered to be in danger. The stated objective of the initiative combined propagandistic messages concerning the need to restore ‘hope’ for Italians, with considerably more threatening messages: ‘we want to send a warning to criminals: Italians have run out of patience and they will not tolerate that their sisters are touched’ (Forza Nuova, 2017c). Accordingly, the national headquarters asked territorial branches to invite the following categories of people to take part to patrols: football supporters, ‘because they feel a strong and lively attachment to their cities’; taxi drivers ‘for their knowledge of the territory and civic engagement’; boxers, ‘for their bravery and discipline’.

In conclusion, the analysis shows that FN is careful in not using – at least explicitly – the stigmatizing vocabulary of vigilantism, and presents its street patrolling activities in a way that is compatible with the political and discursive context of Italy. At the same time, the framing of vigilantism must be coherent with FN’s ideological and programmatic apparatus. Accordingly, I suggest conceptualizing this form of activism in the framework of the notion of direct activism. Previous literature appraises direct (social) actions as a specific form of political contention aiming to offer a direct solution to phenomena perceived as dysfunctional, which accordingly can be distinguished from traditional repertoires addressing representative institutions and demanding the mediation of the state for the solution of public problems (Bosi & Zamponi, 2015; Froio & Castelli Gattinara, 2017). The group claims to provide a service to the community, replacing the inefficiency of state authorities in delivering security and preventing crime, and thus reinforcing the link between the ‘movement and the people’ (Interview IT4). At the same time, vigilantism transforms the very meaning of political participation in FN, as militancy becomes a form of ‘patriotic Christian solidarity’ (Interview IT4). This has to do with an organicist understanding of the nation, in which each individual is conceived as a parcel of the same body of the people. By organizing the patrols, FN militants show the way in which Italians ought to behave, setting up the example for the behaviour of others. In this respect, vigilantism is expected to ‘shake the conscience of the citizens, giving them a sense of nation, land, of homeland’ (Interview IT1). In short, while vigilantism is to be understood as a political repertoire based on direct activism, its deep ideological and symbolic implications perfectly fit with fascist world-views and especially with FN’s self-proclaimed investment in ‘a revolutionary project based on an idea of counter power’ (Interview IT4).

Concluding remarks

This chapter analysed vigilantism as a response to the perceived inability of the state to enforce security and the rule of law. Empirically, it looked at *Forza Nuova*, which stood out in recent years for its aggressive campaigning against migrants and refugees, and at the specific case of the security walks, promoted to ensure street security for Italian families. Considering the political and economic turmoil that Italy has suffered in recent decades, and the ensuing crisis of legitimacy characterizing its political system, it was suggested that Italy would offer fertile grounds for the development of vigilante activities. Indeed, vigilantism is facilitated by political and discursive opportunities available for collective street action by extreme right organizations. On the one hand, Italy displays a favourable legal framework for street patrolling by groups of private citizens, which were inherited from the security policies implemented by centre-right and Lega Nord coalition governments in the late 2000s. On the other, the historical legacy of Italian fascism and squadristo triggers motivational incentives for street mobilization by extreme-right activists, especially in terms of direct activism, albeit arguably also representing a discursive constraint for the legitimization of vigilantes in the public sphere.

At the most basic level, the rationale of vigilantism by *Forza Nuova* is that of serving a function that the Italian state is unable – or unwilling – to fulfil. Yet, the specific content of vigilantism is framed depending on external circumstances, so that at times of economic distress the focus is on the lack of resources for law enforcement agencies, whereas during political crises street patrolling is understood as a response to the unresponsiveness of the government and the inefficiency of the state. Unsurprisingly, therefore, recent public debates on asylum have contributed to making the linkage between vigilantism and opposition to migration more explicit and visible. In this context, the impression is that the moral panic that followed the so-called refugee crisis facilitated the radicalization of FN militants and supporters. In this respect, while *Forza Nuova* ostensibly has been one of the first actors engaging in this form of activism, and despite being the group engaging in it most systematically, it is certainly not alone. Vigilante patrols are increasingly embedded in broader cycles of demonstrative protests, so that the groups that had originally formed to ensure neighbourhood watch become an integral component of anti-refugee collective action. By integrating street patrolling with political contestation, vigilantism in Italy has thus also progressively turned to political confrontation with – and at times even violence against – opponents and the police.

Notes

- 1 Squadristo consisted of fascist squads organizing strikebreaking, punitive missions and vigilante reprisals against revolutionary socialist and communist groups in the period 1918–1924. The rationale of these actions was precisely that public authority was either absent or too timid in disciplining criminal acts, strikes, seizures and occupations (Suzzi Valli, 2000).

- 2 M. Sasso, *L'Espresso*, 20 September 2016: 'Forza Nuova e la festa sul campo dei partigiani'. Retrieved from <http://espresso.repubblica.it/attualita/2016/09/20/news/forza-nuova-e-la-reunion-sul-campo-dedicato-ai-partigiani-1.283453>.
- 3 L. Matarrese, *Huffington Post Italia*, 8 September 2017: 'La ronda di Forza Nuova al Tiburtino terzo. Tensione con la polizia, rimbombano gli slogan: Roma ai romani'. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.it/2017/09/08/la-ronda-di-forza-nuova-al-tiburtino-terzo-in-cerca-di-migranti_a_23202125/.
- 4 *Il Messaggero*, 9 September 2017, 'Roma, Forza Nuova sfida la Questura: "La passeggiata di sicurezza si farà"'. Retrieved from http://www.ilmessaggero.it/roma/cronaca/forza-nuova_passeggiata-3226845.html.
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List of interviews

- IT1: Local activist Forza Nuova, 17 January 2017.
- IT2: Local Activist Forza Nuova, 17 January 2017.
- IT3: National-level official Forza Nuova, 23 January 2017.
- IT4: National-level official Forza Nuova, 24 January 2017.
- IT5: National-level official Forza Nuova, 6 February 2017.