

Radicalization and deradicalization in Italian migration political debate in the time of COVID-19 pandemic*

Angela Genova

Dipartimento di Economia, Società e Politica - Università degli Studi di Urbino Carlo Bo

Elisa Lello

Dipartimento di Economia, Società e Politica - Università degli Studi di Urbino Carlo Bo

Abstract

In the history of societies, pandemics have been associated with increasing violence against foreigners and xenophobic discrimination. This study investigates right-wing radicalization process on the migration public debate in Italy, testing the hypothesis that the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed it forward. Radicalization is investigated in the dialectical relationship with the de-radicalization process. Critical discourse analysis is applied to the discourses of the main political parties representatives before and during the COVID-19 pandemic emergency. The results show the attempt, by the main right wing political actor, to exploit the pandemic in order to fuel anti-migrant radicalization of ideas, even if this effort didn't meet the expected results. The study also highlights the weakness of center left-wing parties in counteracting this process of radicalization and the key role played, in this respect, by the highest Catholic authority. This study contributes to the theoretical debate on radicalization processes, highlighting the dialectical perspective between the dynamics of radicalization and de-radicalization.

Keywords: radicalization and deradicalization, conveyor belt, Fratelli Tutti, Twitter, critical discourse analysis

Riassunto. *Radicalizzazione e deradicalizzazione nel dibattito politico sull'immigrazione in Italia al tempo della pandemia*

Nella storia delle società, le pandemie sono state associate all'aumento della violenza contro gli stranieri e alla discriminazione xenofoba. Questo studio analizza il processo di radicalizzazione a destra del dibattito sull'immigrazione in Italia, mettendo alla prova l'ipotesi che questo sia stato ulteriormente amplificato dall'emergenza pandemica COVID-19. Il processo di radicalizzazione è analizzato nel rapporto dialettico con quello di deradicalizzazione. La *Critical discourse analysis* viene applicata alla comunicazione dei principali attori politici prima e durante l'emergenza pandemica. I risultati mostrano il tentativo, da parte del più importante attore politico di destra, di sfruttare la pandemia per alimentare la radicalizzazione delle idee anti-immigrazione, sebbene questo tentativo non abbia conseguito i risultati attesi. Lo studio evidenzia anche la debolezza dei partiti di sinistra nel processo di deradicalizzazione e il ruolo chiave in questo senso svolto dalla massima autorità cattolica. Questo studio contribuisce al dibattito teorico sui processi di radicalizzazione, evidenziando la prospettiva dialettica tra le dinamiche di radicalizzazione e deradicalizzazione.

Parole chiave: radicalizzazione e deradicalizzazione, conveyor belt, Fratelli Tutti, Twitter, critical discourse analysis

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1. Introduction

«Radicalization can be defined as the process whereby people become extremist» (Neumann, 2013, p. 874), occurring in a period of time and involving different factors and dynamics as highlighted by Moghaddam (2005), McCauley and Moskalenko (2008) and

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Baran (2005).

Moghaddam (2005) developed the metaphor of a six-floor narrowing stairway in describing the radicalization process. The ground floor is characterized by the perception of injustice and relative deprivation. The first floor looks for different possibilities. The second floor is dominated by anger against the people considered responsible for injustice. The third floor implies a moral engagement. The fourth floor implies becoming part of a usually terroristic group. The fifth and last floor is dehumanizing people considered as an enemy and through this process legitimizing the violence against them. This approach refers to an individual level, and the difference between moral engagement and being part of a violent group outlines the boundary between radical opinion and radical action.

In the pyramid model (McCauley and Moskalkenko, 2017), the base of the pyramid is characterized by a neutral individual who does not care about a political issue. Higher on the pyramid is the place of sympathizers, who believe in the cause but do not justify violence. Still higher are the justifiers, who are in favor of violence to support the cause. At the top of the pyramid are those with a personal moral obligation to apply violence in defense of the issue.

Zeyno Baran highlighted the role of complementary organizations taking part in an ideological struggle as a “conveyor belt” (2005, p. 68), even if they are not directly involved in action. Radicalization is in fact characterized by different levels of involvement, separating radicalization of opinion from radicalization of action. Radicalization can therefore lead to different ideas as a cognitive phenomenon but might also be defined by actions as results of ideas, actions which are violent and coercive. Academics have set a distinction between the cognitive radicalization process and violent extremism as “action pathways” (Borum, 2011a, p. 2). Radicalization of ideas and of actions are both strongly related to emotional experiences (McCauley and Moskalkenko, 2017). Emotions do not just drive individual actions but also outline the landscape of our social life and are part of the ethical discourse. Social order is related much more to emotions than to perfect laws (Nusbaum, 2001).

Nevertheless, extremism is a slippery concept, related to political ideas but also to

methods. Political ideas constitute extremism when they totally conflict with society's core values (Neuman, 2013), while methods of extremism are characterized by the use of any mean disregard for the life, liberty and human rights of other people (Scruton, 2007).

Radicalization studies have emerged as a specific academic area of interest after the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001 (Antonelli, 2020). In the last decade, radicalization has become an interpretive key to investigate the development of extremism in political ideas, in the context of “cultural backlash” (Norris and Inglehart, 2018) to the libertarian and cosmopolitan boost fostered by the Silent Revolution (Inglehart, 1977; Kitschelt and McGann, 1995; Ignazi, 2003).

Despite the different and complementary interpretations of the radicalization process, scholars agree that “becoming extremist” is a process, and the main objective of radicalization studies is to investigate the context and characteristics of this process (Borum, 2011b). Context plays a crucial role, because in supporting or engaging in activities deemed (by others) to be in violation of important social norms, radicalization implies a dialectical process between different and opposite positions – radicalization and de-radicalization (Kruglanski *et al.* 2014; Della Porta and LaFree, 2012). Therefore, to investigate the radicalization process, it is necessary at the same time to focus on the context and specifically on the de-radicalization process as well (Della Porta, 1995; Della Porta and Haupt, 2012).

Moreover, Kruglanski *et al.*'s (2014) radicalization model has identified three different crucial components: the motivational component at the individual level, the ideological component at the meso-organizational level and the macro social action level. According to this theoretical approach, the emergence of radical right-wing parties in Western societies might be considered a radicalization process at the meso-ideological level and level of political organizations.

Despite the increasing attention to the radicalization process concerning migration policy (Dal Lago, 2004; Palidda, 2007; Gargiulo, 2019), this issue has not yet been investigated in the framework of the COVID-19 pandemic emergency. Focusing on the Italian national case, this study investigates the context and characteristics of radicalization and de-

radicalization in the migration political debate before and during the emergence of the health crisis.

Epidemics have been associated with increasing violence against foreigners (Chase, 2004; Markel, 2004; 1997; Leavitt, 1996; Barr, McKay and Doroshov, 2021). Individual and systematic xenophobic discrimination is strongly associated with epidemic disease. In the face of past epidemics, immigrants were also unfairly discriminated against during the last century, as argued by Markel (2004), dealing with outbreaks of typhus, cholera, tuberculosis, plague, trachoma, HIV/AIDS and mysterious gastrointestinal symptoms in the USA in the 1900s (1997, 2004). An irrational and aggressive response to a contagion is not new to the history of infectious diseases within a scapegoat logic (Girard, 1987), and Markel (2004) has pointed out that it is still with us even now. Nonetheless, aggressive and irrational response to contagion might be also be related not directly to the pandemic in itself, but to the several effects of the pandemic in a society (for example concerning the impact of pandemic on the economic and social systems).

The main hypothesis is that the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed forward the right-wing radicalization process against migrant people in Italy that has developed in the last few years before the pandemic.

In societies in which emotions play a crucial role (Nussbaum, 2001), an institution's position is fundamental to outline the social responses to dramatic events such as pandemics. We investigate the radicalization process promoted by the main right-wing political party against migrant people. Nevertheless, within the radicalization theoretical framework, the analysis focuses on radicalization and de-radicalization processes (Kruglanski *et al.*, 2014; Della Porta, 1995), considering the six-floor narrowing stairway model outlined by Moghaddam (2005), McCauley and Moskalenko's pyramid model (2008; 2017) and Baran's "conveyor belt" perspective (2005).

Therefore, this study is led by the following research questions:

- 1) Has the COVID-19 pandemic pushed forward the anti-migration right-wing radicalization process of ideas in Italy?
- 2) Within the dialectical process between radicalization and de-radicalization regarding

migration debate in Italy, what has been the role of left wing parties and of the context?

2. Background: the radicalization of the debate on migration within the left-right cleavage

In order to comprehend the current dynamics in radicalization and de-radicalization processes in migration policy in Italy, it is useful to contextualize them within a broader time period, paying attention to the transformations that have affected the political dialectic and the degree of polarization between the right and the left over the past few decades. Two processes can be detected as particularly relevant.

On the one hand, the process of cartelization affecting traditional mainstream parties – the successors of the socialist and social-democratic party family as well as those of the liberal-conservative one – fostered a progressive depolarization and convergence process, at least concerning decisive issues regarding economic, labor, and redistributive policies (Katz and Mair, 1995; 2009; Blyth and Katz, 2005).

The other significant process is the rotation of the right-left axis due to the impact of the Silent Revolution tied to the affirmation of post-materialist values between the end of the 1960s and the following decade (Inglehart, 1977). At first, parties on the Left evolved in a libertarian direction by incorporating post-materialist values, such as the fight against discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation and the related battles for the extension of civil rights, as well as cosmopolitanism. Their identity and difference with respect to the (center) right parties would also be increasingly in play on these issues, even on a symbolic level, while the distances on more properly economic and redistributive issues, consistently with the cartelization thesis, tended to lose relevance.

However, the social transformations induced by globalization and the affirmation of neoliberalism have led over time to the worsening of inequalities and the spread of insecurity (Bauman, 1999; Beck, 1992; Bourdieu, 1998) and feelings of “displacement”

(Ignazi 2003). This has encouraged demands for defenses against multiculturalism and migratory flows, the need for reassurance and the desire to return to closed identities, characterized in an ethnic-cultural and exclusive sense. This process has contributed since the 1980s to the conspicuous affirmation in Europe of the parties of the new radical right (Kitschelt and McGann, 1995; Ignazi, 2003), leading in times closer to our days to a cultural backlash in which some observers identify the origin of contemporary neo-populism (Norris and Inglehart, 2018; Bazzoli, Lello 2021; Bordignon, Ceccarini, Diamanti 2018).

These two historical processes have determined, in their meeting and intertwining, a shift of the center of gravity of the political debate towards the right, not only on the traditional issues of the right / left opposition – for example, labor regulation, the role of the state in the economy and welfare – but also around the issue of immigration.

In fact, on the one hand, the radical right-wing neo-populist parties have raised the need to defend societies against “uncontrolled” immigration, insistently described in terms of invasion (Dal Lago, 2004), as one of the priorities of the political agenda and of their own identity, with the effect of producing also in Italy an increase in the perception of the salience of the issue.

It is important to note that there does not seem to have been a change in the opinions of Italians on the issue (they would not have become nastier, in short) but rather a sorting process (Schadee, Segatti and Vezzoni, 2019). In other words, there has been a realignment by voters who previously shared orientations of distrust and fear towards immigration who, once the issue has been perceived as more important, have moved towards those parties that show better issue ownership (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik 1996) – that is, which are deemed more skilled and credible in addressing the problem. In this way, the rapid and vertiginous growth of consensus in 2018 and 2019 towards the radical right-wing parties Fratelli d'Italia and above all the Lega¹ could be explained.

On the other hand, it seems plausible to hypothesize that this radicalization on the positions of the right has been fostered by the weakness and uncertain credibility of the

¹ The League, for example, passes from 4.09% of votes in the 2013 general elections to 17.3% in 2018, and then doubles its percentage of votes in the European elections of the following year (34.3%) and in some of the regional consultations of the same year, for example in Abruzzo (27.5%), Piedmont (37.1%) and Umbria (37.0%).

center-left in mastering the question, that will be exploited, as we will see, by right wing rhetorics.

Hence, this background on the right and left wings' relationships develops the hypothesis that the left-wing political parties have not been the protagonists of the de-radicalization process in Italy concerning migration policy, suggesting the need to research other actors and organizations.

3. Research design

3.1. The data collection and procedure

To investigate the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the radicalization and the de-radicalization concerning migrant debate in Italy, this study explores political discourses before and during the pandemic time. In the dialectical process between radicalization and de-radicalization processes, the research investigates the role played by selected representatives of the right wing and center left parties, as well as the context with the role of other organizations working as “conveyor belt” (Baron, 2005) taking part in the development of ideological position.

Right wing radicalization of ideas is analyzed by focusing on M. Salvini's communication. The study focuses on M. Salvini, in light of the key role he has played, as secretary of the main right wing party (Lega) and Ministry of the Interior (since June 2018 and until September 2019), in driving the radicalization process and bringing the immigration issue to the centre of the media and public opinion agenda. Secondary analysis of topic discussed by political representatives in the social media (Facebook and Twitter) show that in the period between 29th June and 13th July 2020, the posts on migration issue increased, and an examination of the total number of posts (175) reveals that most of them were written by Salvini (146) (Buccione, 2020).

Meanwhile, in an investigation of the de-radicalization process, the study focuses on

communications by the secretary of the main left wing party (Partito Democratico), N. Zingaretti (in 2019-20) and E. Letta (since March 2021). However, the Italian national debate before and during the pandemic has been characterised by several complementary organisations taking part in the ideological struggle of de-radicalization as “conveyor belt” (Baran, 2005). In the national debate, a key role has also been played by Pope Francesco during the pandemic time (in 2020). Pope Francesco’s position has been investigated in depth through the analysis of his most significant communication on the issue: the encyclical «Fratelli Tutti» (October, 2020).

Considering it appropriate to focus our attention on increasingly important forms of direct communication which allow political actors to bypass journalistic mediation (Chouliaraki, and Stolic, 2017), we therefore focused on social media. Due to the wide amount of available data, in this study we only present and discuss the communications on Twitter². We selected all tweets from M. Salvini’s and N. Zingaretti’s and E. Letta’s accounts including at least one of the following words: “immigrato / a / i / e”, “migrante / i”, “immigrazione”, “rifugiato / a / i / e”, “clandestino / a / i / e”, “nomade / i”. We focused on three distinct time periods, the first being between 1st August and 31st October 2019 and the other two covering the same time span in the following two years. The selection of the time periods is the result of an evaluation aimed at reconciling different needs:

- 1) to compare a period before the pandemic with the same period of the year during the first incidence of the COVID-19 health emergency and, again, one year later, in a more advanced phase of co-existence with the sars-Cov-2 virus;
- 2) considering that, in 2019, 2020 and 2021, the highest numbers of arrivals of migrant ships to the Italian coasts manifested in August, July and September³, we decided to concentrate on the last part of summer, when the issue gains additional attention in the political debate;
- 3) to partly include the autumn period as well, in 2020 particularly, marked by the acceleration of infections after a summer truce, in order to verify how the immigration issue is intertwined with the epidemic threat.

² Cfr. also the work carried out by Bachis (2020).

³ Data by Ministry of the Interior (2021).

Research questions	Sources of data
1) Has the COVID-19 pandemic pushed forward the anti-migration right-wing radicalization process (of ideas and actions) in Italy?	Radicalization of ideas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discourses of selected political representatives of right wing parties before and after the pandemic: M. Salvini posts
1) Within the dialectical process between radicalization and de-radicalization regarding migration debate in Italy, what has been the role of left wing parties and of the context?	De-radicalization of ideas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discourses of left wing political leaders: N. Zingaretti and E. Letta. - Context: Pope Francesco's encyclical «Fratelli Tutti»

Details of data analysed:

Tweets by Salvini

Years (from August, 1 st to October, 31 st)	N. of tweets (total)	N. of tweets on migration issue
2019	2116	127 (6,0%)
2020	2157	141 (6,5%)
2021	445	40 (9,0%)

Tweets by PD secretary

Years (from August, 1 st to October, 31 st)	N. of tweets (total)	N. of tweets on migration issue
2019 (Zingaretti)	285	3 (1,1%)
2020 (Zingaretti)	161	1 (0,6%)
2021 (Letta)	257	0

3.2. Data Processing and Analysis

The analysis was carried out on different sources of qualitative data through Content Analysis (Patton, 2002; Ritchie and Spencer, 1994) to describe and interpret the process of radicalization and de-radicalization of ideas concerning immigrants in Italy.

The main steps of the qualitative research process were followed in data processing:

1. familiarization with the data: posts on Twitter and encyclical «Fratelli Tutti». In this phase we gained an overview of the collected data and started to highlight recurring topics concerning migration;
2. according to the research questions, the thematic framework was set out with the focus therefore being on radicalization and de-radicalization;
3. the indexing phase was developed based on the research questions and theoretical framework;
4. all the data were considered in depth and each specific piece of the data was charted according to the research themes;
5. the charted data were scanned in their main aspects and in relation to the radicalization and de-radicalization processes. They were mapped and interpreted (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994).

Content analysis was conducted through a classic interpretative approach, without resorting to any specific software.

The epistemological framework used to analyse qualitative data (posts on Twitter and encyclical «Fratelli Tutti») has been critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2012). This focuses on language through a critical sociological analysis to highlight power relationships, ideologies, institutions, and social identities all of which are key aspects in the radicalization and de-radicalization processes. Therefore, critical discourse analysis has been applied in its explanatory capacity because it does not simply describe existing realities, but seeks to explain them by showing the power dynamics as well as the mechanism and forces in the context of the immigration debate. Moreover, the role of complementary organizations in the radicalization and de-radicalization processes is supported by the focus on context as it is fostered by critical discourse analysis (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 2010).

Regarding the relationship between theoretical framework presented in the introduction of this work and the results of the analysis, the six-floor narrowing stairway model

(Moghaddam, 2005) has driven the investigation from a theoretical perspective. Nevertheless, as Moghaddam points out, the approach refers to an individual micro level, and moving towards being part of a violent group stresses the step towards radicalization of action. The focus of our analysis is on the radicalization of ideas. Nonetheless, the Moghaddam fifth level of dehumanizing people considered as an enemy thus legitimizing violence used against them, is part of the analysed discourses. Therefore in our analysis we test the possibility of applying the Moghaddam six-floor narrowing stairway model to radicalization discourses, opening the possibility to further develop this theoretical perspective in discourses analysis and therefore moving beyond the distinction between opinion and action.

4. Results

4.1. Radicalization of ideas and pandemic in M. Salvini's communication

Looking at M. Salvini's tweets, what emerges is an intense communication activity in the considered months of 2019 and 2020, with an average of 23 tweets per day. In both periods, the percentage of tweets including words attributable to immigration is on average 6-6,5%. The qualitative analysis of the content highlights the centrality of some thematic issues and the changes in the processes of radicalization and de-radicalization.

4.1.1. Radicalization process at the second floor: the right-wing anger against the left wing

In M. Salvini's discourses, the perception of injustice and relative deprivation, representing the ground floor of Moghaddam's approach (2005), is targeted towards the left-wing parties that are considered responsible for injustice generated by immigrants. In both periods in 2019 and 2020, many tweets by M. Salvini deal with accusations against the left

with regard to immigration management. His rhetoric skilfully leverages on the weakness of a centre-left whose credibility as a guardian of the interests of the lower classes and workers has been severely challenged by the processes mentioned above. The main discourses concern corruption in hospitality services for and illegal hiring of migrants. “Mangiatoia” (“feeder”) is frequently used term to designate the alleged hospitality business that favors associations, NGOs and cooperatives linked to the centre left (here and in all subsequent excerpts, the use of capital letters is faithful to the original).

Aug 7, 2019

But there is no turning back: the MANGER of illegal immigration is FI-NI-TA (finished)!

Aug 16, 2019

Reopening of ports and feeders? Not in my name! The only “inhumanity” is that of those who, stammering and retreating, favor the lousy business of illegal immigration.

Secondly, there is the accusation of wanting to encourage forms of exploitation of immigrant labour and “caporalato” (illegal hiring), which leads to unfair and downward competition and therefore to the dismantling of the contractual rights and protections of the Italian workforce.

Sep 15, 2019

#Molinari: Behind the support for illegal immigration there is a very specific plan that wants us as slaves. They want us to go back to the early 1900s, to increasingly exploited workers and increasingly wealthy bosses.

Oct 7, 2020

#Salvini: Italians would do any kind of work if paid normally, without having the unfair competition of irregular immigrants, who are perhaps exploited.

There are also accusations of collusion between the center left and global financial elites (personified, for example, by the figure of George Soros) or of organized crime.

Oct 8, 2019

«Wrong to handcuff suspects.» Who says that? ICS (Italian Consortium of Solidarity), a cooperative that deals with immigrants chaired by a gentleman who is also vice-president of Asgi, an association financed by Soros. Everything fits.

Sep 11, 2019

#Salvini: The mafia said that the immigration business is more profitable than drugs; my pride is having stopped this business and saved many lives.

Finally, by accusing the left of being an accomplice of smugglers and of having encouraged journeys across the Mediterranean with the policy of open ports, Salvini blames them for deaths at sea, which would have been decreased by his actions as interior minister.

Oct 10, 2019

#Salvini: the fight against illegal immigration has also meant, at my peril, drastically reducing deaths at sea. Those who call themselves good then have on their conscience the responsibility for greater departures and greater deaths.

4.1.2. Towards the fifth floor: consolidating the dehumanization process

The analysis of Salvini's tweets highlights the use of speeches and images aimed at dehumanization (Moghaddam, 2005).

In its "softer" version, it emerges as a discursive strategy in which migrants are treated not as people but as objects, packages or bulky and unwanted cargo.

Oct 30, 2019

Conte, Di Maio and Renzi announce that they are sending a few dozen immigrants dumped in Italy by the usual NGOs to Germany, then secretly give in to Berlin and accept 50 refugees PER MONTH, every month.

More often, however, de-humanization consists in placing immigrants in a space different

from that of civilized humanity. Such a space could be described as animalistic, repugnant and dangerous and recalls images and feelings of dirt and bad smells. By doing so it describes a kind of sub-humanity which is reduced to physiological needs (emphasis on excrement and stench), brutalized in depravity (the «beer in hand» or «shards of bottles», for example, which recall drunkenness, or eating pets) and denied any dignity or sense of decency. Animalistic non-people (Dal Lago, 2004; Ravenda, 2011) are also described as having aggressive and bloodthirsty instincts and impulses («slaughter», unmotivated violence) that trigger fear and a sense of threat and siege, together with feelings of disgust and a desire for cancellation and removal.

The linguistic and visual strategies that recall signifiers of dehumanization are often accompanied by the criminalization of immigrants, evident in all those tweets in which news episodes featuring an immigrant offender are brought up.

Oct 2, 2019

In the underpass of the Arezzo station, an immigrant from Mali, offender, backpack on his shoulder and beer in hand, punches a girl in the face. An incredible, unjustified, chilling (act of) violence.

Aug 12, 2020.

ATTENTION! STRONG IMAGES. SHOCKING VIDEO CONTENT. IMMIGRANT THREATENS TO SLAUGHTER AN AGENT IN THE #DUOMO DI MILANO.”

However, perhaps the most interesting aspect is that the dehumanization strategy seems to involve not all immigrants but only *illegal* ones. Many references to dehumanization are in fact present in frequent tweets in which illegal immigrants, guilty of all evil, are contrasted with respectable and legal ones, who are, eloquently put, those who «show respect, pay taxes and send their children to school» (tweet of 18/09/2019). In numerous posts, the slogan «Italians first» also refers to legal immigrants, described in positive terms and portrayed with completely different images, which evoke successful integration and arouse feelings of sympathy, respect, warmth and cheerfulness. It is a discursive strategy aimed at establishing an ontological and anthropological difference between respectable and

illegal immigrants, as if clandestinity was a choice to feel guilty about (a crime, in fact) and not a consequence of the circumstances and policies themselves (Bachis, 2018; 2020). The following tweet, accompanied by an image with a victim's body inside a sack and a very obvious blood-stained knife, is typical in this respect:

Sep 15, 2020

A prayer for Don Roberto, killed this morning in Como by an illegal immigrant. A thought for all Italians and respectable immigrants, who love our country and respect life.

During the pandemic time in the summer, but less in the autumn months of 2020, posts were even more explicit and crude, showing the radicalization process of ideas and actions by the right wing against migrant people in Italy.

Aug 7, 2020

Rosy is desperate. She has been pressing charges for four years. To no avail. Her hectare of land has become a landfill. Over the years she has collected hundreds of blankets, rubbish, shards of bottles, excrement. She has had to face a group of ten drunk migrants.

COMPLAINT in Lampedusa. Immigrants ate my 4 dogs

Oct 14, 2020

Welcome to Rome. With the crazy unbridled immigration policy of this government, the situation of our cities will only get worse; you don't need a genius to understand it (accompanied by a video entitled «CLANDESTINI AND DEGRADING IN ROME», which portrays homeless people who sleep in the street, dirty clothes abandoned on the ground with very evident stains around which insects fly and talks about decay, stalking, theft, rape and aggression).

4.1.3. Illegal migrants as COVID-19 pandemic spreaders?

With the advent of the pandemic, and particularly after June 2020, with the increase of landings and cases of contagion registered at hotspots and reception centres, the two themes

of immigration and the pandemic began to intertwine. The ordinance (n. 33 of 2020) of the president of the Sicily region which established the immediate closure of all reception centers on the island, and the “outcry” of the mayor of Lampedusa testify to how the pandemic on the whole has led to an acceleration of anti-immigration sentiment, bolstering the notion of immigrants as possible “spreaders” of disease, and the need for security measures and externalization of migration flow control (Spada, 2020).

With the advent of the SARS-CoV-2, Salvini’s communication shows an attempt to exploit the potential amplifying effects exerted by the pandemic on this narrative, through messages aimed at conveying fears of contagion but also frustrations and broader resentment towards restrictions against foreigners. In August 2020, his tweets update the trends of dehumanization and criminalization by relating them to the epidemic threat, identifying a possible “spreader” in the figure of the migrant and even more so in that of the “illegal” migrant – mobile, invisible and therefore capable of escaping restrictions.

Aug 6, 2020

The more landings, the more infections: positives are growing in Sicily, and almost half of the cases involve immigrants. This #governoclandestino puts Italy in danger.

Aug 12, 2020

#Salvini: I remember that 15 thousand immigrants landed this year, and hundreds of these are wandering around Italy not caring about everything and everyone. And maybe they saw the masks at the carnival. It is not possible to ask Italians for sacrifices, *when they* ...

Aug 29, 2020

LAST HOUR. While the Interior Ministry gives numbers to deny the immigration emergency, in the real world, three COVID-positive Nigerians have sparked panic at the Celio military hospital in Rome: bites and blows to health personnel, and an anti-COVID suit torn to a military man.

Another discursive strategy used is that of trying to merge discontent over the pandemic restrictions with frustration experienced by many categories about their great economic suffering, and turning these feelings into anger against immigrants, who would benefit from preferential lanes and investments that should instead be reserved for Italians during the

pandemic.

Aug 20, 2020

While five million holders of VAT number, artisans, entrepreneurs and self-employed workers will have to pay their taxes on time – despite COVID, closures and crises – the government extends 499 reception projects for immigrants with a cost of more than 375 million. (1/2)

«Taxes and closures for Italians, money for cooperatives and illegal immigrants»

Oct 13, 2020

#Salvini: 604 people landed on Saturday, 559 on Sunday ... You cannot chase the Italians on the landing of the house and in the meantime disembark thousands of illegal immigrants who then escape and travel around Italy without any precaution and without any control!

4.1.4. Retrenchment of radicalization process

In the considered period of 2021, Salvini's communicative activity recorded a sudden slackening, which was possibly affected by tensions within the party and the scandals that involved the head of his communication staff, Luca Morisi (Fatto Quotidiano, 2021). The daily average is thus reduced to about 5 tweets / day. The messages dedicated to immigration in August 2021 are 23, fewer than in previous years but higher in terms of percentages, standing at 15%. In September and October they are reduced to 8 and 9 respectively, equal to 5.6% of the total amount of tweets.

Analysis of the Salvini's tweets shows that, after August 2020, he dampened the emphasis on the potential migrant-contagion link and on the issue of immigration as a whole, preferring to move onto other themes in which the electorate appeared more interested. This trend is confirmed by the analysis of Salvini's messages in the months of 2021. In fact, in this period, as we have seen, Salvini's communication efforts slow down, and the same applies to messages concerning immigration.

Even more interesting, however, is the observation that the posts drawing a link between migrants and risks of contagion eventually disappear. Content analysis signals a focus of the

communication relating to immigration on the “traditional” themes of the “invasion”⁴, on episodes of crimes and on the themes of violence and degradation.

Particular emphasis is given to the trial where Salvini is accused in relation to the facts involving the Open Arms NGO. In these messages, the expression “a testa alta” (“with my head held high”) often recurs, representing his pride and the vindication of his courage.

Aug 29, 2021

This is not immigration, this is invasion. And on September 15, I go to trial. With my head held high

Sep 15, 2021

My fault? Having opposed smugglers and traffickers, having eliminated the landings of illegal immigrants, having saved innocent lives, defended Italy and protected the Italians. In that court, where the mafia are usually tried, I will go there with my head held high!

4.2. The de-radicalization of ideas process: the focus on the main left wing political party communication and the context

4.2.1. The left wing political party secretary’s posts

Despite the intensity and frequency of Salvini’s accusations against the left, in the first period considered (August-October 2019), Nicola Zingaretti’s account shows only 3 tweets containing the keywords seen above, showing a weakness by the center-left in responding in terms of de-radicalization. Even by extending the search to the previous summer months (since June 1st), when the center-left was in the opposition coalition, the number of tweets grows only slightly (5 tweets). As far as the content is concerned, even though in some messages there is an attempt to take different positions on the theme of human rights, elsewhere a continuity with the discourse of the right emerges with reference to the concepts of security and legality (Gargiulo, 2019).

⁴ The Lega went to government opposition after the fall of the Conte I government, in September 2019. It is important to recall that, after the slowdown in the number of landings between 2018 and 2019, in 2020 and even more so in 2021, also due to the pandemic, there is a new surge in the number of arrivals. See Ministry of the Interior, Department of Public Safety (2021).

Sep 1, 2019

The #MareJonio affair confirms that in Italy everything has to be changed on immigration. Involving Europe with authority, combining security, legality and humanity is possible. The government does not pretend nothing has happened; we are talking about human beings

Oct 5, 2020

The immigration decree has now been approved in the Council of Ministers. The propaganda / Salvini decrees are no longer there. We want a more humane and safer Italy. A Europe that is more of a key actor.

The last Tweet appears as the only one concerning migration issues in the time frame in 2020. During the same period in 2021, no messages on this issue appear on the account of the new PD leader, Enrico Letta, thus confirming the centre left's weak response.

4.2.2. The context and the complementary organizations in the de-radicalization process

Despite the low profile of PD leaders in the de-radicalization process concerning immigrants in Italy, analysis of the context⁵ has highlighted the presence of a key role played by the highest Catholic authority Pope Francesco as “conveyor belt” for the de-radicalization process (Baran, 2005). The encyclical «Fratelli Tutti», published in October 2020, therefore during the pandemic time, has fostered the de-radicalization process. Pope Francesco speaks of a deep sense of brotherhood linking all human beings in a global and universal perspective. Moreover, the pontiff explicitly refers to international relations, highlighting the importance of multilateralism with a real condemnation of a bilateral approach in which powerful countries and large companies prefer to deal with other smaller or poorer countries to gain greater profit (cf. n. 153). The key is «knowing that we are responsible for the fragility of others, seeking a common destiny» (n. 115).

⁵ Regarding civil society actors (Della Porta and Diani, 2015), we might just mention the Riace case (Driel, 2020), the «Mediterranea Saving Humans» (<https://mediterraneaescue.org>, 21/12/2021) and the network and the Sardine movement (Tondo, 2019), nevertheless the role of these organizations and practices is not in depth analysed in this study.

Moreover, specific attention is paid to the “Rights without borders”.

No one, then, can remain excluded because of his or her place of birth, much less because of privileges enjoyed by others who were born in lands of greater opportunity. The limits and borders of individual states cannot stand in the way of this. As it is unacceptable that some have fewer rights by virtue of being women, it is likewise unacceptable that the mere place of one’s birth or residence should result in his or her possessing fewer opportunities for a developed and dignified life (n. 121).

Chapter 4 of the Encyclical deals with migrant issues:

Complex challenges arise when our neighbour happens to be an immigrant [...] we are obliged to respect the right of all individuals to find a place that meets their basic needs and those of their families, and where they can find personal fulfilment. Our response to the arrival of migrating persons can be summarized by four words: welcome, protect, promote and integrate (n. 129).

This implies taking certain indispensable steps, especially in response to those who are fleeing grave humanitarian crises. As examples, we may cite: increasing and simplifying the granting of visas; adopting programmes of individual and community sponsorship; opening humanitarian corridors for the most vulnerable refugees; providing suitable and dignified housing; guaranteeing personal security and access to basic services; ensuring adequate consular assistance and the right to retain personal identity documents; equitable access to the justice system; [...] and preparing local communities for the process of integration. (n. 130).

Moreover, the Pope highlights the focus on rights of citizenship:

For those who are not recent arrivals and already participate in the fabric of society, it is important to apply the concept of “citizenship”, which «is based on the equality of rights and duties, under which all enjoy justice. It is therefore crucial to establish in our societies the concept of full citizenship and to reject the discriminatory use of the term minorities, which engenders feelings of isolation and inferiority. Its misuse paves the way for hostility and discord; it undoes any successes and takes away the religious and civil rights of some citizens who are thus discriminated against» (n. 131).

5. Discussion and conclusions

This study has tested the hypothesis that the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed forward the process of anti-immigration radicalization of ideas. In the history of societies, pandemics have in fact been associated with increasing violence against foreigners and xenophobic discrimination (Markel, 1997, 2004; Chase, 2004; Leavitt, 1996; Barr, McKay and Doroshov, 2021).

Results showed an already ongoing right-wing radicalization process taking place in Italy before the pandemic, rooted in processes which have evolved over the past decades and which help us to understand both the shift of the center of political debate on migration issues towards the right pole, and the weakness of the center-left in playing a de-radicalization role. Right-wing political communication skilfully exploited the weakness of the left, connecting anti-migration discursive rhetoric with the attempt to present the Lega as the real guardian of workers and popular classes who have been “betrayed” by left-wing parties.

Salvini’s communication strategies thus pushed forward right-wing radicalization, mainly mobilizing the theme of de-humanization, a key aspect of radicalization (Moghaddam, 2005), and relating it to illegal migrants. With the health crisis, de-humanization is made current and linked to the risk of contagion, within a broader attempt to direct citizens’ fear and frustrations towards migrants. The pandemic is therefore exploited to further push radicalization and, above all, to maintain the perception by public opinion of the salience of the migration issue, where the Lega is recognized as the most credible issue owner.

These elements, on the whole, foreshadow a scenario in which it would have been very likely that the pandemic in a manner consistent with the past, would contribute to further radicalization. However, this is not what has really happened, as the pandemic seems to have contributed almost to a “freezing” of the radicalization of ideas.

Results show the need to consider radicalization as a process to be investigated in its context and its dialectical relationship with the de-radicalization dynamic (Kruglanski *et al.*, 2014). To this purpose, analysis has highlighted the importance that different elements

pertaining to the context as well as the main Catholic religious authority, had in defusing further radicalization.

Salvini's attempt towards radicalization can be considered a process towards extremism. His political ideas have been in conflict with society's core values (Neuman, 2013) as the comparative analysis with Pope Francesco's encyclical «Fratelli Tutti» shows.

To sum up, although the contribution of the center-left political representative has been weak and ineffective at countering right-wing radicalization, the pandemic does not seem to have furthered the radicalization of ideas against immigrants, which seems to have “frozen”. The radicalization of ideas against immigrants seems to have been pushed out of the policy agenda. In this study we argue that Pope Francesco has played a key role in the de-radicalization process, as conveyor belt (Baron, 2005). De-radicalization was mainly carried out by actors external to the party system. Meanwhile, citizens' concerns, as a consequence of the health crisis, have moved towards other issues, such as the fear of the virus itself and the economic fallout of restrictions (Demos&Pi, 2021; Diamanti, 2021). Nevertheless, COVID-19 discourses seem to open the way to a new form of radicalization and this time the process affects different positions in dealing with the health crisis management particularly around the vaccine issue. The fear of the spreader persists, but the target tends to shift coherently to the media narrative from immigrants to vaccine hesitant and refusers (Atwell and Smith 2017), thus suggesting interesting paths of research about the hypothesis that anti-migrant radicalization may be hampered as hostility shifts towards an alternative and internal enemy.

From a theoretical point of view this study suggests three main points:

1. being radicalization a process, it confirms the need to investigate it in the relationship with de-radicalization dynamics and the analysis of the context and complementary organization (Della Porta, 1995; Della Porta and Haupt, 2012; Borum, 2011b; Kruglanski *et al.* 2014; Della Porta and LaFree, 2012; Baron, 2005);
2. it suggests that applying the Moghaddam six-floor narrowing stairway model to radicalization discourses might open the possibility to further develop this author's theoretical perspective in discourse analysis, going beyond the distinction between

radicalization of opinion and action;

3. it proposes that applying the pyramid model (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2017) to discourse analysis for radicalization processes might also consider aspects of “violence” as part of the discourse and not only as physical action. This issue would deserve further investigation in relationship with the hate speech literature (Gitari *et al.*, 2015; Banks, 2010).

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