

Article

When Populists Govern the Country: Strategies of Legitimization of Anti-Immigration Policies in Salvini's Italy

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Abstract: The study aims at disclosing the narrative of immigration and the construction of the otherness in Italian Interior Minister, Matteo Salvini's discourse, geared towards the legitimization of anti-immigration policies. For this purpose, the author analyzes a sample of the Italian Interior Minister's discourses related to three cases of migrant landings, drawing on Proximity Theory, revealing how the concepts of closeness and remoteness are manipulated for the construction of threat and the legitimization of negative political response. The study concludes that Salvini's discourse presents all the classic characteristics of populism. It depicts virtuous and hardworking people threatened by the "others", them "illegals" who are not "legitimate refugees", along with inventing a new antagonist "other", the rescue NGOs that are framed as criminals, justifying their criminalization.

Keywords: populism; far-right parties; political discourse; anti-immigration discourse; refugee crisis; anti-immigration policies

1. Introduction

Due to its geographical position of natural passage for maritime arrivals who intend to move to continental Europe, Italy has become a focal point of the current so-called European migration "crisis".

Immigration has become a central topic in the run-up to the last Italian elections, and its politization has been considered the breeding ground [1] for the electoral breakthrough and success of populist parties, that capitalized on the fear of the perceived "crisis" [2].

The description of the recent migration flows as a "crisis", as pointed out by Krzyżanowski, Triandafyllidou and Wodak [3], adding an alarmistic connotation, embeds the political purpose to justify emergency measures.

Anti-immigrant political arguments have long been at the center of the campaigning of the *Lega Nord* party (currently only *Lega*) [4], that has been defined as the first "political entrepreneur" of xenophobia [5] for its role in focusing the political debate on the dangers of immigration and profiting from it.

In the 2018 general elections, the two main populist parties, *Lega* and *Movimento 5 Stelle*, achieved historic success, with a combined vote representing the absolute majority [6], allowing them to form a coalition government.

Matteo Salvini, leader of *Lega*, became Minister of the Interior and Deputy Prime Minister. Immediately after his election, he took a hard line on immigration, closing Italian ports to immigrants.

Our study aims at disclosing the strategies of legitimization of anti-immigration policies in Salvini's discourse as a Minister.

In accordance with Heinisch's [7] findings, populist discourse, which is very useful to succeed in elections, turns into a disadvantage once in government, since the party will have to moderate its message, thus losing communicative strength. Mudde [8], on the other side, argues that populist parties will uphold their populist oppositional image and radical rhetoric when justifying their policy choices, in order to keep the emotional tension high.

In order to analyze Salvini's discursive strategies in action, we will focus on the three specific cases of migrant arrivals that reached wide media attention worldwide: the "Aquarius case", when Salvini, for the first time announced the closing of Italian ports; the "Diciotti case", that led to an accusation of kidnapping for the Interior Minister; and probably the most mediatized one, the "Sea-Watch case", that brought the arrest of Captain Carola Rackete.

1.1. Salvini's Immigration Policy and the Three Analyzed Cases

When, on 1 June 2018, Matteo Salvini was nominated Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior, he immediately stated that his main aim was to drastically reduce the number of illegal immigrants to Italy [9]. Despite Salvini's junior status in the governing coalition, he placed himself in a role even more dominant than Conte and appeared to set Italy's agenda. Days after taking his oath, the new Interior Minister created a diplomatic incident with Tunisia, stating that the country sent Italy only convicts who came to Europe with the sole aim of committing crime [10]. On 10 June 2018, Salvini announced the closure of Italian ports, stating that "Everyone in Europe is doing their own business, now Italy is also raising its head" [11]. After different cases, on 24 September 2018, the Council of Ministers approved the so-called "Salvini Decree", which contained a series of hardline measures that abolished key forms of protection for migrants and made it easier for them to be deported. The decree also suspended the refugee application process of those who were considered "socially dangerous" or who had been convicted of a crime [10].

1.1.1. The Aquarius Case

Salvini's first announcement of the closure of Italian ports, on Sunday 10 June 2018, was consequent to the request by the Aquarius vessel (carrying 629 rescued migrants, including 123 unaccompanied minors, and 7 pregnant women), operated jointly by the NGOs Médecins Sans Frontières and SOS Méditerranée, to enter an Italian port. Finally, these migrants were transferred to Spain, which offered to host them [9].

1.1.2. The Diciotti Case

A month after the Aquarius case, the night between 14 and 15 August 2018, the Italian Coast Guard *Diciotti* ship rescued 190 migrants. At its arrival to the port of Catania, the Minister prohibited migrants to disembark until "the distribution of the migrants rescued among the countries of the European Union would be clear" [11].

Only five days after, when Albania, Ireland and the Italian Catholic Bishops' Conference offered to take care of the migrants, the Interior Minister gave the green light for disembarking.

According to international laws, a rescue operation must include the landing in a safe harbor. For this reason, an Agrigento prosecutor accused Salvini of the crime of kidnapping. Salvini will never be prosecuted because both the Chambers of Italian Parliament voted in favor of protecting his immunity [11].

1.1.3. The Sea-Watch 3 Case

The last case, probably the most mediatized of all, happened in June 2019, when vessel Sea-Watch 3, of the German NGO Sea-Watch, docked at the port of Lampedusa, despite the Italian government's ban on entry against the ship. The 40 asylum seekers, who had been on board for about 20 days since they had been rescued in Libyan waters, disembarked, while the Captain, Carola Rackete, was immediately arrested *in flagrante delicto* by the Italian police, because during the maneuver her ship hit a patrol boat.

The Captain was later released, and she subsequently sued Matteo Salvini for defamation and solicitation, requesting to close the Minister's social accounts for being "means of propagating hatred" [10].

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Radical Right Populism and the Characteristics of Its Discourse

This paper follows an approach that combines Mudde's [12] ideology-centered and Hawkins' [13] discourse-centered understanding of populism, conceiving populism as an ideology that is articulated discursively by political actors.

Accordingly, populism can be understood as a discursive manifestation of a thin centered ideology that is not only focused on the underlying "set of basic assumptions about the world" but in particular on "the language that unwittingly expresses them" [14,15].

In general, scholars agree that far-right wing populist discourse focuses on the juxtaposition of: (1) "the People," (2) the "corrupt" elite, and (3) the identification of an out-group. [12,16].

The idea of "people" is at the center of populism: people form a community, a place where they feel safe and where there is mutual trust, a place where it is clear who is "one of us and who is not" [17].

The definition of the elite can also vary—although it usually includes politics, media, financial, judicial and intellectual elites accused of being incompetent and selfish—yet the central claim that a group of elites is oppressing the people and seeking to undermine their rights and voice, does not change [16,18].

Populism is based, therefore, on a Manichean perspective [19] that combines the positive valorization of the people, with the denigration of their enemies, the elites, guilty of the current (undesirable) situation the people live in.

The most important common denominator amongst far-right populist parties is their exclusionist and nativist notion of citizenship, advocating that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (the nation) and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) threaten homogeneous nation-states [20]. For this reason, they consider that culture, habits, traditions, identity and lifestyle are of paramount importance and must be protected [18].

Accordingly, far-right populism identifies a series of "others" on whom insecurities may be projected, capitalizing on the human inclination towards in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination [21]. These "others" are portrayed as not sharing the identity or values of the people [16,20,22–24], and as enemies, accusing them of conspiring—normally together with or with the direct or indirect help of the elite—against the people [25] (pp. 16–17).

The strategies of representing the out-group typically tend to foreground what is positive about "us" and negative about "them," [26] displaying what Wodak [27] calls a "rhetoric of exclusion".

Like "the people" and "elites", the composition of the "others" differs from one case to another. In recent decades, the "others", key to most right-wing populists in Western Europe, have been immigrants, especially Muslims after the attacks of 11 September 2001 [28].

2.2. Immigration in Political Discourse

Specific literature points out the centrality of immigration in the populist right's appeal to voters [22] and how they manage to generate a moral panic around immigrants through "politics of fear" [27].

Halla et al. [29] in Austria, Dustmann et al. [30] and Harmon [31] in Denmark, Sekeris and Vasilakis [32] in Greece, Barone et al. [33] in Italy, Brunner and Kuhn [34] in Switzerland and Becker and Fetzer [35] in the UK, respectively, conclude that increases in immigration play an important role in the success of contemporary far-right parties. However, both the (neo) cleavage theory [16,36] and the theory of issue entrepreneurship [37] have successfully shown how the political conflict over immigration follows a "political logic" [38] and must be attributed to parties and party competition

rather than to objective pressures of immigration itself. In particular, the most comprehensive study on this topic by Van der Brug et al. [39] attributes increasing salience of immigration issues to a top-down process, in which government parties play an especially important role.

Accordingly, as Van Dijk [40] indicates, ideologies are not innate, but learned mainly through public discourse. Such discourse is controlled by the symbolic elites, who are responsible for the production and reproduction, for example, of racism in society, which, once popularized, serves as a basis for the legitimation of even more radical discourse and immigration policies.

In other words, whenever new immigrants appear at the borders, politicians are the ones who are supposed to provide the first official definition of the situation. Therefore, if politicians, as symbolic elite, undertake a racist stance, this would be the major source of the acquisition and reproduction of racist prejudices and ideologies [40], useful to justify negative response.

2.3. Lega and Matteo Salvini

Lega Nord, whose full name is *Lega Nord per l'Indipendenza della Padania* (Northern League for the Independence of Padania), founded in 1991 by Umberto Bossi, and originally born as an ethno-regionalist party defending the secession of the Northern region called Padania [41], has been one of the most successful regionalist parties in Europe, participating in right-wing government coalitions led by Silvio Berlusconi in 2001–2006 and 2008–2011 [1]. In this institutional stage, the party became federalist, insisting, in particular, on fiscal federalism so that the North of Italy would be able to retain its income.

After an internal crisis, due mainly to corruption scandals that directly involved the leader, in 2013, Matteo Salvini became the new Secretary.

Under the new leadership, the regionalist party embraced Italian nationalism eliminating the suffix “Nord”, to become only Lega, taking a turn to the right [42]. The nationalist push of Salvini demanded a change of paradigm: the great enemy to be opposed were no longer the southerners, but the foreigners and immigrants, against whom were the faults of the economic crisis and social insecurity directed. In the 2018 electoral campaign, fierce opposition to immigration became the focal point of Salvini’s communication [43].

Under the new slogans “Stop Immigration!” and “Defend Italians from the invasion”, migrants, especially Islamic communities and irregular immigrants, framed through increasingly explicitly xenophobic and racist positions, became the target.

Matteo Salvini lost his Ministry after only 445 days, when the coalition broke leading to the formation of a new government that does not include Lega [44].

3. Materials and Methods

Both linguistic and social science literatures offer a wide range of options to approach political discourse, and especially populist discourse.

In particular, computer-assisted quantitative text analysis, based on coding dictionaries [45] is often considered the most suitable method for measuring populist discourse (exclusionism, anti-elitism, conservatism, nationalism, etc.). Computer-assisted methods based on semantic triplets [4] seem to be particularly well suited to study populist discourse, allowing to combine quantitative data and qualitative insights.

In this case, the study positions itself within a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach to the study of discourse. The main goal, in fact, is to investigate the specific role exerted by symbolic elites in the production and reproduction of anti-immigrant discourse, building on the understanding of discourse as a social practice [40] that reproduces and reflects power dynamics, ideologies, and inequalities [46]. Accordingly, the study does not limit its analysis to specific structures of text or talk, but systematically relates these to structures of the sociopolitical context.

According to van Dijk [40], CDA assumes the existence of a sociocognitive interface between social structures and discourse structures. In this sense, CDA differs from discourse analysis in that it highlights issues of power asymmetries, manipulation, exploitation, and structural inequities.

CDA assumes a critical stance towards hegemonic norms placing itself within the field of immanent critique, which aims to contextualize not only the object of its investigation, but also the ideological basis of that object: both the object and the category to which it belongs are shown to be products of a historical process [40].

Our focus, thus, is on how the social phenomena of immigration is constructed and represented linguistically in Salvini's political discourse, in order to justify a negative response.

As Ruth Wodak [47] suggested, the systemic collection of sample texts on a topic allows to better understand the interrelationship of discourses that exist within the field. This framework allows for the discussion and analysis of ideologies involved in a set of discourses. The macro level of analysis is helpful in understanding how macro-structures of inequality persist through discursive processes across multiple sites and texts [47].

Accordingly, verbatim transcription of five discourses regarding each of the three mentioned cases have been analyzed (n = 15. Total corpus of 60,178 words).

The discourses have been selected ad hoc, in an attempt to compare different moments, contexts and targets: official speeches in front of the Parliament or the Senate, intervention in media, public meetings and Facebook Live (livestreaming where Salvini talks directly to his more than 3 million Facebook friends).

In order to disclose the dynamic of the discursive strategy, we follow and adapt Cap's [47] "proximization model", a cognitive-critical model that accounts for the ways in which the discursive construction of closeness and remoteness can be manipulated in the political sphere.

The concept of proximization describes a discursive strategy of presenting a symbolic "them", referred to as ODCs ("outside deictic-center"), approaching or invading the physical and ideological "us" territory, defined as IDC, ("inside-deictic-center") entities, the speaker and her addressee. By representing this threat, the speaker is able to claim leadership and legitimize actions and/or policies to neutralize the growing impact of the negative, "foreign" threat [48].

This dichotomous representations of the discursive "home" and "peripheral/adversarial" entities (IDCs vs. ODCs), and the representation of impact upon the "home" entities, perfectly fits the aforementioned Manichean perspective characteristic of populist discourse, making this model well suited for our analysis.

According to Cap, proximization can be presented in three frameworks: spatial, temporal and axiological [47], captured, at the linguistic level, in a specific sequence of verbal and nominal elements that can be studied both qualitatively and quantitatively.

In our case, we will focus on the 'Spatial proximization' relating to the invasion of the physical space and the 'Axiological proximization' involving the evocation of an ideological clash between the 'home values' of the "us" entities and the "them", alien and antagonistic values.

Cap's [47], "proximization model", therefore, while keeping a critical approach, allows the text to "speak by itself" [48] isolating the sequence of linguistic elements.

In addition, in order to better understand the justification of anti-immigration policies and the role of Salvini as the leader, following Kuypers' model [49], that perfectly matches and completes the proximization theory, we can distinguish between a Defining, a Diagnostic and a Solution frame.

4. Results

Table 1 shows the results for Category 1: Lexico-grammatical items and phrases (values of elements of the deictic center and values of elements on the periphery).

Table 1. Elements marking the “us” and the “them” value.

Item	Nouns	Adjectives	Verbs
Noun phrases marking the “us” values (Italians)	The people; Italy; us; workers; families; our homes; homeland; citizens; sons and daughters.	Working; honest; good; first; generous; solidarity; dignity and pride; common sense; poverty; <i>terremotati</i> (victims of an earthquake).	Work; struggle; pay taxes; strive; have lost their jobs; have lost hope; cannot bear the cost; are fed up.
Noun phrases marking the “them” values (Immigrants)	“Supposed refugees”; them; illegals; these; traffic; rabble; criminals; animals; <i>fenomeni</i> .	Fake; wretched; foreigners; out of control; “robust and vaccinated”; <i>palestrati</i> (muscled workout freak); <i>pacchia</i> .	Invade; arrive (all in Italy); bring war; commit crime; steal; cruise; damage; (they) make fun of (us).

4.1. The “Us”

The “us” values are represented by Italians, mainly defined as “the people” or openly as “us”, “families” and “workers” and is positively charged through the use of adjectives such as “good” or “honest”, representing the “virtuous and homogeneous people” [23], characteristic of populism:

“Parlo a nome di un popolo che, parlando di solidarietà, non ha niente da imparare da nessuno.” (I speak in the name of a People that, when it comes to solidarity, have nothing to learn from anyone). (Salvini’s Senate Intervention, Italian Senate. 1 February 2019).

“L’Italia é un paese col cuore grande.” (Italy is a country with a big heart). (Salvini’s Senate Intervention, Italian Senate. 13 June 2018).

This becomes specifically evident with the use of the word “work” or “workers” appearing multiple times in all the analyzed discourses. Besides the obvious positive connotations of the semantic field of “work”, Article 1 of the Italian Constitution (1948) states that “Italy is a democratic republic, founded on work”, implying, somehow, that work is a key characteristic of “Italianess” (and not of the “others”).

4.2. The “Them”: The Others

The most used defining sentence is *questi presunti rifugiati* (these supposed refugees), pronounced multiple times, in all the discourses. There is, indeed, a discursive construction of the distinction between “real refugees”, fallaciously defined as people who “run away from a war” and “illegals” who “pretend to be refugees”.

This dichotomy between “real” and “fake” refugees is developed through two different strategies. On the one hand, the construction of the above mentioned fallacy leads to an almost automatic categorization between people who actually are refugees, and thus deserve to be helped, and people who do not, because their countries are not in a warzone:

“Il fenomeno migratorio é complesso e si osservano certe stranezze. La prima etnia sono i tunisini. La Tunisia mi risulta essere un paese libero non affetto né da guerra né da pestilenze.” (The migration phenomenon is complicated and some weirdness can be appreciated. The first immigrants in number are Tunisian. As long as I know Tunisia is a free country: there is no war and no pestilence) (Salvini’s Senate Intervention, Italian Senate. 13 June 2018).

On the other hand, migrants are portrayed as very healthy, using two main expressions: “robust and vaccinated” (expression retrieved in 14 discourses) and *palestrati* (word present in 7 discourses). The first is a colloquial expression normally used to display adulthood (vaccines are mandatory by law and the last one is at the beginning of adulthood), strength and good health, and the latter is an even more colloquial word, similar to “workout freak”, used to define highly trained muscled individuals.

“Le donne e i bambini scendano subito, ma questi belli, robusti, vaccinati e palestrati: a casa!” (Women and kids can disembark right now, but those handsome, robust and vaccinated must go home). (Salvini’s Senate Intervention, Italian Senate. 13 June 2018).

The representation of immigrants as healthy and showing an exceptional body shape allows the speaker to question whether they actually come from desperate situations, insinuating doubt and that they are lying, and that they might come for other reasons.

During the Aquarius case, for example, immigrants have been defined as being “on a cruise”:

“(Referring to Aquarius rescued migrants) *Questi dicono: “Ma si andiam in Italia, facciamo anche un giro a Venezia e poi andiamo in Calabria che ha delle belle spiagge.”* (They say: “Come on, let’s go to Italy, we visit Venice and then we go to Calabria that has beautiful beaches). (Salvini’s Senate Intervention, Italian Senate. 13 June 2018)

The colloquial expressions *pacchia* (retrieved in 10 discourses), indicating an easy and carefree life condition, and *fenomeni* (retrieved in 12 discourses), someone who “bosses around”, strengthen the discursive construction of immigrants arriving in Italy to abuse the system and live off of Italians.

This word, literally “phenomena”, etymologically comes from the Greek present participle of the verb *pháinomai*, which means “to appear”. Who “does the phenomenon” behaves in such a way as to show off in front of others. Specifically, the expression has taken the colloquial meaning of “bossing around”:

“*Se qualcuno pensava di venire a fare il fenomeno in Italia ha sbagliato.*” (If someone is thinking of coming to Italy to boss around, he is wrong).

“*La pacchia é finite.*” (The party is over). (TV interview, “8 e mezzo”, La7. 12 June 2018)

Portraying migrants as fake, therefore not trustworthy, and profiteers, opens the door to criminalization:

“*Se apriamo i porti questi fenomeni rimangono in Italia a spacciare droga.*” (If we open the ports these phenomena will stay in Italy to smuggle drugs). (Salvini’s Senate Intervention, Italian Senate. 13 June 2018).

4.3. The Other “Them”: The NGOs

Analyzing the data set, another predominant and antagonistic “others” appeared: the rescue NGOs. (see Table 2).

Table 2. Elements marking the “NGO” value.

Item	Nouns	Adjectives	Verbs
Noun phrases marking the “them” values (NGOs)	“Supposed volunteers”; pseudo-volunteers; <i>scafisti</i> (immigrant traffickers); <i>fenomeni</i> ; George Soros. Carola Rackete: <i>Comunistella</i> (little Communist); <i>sbruffoncella</i> (little braggart); partner in crime (of immigrant traffickers); <i>la zecca tedesca</i> (the German tick); potential murder; criminal; pirate; white, rich German; bored.	Pseudo; fake; foreigners; out of control; criminal; exploiters; Mafia; Radical Chic; funded by doubtful sources.	Exploit; commit crime; receive money (from unknown sources); are not Italian; disobey.

Rescue NGOs, generically portrayed by the media as heroes that save lives, are constructed as dangerous criminals.

The discursive fabrication of the NGOs as enemies displays a sort of crescendo: in the first discourses, corresponding to the Aquarius and *Diciotti* cases, they are defined as foreigners, not Italian (so none of the Italian business), and, exactly as immigrants themselves, as *fenomeni*, someone who is not Italian but comes to Italy to “boss around”.

In addition, they are defined as “doubtful”, and are suspected of receiving money from doubtful sources. The sentence “*pagati da chissa chi*” (paid by who knows who) appears in all the analyzed

discourses together with the word “NGO”, becoming a sort of adjective, to represent NGOs as part of a conspiratorial, left-leaning corrupted elite, who help the “others”.

Specifically, the name of George Soros appears in 7 out of 15 analyzed speeches:

“Queste ONG sono associazioni private finanziate da chissachi. Poi quando vedi che dietro c’è la Open Society di George Soros qualche dubbio ti viene sulla spontaneità di questa generosità.” (These NGOs are private associations financed by who knows who. Then when you realize that behind there is Soros’ “Open Society”, you start having some doubts about the authenticity of this solidarity). (Salvini’s Senate Intervention, Italian Senate 1 February 2019).

Quoting Soros responds to a recurrent conspiracy theory suggesting a left-wing conspiracy to fill Europe with immigrants in order to foster a (supposed) ethnical substitution.

In the last discourses, they are openly criminalized. Words such as “criminal” or “criminals”, appearing sporadically in the Aquarius and *Diciotti* cases, become the main definition of NGOs in the Sea-Watch case. Rescuing human beings becomes a “criminal war act”, the Sea-Watch is defined as a “criminal ship who has broken the laws of Italian Republic” and the volunteers are “criminals who cooperate with immigrants traffickers who use immigrants’ money to buy weapons and drugs” and, thus, they deserve to be “sent to jail”:

Altro che salvare vite . . . hanno gettato la maschera questi sono delinquenti! They claim to save life but they have dropped the act: these are criminals! (Salvini’s Senate Intervention, Italian Senate. 1 February 2019).

4.4. Captain Carola Rackete

A specific note on Captain Carola Rackete is needed, since for the first time, the dispute between the Minister and the NGOs became personalized.

As already mentioned, Carola Rackete, Captain of the Sea-Watch vessel, despite the prohibition, disembarked 40 migrants in Lampedusa, somehow personally challenging Salvini’s authority. Salvini’s reaction can be seen as the perfect culmination of the above mentioned criminalizing strategy.

Carola Rackete, in fact, embodies the perfect discursive opportunity to scapegoating: she is “white, rich and German”, as she defined herself (to justify her moral duty to save life), and thus “bored”; she is a *zecca*, a tick (a derogative word used, typically by the extreme right movements, to insult left-wing individuals) and she is a woman.

The word *zecca* is mainly used in the Rome area as an insult towards left-wing individuals. Probably, it was originally constructed as metaphor to compare Communists to parasites; however, after the beginning of the No-Global Movement, and specifically after the G8 meeting in Genova, the word started being used to define “alternative” people, focusing on pure aesthetical criteria (dreadlocks, casual dress, etc.)

The most recurrent words to describe her are *Comunistella* (little Communist) and *sbruffoncella* (little braggart/loudmouth). Both the words are adjectivized using the suffix *-ella*, a diminutive, and useful to infantilize the opponent.

In addition, recurrent indirect sexist comments of her being a woman are retrieved:

“Uno basta che la guardi in faccia . . . ” (You only have to look at her . . .) (Facebook Live, Salvini’s Facebook page. 7 June 2019).

4.5. The Relationship Framework

The isolation of the items corresponding to the “us” and the “them” values allow us to understand the relationship of spatial and axiological proximization between them.

In order to better understand the justification of anti-immigration policies and the role of Salvini as the leader, following Kuypers’ model [49] which perfectly matches and completes the proximization theory, we can distinguish between a Defining, a Diagnostic and a Solution frame.

The defining frame can be retrieved in the construction of the “us” value and it is perfectly summed up in the nativist stance “*Prima gli italiani*”, (Italian first), Salvini’s campaign slogan and pronounced in every analyzed discourse.

If Italians come first, and they are suffering with “4 million Italians in poverty” (sentence retrieved in all the discourses), it is logical that the State has the moral duty to concentrate first on these Italians suffering a difficult situation. Of note is the recurrent mention to *terremotati*, referring to citizens who suffered from earthquakes in different regions that are still striving to rebuild their homes.

The diagnostic frame describes the situation, relating to both the Spatial and Axiological proximization.

From a spatial perspective, Italy is represented as a limited space that cannot host everyone who wants to get in.

From an axiological perspective, as already mentioned, these “fake” refugees are only bringing problems. Therefore, if we analyze both the adjectivization and verbs applied to the “us” value, we can appreciate how Italians work, put out a lot of effort, and are generous and supportive, but cannot stand the pressure of immigration any more:

“Il Mediterraneo non può essere fonte di problemi solo per l’Italia.” (Mediterranean Sea cannot be a problem only for Italy). (Facebook Live, Salvini’s Facebook page. 7 June 2019).

In order to discover the role of Salvini in the solution frame, we applied the same categories of analysis to Salvini’s auto definitions of himself, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Elements marking the “Salvini” value.

Item	Nouns	Adjectives	Verbs
Noun phrases marking the “Salvini” value	Father; Italian; (hard) worker; Minister; family man; Salvini.	Honest; working; good; tired; fed up; angry; common sense.	Works; struggles; closes; controls; puts order; “has enough”; defends; says no, <i>nisba</i> .

As shown in Table 3, he presents himself having the same characteristics (represented by the use of the same adjectives), as the Italian people.

Specifically, as for the description of Italians, there is a massive use of the word “work”, “worker” or hard worker, but mainly he presents himself as a father. He actually is a father, but this insistence in presenting himself as one, on the one hand, helps the creation of the image of the politician as “one of us”, having the same worries, the same problems and the same “common sense”—contraposed to the senseless elites—as everyday people [50]. This assimilation between the leader and the people is another crucial characteristic of populist discourse. If people come together and make their voice heard through the leader of the populist party, democracy will return to work as it should, since, as Gianfranco Pasquino [28] points out, populist leaders do not represent the people, but consider themselves (and they succeed in being considered), an integral part of the people: they are the people“

“Gli Italiani si sono rotti le palle. Io mi sono rotto le palle.” (Italians are fed up (with immigration). I am fed up with immigration). (Facebook Live, Salvini’s Facebook page. 7 June 2019).

On the other hand, the fatherly figure is wise enough to provide love and strictness, and able to make the right decision for the well-being of his family [51]. This strict father metaphor is strengthened by the extensive use of the semantic field of “no”:

“No way. Irregolarmente non metti piede né in Italia né in Europa.” (No way. Irregularly nobody puts his feet in Italy or in Europe!) (Facebook Live, Salvini’s Facebook page. 22 August 2018).

“Adesso mi sono rotto e dico NISBA, no.” (Now I’m fed up with ... (immigration) ... and I say NISBA, no). Facebook Live, Salvini’s Facebook page. 7 March 2019).

Specifically Salvini, when speaking to his Facebook followers, uses the word “nisba”. Its meaning is simple, it means a clear no, nothing, but compared to other usual synonyms of the word “no”, it has

a singular intensity and incisiveness. The *registra* to which it belongs to is popular, and its probable German ancestry (from the word *nichts*, “no” in German) charge it with a particularly harsh and dry energy, making the word more than a simple “no”, meaning something closer to “forget it” or “no way”.

The solution, therefore, is the leader himself. If “Italy belongs to the Italians” and “there is no room for everybody”, the only way to stop the “invasion” of “fake refugees” is the leader, who takes care of the country as a good, responsible (and hence tough) “father” and will “close the door” for good.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Salvini’s discourse presents all the classic characteristics of populism: a virtuous and hardworking people who are threatened by the invasion of some “others”, the “*clandestini*”, the illegals, who are not “legitimate refugees”, but instead intrude the limited, sovereign, space of Italians and “come only to commit crimes”. Italy is portrayed in a situation of chaos and emergency, in which Italians, the sovereign people, suffer and need to regain control, and the leader, who is “one of us”, comes to restore order and normality by “closing the door” to the intruders.

Therefore, we can conclude that in accordance to Mudde’s thesis, Salvini does not moderate his language when in power, rather, he harshens it in order to keep the emotional tension high.

Accordingly, although the data stem from the Italian context, the results of this analysis align with the findings of many studies in other political contexts [3,48,52–54], showing that different right-wing populisms show common discursive patterns, especially in their framing of the immigrants as “others” or “invaders”, putting in place what Wodak calls “victim-perpetrator reversal” [27].

However, the study identifies a factor of novelty: the construction of the rescue NGOs as the new antagonist: transforming volunteers, a category traditionally well regarded by both the media and public opinion, into dangerous criminals that cooperate with immigrant traffickers hiding sinister political intentions. This, on the one hand, makes the research interesting for all who are concerned with xenophobia, ethnic discrimination and racism and, in particular, with the role exerted by symbolic elites in the production and reproduction of anti-immigrant discourse.

Therefore, besides researchers in political discourse analysis, these findings can be the basis for investigations in related areas of well-being of migrants [55], inequality, and well-being in the living and working environment [56].

On the other hand, it underlines the importance and urgency of new comparative studies, specifically geared on how systemic attacks against NGOs seem to have become a trademark of populists worldwide (see, for example, how President Bolsonaro blamed NGOs for the burning of the Amazonian Forest in Brazil or populist Vox party in Spain used a “Salvinian” rhetoric to frame the Open Arms case).

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