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**The Covid-19 Crisis as
an Ideological Armory
for the Populist Right in
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Abstract

As Europe begins to emerge from a troublesome part of the pandemic, we begin to evaluate emerging political damages. Now more than ever, we must understand how radical right populist parties design their message toward vulnerable, crisis-shaken populations. Disentangling common denominators of the various political strands subscribed to an approximate heterogeneous radical right-wing populist tradition, this interdisciplinary research project purports to explore the new populist radical right discourse triggered by the crisis in Spain and Italy, and to what extent its rhetoric can be substantiated by analysing how right-wing populist parties can corrode liberal democracies in times of crisis. The objective of this study is to reflect critically on the interplay between democracy and populism, exploring recent discursive developments of the parties Vox and The League and its power relations, which are linked to the exogenous shocks provoked by the pandemic. The author used qualitative techniques of content analysis, and conducted interviews with scholars and political actors, and group discussions with local actors for several months.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemics, health crisis, radical right populism, Vox, The League

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The Covid-19 Crisis as an Ideological Armory for the Populist Right in Spain and Italy

Amélie Jaques-Apke ¹

“... Until yesterday, it believed itself immune from the hereditary plagues of mankind. It could not credit the danger of being suffocated or infected by any sinister principle.” (George Santayana in: David Bell, ‘The dispossessed’, 1962).

“Fdi and Vox are ultimately the only opportunities to (re-)unite the left today and to reconstruct an alternative political project to the current one that led (among other things) to the return of the far right” (Professor Santiago Zabala, personal communication, November 2022).

Introduction

As Europe begins to emerge from a troublesome pandemic, we begin to evaluate the political damages. Italy’s recent elections in September 2022 and the triumph of the *Fratelli d’Italia* (extreme right, ECR in Europe) might indicate that populist right-wingers have acquired a different assertiveness. Over the past two years, scholars and analysts explored many facets of the Covid-19 pandemic and how this sanitary crisis has been (ab-)used by populist parties (e.g. Bol et al. 2021; Santana et al. 2020; Bobba and Hubé 2021; Jungkuntz 2021; Rennó and Ringe 2022). The comparative analysis of how populist radical right party leaders took advantage of the pandemic to adjust their political discourse and gain political power is however yet in its infancy (e.g. Wondreys and Mudde 2020, Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2021). Exclusionary radical right populism and “post-truth” (Tallis 2016, McIntyre 2018) claim-making was and is still high up on political party agendas, as ideological, moral, and emotional distortions of reality, as the simplification and dramatization of facts, and the blaming of specific parts of society. However, one thing is sure: the pandemic is far from over.

In the XXI century, the phenomenon of populism has proliferated rapidly: we have observed a much greater diversity of its manifestations and new variants with varying degrees of exclusionary and inclusionary approaches. Whether being understood as an ideology, worldview, strategy, or discourse, there is every reason to believe that populist leaders have used and will continue to use crises to reinforce narratives that serve to singularize and construct new enemies of “the people” (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2017: 110). Key topics that

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are discussed in the literature on populism very often deal with their impacts on liberal democracies in rather normative terms (see, e.g. Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Mény and Surel 2002; Mudde 2007; Panizza 2005; de la Torre and Peruzzotti 2008): the rise of populist radical right parties (PRRPs) triggered scholars to draw attention to a possible instrumentalization of the current pandemic and the rise of populism in the “post-truth era” (Innerarity 2020) in liberal democracies (Speed and Mannion 2020; Lasco and Curato 2019; Betz 2020; Bruni 2020; Bruno, Downes 2020; Brubaker 2020; Gerbaudo 2020). Surprisingly, only a few studies are dealing with comparative and cross-regional approaches to the reactions of political populism and crises.

In the field of politics, many party developments have happened, mostly unnoticed, in Southern Europe. The European South has suffered more than most of the others, due to recent political party struggles, public debt, and heavy dependencies on tourism (EP 2021). The populist radical right (PRR) might have gained much from the crisis in Spain and Italy: these countries produce the worst indicators in terms of deaths and infection rates (Dombey 2020) and political polarization might have strengthened PRRPs, eventually emerging as winners from the current crisis. Empirically, the focus of this project lies on two Western-European cases in the 2020–2021 period after the outbreak of the pandemic: the Spanish ultra-national newcomer ‘Vox’, which managed to grow into one of the most successful PRRPs in Western Europe in a short period (Mudde 2019), and ‘the League’ (La Lega; formerly the Northern League), a fully-fledged populist radical right party rooted in the post-fascist tradition which emerged in the late 1980s (Albertazzi, Giovannini, Seddone 2018). Born as a regionalist counterforce in Northern Italy against the elites ‘of Rome’ (Albertazzi and Vampa 2021), Salvini’s party leadership managed to replace its regionalism with other considerations, such as nativism (the belief that natives should have priority in all aspects of life, excluding foreign-born groups) and authoritarianism (law and order), to please Italians in the entire country. Moreover, the attitudes of these two parties show different but also typical Covid-19 trajectories. They also appear to incarnate different types of populist challengers emanating around the world: entrepreneurial (Heinisch and Saxonberg 2017) and ultra-national (Rama et al. 2021) populism on the radical right side of the political spectrum. Both parties offer to comparative scholars to investigate respective PRR positionings and developments, especially since Italian and Spanish states have a set of political, cultural, economic, and public health similarities (Raffini and Penalva-Verdú 2022). They are also adequate cases for undertaking further exploratory research and elaborating conclusions to be tested in the future.

To overcome the regional isolation of radical right and exclusionary populism since Covid-19 in political science, this exploratory and interdisciplinary research project sheds light on the new populist radical right discourse triggered by the Covid-19 crisis in Spain and Italy. It asks whether and to what extent its rhetoric can be substantiated by analyzing how right-wing populist parties can corrode liberal democracies in times of crisis. As such, the objective of this study is to reflect critically on the interplay between democracy and the rule of law and to analyze the very recent discourse development of the parties and respective political power relations, which are linked to the exogenous shocks provoked by the pandemic. This paper also contributes to the study of PRRPs in times of Covid-19 and by extension to the investigations of how the radical right uses crises to gain political power. Although the first

part concentrates on the theoretical categories useful for defining the relationship between the PRR and crisis, its focus is primarily the understanding of populist claims since the outbreak of the pandemic until mid-2021. During the year 2020–21, I conducted twenty informal and semi-structured interviews with Spanish and Italian scholars, professors, and party members.

1. Crises à la carte?

The Covid-19 pandemic is universally perceived as a shock that hit countries around the world, stable democracies, authoritarian states, and societies where populists are on the rise (e.g. Inglehart and Norris 2019). Looking back to medieval times when rulers were considered supreme healers (Murray et al. 2016) we can see that promises related to health crises are not new. However, the ongoing “polypandemy” (Munich Security Report 2020) appears as a potentially unique crisis-driven environment that undermines trust in elites and builds new identitarian links between the crisis and the people. This link points to several assumptions: First, populism is generally expressed by claims that describe (a) ‘the people’ as a morally pure and single homogenous entity, (b) sources of threat, related criticism, and blame directed towards ‘the elite and/or others’, (c) promises to provide deliverance through change (Mény and Surel 2000). Central to the appeal and message of populist figures is bringing change (Canovan 2005: 81-82), which can take many forms (systematic, vague, or clear strategies, demands for policy or polity change, etc.). The disentangling of common denominators of the various political strands subscribed to an approximate heterogeneous right-wing populist tradition needs at this point some clear distinctions between post-war far-right politics and the populist right. The latter term has been greatly overused (Jaques-Apke 2023: 2). Being inspired by Paul Taggart’s definition, I examine populism as a “political, empty-hearted, chameleonic celebration of the heartland in the face of crisis” (Taggart 2000: 5), combining far-right extremism and a populist worldview that assumes ideas to express the popular will at large (Heinisch 2003: 96). Following a “relational structure-agency approach” (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2017: 117), this paper argues that populism can be heuristically observed across contexts and time (Aslanidis 2017) through its inherently ambivalent, vacillating claims; as a frame disseminated by moral, and political entrepreneurs and change makers with the ultimate objective to gain political power through the challenge of the status quo, in favor of elite change and popular sovereignty.

Second, this pandemic can be considered a fast-burning crisis (compared to other longer-lasting crises such as climate change or the so-called migration crisis), which seems to favor common approaches of populism towards crisis politics: offering simple and quick solutions to complex societal and public policy problems. Societies realized more than ever what establishments and elites are capable of, in terms of control of the system, internal security, and of societies.

Third, the boundary between the ‘people’ and the ‘elite’ (or other outsider groups such as ‘establishments’) adapts to conjunctures when a society expresses low trust in politicians, institutions, and/or elites, due to many factors such as collective anxieties, malaise, or societal schisms, just like now during the pandemic. Hence, any actor may use populist claims as a tool to discursively create ‘new’ crises of representation, but also mainstream actors and parties.

Surprisingly, the relationship between crisis and populism is still undertheorized (Moffitt 2015). While scholars see an intrinsic connection between populism and crises (e.g. Capoccia and Kelemen 2007; Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2005), others assume that the populist claim is not necessarily a pathological symptom of the crisis, but rather a tool to provide an efficient response to obtain political power (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2017: 115). Yet, populist actors may also have a hard time in politics when they use outdated emotions or promises of change in discourse for example. However, I claim that populism is only able to turn crises politically *and* electorally into an opportunity when actors can frame a crisis as a systemic and general failure of representation: A failure that is portrayed as a direct result of incapable elites and other mainstream actors to provide the promised change to the people.

In many countries in Western Europe, public confidence has been severely damaged, unfurling heavy disappointments because of national and EU responses to the crisis (OECD 2021). Some new regulations, such as vaccine obligations, also aggravated radicalization (Neumann 2021). Now, more than ever, we must understand how radical right populist groupings design their message toward vulnerable, crisis-shaken groups. Throughout the Covid-19 crisis, different and common responses shaped populist performances around the globe, such as pharmaceutical messianism (Lasco and Yu 2021), or the simplification, dramatization, and blaming of other parts of society. While almost all political parties - from left to right - spoke about *a war* on Covid-19, the direct authoritarian confrontation became the usual money within the radical right discourse (Mudde 2020).

However, PRRPs generally responded very differently to the ongoing crisis. Despite Cas Mudde's early restraint foreseeing that populism would "not have one, unitary response to the pandemic," (Wondreys and Mudde 2020), analyses that made generalizations kept proliferating. In an environment of deeply disputed claims over governmental policies in response to Covid-19, rivaling populist political actors generally represent deeply diverging understandings of crises as their material, political and symbolic dimensions greatly differ (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018). Distrust of – and discontent with – evidence-based policy interventions, discrediting professional and technocratic expertise, and the promotion of simplistic or emotional responses, often through social media, can be handled as one of the many reactions of the PRR to this crisis (Speed and Mannion 2020; Friedman 2019; Wondreys and Mudde 2020). Proposing political change through the salvation of the people and mobilizing new issues to break established party dominance, PRRPs responded very differently to the current pandemic (see Bol et al. 2021; Bobba and Hubé 2021; Jungkuntz 2021; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2020: 3; Wondreys and Mudde 2020; Santana et al. 2020). Their trajectories have been shaped by various parameters as well. Since populist claims are not only a discursive phenomenon, intrinsically variable and ambivalent (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2017: 108), they need to be assessed regarding their impact on political practice (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2021: 172). However, there is no unitary epidemiological or anti-scientific populist right-wing response, nor any coherent pattern regarding the success and/or approval ratings of populist governments (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2020: 3). In some cases, such as in Hungary or Turkey, illiberals became eventually profiteers of the pandemic and increased authoritarianism in their countries. However, it remains uncertain whether this development is due to populist features. As a reminder of the above, pandemic mitigation policies, which

have sometimes been classified by the media as populist, were also often adopted by non-populists or the mainstream. Most importantly, inefficient, anti-scientific, harsh measures, policies, or strategies proposed by populist actors are not necessarily populist in nature, nor are they sufficient to indicate a populist character. Populism across the board is “not primarily characterized by hostility to scientists” (Müller 2020) since anti-scientific solutions to the pandemic have also been part of non-populist agendas.

Hence, it is no surprise that inclusionary and exclusionary types of populism proposed very different solutions during the pandemic, such as immigration, social cohesion, unemployment, in- or exclusion of minorities (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2020) or the national centralization of power. Some PRRPs who are or were deeply critical of the lockdown measures – such as Vox and sometimes The League – appear to have taken a radically different view on the crisis compared to the populist left (e.g. Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2021). Labeling Covid-19 mitigation policies as inhibitions to personal freedoms, liberties, or rights and at the same time invoking rights to sovereignty, citizen’s rights, social rights, and economic rights (Alekseev 2021), Vox and the League, like many parties and political actors, seem to refer to science-related issues in very different ways. Consequently, we should be able to detect commonalities of various typologies of populism employed by actors and parties concerning the Covid-19 pandemic.

National political races are rooted in a defined constituency whereas regional, systemic, and epistemic differences produce different outcomes. Thus, the great concern about PRRPs’ likely long-term impacts on political practice through ideologically charged, nativist, authoritarian, and sometimes even illiberal claim-making (Falkenbach and Greer 2018: 15). In fact, Vox’s and the League’s PRR narratives objectively demonstrated a good appetite for ideological references, which leads to the assumption that the natural ambivalence of the PRR has been transformed in some cases (Galanopoulos and Venizelos 2021).

There are several structural reasons why populists’ ideological positions play a crucial role, especially now during pandemic politics (Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2021). Depending upon whether parties are in government or opposition (Galanopoulos and Venizelos 2021: 10) and political positionings, ideology eventually defines how parties interpret crises and the world. As mentioned above, ideological positions define whether populist actors frame crises as failures of representation, and how policies are used in the populist discourse. On the one hand, populist actors are very much concerned with policies and agendas connected to their ideological narratives (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2017: 105; Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2020: 12). Numerous studies have shown that ideology is a key factor when assessing populists’ responses to endogenous and exogenous challenges. On the other hand, we should avoid applying the normatively laden label of populism as a(n) (thin or thick) ideology to populist actors and I argue in favor of examining populism from an anti-essentialist point of view (Aslanidis 2015: 7). Because of socio-economic, political and cultural changes may by themselves not explain populist claim-making, I ultimately argue that populism is simply the most efficient claim-making type as such, employed by political actors when pursuing to gain political power (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2017: 115), including mainstream parties.

2. Performing Covid-19

As protests opposing COVID-19 mitigation policies emerged, the discourse of European radical right-wing populism shifted gradually towards the application of science-related and medical populism. According to some scholars, this pandemic is composed of performances of public health crises that triggered “the people” against “the establishment” (Lasco and Curato 2019), with fundamentalist claims, characterized by a “vilification of opponents, distrust of existing political and social institutions, ideological rigidity, (..) a rededication to individualism and personal freedom” (Westermeyer 2021: 116). Conceptualizations of science-related and medical populism call attention to the political responses to and constructions of the health crisis by populism in general, offering a new vision of the politicized and performative natures of pandemics. This is especially important, since medical and health emergencies differ from other crises, as they take a commonly shared emotional, “aesthetic and affective character, where claims are not just articulated through voice and text but creatively performed to evoke reactions from a targeted yet fragmented and globalized audience” (Lasco and Curato 2019: 4).

2.1 The siren call of the Spanish radical right

Spain had always been considered as being immune to the appeal of right-wing populism until recently in 2018 when the new populist phenomenon Vox became the third strongest party in the Parliament with 52 MPs. It is the first major PRRP to emerge in Spain since the death of General Franco. It also managed to grow into one of the most successful PRRPs in Western Europe in a short time (Mudde 2019), a great indicator of its adaptability as a political entrepreneur and change agent (Evans 2005). Previous studies have shown contradictory evidence regarding Vox’s populist nature (Ferreira 2019; Ortiz Barquero 2019; Rooduijn et al. 2019; Turnbull-Dugarte 2019; Marcos-Marné, Plaza-Colodro and O’Flynn 2021; Rama et al. 2021) but discourse analyses proved that the party developed and applied a more structured populist strategy of crisis performance (Moffitt 2015), constructing its messages around clear-cut Manichean moral and dualistic worldviews (see Plaza-Colodro and Olivares 2022). At the beginning of the state of danger in March 2020, 80 % of Spanish citizens considered the national political situation as inflamed, and a quarter considered Santiago Abascal and his Vox party as the main source of this tension (Centre for Sociological Research, CIS; in: Magre et al. 2021: 4). It is also worth mentioning that Julian King, the European Commission’s security commissioner, named Vox on 14 June 2019 as an example of disinformation and rumor-peddling on social media (ibidem: 9).

Nowhere else might the radical right have changed its leadership so drastically than in Spain in the last years. Vox softened its neoliberal economic discourse and empowered its leadership trying to turn into the direct opposition pole of the government, overriding the conservative People’s Party. The recent increase in publications testify to the great interest in the transformational character of the party (see e.g. Alonso and Rovira Kaltwasser 2015; Mudde 2019; Greve 2019; Gonzalez Cuevas 2019; Turnbull-Dugarte 2019; Olalla et al. 2019; Turnbull-Dugarte et. al. 2020; Magre et al. 2021; Olivas Osuna 2020; Rama et al. 2021; Plaza-Colodro, Miranda Olivares 2022). Following a traditional RRP strategy, the party appears to be

organized around its main leader, Santiago Abascal, whose leadership style embodies much of the party's image in the media. However, the party's leadership is not embodied within one single figure but is distributed among Abascal's potential successors (Rama et al. 2021: 146). Lately, many historic moments happened in Spain: most recently, Vox revolutionized the Catalan landscape in February 2021 when it became the fourth political force in Parliament, replacing the regional anti-independence parties, the Partido Popular (PP) and Ciudadanos.

The pandemic situation in Spain certainly favored the emergence of Vox, becoming the third national political party and the only counterforce to the Socialist-led coalition government and the right-wing conservative party PP. It is also important to highlight that the PP is Vox's 'birthplace' and delivers many of its conservative voters to the latter. At the same time, Vox, originally far from the ultra-right family, is also rooted in the history of the Spanish ultraright of the 80s and the end of the Franco regime (Casals 2020). Since then, the Spanish ultraright emanated from three different cities with very different characteristics: Madrid, Barcelona, and Valencia. However, Vox emerged in Andalucía in 2018, as a sign that the party somehow broke with the traditional extreme right forces.

Surprisingly, many Spanish scholars still do not agree on the party's neo-fascist profile and discussions are rather flavored by recent political developments. The party succeeded in 2018 to radicalize its reactionary narrative – driven by conjunctures – by amalgamating four different conservative right-wing policy areas: policies that the PP did not use for its agenda (e.g. laws related to abortion, historic memory, or same-sex marriage); traditional policies of the radical and extreme right (e.g. the irredentism concerning Gibraltar, Ceuta and Melilla and its opposition to decentralized autonomic powers in Spain); topics of the Western ultraright family (such as immigration, a radical anti-Islam agenda, references to the Reconquista – the *reconquest*, strong oppositions to the so-called “gender ideology” (VoxEspaña 2022) and the Euroscepticism of the Visegrad group). The party also adopted the most successful aspects of Trumpism, such as “making Spain great again”² (Vox 2016), identifying as “España viva” (Vox 2018), erecting walls in Ceuta and Melilla paid by Morocco, and close ties to Steve Bannon are to be mentioned.

The Catalan crisis, at its height in October 2017, reactivated the Spanish ultra-nationalism dating back to the 19th century, Cuban secessionism and the “españolismo incondicional”³. However, this ultra-nationalism is also a direct answer to the political system that had been created back in 1978: Vox sees itself as the only valid eraser of the existing system, which is built upon regional autonomies and institutions such as the Constitutional Court. As such, the ‘ideological war’ against the left and ‘progressive forces’, the ‘anti-Spain’ and ‘peripheral nationalisms’ has been on the party's agenda since it gained power in 2018. These aspects and the simultaneous declines of the centrist party (Ciudadanos: Cs) and the Catalan crisis explain its recent electoral successes at the European (2019) and national levels.

According to recent research and data analysis (Rama et al. 2021: 57), the emergence of Vox and the polarizing political strategies of its party leaders are largely responsible for the new

² Translated from “hacer España grande otra vez”.

³ See: Enric Ucelay-da Cal: ‘Cuba y el despertar de los nacionalismos en la España peninsular’. *Studia Historica. Historia Contemporánea*, 15 (1997), pp. 173-178.

left-right polarization within the Spanish system. The traditional parties also reacted to this new landscape and the general political debate became closer to an antagonistic populist confrontation than a political consensus (Olivas Osuna 2020). This is also because electoral competition has recently taken place within ideological blocks, and not across them (Rama et al. 2021: 246). For example, Vox failed to attract the Socialist party (PSOE) or left-wing populist voters. However, recent Catalan elections in February 2021 proved that the party succeeded to stabilize its political presence within the core debate between unionists and independentists but also because other nationalist parties in the region are declining (PP, Cs). This also explains why the party is not 'anti-system' in nature: Vox always remained monarchical and accepted the EU's support packages during the pandemic.

During the pandemic, the government scheduled seven extensions of the state of danger (voted in March 2020) to a vote in Congress. Vox only voted in favor on the first occasion; the other six times, it voted against (like most of the regionalist/independentist parties, e.g. JxCat or Bildu, ERC) (Alfonso, 2022). After this first refusal to vote for the extension and especially after the vote of no confidence against prime minister Pedro Sánchez on 29 July 2020, Vox became truly a 'lone wolf', to control and check the government. At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, Vox voted once in favor of the state of alarm but quickly took the opportunity to remind people that the only enemy was the state and the government. When Vox began to vote against the decrees of the government related to the state of danger, it also appealed them before the Constitutional Court – successfully: the Court agreed on several occasions and stated that the government should have decreed a state of emergency and not a state of danger, because of the implemented *suspension of rights*. The Court eventually corrected the government's version of being simply an *affectation of rights*. Hence, Vox shed light on the incorrect and unlawful execution of the government's actions: this case illustrates that populism does not necessarily erode liberal democracy but that it can also strengthen it.

Vox also grew a typical radical right and nationalistic anti-establishment profile. However, it did not change ideologically by maintaining clear political positions and became part of the Western European right-wing mainstream. Using 'grassroots' protests to expand its anti-establishment profile and to transform the crisis into a crisis of representation and legitimacy, Vox organized 'caceroladas' (protests on balconies with pans), street protests, and encouraged the people in violent riots against the government measures. During 'the rally 'round the flag' effect at the beginning of the pandemic (Europe Elects 2020), Vox tried to be a respectable partner of the government. Santiago Abascal managed to combine continuities of the Spanish ultraright with abrupt, deep, and surprising changes. This also explains why the party attracts voters from the working class and the left who reject the PP. On the other hand, the party also wins tactical voters, people from the conservative right who want the PP to govern, but only under the condition that Vox checks and balances out.

The pandemic context eventually allowed to enhance Vox's populist narrative and political views around traditional radical right topics, but also to foster its cultural views. However, Vox did not employ a negationist narrative nor did it use the pandemic as a major political topic. The current health crisis ultimately favored not only the emergence of Vox but also the enemies of populism, preferring expert knowledge and science-based policy solutions. Since

economic issues and social problems have been prominent issues in Spanish public debates, left-wing populist actors such as Unidas Podemos (Podemos) had it also much easier than the PRR. However, Vox profited from the Spanish context, due to heavy feelings of disappointment about a highly indebted state and a permanent state of disunion with the Catalan government. Also, Vox's success can't be understood without understanding the Catalan crisis of 2017, nor without the existence of Unidas Podemos (Podemos). Vox is not the first national party to advocate for a revision of the Spanish Constitution of 1978, it was Podemos. This explains why right-wingers adopted this issue in a reactionary way and why it remains an essential point of the party program.

Even if the party failed in promoting its pandemic policy solutions and in polarizing public opinion, we can say that Vox emerged as a Covid-19 profiteer: it was able to develop a cultural and anti-government profile, and its signature debates around identitarian claims, the Catalan issue and the reforming of the Constitution proved to be electorally successful.

2.2 Too many earthquakes in the country of many populisms

Interestingly, all main parties of the Italian right can be defined as populist. As such, Italy might be described as a "country of many populisms" (Tarchi 2015: 84) with a broad right-wing galaxy (Albertazzi, Bonansinga, Zulianello 2021). Italy owns two PRRPs: the League and Brothers of Italy (Fdi; Fratelli d'Italia). However, something unprecedented recently happened in the history of parliamentary regimes: the alternation of two governments of opposing alliances (the extreme right, Five Star and *Leaga*, and Five Star with PD, the social democratic left), all led by the same Prime Minister Professor Giuseppe Conte. This period was concluded with 20 months of government led by a highly esteemed technocrat, Mario Draghi; a government that was supported by all parties except Fratelli d'Italia (Fusaro 2022). Interestingly this was the fourth such experiment since 1993. It might thus not be a surprise that electoral participation dropped by another 9 points to 64 percent this year (ibidem).

After the disappearance of Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI), Fdi took the place of *the* 'post-fascist' populist party of the PRR electoral alliance. When the pandemic hit Italy in February 2020, a coalition formed by the populist Five Star Movement (M5S) and the center-left Democratic Party (PD) supported the independent Giuseppe Conte. During the pandemic, the League did not employ the same strategy as Vox and its attitude was – especially comparing the two periods during the Conte II cabinet and Draghi's I coalition – rather erratic and inconsistent (Mari 2020). During the initial period in February 2020, Salvini highly criticized the lockdown measures and demanded the reopening of the most affected regions in the North, especially of the party's 'heartland' Lombardy, governed by themselves. While the region suffered from a heavy death toll, Salvini was finally not able to justify the poor management of the crisis in the region, and his party lost a considerable amount of support.

While structurally attacking the government, Salvini came back to its PRR 'signature' policies: immigration, law and order, and the economy (see Custodero 2020; Vicentini and Galanti 2021). As the situation worsened, a 'rally 'round the flag' effect kicked in and the executive enjoyed a particularly high level of support. Already at this stage, Salvini's narrative was highly

politicized according to his nativist ideological view. In a typical populist manner, Salvini framed the health crisis as a crisis of representation: trying to mobilize the electorate by accusing both migrants and Chinese nationals to spread the virus (Mari 2020), advocating for those 'left behind' and accusing the government's inaction (Tondo 2020) or illegitimate ruling. Salvini performed a complete U-turn in March and punctually supported the lockdown in the name of "national unity" (Segatti 2020). The League adopted protest as an important way to communicate its opposition to the government, for instance when Salvini and 70 parliamentarians from his group occupied the Chamber of Deputies and Senate in April 2020 (La Vanguardia 2020).

However, the next U-turn happened fairly soon when Conte lost the parliamentary majority, causing the breakdown of his cabinet. The League decided to back Draghi's new executive "without conditions and vetoes" (La 7 2021), which was formed by Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI) and the League in January 2021, together with the parliamentary parties that had supported Conte (M5S, PD, Italia Viva [Iv] and Free and Equal [LeU]), with Fdi as the only party in opposition. The party softened its discourse and employed its usual strategy of keeping "one foot in and one foot out of government" (see Albertazzi and McDonnell 2005). During this period, the first part of 2021, the League softened its Eurosceptic narrative as well, remained consistent with the use of its traditional topics (migration, law and order, cutting taxes, and Euroscepticism), and tried to naturally shift the focus to the migration crisis. Yet, the League mainly supported Draghi's efforts while criticizing some of his proposed measures and ministers (Lettig 2021). Salvini tried to position himself as a 'responsible leader' and a "devoted super-Catholic" (Manucci 2020): siding with the government, proposing even stricter Covid restrictions, redirecting blame mostly towards the European Union, accusing the latter of starting a trade war against Italy and of being ignorant when it comes to the concerns of Italians. Employing a rather radical strategy, the PRR leader structurally employed conspiracy theories and anti-elitism against supra-national entities and Brussels especially. When Ursula von der Leyen, apologized to Italy in an open letter published by *la Repubblica* (2020), acknowledging that the Union had been too slow in supporting Italy and announcing the 'Recovery Fund' as an unprecedented help package, the League reacted similarly to the majority of PRRPs in Western Europe. Salvini severely attacked the EU institutions as being too slow and on the European Stability Mechanism, the League argued that accepting it would inevitably lead to establishing "a dictatorship in the name of the virus" (Albertazzi and Zulianello 2020).

Also, evidence supports that presidential systems with comparatively low levels of economic development and/or state/leadership capacities generally produced notable deviations from a consensus in support of public health measures at the beginning of the pandemic (Rennó et al. 2022: 283). Like many other PRRPs in opposition, Vox supported government-imposed policies at the beginning of the pandemic and changed its strategy into a great critic of public health measures after the summer of 2020. Contrarily, the League became more supportive over time after leaving its opposition status and becoming part of Draghi's coalition in January 2021. Also, contrarily to Abascal, Salvini always remained a populist outsider.

In general, the League's discourse had been marked by many inconsistencies and U-turns, and polls indicated that the party could not capitalize on the crisis (Manucci 2020), since its support

decreased to 15 % at the time of writing (Polls of Polls, Politico 2022). At the beginning of the pandemic, the League was already very critical of Conte's government and took advantage of the institutional marginalization of the Parliament in Rome. During this period, Salvini even demanded the prime minister resign "if not able to defend Italy and Italians" (Tondo 2020).

Yet, times of emergency allowed the President and the Council to use the instruments of the decrees resident of the Council of Ministers (DPCM), a sub-legislative instrument that does not have to be approved by the Parliament. That was possible on the basis offered by Decree-Law 6/2020. The use of these DPCM became a frequent practice, and thanks to that Conte became the "master of emergency" (Vedaschi and Graziani 2020) and the protagonist of the rule-making process. This practice did not change fundamentally during Draghi's time in office, but the Parliament was more involved than it had been under the former cabinet. This happened for two reasons: first, the end of the acute phase of the lockdown allowed the Parliament to meet physically – an important factor since in Italy its members cannot vote remotely –, and second, the attempt to switch from DPCMs to decree-laws, which are government measures approved in situations of necessity and urgency provided with legislative force (see: Martinico 2020; Pacini 2020). Under the Italian Constitution, these decree laws lose effect from the beginning if they are not transposed into law by Parliament within sixty days of its publication (Martinico, G., personal communication, June 2021).

Draghi's cabinet was also a good opportunity for populists to elaborate a counter-narrative since Draghi's late application of the recovery fund proved excessive mismanagement of the pandemic. Consequently, FdI, as the only party in opposition to Draghi's government, became a real profiteer of the pandemic. As we have seen during the September 25, 2022 elections and the triumphant win of Giorgia Meloni, leader of FdI and long-time militant of the uttermost right end of the political spectrum: the populist right has acquired a different assertiveness in the West (Fusaro 2022). In these crisis times, it seems difficult to stay optimistic.

Conclusion

Many exogenous and endogenous conditions explain the evolutions of the PRR since the outbreak of the pandemic, such as government-opposition status, state capacity, institutional contexts, and levels of economic development. When examining changes in PRR discourses over time, we can identify differences in populists' responses to the pandemic depending on parliamentary or presidential systems, and personalistic or leadership styles. While regime type alone does certainly not explain variations in discourse nor levels of denialism or support of public health measures, it helps understanding specific parameters of 'the populist performance'. In this project, I observed that both the League and Vox adopted different strategies with varying success but employed similar parameters during the pandemic. Both avoided the crisis to continue since the political costs would have been too high. Like other EU populist parties, both PRRPs did not increase their radicalness when it comes to health measures and remained stable in terms of alternative claim-making over time. However, Vox was a denialist and opposed public health measures since the very beginning of Covid-19. The League - while in opposition - did not generally argue against public health measures but had

denialist tendencies (Rennó et al. 2022: 283). While being very critical of the government, the League did not change ideologically and focused on traditional PRR topics, becoming closer to the youth, and targeting specific segments of society. The party also failed in instrumentalizing the pandemic, despite trying to capitalize on fueling emotions.

My fieldwork in both countries also confirmed that the selected cases, despite their belonging to very different cultural, social, and political contexts, indicate a high level of flexibility as political entrepreneurs and change agents (Evans 2005). Generally demonstrating a problematic relationship with liberal democracy and the rule of law, both parties attempt actively to undermine liberal and democratic institutions via the (re-)politicization of specific PRR issues. However, Vox is also a good illustration of populism sometimes acting as a threat *and* a corrective for democracy (Rovira Kaltwasser 2012), whereas the League did fulfill rather a threat than a corrective function for democracy. Hence, considering that the ‘populist logic’ can be antithetical to constitutional liberalism, scholars and practitioners should keep a close eye on its chameleonic *and* ambivalent character. For example, the League nourished its authenticity from the fact that it was the only territorial party in Italy that advocated national federalization during the constitutional reform in 2001. It was Salvini who changed this paradigm and turned the League into a national force, and later – while becoming a soldier of Viktor Orbán – transformed it into a sovereigntist and Europhile party.

In general, we can observe that PRRPs are generally able to capitalize on a crisis and consolidate power only if they have the tools to reframe a crisis-infused moment as a crisis or representation. This explains why most PRRPs maintain polarizing strategies of disruption and (re-) politicization of issues under existing populist repertoires of blame-making and grievances. Ultimately, the success of this strategy depends on the flexibility and adaptability of PRR actors. Both case studies show that the parties succeeded more or less in reframing the health crisis as a failure of representation in a traditional PRR fashion, aimed at selling their discourse and mobilizing the electorate. However, this health crisis is neither convenient nor useful for PRRPs in general, precisely because it is more about competence than representation. Considering that citizens in these times prefer a responsible instead of a responsive government (Mair 2009), the typical ‘populist promise’ (Mény and Surel 2002) to save and restore the sovereignty of the people betrayed by elites is not easy to maintain nor to reconstruct. However, this crisis could still reinforce socially and politically authoritarian and regressive forces in liberal democracies, if unsuccessful state coordination, insufficient public communication, and transparency, failures of adoption of scientific expertise, and uncoordinated EU policies remain a common practice. This is especially important to keep in mind since the populist radical right could be compared to a nostalgic sleeping giant, which often finds new transnational alliances.

Moreover, when we look at the current rule of law (RoL) developments in the EU, we can observe and argue that the cases of Hungary and Poland have one good thing in common: for the first time in history, the European Union works on a more systematic answer to counter illiberalism through the new Rule of Law (RoL) toolbox, which enables the implementation of the budget conditionality and the prevention of emerging threats to the rule of law and breaches of other domestic EU values. However, we should learn from past experiences of international sanctions and know that populations – especially those who are already

aggrieved – often blame the outsiders rather than their own leadership for external punishments, and their loss of funds might eventually not be attributed to their national leader’s policies. In these times it appears to be almost as important as the new RoL framework to also care for different ‘bottom-up’ mechanisms, which could build new bridges between civil societies, and reinforce liberal forces and pluralism. If we fail to do that, then it will be impossible to convince people that there are better alternatives to illiberal worldviews.

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