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Territorializing threats in nationalist populist narratives: an Italian perspective on the migration and Covid-19 crises

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the capacity of ‘territorialising threats’ expressed by nationalist populist parties by reinventing and replicating the geopolitical ability to speak in territorial terms exploiting emergencies to advance nationalistic claims. We focus on the Italian case exploring the narratives and political positions on borders and sovereignty adopted by the Lega party during 2019, when the ‘crisis’ was related to migration flows, and in the first half of 2020, when the Covid-19 emergency reached its first peak in Italy. Our aim is to contribute to the effort of political geographers to unveil the spatial methods of nationalist populism.

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Introduction

The global spread of populist movements is attracting the attention of a number of disciplines. Various attempts have been made to define this political wave occurring in several countries, and its most basic definition describes populism as a movement promoting a reified ‘will of the people’ against the ‘global conspiring elites’ (Brubaker, 2017; Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). Both the ‘people’ and the ‘elites’ may be and are actually defined in a variety of ways in different contexts; however, the crucial aspect of the distinction is morality, as *pure* people confront with *corrupt* elites (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

In applying a geographical lens, a crucial aspect worthy of analysis concerns the definition of ‘the people’ as a native group (Agnew & Shin, 2019), which reinforces nationalism by territorializing sovereignty and identifying threats as coming from outside the domestic space of the nation, an aspect that led to the common definition of right-wing populism as ‘sovereignism’ (Basile & Mazzoleni, 2020; Kallis, 2018; Verzichelli, 2020). Brubaker (2020) has recently highlighted that nationalism and populism cannot be completely separated, as they are both constitutive of populism itself and internal to populist discourse. As we shall see, focusing on the nationalist and sovereignist dimension not only allows for a clearer understanding of the (native) character of the people, but also for a better definition of the elites: indeed, ‘while the key distinction in populism is moral, populist actors use a variety of secondary criteria to distinguish between the people and the elite’ (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 14), including the attitude of the elites to favour the interest of ‘outsiders’ (e.g. immigrants) over those of the

native people. Kaufmann (2018) identifies the concerns of white majorities over immigration as the key driver of the rise of populist parties in the West, particularly right-wing parties. Even if recent analysis emphasize how both right-wing and left-wing populist parties converge on a number of policy issues, including 'restrictive immigration policies and protectionist economic policies' (Eiermann et al., 2017, p. 5) native understandings of 'the people' and nationalistic claims are considered evident components in particular of right-wing populism, or nationalist populism. This paper focuses on an example of this kind, underlying the geographical component of nationalist populism and searching for its evidence in the Italian case.

A geographical perspective points to the crucial role played by borders in nationalist populist discourses and practices (Casaglia et al., 2020; Kallis, 2018; Lamour & Varga, 2017), both as 'containers' of national identity and as crucial markers of national sovereignty, with respect to external influences, including transnational mobility, multiculturalism, supranational and international organizations.

Indeed, borders offer a crucial site where to explore processes of the territorialization of threats and security issues in nationalist populist discourses and practices. We argue that populist politics somehow reinvent and replicate the geopolitical ability identified as 'discursive practice, by which intellectuals of statecraft "spatialize" international politics and represent it as a "world" characterized by particular types of places, peoples and dramas' (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992, p. 190). The tendency to speak in territorial terms, identify an 'us' against a generic 'them', exploit crises and emergencies to advance nationalist claims, and immutably define good and evil are typical of nationalist populist leaders.

This article thus focuses on the capacity of territorializing threats expressed by populist parties by framing different realities in the same scheme and reproducing the same narratives for very different situations. More specifically, the analysis of the case study reveals that different situations and contexts are articulated in the populist discourses and practices through the same process: the identification of threats; their 'territorialisation'; the fuelling of fear and the mobilization of national identities; the promotion of a strongly territorial understanding of identity and politics; the nurturing of a sense of common belonging; and the channelling of frustration and discontent by pointing to common enemies who come from 'outside'.

We explore the Italian case, especially highlighting the narratives adopted by the country's main right-wing populist party, the Lega, in two different scenarios: in 2019, when it was part of the governing coalition, the party's leader Matteo Salvini was Minister of the Interior, and the 'crisis' was related to migration flows through the Mediterranean; and in the first half of 2020, when the Lega was in opposition and the Covid-19 emergency peaked in Italy. We explore the framing of these two different moments and related crisis within the Lega's narratives and political positions with respect to Italian borders and sovereignty. The analysis focuses in particular on the statements of the party's leader Matteo Salvini, by far the most relevant voice shaping the Lega's positions at the national scale, as well as the person responsible for the upscaling of the party to the national stage in the last decade, as we shall see in the next sections. It is worth highlighting that the Lega party is also characterized by a lively and dialectic internal relationship in particular between the local/regional and the national scale (Albertazzi et al., 2018); however, the analysis of this relationship goes beyond the aims of this paper.

If we examine the Italian context, as we shall see, we can identify a common thread underlying the Lega's narratives along emergencies arising from issues as radically diverse as the refugee crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite their differences, the two emergencies are traced back to the us/them dichotomy, both internally and externally. Whereas the use of the 'migration crisis' rhetoric served to advance anti-immigrant discourses in defence of national interests and against supranational institutions (Casaglia & Coletti, 2020), the pandemic was presented as the crucial and final reason for adopting defensive and bordering measures. This is clearly in line with an understanding of borders as defensive lines, even if 'there is not really any such thing as totally sealing off borders' (Christakis, 2020, p. 107) in the case of a pandemic. Despite the differences, the outcomes of those two emergency situations' responses are very similar: such rhetoric reinforces internal cohesion and the feeling of disenchantment with supranational power and associated policies and politics, seen as the concretization of international elites' conspiracies.

The methodology is based on an analysis of political documents, including official and unofficial statements by the Lega leader or other party members, as well as by other political figures, which appeared in newspapers and/or on social networks in the timeframes considered for the study: both during the migration crisis with the 'closure of ports' policy and throughout the pandemic's spread. Salvini's Twitter and Facebook accounts were analysed daily in the two periods, also checking other party members' and government related ones. We conducted research on a wide spectrum of Italian online newspapers¹ limiting the search to the two specific timeframes and using keywords such as 'Salvini', 'emergency', 'migration crisis', 'covid-19' and combinations of those.

The article opens with a theoretical section that outlines how politics often uses space instrumentally to recognizably define threats, enemies, and dangers. We propose an interpretation of nationalist populism that recognizes its ability to use spatial tropes like those critical geopolitics scholars identify in the political territorialization of threats. The text continues by presenting Italy's populist political context in recent decades, to stress the different attitudes expressed by populist leaders when they are in government or opposition: given their need to continuously provoke resentment and dissatisfaction to maintain their electoral basis (Magri, 2018), we analyse how this discontent has been channelled in different phases of the Lega's evolution. A case study analysis follows, with a detailed interpretation of the strategies mobilized by nationalist populism in Italy in the two phases under scrutiny. We show that a bordering and territorializing approach has characterized the Lega narratives in relation to the different emergencies considered and has become a typical feature of its leader's political strategy. The article concludes by discussing the main findings and clarifying the contribution we provide to the existing literature on populism, and more specifically, the effort of political geographers to unveil its spatial methods

Borders and populism, or concerning the territorialization of threats

Populism, and more specifically what has been termed nationalist populism, seems to have a very special attachment to territory, especially if we consider the instrumental use of border rhetoric it entails (Casaglia et al., 2020; Kallis, 2018; Lizotte, 2018). As recently outlined by Agnew and Shin (2019), despite several differences, there are two

main common characteristics in any populist movement that allow for the term populism to maintain an analytical value. These are ‘the idea of taking politics to the people by means of limiting and undermining the dominant political caste or establishment of existing political parties [...], and the framing of the people in the entirely territorial sense of a founding or native group, particularly the ordinary people in it, increasingly threatened by foreign and/or domestic invaders, migrants, or cultural influence’ (Ibid, p. 7). This specific use of the nation’s bounded space becomes a mantra when it begins to face real or crafted emergencies, related to migration, terrorism, environmental hazards, or global pandemics.

The process of the territorialization of threats is not new. Nor has it been invented by populist political actors. Indeed, critical geopolitics scholars have long recognized the capacity of the political performance to resort to geographical tropes in situations of crisis and insecurity (Dalby, 2003; Jeffrey, 2016). As argued by Simon Dalby with reference to the reaction to the 9/11 attacks, ‘geography is no comfort from dangers from outside. But that has not stopped the impulse to reinscribe security in spatial tropes’ (Dalby, 2003, p. 68). The process that concerns us lies in the evolution of the use of spatial tropes by nationalist populism in a complex and changing scenario, focusing on Italy as a case study.

This process relates to the analysis of populism as a sovereignist project, a definition that emphasizes two central aspects of (mainly) right-wing nationalist populism. Firstly, the nation-state is invoked as the frame of reference, within an international order, where the ‘self-identified interests of the native ethno-cultural population’ guide the politics and the state ‘maintains or re-asserts sovereign control over its laws, institutions, and the terms of its international interactions’ (De Spiegeleire et al., 2017, p. ii). Sovereignism seeks to re-territorialize the geographies of power (Basile & Mazzoleni, 2020) also by restoring national sovereignty, which has its origin and base in the will of the people and its scope within the borders of the nation state. This kind of project is strongly exclusive and points to the elites as the ‘actors that undermine “true” sovereignty and [are] consequently incapable of defending ordinary citizens from the threats to their culture, identity, economic wealth, and security’ (Ibid, p. 158). In sum, sovereignism is associated to ‘the need to subvert the corruption of the elites by bringing the power back to the people’ (Verzichelli, 2020, p. 264) and redefining the geographies of power within the bounded space of the nation.

The constructed nature of nations and the feelings of belonging associated to it have been widely analysed since the seminal contribution of Anderson (1983), while the notions of territory, territoriality and territorialization have been variously interpreted and circumscribed in order to tackle the ways in which space is invested with power (Elden, 2013; Storey, 2001) and strategies are put in place to ‘affect, influence or control people, phenomena and relationships’ (Sack, 1986, p. 19). In short, territoriality is understood as the process in which ‘space and society’ (Storey, 2001, p. 15) are connected, with territories as socially constructed spaces that are part of specific political technologies (Elden, 2013). Borders are key in the reiteration of territoriality, as symbolic and material elements that give form and interact with territory, providing the possibility to control geographically both access and the exercise of power.

The three basic dimensions of sovereignism, namely the cultural, political and economic (Basile & Mazzoleni, 2020; Verzichelli, 2020), seek respectively to preserve national

identity, to defend people's sovereignty against corrupt elites, and to oppose market globalization and supranational rules. The territorial character of these three objectives clarifies the connection between nationalist populism and geographies, opening the way for an analysis of the discursive and material strategies through which power is re-territorialized.

In a straightforward way, our take here is that the relation between power and place is reinforced, both on an ideational and a material level, through the instrumental use of emergency and its securitization. In a scenario where a political problem emerges, its securitization therefore consists in the identification of a threat and the invocation of an emergency situation, which also entails the production of fear.

Diverse 'dangers from outside' are a recurrent theme in the hands of nationalist populism that allows the creation or reinforcement of a sense of national identity, the feeding of fear and the sense of insecurity, and that can also serve the purpose of diverting attention from internal political, economic, and social problems. In the populist approach, the border of the nation is used as the ultimate barrier against menaces originating from different external sources identified in the forces of globalization, like supranational institutions, multiculturalism, and international mobility. In doing so, populism reaffirms a perceived loss sovereignty by part of the nation-state and its native population and adopts border imaginaries not only aimed at marking the sovereignty of the state but based on functions that were typical in ancient times, for example in the Roman Empire, when the aim of borders (*limes*) was mainly to protect against 'barbarians' and control trade (Popescu, 2011).

The subjects under threat are recognized in a supposedly homogeneous national community to be defended in terms of economic interests, limiting immigration, or claiming legislative autonomy. As analysed elsewhere (Casaglia et al., 2020), the bordering performance in the populist discourse is manifested in both the structuring of internal cohesion and the delegitimizing of supranational entities and institutions. Internally, there is a constant reassertion of domestic decision making, based on the idea that the nation comes first, limiting the influence of external (multinational or supranational) actors. Moreover, populist leaders also create internal enemies who correspond to governing parties, considered either to be in line with supranational elites or corrupted and detached from 'the people'. Externally, the biopolitical control of migrants' movements is aimed at protecting native groups from threatening invaders. As we shall see, within this framework, dynamics may change according to both the stage of evolution of populist agendas and the position of parties in the composition of the government or opposition.

The spatialized character of the populist rhetoric creates a juxtaposition of the space of the nation and the space of the political, identifying the state, when governed by populists, as the only legitimate actor capable of defending the people from different threats. Driven by a compulsion 'to be in constant electoral campaign mode' and to 'mobilize public opinion even when they are governing' (Magri, 2018, p. 11), nationalist populist leaders have been able to instrumentalise different 'crises'. The state's borders in this strategic use of emergencies are increasingly the 'locus of the populist performance of "taking back control"' (Kallis, 2018, p. 285), both practically and symbolically.

Whereas in the pre-Covid-19 era this bordering exercise was circumscribed to populist narratives, it is interesting to assess the role of the global pandemic in reinforcing

nationalism, even beyond populist discourse (Radil et al., 2020). In both politics and the media we have seen the general promotion of narratives built around metaphors related to war, battles, patriotism, and sacrifice in facing the spread of the virus, as well as the instrumental use of bordering as a defence strategy, however illusory.

To explain this approach, we can question if and how populist positions have affected the general political discourse through a mechanism of contagion (Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013). Moreover, we can consider how the pandemic crisis has actually impacted very differently among countries, emphasizing unequal geographies (Kallio et al., 2020). Alternatively, although the parallel with the territorialization of the terrorist threat is hazardous, it is useful for highlighting the importance territory retains when the nation's security is at stake, whether in relation to its ethnic and cultural integrity or the wellbeing of its citizens. In the radically different cases of global terrorism, migration, and the pandemic "homeland defence" [...] is a matter primarily of border controls' (Dalby, 2003, p. 68).

Geopolitics and international relations have been exploiting this strategy, which 'naturalizes and normalizes particular political claims as "geographical" and hence given' (Kuus, 2007, p. 7). The process of the territorialization of threats results in the reification of dangers that are by their nature aterritorial. This strategy has been analysed with regard to the spatialisation of the terrorist threat in the identification of Afghanistan and later Iraq as failed states that must be considered responsible for hosting, protecting, and/or facilitating terrorist groups. As Jeffrey argues, terrorist networks are global and aspatial, whereas the reaction to the 9/11 attacks, for example, has been directed at specific territories that coincided with nation states, the most recognizable and taken-for-granted spatial entity (Jeffrey, 2016).

The recourse to the 'territorial trap' (Agnew, 1994) of the nation state to recognizably define danger has been analysed in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic in a recent article by Wang et al. (2020). The authors reflect on three articulations of the territorial trap that relate to the management of the health emergency, underlining the risks involved in such a territorialized reaction.

The first territorial trap is mainly based on Agnew's critique of [...] the state as a container of society – especially as it relates to the governance of international travel and migration within the system of territorial states. The second trap relates to how inter-state coordination has been impeded by differential political systems and inconsistent responses of different territorial states. Lastly, the third trap refers to the pervasiveness of territorial thinking in both nationalist stereotyping and geopolitical strategies, which may lead to reinforcing territorial control of critical resources and even wars (Wang et al., 2020, p. 155).

This process's similarity with the more typical populist strategy of bordering and identifying borders as the ultimate defence against the forces of globalization is interesting for an analysis of populism and its instrumental rhetoric use of the national territory. The travel ban and the interruption of migration flows were the first and most obvious reaction to the increase in infections, but this reasonable measure has sometimes been amplified and instrumentalised by populist leaders. Moreover, the metaphor of war that was largely used to define the struggle against the contagion reinforces a geopolitical imaginary that does not suit the challenge of a global pandemic scenario in which the effectiveness of measures would probably benefit from countries' coordination and

collaboration. As Wang, Zou, and Liu highlight, '[t]he fears and mistrust triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic and the territorial responses to it may resonate and even augment territorial thinking in both nationalist stereotyping and geopolitical strategies' (Wang et al., 2020, p. 156).

Populism in context: the recent evolution of the Italian political landscape

The diffusion of a contemporary form of right-wing populism in Italy started with the infamous election of Silvio Berlusconi in 1994. As the owner of the most influential private television channels in the country and with a long involvement in politics, Berlusconi gained political power in Italy after the 'Manipulite' investigation², which offered a perfect contextual definition of 'corrupt elites' and steered a temporary renewal of the Italian political class profoundly affecting the political scene (Albertazzi & Newell, 2015; Diodato & Niglia, 2019; Ruzza & Fella, 2009; Shin & Agnew, 2008; Tarchi, 2008).

From the outset, Berlusconi's strongest allies were the main right-wing Italian party (*Alleanza Nazionale*) and an emerging right-wing populist and separatist party called *Lega Nord* (the Northern League). Created in 1991 under the guidance of its secretary Umberto Bossi, *Lega Nord* was especially popular among entrepreneurs in Northern Italy. Its discourse was built on the frustration of Italian entrepreneurs with high taxes and slow bureaucracy, and the party channelled this dissatisfaction against two clear and identifiable principal enemies: southern Italians, accused of being lazy and living on the shoulders of the productive north; and the inept and corrupt political class, physically located in and metaphorically identified with the city of Rome (one of the most famous slogans of *Lega Nord* at the time was '*Roma ladrona*': 'Rome, the big thief'). From its establishment *Lega Nord* was populist in its content and style, organizing major street demonstrations aimed at provoking anger instead of discussing possible solutions. However, its geographical base and scope was limited to some Italian northern regions allied against the centre's bad policies and the inactivity of southern citizens.

For a period during the first decade of the 2000s *Lega Nord* lost some of its attractiveness³ until the new party secretary, Matteo Salvini, elected in 2013, succeeded in returning it to the centre of political life. Salvini's strategy may be defined as geographical upscaling. Starting with the two classical enemies of *Lega Nord*, Salvini shifted the target from the centre of power in Rome to the corruption of the EU elites, and from southern Italians to foreign migrants (Albertazzi et al., 2018; Mazzoleni & Ruzza, 2018). One of Salvini's term's first actions was indeed to change the name of the party: from *Lega Nord*, with a separatist and racist policy towards the south, to the *Lega*, with objectives and imagery that focused strongly on the defence of national interests. Salvini's narratives started to focus on Italy and Italians as a whole, a country and a population to be defended and protected from different threats coming from 'abroad'. The internal and external dimensions of the populist performance are coherent with the main targets of the *Lega*'s narratives, which have from the outset been migration movements – with migrants depicted as threatening invaders – and the EU as a supranational entity, accused of imposing overly strict rules and controls against the interests of 'the people'.

Throughout the Salvini-driven ascent of the Lega we have witnessed the resurgence of a patriotic rhetoric instigated by a political and popular discourse that asserts a sovereignist position by promoting internal cohesion against a backdrop of external challenges and threats like the EU's economic and political constraints, especially following the 2009 economic crisis, and the 'refugee crisis' that started in 2013. This is especially odd in a country like Italy, where '[m]ultiple factors – cultural differences between regions, the developmental gap between north and south, the lack of a national vernacular language until the late nineteenth century, and the weakness of state authority relative to social institutions such as families and the Catholic Church – have conspired to produce a weak national identity' (Agnew in Casaglia et al., 2020, p. 4); and it is even more odd considering the North–South divide which was the defining trait of the Lega's traditional narratives.

However, Salvini's Lega's use of nationalist language and the defence of national values have seen it rapidly becoming Italy's main right-wing party, overtaking allies like Berlusconi's *Forza Italia*. The Lega's growth happened in a period when populism was spreading in Italy also thanks to the emergence of another influential populist party, the *Movimento 5 Stelle* (M5S, the Five Star Movement), a more transversal party, attracting voters from different political backgrounds.

The Italian elections in 2018 were dominated by M5S, which gained around forty per cent of votes, while the Lega reached 17,35% of votes, distributed unevenly with peaks of 30–35% in northern Italian regions and lows of 3–5% in the south (Table 1).

After a long and uncertain negotiation period M5S reached an agreement with the Lega and other right-wing parties to form a government coordinated by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, with Matteo Salvini as Minister of the Interior. The coalition governed from June 2018 to August 2019 when Salvini played a crucial role in opening a crisis, determining the exit of the Lega from the majority and thus sanctioning the fall of the executive. As a result, he returned to the traditional center-right alliance and switched to opposition to the new Conte government, formed (without new elections) by M5S and the centre-left Partito Democratico (PD, Democratic Party). In the European elections of 2019, which were admittedly marked by low voter participation, the Lega

Table 1. Electoral results of political elections in Italy, 4 March 2018.

	CAMERA (72,94% of the electorate)		SENATE (73,01% of the electorate)	
	Votes	%	Votes	%
Coalition	12.152.345	37,00%	11.327.549	37,50%
<i>LEGA</i>	5.698.687	17,35%	5.321.537	17,61%
<i>Forza Italia</i>	4.596.956	14,00%	4.358.004	14,43%
<i>Fratelli d'Italia</i>	1.429.550	4,35%	1.286.606	4,26%
<i>Noi con l'Italia – UDC</i>	427.152	1,30%	361.402	1,20%
Movimento Cinque Stelle	10.732.066	32,68%	9.733.928	32,22%
Coalition	7.506.723	22,86%	6.947.199	23,00%
<i>Partito democratico</i>	6.161.896	18,76%	5.783.360	19,14%
<i>Più Europa</i>	841.468	2,56%	714.821	2,37%
<i>Italia Europa Insieme</i>	190.601	0,58%	163.454	0,54%
<i>Civica Popolare Lorenzin</i>	178.107	0,54%	157.282	0,52%
<i>SVP PAT</i>	134.651	0,41%	128.282	0,42%
Liberi e Uguali	1.114.799	3,39%	991.159	3,28%
Others	1.335.092	4,07%	1.210.528	4,01%

Source: Authors' elaboration on data of the Ministry of Interior of Italy⁵

emerged as the largest party in Italy (with almost thirty-five per cent of the vote, see Table 2). However, several internal fractures between the leader and regional representatives underpinned the Lega's rise (Albertazzi et al., 2018); in the September 2020 administrative elections the Lega's support decreased again, initiating an internal debate about the consequences of its leader's upscaling of both its aims and the definition of elites and enemies.

Territorializing threats and bordering the nation: the (evolving) policies of the Lega

Populism in the government coalition during the 'global migration crisis'

Matteo Salvini's '*breve ma intenso*' ('short but intense') term as Minister of the Interior during the M5S and Lega coalition government between June 2018 and September 2019 starkly exemplified the articulation of populism around bordering processes and borders' performativity. Salvini's policy bore several of the main features of right-wing populism, from the construction of the leader's personality and his use of social media to the staging of the border as the ultimate condition for 'taking back control' and affirming exclusive sovereignty over the territory of the nation state. The use of simplifying discursive strategies such as the idea of '*buon senso al governo*' (common sense government) made his approach easily understandable and replicable, contributing to the creation of the leader's personality as 'one of us', who made people feel represented, different, and closer with respect to the transnational elites who pursued their own interests.

Security, essentially articulated around border control and the slogan 'stop illegal immigration', was from the outset one of the central points of the Lega's political programme presented during the 2017 elections. At the same time, in the rhetoric of the party and its leader, another recurring and fundamental concept was that of 'sovereignty', connected with a representation of the EU as a detached elite incapable of and uninterested in pursuing the Italian people's interests and the management of migrants' arrivals through the Mediterranean. Policies and practices were put in place to implement these narratives, with borders and bordering the pivot of the strategy to re-territorialize the geographies of power. The performative character of Salvini's sovereignist actions and speeches was clear, as they were centre-stage during his entire term.

His ostentatious policy towards the outside was based on the closure of the border and a securitized management of the reception of refugees and migrants. This line has been

Table 2. Electoral results of European elections in Italy, 26 May 2019 (56,09% of the electorate).

	Votes	%
Lega Salvini Premier	9.153.638	34,33%
Partito Democratico	6.050.351	22,69%
Movimento Cinque Stelle	4.552.527	17,07%
Forza Italia	2.344.465	8,79%
Fratelli d'Italia	1.723.232	6,46%
+EUROPA - ITALIA IN COMUNE - PDE ITALIA	822.764	3,09%
Europa Verde	609.678	2,29%
La Sinistra	465.092	1,74%
Altri	941.215	3,53%
Total	26.662.962	100,00%

Source: Authors' elaboration on data of the Ministry of Interior of Italy

pursued both through direct border control and the tightening of internal practices through the redesign of the security decrees approved by the M5S and Lega coalition. The pinnacle of this performance was undoubtedly the alleged closure of ports, proclaimed, heralded, and reiterated by the related hashtag circulated for months on social media (Figure 1) and representing a stark example of the territorialization of politics and the instrumental use of the bounded space of the nation.

The ‘closed ports policy’ was initiated by the Minister of the Interior on 10 June 2018. On the same day Salvini prevented the docking of the *Aquarius*, managed by the international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) *SOS Méditerranée* and *Médecins Sans Frontières*, with 629 people on board. The ship and its passengers were left waiting for eight days before the Spanish government opened the port of Valencia for it to dock. The episode was the first of a long list (twenty-five ‘sea crises’, as defined by the media, during the Minister’s term⁴), inaugurating the narrative that in the following months would characterize Salvini’s management of the Ministry of the Interior, based on the slogan ‘nobody comes to Italy when the Lega is governing’. Several analyses have shown that the ‘closure of ports’ – and thus of the Mediterranean border – was in fact largely a slogan and was in practice limited to some specific cases: vessels with a large number of migrants on board had a certain visibility, while no formal measure was adopted to officially prevent landings (ASGI, 2019).

However, it is important for this article’s aim to underline that, with the criminalization of search and rescue (SAR) work conducted at sea by NGOs, the closure of ports clearly represented the reaffirmation of territorial sovereignty and the exercise of self-determination in opposition to and in contravention of European standards and international principles: a true act of sovereigntism and an evidence of the key importance of territory in the populist performance. In his political acts and narratives Salvini



Figure 1. The Lega’s campaign for the closure of the ports.

Source: <https://it.blastingnews.com/politica/2018/06/video/migranti-la-svolta-di-salvini-chiusi-tutti-i-porti-italiani-004986663.html>, 2018.

emphasized the Mediterranean's role as an external EU border; he therefore called for other European member states to take responsibility, accusing them of leaving Italy to manage the migration 'crisis' alone, and fuelling revenge and pride in opposing European positions, therefore also connecting the EU management of migration to the will of European elites.

The challenge to the EU becomes even more evident considering that although the Mediterranean was certainly the most important element of Salvini's anti-immigration statements, his attention was devoted to both the EU's external and internal borders. Towards the end of his term and following the increase in migration flows along the Balkan route, Salvini announced a proposal in response to the governor of the Friuli Venezia region to build a fence or wall on the eastern Italian border with Slovenia to prevent the entry of migrants. Although this project was not implemented, the idea of building a wall has fuelled a populist imaginary of 'taking back control' beyond any supranational legislation, in this case in contravention of the Schengen Treaty.

It is therefore unsurprising that on the domestic front of the sovereign performance the Lega leader played a game that sought to discredit European institutions, built around slogans like *'schiavi dell'Europa? No grazie!'* ('slaves of Europe? No thanks!'), *'recuperiamo la nostra sovranità'* ('let's regain our sovereignty'), or *'prima l'Italia e prima gli italiani'* ('Italy and Italians first'), advanced during both the March 2018 national and May 2019 European election campaigns (Figure 2). The territorial aspects of the exercise of self-determination were also fundamental, because they shaped and outlined the aspirations of the former minister and his policies, as well as defining a phantom external enemy that threatened the integrity of the people, their wellbeing, and the realization of their interests.



Figure 2. The Lega's posters for the May 2019 European elections.

Source: <https://leganord.org/programma-politiche>, 2018; <https://www.leganord.org/component/phocadownload/category/195-manifesti-europee>, 2019.

The Lega presented itself as the only legitimate political actor capable of taking care of the needs of Italians and acting as the guarantor of their security, in opposition to any rule derived from supranational structures and elites. However, while this opposition initially took the form of a critique that foreshadowed the possibility of exiting the EU (Figure 3), Salvini's narrative as Minister of the Interior was more about changing the EU and its corrupt elites from within, by networking with other European right-wing populist leaders such as Marine Le Pen in France, Viktor Orban in Hungary, and Geert Wilders in the Netherlands (Dalton, 2019). In so doing, these allies appropriated and negotiated the meaning of European integration, putting in place a sort of 'paradoxical Europeanisation' (Mamadhou in Casaglia et al., 2020), territorializing threats and creating defensive fantasies at the European scale. In this context Salvini's speeches and declarations were clearly intended to undermine the EU's credibility and advance an alternative based on a network of populist leaders: 'Those who are undermining the European dream [are] the bureaucrats, the do-gooders, the bankers, who have governed Europe for too long. We want to bring the people back to governing Europe' (Salvini's quote in France 24, 2019); 'We want a different Europe, one that defends security and boosts jobs, [one that defends] the family and the Christian identity of our continent' (Salvini's quote in La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno, 2019).

Opposing the government during the Covid-19 emergency

When the Covid-19 crisis emerged in Europe, Italy was at the forefront of the number of cases and therefore in drafting and managing containment and social distancing measures that aimed to prevent the further spread of the virus. After China Italy was the second country to register a rapid increase in the number of infected people, especially in the productive northern part of the country, which was increasingly sealed and isolated.



Figure 3. The Lega's 'Basta Euro' campaign for the 2014 European elections.

Source: <https://www.nextquotidiano.it/matteo-salvini-e-la-lega-che-vuole-uscire-dalleuro/>.

When the health situation worsened, borders were closed, and cities throughout the country started to lock down. Despite the greatly varying distribution of infected people throughout the country, the lockdown invested the whole of Italy in the attempt to avoid the increase of sites of contagion, especially in the south, given its weaker health system. During the emergency, regional governments repeatedly raised their voice in support of or opposition to the government's policies, based on the specific situation in their territories.

From a political perspective this phase was used to feed internal solidarity and territorial unity among Italians, who were prompted by political figures to celebrate a supposed '*italianità*' through forms of 'banal nationalism' (Billig, 1995) by flying national flags (unusual in Italy), playing the national anthem from the windows (even more unusual), and supporting the government's approach to the pandemic with the slogan '*andrà tutto bene*' (everything will be fine). Italy's main monuments (and then monuments throughout the world in solidarity) were illuminated with the colours of the Italian flag to promote a sense of national unity and resistance in 'the war' against the virus. This expression of national unity sometimes overlapped with the natural need for solidarity and sharing people experienced in social and physical isolation. However, its instrumentalisation by political actors resulted in the subsuming of these acts of solidarity and the promotion of national symbols and colours to channel them in a specifically patriotic way.

Yet if '[i]t is in this new world that populist discourses and imaginaries reveal all their fragility and unsustainable ambivalence' (Minca in Casaglia et al., 2020, p. 6), the spread of the virus and the need to tackle the health emergency exposed the ability of populist rhetoric to repeatedly shift the focus to a representation of the nation as the only legitimate actor that could properly take care of 'its people', by using every circumstance as an occasion to showcase the sovereign performance.

When Covid-19 emerged, the Lega was already in opposition, as a new coalition was established between the populist M5S and the left-wing PD. This makes interesting an analysis of how the use of recurrent discourses against different kinds of enemy can switch at different scales according to the political position. Attacks on or the defence of institutions are connected with the role performed, and what 'the state' means obviously depends on who is governing it. Populist parties can thus attack supranational institutions when they are in governing coalitions, while questioning the reliability of state rulers when in opposition.

The Lega's typically populist slogan '*prima gli italiani*' (mirroring the Trump administration's 'America first') in the context of the pandemic corresponded to different stages of internal cohesion against foreign threats and corrupt elites, and was manifested in three different but interconnected dimensions. First, where the closure of borders was concerned, China was initially blamed for the emergence and spread of the virus, to the point that various memes and videos circulating largely in social networks hinted at the alleged creation of the Covid-19 in Chinese laboratory experiments. This led to racist episodes involving Italy's longstanding Chinese community. Moreover, at the end of January, Salvini asked for 'controls, controls, and more controls' for the 'daily deluge of flights from China' (Salvini's quote in Ajello, 2020, authors' translation). On 21 February, following the first confirmed coronavirus-related death in Italy, he proposed to 'seal Italian borders' with the aim of 'controlling, controlling, controlling' to identify

'who enters and who leaves *my country*' (Salvini's quote in Bernasconi, 2020, authors' translation and italic). From the outset the Lega's request focused not only on blocking arrivals from China but on sealing the border against the migrants' 'invasion', so often an element of its narrative, emphasizing the risk that the virus could transit on boats crossing the Mediterranean (Figure 4). On 13 March Salvini invoked the closure of the Schengen Area (Ansa, 2020), asking at the same time for protective and defensive measures to be applied within the space of the EU. It is important to highlight that the Lega's invoking of border closures was basically in line with those of the Italian government, and that many of the 'closures' sought by the Lega were government policies during the lockdown months. For example, logical measures intended to contain further infections had



Figure 4. 'Coronavirus and boats. Africa risk'.

Source: Twitter, Matteo Salvini, 21 February 2020.

consequences for the management of the reception of undocumented migrants arriving by boat via the Mediterranean, when Italy declared its own ports ‘unsafe’ for health reasons (Tondo, 2020). The difference between the Lega’s and other parties’ positions – including the ruling coalition – were mainly related to the discursive style, including the emphasis on threats from abroad, as well as the strongly nationalist framing of the closure of ports. This stands in line with the strongly sovereigntist character of the Lega’s rhetoric and of its leader discursive strategies.

This leads to the second dimension of the ‘Italians first’ approach during the pandemic concerning internal cohesion, because the Lega’s protective attitude took the form of a defence of Italian honour when the spread of Covid-19 transposed Italy from being a container of security to an object of external security and fear. Regardless of the contradiction, in asking for the closure of borders, Salvini tweeted: ‘The world must know that coming to Italy is safe, because we are a beautiful, healthy, and welcoming country, quite unlike the “lazzaretto”⁵ of Europe as someone is trying to make us look like’ (Twitter, 29 February 2020, authors’ translation). ‘Now more than ever, [it is important to] eat Italian, travel in Italy, [support] Italian tourism. I will remember the friendly countries that are helping us, and those that are shutting the door in our face’ (Twitter, 10 March 2020, authors’ translation).

Both cited tweets include a reference to countries that ‘shut the door’ in the face of Italian suffering, leading to the third main element of the Lega’s position during the pandemic, since all these narratives were accompanied by a constant critique of the detached elites represented alternatively by the Italian government, the EU, and countries that according to the Lega’s narratives were not sufficiently supportive of the domestic situation. It is worth highlighting here that the main pressure to close borders with Italy in neighbouring countries came from other right-wing populist parties that were the Lega’s traditional allies in Europe, such as Le Pen’s National Rally in France and Austria’s Freedom Party (Reuters, 2020).

Concerning internal politics, the critical attitude to the national government was a clear consequence of the Lega being in opposition. Moreover, the national government and the EU were blamed for the situation in Italy – for example, regarding the health system – which had direct consequences for the management of the crisis: ‘We need to revise all the European rules. In recent years we’ve had to close hospitals and schools ... because Europe asked us to. Now, with the emergency, Italian citizens are understanding that we can (and must!) not care about the [EU’s] “you can’t”’ (Salvini’s quote in Adnkronos, 2020, authors’ translation). This reflects the will to re-territorialize power to properly represent the will of the people against international constraints and supranational directives. Indeed, the territorialization of threats and identification of borders as the ultimate defence against any menace were also mobilized in the call for Europe and the country to take responsibility in addressing the virus, when Salvini defined Bergamo, the Italian city hit hardest by Covid-19, as ‘the border of Italy and Europe’ (ibid., authors’ translation).

Similar narratives were confirmed by the Lega in the ensuing summer, when containment measures were relaxed, and the main focus of public discourse shifted from health to the economic and social emergency. The Lega continued to territorialize the threat of the virus, matching this narrative with its traditional anti-immigration and anti-government positions. Mediterranean borders and migrant-laden vessels crossing the sea thus

became the main vectors for the spread of the virus in the Lega's discourse, and the government, insensitive to the situation of Italians and rather worried about defending the interests of migrants, was considered responsible. 'Thanks to open ports, 22 immigrants transferred to reception centres have proved positive. Italians [were] in quarantine for months, infected illegal migrants [are] free to disembark. This government is placing Italy in danger' (Twitter, 21 July 2020, authors' translation). 'The government is spreading infected migrants across Italy' (Salvini's quote in Tomasetta, 2020, authors' translation).

Opposition to the 'inept' national government was also evident in the Lega's reaction to the agreement reached by the European Council between 17 and 20 July 2020 concerning the recovery funds to be made available on the EU scale to face the consequences of the pandemic. The reaching of a consensus was complicated by the contrast between countries asking for a strong EU intervention (like Italy) and countries that wanted to limit EU credits and grants (the 'frugal' countries). While the agreement was considered a success in the narratives of the Italian government, Salvini tweeted about 'an unconditional surrender to the conditions posed by the European Commission' (Twitter, 21 July 2020, authors' translation), with an EU that 'betrays the dream of our fathers: it is only a business bank where a few earn and many lose, and above all Italy' (Twitter, 19 July 2020, authors' translation).

It is interesting that an opposite but incredibly similar narrative was also adopted by Wilders, the leader of the main right-wing populist party in the Netherlands (one of the most severe 'frugal' countries) and one of Salvini's allies during the European elections. Wilders and his followers accused the national government of 'surrendering' to Italian requests that were against the Netherlands' national interests (Corriere della Sera, 2020).

Conclusions

The aim of this article was to address the nationalist populist movements' capability of articulating their strategies around the spatialisation of the political arena, oriented both internally, by fostering a feeling of cohesion and proud patriotism, and externally, by claiming the right to self-determination *vis-à-vis* supranational institutions and a strict regulation of migration. The challenge was the proposal of an understanding of nationalist populism as reproducing a geopolitical instrumentalisation of emergencies that relies on territorial tropes to gain recognisability and a facile dichotomy of good and bad actors. This discursive and material strategy is meant to support the achievement of the cultural, political and economic dimensions of sovereignty.

The Italian case has provided interesting support for this thesis. The attacks on the EU's immigration control policies by populist parties, and specifically by the Lega, have characterized the Italian political narrative since the beginning of the 'migration crisis'. Complaints against the EU included its abandonment of arrival countries with regard to the management of migrants' reception and the discrediting of the Union's institutions, which were considered unable to face the challenges posed to Europe's cultural integrity by global migration flows. Those institutions were presented as committed to defending the rights of migrants rather than pursuing the interests of the (native) people, therefore jeopardizing national, ethnic, linguistic and religious identities. Given the diffusion of similar forms of nationalist populism in Europe, the outcome of sovereignist projects severely put into discussion the future of Europe's politics of hospitality.

A similar recriminatory attitude distinguished Italian political leaders during the pandemic's first peak between March and June 2020, when the complaints concerned the lack of cooperation among EU member states and the absence of concrete help from EU institutions, again fostering anti-EU sentiments and a sense of betrayal of the European elites. Moreover, the EU was accused of being responsible for social and health cuts in Italy that made it difficult for the system to face the pandemic. This phase was also characterized by criticisms of the national government, because the Lega was in opposition and its mobilizing attitude redirected the attention to domestic mismanagement. The Italian government was portrayed by the Lega as acting in accordance with the European elites and against the interests of the nation. From this point of view, the analysis confirmed what has been defined as the permanent electoral campaign mode of populist movements (Magri, 2018) that shift their targets according to the position they occupy, always emerging as the guarantors of the people's wellbeing against conspiratorial powers.

These subsequent and coherent standpoints contributed to the feeding of a nativism based on dichotomies and resentment of national and supranational institutions coupled with external threats, thus reinforcing a spatialisation of politics in the form of the nation state territorial trap. In both situations – the migration crisis and the pandemic – the Lega's narrative indeed produced a strong territorialization of threats, identifying the border as the ultimate defence of national safety and security.

The ability of nationalist populism to retrace various threats and emergencies to the same territorializing scheme reveals that the scheme itself is ultimately empty. As analysed in the article, the narratives adopted during the pandemic evolved at the point of an almost complete overlapping of different threats, with illegal migrants identified as the main vectors of the virus in Italy, and specifically the Mediterranean border as their visible and tangible entry point. The juxtaposition of different issues such as the virus and the migration threats identified in the Mediterranean space unveils the vacuity of the populist discourse, for which recurrent schemes and territorialization practices work as a narrative structure for whichever argument can foment people and channel resentment and fear.

Moreover, the case study also allowed light to be shed on the inherent contradictions of any networking process among populist parties across Europe, as was seen in the 2019 EU elections. Whereas these parties' common ground is the recovery of national sovereignty and control against supranational institutions and national identity against multiculturalism, these claims are based on an assumption of national supremacy that is scarcely compatible with any form of crossborder networking and collaboration.

Despite the contradictions arising from the encounter between populist bordering narratives and the reality of the increasingly global challenges that do not respect borders, the political performance continually uses territorial tropes to advance sovereignist populist agendas that foment hate and resentment towards external threats and treacherous elites, without creating a counterbalance of the sense of cohesion based on civic elements. The tendency to use patriotic rhetoric and recurrent territorial metaphors in combating the virus belongs to nearly all governments and political parties in Europe and elsewhere, but the *closures* deemed necessary to stop the circulation of the virus are balanced by the *openings* needed to cooperate and collaborate in facing a global phenomenon. In contrast, the specific instrumentalisation of territory and borders in the face of various threats by populist parties in the processes the article describes

with reference to the Italian case seems to provide scope for a feigned and fragile nationalism, justified and motivated in opposition to global processes to exclude them from the bounded national space.

Notes

1. Analysed newspapers include: *La Repubblica*, *Il Corriere della Sera*, *Il Giorno*, *Il Giornale*, *Libero*, *La Stampa*. Besides, we also consulted online news agencies.
2. ‘Manipulite’ or ‘Tangentopoli’ was a famous investigation into bribes and corruption that, in the early Nineties, led to the fall of several local administrations and the incarceration of many public and political figures both at the national and local levels.
3. ‘The Lega Nord reached its peak with 10.2 percent of the vote in the 1996 general election, before declining to 3.9 percent in 2001’ (Tarchi, 2008, p. 85)
4. In 2020 Matteo Salvini is facing two trials in Italy, accused of abduction in relation to the prohibition of the docking of NGO vessels.
5. Formerly a term for a leper hospital, now commonly used to describe a situation where many are sick.
6. Data are available at the following link: <https://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it/index.php?tpl=C&dtel=04/03/2018&tpa=I&tpe=A&lev0=0&levsut0=0&es0=S&ms=S>

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