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'Old' and 'New' Far-Right Parties in Germany and Italy: An Overview

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Abstract. This chapter examines the evolution of far-right parties in Germany and Italy, focusing on the intersection of 'old' and 'new'. Despite the transformation of traditional far-right parties and the rise of new populist radical right forces in both countries, the legacy of Fascism and Nazism remains deeply entrenched. The Italian and German far right has adapted to contemporary political and social landscapes, yet continues to rely heavily on the tenets of their fascist and Nazi predecessors.

Keywords: Far-right; Populism; Fascism; Nationalism; Immigration

Introduction[2]

In the aftermath of their defeat in 1945, both Germany and Italy were subjected to significant external and internal pressure to dismantle the legacies of Nazism and Fascism. Measures toward denazification and defascistization were undertaken in

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[2] This contribution is a short overview of my reflections at the international seminar *Populism and the Far Right*, organized by Polidemos at the Univeristà Cattolica di Milano on 24 April 2024. Due to limited space and the introductory character of this chapter, I have left out many details (e.g., minor far-right groups) and focused on the broad strokes of the analysis.

order to purge the remnants of dictatorship from political life and to facilitate the transition to democratic rule. Both countries faced the complex task of rebuilding not only their political systems but also their national identities in the shadow of their totalitarian histories. However, despite these considerable efforts, the postwar period saw the immediate re-emergence of neo-fascist and neo-Nazi groups in both Italy and Germany (Ignazi, 2003, pp. 35-38; Pfahl-Traughber, 2006, p. 22).

Initially operating on the political fringes, some of these groups found ways to reorganize and expand, and their persistence has proven to be a significant challenge for the democratic systems of both countries. More specifically, while a number of them did not survive the postwar period, others have demonstrated an ability to adapt their rhetoric and strategies to shifting social and political conditions. At the same time, new far-right parties were founded and often assumed a 'hybrid' form, combining old extreme with new radical right ideas and personnel (Mudde, 2019).

Mirroring a trend also seen in other European countries, far-right parties in both Italy and Germany have thus undergone a process of 'renewal' or 'transformation'. This process has involved both a general shift in rhetoric and a more pronounced populist style, the accentuation of national sovereignty as a defense against perceived threats from globalization, immigration, and supranational institutions, and, later on, the exploitation of social insecurity arising from various crises, especially the refugee crisis and the Covid-19-Pandemic (Backes and Moureau, 2021, pp. 13-16).

Nevertheless, apart from a few exceptions (like the self-proclaimed 'anti-fascist' Lega Nord in the 1990s), German and Italian far-right parties continue to draw on various ideological tenets of Fascism and Nazism, or refuse to seriously distance themselves from them. The goal of this contribution is to

provide a concise and schematic overview of the growing intersections between major contemporary populist radical right parties and 'traditional' far-right parties in both countries.

1. *Outlining the interfaces between old and new*

Defining the 'far right' and classifying far-right parties in Germany and Italy requires determining among other things: a) the use of terminology in different languages, b) the relationship between a general definition and analytical differentiation, and c) the importance of a diachronic approach. The use of terminology is often not aligned between German, Italian, and English as the *lingua franca*. While the German word *Rechtsaußenparteien* offers an almost literal translation of the English 'far-right parties', no Italian term can express the same concept. If any, there is only the phrase *destra estrema*, which may merely refer to the position of a party on the political spectrum (Ignazi, 1994a), and can be considered close to the English word 'far'. However, *destra estrema* may correspond also to 'extreme right', thus indicating 'extremism', which definition in turn differs significantly within the German and Italian contexts (Ignazi, 1994a; Stöss, 2007; Backes, 2018; Ruzza, 2018, p. 718; Livi, 2023).

The second issue – with which the literature has been confronted for years – concerns both the identification of a general definition and the grouping of different parties with common traits into a 'far-right family'. Although a minimal definition is necessary to delimitate the analytical framework, a nuanced view is also needed, in order to take into account the different manifestations of the far right. On a typological level, differentiation is certainly not lacking, as far-right parties are usually categorized under different labels (neo-fascist, post-

fascist, radical, extreme, or populist radical right). However, the differences between separate parties are sometimes taken too lightly.

In Italy, Matteo Salvini's Lega and Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia, for example, have less in common than usually assumed. The former, while claiming more sovereignty for Italy in order to limit the EU's influence on domestic politics, is in fact still today (despite the 'national' course promoted by Salvini, who has ended the northern characterization of the erstwhile Lega Nord) a regionalist and autonomist party (de Ghantuz Cubbe 2025). The latter, on the contrary, which originates from the Italian neo-fascist tradition and defines itself as 'patriotic', is a typical nationalist party (Fratelli d'Italia 2017). Their differences, moreover, produce tensions on their cooperation with respect not only to domestic politics, but also to the international level, with Salvini holding a pro-Russia stance and Meloni supporting Ukraine (for a comparison between the two parties, see Valbruzzi/Ventura 2023).

The third issue relates to a more general problem that can only be discussed here in general terms, namely, the evolution of the far right over the years and the scholarly definitions adopted to describe it. Following a common trend that is observable in various European countries, many older far-right parties have tried, especially (but not only) in the 1990s, to adapt to new social and political landscapes. Other, more recent parties were born in such landscapes, and differ from their predecessors.

Throughout this process, alongside the 'hard' or 'traditional' far right, a 'softer' and/or 'newer' version emerged (see for example Art, 2011, p. 18; Backes and Moreau, 2021; Ignazi, 1992; Rydgren, 2018). In no way suggesting an ameliorative nuance, the latter two terms refer to some specific features of the contemporary far right, including (but not limited to): a) the

substitution of biological racism with ethnopluralism, b) the absence of paramilitary structures, c) the (ambiguous) dissociation from fascist ideology, d) the substitution of anti-Semitism for anti-Islamism, e) the acceptance of the 'essential' rules of democracy, and/or f) the refusal of violence as a method for political affirmation (see Art, 2011; Backes and Moreau, 2021, pp. 17-20; Jesse and Thieme 2011, p. 20; Rydgren, 2018, p. 24).

Parties corresponding to this *Idealtypus* or, more generally, not directly identifiable with 'traditional' far-right groups, are usually defined as 'radical right' or 'populist radical right' (see Art, 2011, pp. 10-11; Carter, 2017; Mudde, 2017). They stand between Christian-conservativism and 'hard' right extremism, their agendas aim to strengthen the 'nation' by promoting ethnic homogeneity and advocating a return to traditional values, and they adopt a striking populist style, accusing elites of prioritizing internationalism over national interests and of serving their own narrow interests at the expense of the broader population (Mudde 2017; Backes and Moreau, 2021, p. 17; Rydgren, 2018, p. 23).

However, when compared with definitions and analytical distinctions (e.g., 'old' vs. 'new'), the reality is largely marked by combinations of the two. In recent years, the convergence between traditional and newer far-right ideology, rhetoric, and personnel has been growing on many occasions blurring the distinctions between them (Copsey, 2018, p. 180; Rydgren, 2018, p. 29). Similarly, the line separating 'extreme' and 'radical' (Mudde, 2017) has also blurred (Pirro, 2023). In particular, parties of the contemporary populist radical right have been largely influenced by extremist thinkers, especially through the incorporation of ethnopluralist rhetoric (Copsey, 2018, p. 182). Both the German and the Italian far right vividly illustrate this pattern.

2. *Germany*

The history of German far-right parties is generally divided into three main phases. The first, that of the *Nachkriegsrechtsextremismus*, spanned from 1945 to the early 1950s (or, according to some interpretations, through the first half of the 1960s). The second, marked by the rise of the Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (NPD), was set in the second half of the 1960s. The third, which unfolded throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, was characterized by the emergence of other far-right parties – like the Deutsche Volksunion and Die Republikaner – and the intensification of the militant activity of neo-Nazi movements and organizations (Stöss, 1989; Ignazi, 2003, pp. 63-74; Pfahl-Traughber, 2006).

Especially in the first phase, the German far right propagated a conspiratorial vision of Germany as besieged by both internal and external enemies. It capitalized on the prevailing anxieties of the postwar period, decrying what it perceived as foreign and imperialist domination over a divided nation and continent. Far-right parties framed Germany as a victim of external control, and fueled nationalist sentiment by portraying the country's fragmentation as a consequence of foreign interference (Stöss, 2010, p. 31).

Subsequently, the NPD embraced many traditional *topoi* of the first phase, including the relativization of the Nazi past and the revival of a 'great' Germany. However, the party was also able to bring new issues into its platform. Indeed, it was the first to prioritize immigration as a mobilizing topic, bringing it to the forefront of political discourse. Additionally, it condemned the erosion of traditional moral values and positioned itself against the Americanization of lifestyles (Ignazi, 2003, p. 67).

In the aftermath of the *Wiedervereinigung* and after the election of Udo Voigt as president of the NPD in 1996, the party

increasingly cooperated with neo-Nazi circles. However, the other most significant far-right parties, the DVU and, from 2002, Die Republikaner (though with numerous incoherencies), tried to avoid being stigmatized as extremist, aimed to appeal to a broader feeling of discontent in the reunited country, and sought the support of non-extremist voters from conservative milieus (Stöss, 2010, p. 122). The attempt to attract more voters (above all in the East), as well as the risk of being banned by German authorities, contributed to gradual transformations, the development of new political and communication strategies, and the implementation of radical anti-establishment protest, immigration critique and, in particular, anti-Islamism (Stöss, 2010, p. 145).

As demonstrated by the aggressive electoral campaigns of the NPD and DVU in 2004 (see for example Bosch, 2017, pp. 57-58), which once again addressed old *topoi* and rhetoric, such changes were all but linear and in no case implied a deep revision of the traditional far right's platforms. However, especially after the economic and financial crisis of 2007/08 and the refugee crisis of 2014/15, issues related to the postwar period were marginalized (though they did not disappear), while party manifestos mostly focused on national sovereignty, the Euro, and immigration.

In its manifesto for the 2017 federal election, the NPD accused the EU of having "imposed an open border policy that has led to [the arrival of] millions of illegal immigrants" (NPD-Parteivorstand, n. d.). As the 2019 European Parliament elections approached, the party even called for the dismantling of both the Economic and Monetary Union and the European Stability Mechanism. In line with the Brexit example, moreover, it advocated Germany's withdrawal from the European Union (NPD, 2019, n. p.). Finally, compared to the past, the NPD has definitely endorsed a coherent anti-American foreign

policy, coupled with an increasing alignment with Putin's Russia. (NPD, 2019, n. p.).

The party that really profited from the two crises was, however, a new party, the AfD. Founded in 2013 in response to widespread dissatisfaction with the way the Merkel government was managing the European financial crisis, the AfD radicalized in the following years, driven by its more extreme wing (Rosenfelder, 2017). Born in a historical context quite distinct from postwar times, the AfD has acknowledged the established international order, has not questioned Germany's eastern borders (at least not in its official platform), and has not expressed ambitions for the revival of the German Reich.

By referring to a vague 'liberal' tradition, the AfD declares its support for a *schlanker Staat* that minimizes "interventions limiting freedom" and confines its competences to external security, justice, foreign relations, and financial management (AfD, 2016, p. 9). At the same time, the party advocates a system of direct democracy inspired by the Swiss model, which it describes as the only remedy to the "totalitarian behavior of politicians in power" (AfD, 2021, p. 12). Finally, from an economic point of view, the AfD currently presents itself as "socially protective and a critic of capitalism", though at the same time maintaining distance from the radical anti-capitalist stance of parties such as the NPD (Backes, 2018, p. 648).

The line separating the AfD from the traditional far right is, however, a fine one. What they share is, above all, a refusal of any 'external' influence that might threaten the supposed ethnic, cultural, or linguistic homogeneity of the *Volk*. Even if no overall convergence between the AfD and the traditional far right can be observed (see Backes, 2018, p. 648), there is no doubt that the most defining feature of the AfD's political ideology is its emphasis on the *Volkgemeinschaft* and the German *Leitkultur* (Wildt, 2017). Accordingly, it is probably in its anti-

pluralist *Weltanschauung* and its opposition to multiculturalism that the AfD more closely aligns with the ideological traditions of older German far-right parties such as the NPD.

These similarities also explain the implication of the AfD in the political scandal that broke out in 2024. A covert meeting was held near Potsdam, at whose core was a debate about the deportation of asylum seekers, refugees, foreigners, and even German citizens deemed 'insufficiently integrated'. Attendees reportedly included prominent business leaders, members of neo-Nazi groups, and AfD politicians (de Ghantuz Cubbe, 2024).

3. *Italy*

The history of Italian far-right parties from 1946 up to the 1990s can be understood through two different kinds of periodization, each containing three phases, and both relating chiefly to the evolution of neo-Fascism. According to a more general periodization, the first phase, from 1946 to 1976, was marked by the marginality of the far right in the postwar political landscape. The second phase, which spanned from 1977 to 1993, saw an attempt by parts of the far right to redefine its role in Italian politics, whereas at the same time, a wave of radicalization and terrorism by extremist groups swept over the land. The third phase, starting in 1994 and extending into the following years, was characterized by the far right's systemic integration into mainstream parliamentary politics (Livi, 2023, pp. 75-76).

A second periodization, specifically focused on the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), set the first phase between 1946 and 1960, as the MSI was founded and gained strength. During the second phase, which extended from 1960 to 1983,

the party remained isolated, experienced a partial renewal, and radicalized. In the third, between 1983 and 1993, the MSI progressively gained systemic legitimacy as a recognized player in the political arena. The last phase, from 1993 to 1999, saw a major political shift as the MSI dissolved and transformed into the Alleanza Nazionale (AN) (Ignazi, 2003).

Independent of the neo-fascist tradition, though, another far-right party also emerged. In the 1980s, various localist and regionalist movements, known as the 'Leghe' (Leagues), appeared in northern Italy. In 1991, following their unification into a single group, the Lega Nord (LN) was founded. The party demanded regional autonomy from the central state, condemned the Italian Risorgimento, declared itself anti-fascist (whereas its anti-Fascism mainly coincided with opposition to the nation-state), and strongly protested against the traditional political system (Cavazza, 1995; Diamanti, 1995). Through its leader Umberto Bossi, furthermore, the LN assumed a typical populist rhetoric. By claiming to defend the interests of the northern regions, Bossi fueled an aggressive anti-establishment protest against the 'corrupted' political elites of Rome and southern Italy.

By the mid-1990s and throughout the 2000s, Italian far-right parties were repeatedly forced, due to strategical reasons, to cooperate with Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI). The inclusion of the old MSI in Berlusconi's coalition was facilitated by the ideological – or, according to some interpreters, merely strategical – transformation of the MSI into the 'post-fascist' AN, which through its leader Gianfranco Fini tried to distance itself from its own most explicit ties with fascist ideology (see Ignazi, 1994b; Merkel, 1994; Morini, 2007; Ruzza, 2018).

In the subsequent years, especially beginning in the 2010s, Italian far-right parties showed an increasing propensity for populism. Founded in 2012, the Fratelli d'Italia (FdI)

originated from and within the tradition of the neo-fascist MSI. However, according to some scholars, the new party initiated a 'populist turn', as it had to come to terms "with a new political reality increasingly dominated by anti-elitist rhetoric and the centrality of the 'will of the people'" (Vampa, 2023, pp. 4-8). After initial marginality in the Italian political system, the party led by Giorgia Meloni has seen growing electoral success, culminating in Meloni's election as Prime Minister in 2022.

As for the LN, the election of Matteo Salvini as party leader in 2013 fueled an important transformation, thus marginalizing the traditional northern orientation of his predecessor Bossi. Although Salvini never abandoned the party's autonomist bias, he now claimed to represent the interests of all Italian regions, which allegedly ought to be defended from external threats such as immigration (on Salvini's Lega see de Ghantuz Cubbe, 2020; Passarelli and Tuorto 2018).

In their platforms, both Salvini's Lega and Meloni's FdI have addressed the 'risks' of 'unregulated globalism', which they claim are supported by big capital and big finance, with the 'complicity of the EU' (FdI, 2017). Though not in identical terms, both parties repeatedly portray globalization as a threat to economy, particularly to small and medium-sized Italian industries. The European Union (EU) is depicted as a corrupt organization run by bureaucrats and bankers acting against Italy's interests. Finally, immigration, especially from Muslim countries, is seen as a danger to public order (FdI, 2017; Lega, 2018).

Furthermore, both parties maintain ambiguous positions with respect to Fascism. In contrast to the LN once proudly proclaimed anti-fascist stance, Salvini cultivated ambiguity regarding neo-fascist symbology, rhetoric, and even demonstrations and violence. As for the FdI, several party members were found to have made pro-Fascist statements or been linked to

neo-fascist organizations. While Meloni has officially distanced her party from the crimes of the fascist past, she has generally shown leniency toward fascist supporters within its ranks (de Ghantuz Cubbe, 2023).

Finally, a pivotal component of their strategy is the recurrent "depiction of Fascism in a remote past and of the Left as the real threat to democracy" (Newth, 2022). By portraying accusations of Fascism as irrational, both parties seek to legitimize their stances as the voice addressing the 'real problems' of Italians. According to Meloni, the accusation of Fascism is part of a 'misleading campaign' of left-wing political discourse. In tandem, Salvini mocks his opponents' "obsession" with Fascism, framing it as both absurd and indicative of their inability to generate meaningful ideas (Newth 2022; Salvini, 2019).

However, the 'obsession' is well-founded. In 2024, an investigative report scrutinized the FdI, raising significant concerns about the party's commitment to democratic values and the authenticity of its efforts to distance itself from Italy's fascist past. The report uncovered leaked audio recordings and videos of prominent FdI politicians performing the Roman salute, making racist statements, and praising Mussolini (Fanpage, 2024).

4. *Conclusion*

In both Germany and Italy, far-right parties have skillfully adopted a populist rhetoric that resonates deeply with contemporary social grievances. Despite their differences, they share a similar path of 'recalibration' aimed at exploiting current public discontent over globalization, immigration, and the perceived erosion of national sovereignty. Such recalibration reveals a profound awareness of changing social and political

landscapes, as well as a remarkable capacity for strategical adaptation.

However, these parties still draw heavily upon traditional far-right tenets, resulting in a blurring of boundaries between 'old' and 'new'. The influence of the fascist and Nazi past remains palpable in their platforms and rhetoric, posing substantial challenges to liberal democracy in both countries. As German and Italian far-right parties gain electoral traction, they may not only reshape the political discourse surrounding the historical past, but also risk eroding fundamental democratic values.

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