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Contemporary Neo-Fascisms and Post-Fascisms: Fratelli d'Italia and Rassemblement National

Neofascismos e Pós-fascismos Contemporâneos: Fratelli d'Italia e Rassemblement National

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Abstract

This article examines the ideologies of two European extreme-right parties: Fratelli d'Italia and Rassemblement National. While the label "extreme-right" situates these parties within a particular political-ideological "family," it offers limited insight into the ideas shaping their actions. To better define their ideologies, the concepts of fascism, neo-fascism, and post-fascism are explored. Analyzing the programmatic theses and electoral platforms of these organizations reveals an ultranationalist and xenophobic worldview. Central to their ideology are myths of crisis and decline, alongside themes of reconstruction and civilizational rebirth. This shared ideological foundation justifies their classification as post-fascist.

Keywords: neo-fascism; post-fascism; Italy; France.

Resumo

Este artigo examina as ideologias de dois partidos europeus de extrema direita: Fratelli d'Italia e Rassemblement National. Embora o rótulo "extrema direita" situe esses partidos dentro de uma "família" político-ideológica específica, ele oferece uma visão limitada das ideias que moldam suas ações. Para definir melhor suas ideologias, são explorados os conceitos do fascismo, neofascismo e pós-fascismo. A análise das teses programáticas e plataformas eleitorais dessas organizações revela uma visão de mundo ultranacionalista e xenófoba. No centro de sua ideologia estão os mitos de crise e declínio, juntamente com temas de reconstrução e renascimento civilizacional. Essa base ideológica compartilhada justifica sua classificação como pós-fascista.

Palavras-chaves: neofascismo; pós-fascismo; Itália; França

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The global rise of authoritarian and anti-system political groups and parties advocating for restricting immigrant or marginalized populations' rights has sparked intense conceptual debates. In the past decade, researchers have employed various approaches to define these phenomena. Terms like extreme-right (e.g., Harrison; Bruter, 2011), radical right (e.g., Caiani; Císař, 2019), and radical right populism (e.g., Mudde, 2007) have been widely used, not only in academic discussions but also in everyday media.

This article contends that the categories of fascism, neo-fascism, and post-fascism provide valuable analytical tools for interpreting specific ideological formations whose characteristics distinguish them from other forms of anti-system politics. To assess the explanatory utility of these concepts, the analysis focuses on two significant contemporary cases: Fratelli d'Italia, under the leadership of Giorgia Meloni, and Rassemblement National, headed by Marine Le Pen.

The first section outlines the conceptual framework of fascism, neo fascism, and post fascism. The following sections examine the cases of Fratelli d'Italia and Rassemblement National through an analysis of their programmatic documents and electoral manifestos. The article argues that both parties have evolved from a neo-fascist orientation, marked by revolutionary ultranationalism and rejection of democratic norms, toward a post-fascist position that formally embraces liberal democratic principles. However, this adherence is accompanied by a restrictive conception of the people, understood in cultural or ethnic terms, and by a plebiscitarian and hierarchical model of democracy that minimizes pluralism and weakens institutional mediation.

Defining the concepts

Academic work frequently characterizes the extreme right by enumerating a broad array of necessary attributes. These lists vary significantly. Cas Mudde identified 26 different definitions, listing 58 characteristics, five of which appeared in at least half of the authors' works: "nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy, and a strong state" (Mudde, 2002, p. 11). The disadvantages of these checklist-style definitions are numerous. Frequently, these definitions carry an Eurocentric bias. For instance, xenophobia is a hallmark of European extreme-right movements but seems less relevant in the Latin American context. The main issue, however, is that such definitions tend to be overly restrictive, excluding similar phenomena that do not exhibit all the listed characteristics.

Rather than being defined by a fixed list of essential traits, the extreme-right is more effectively conceptualized, following Ignazi (2003, p. 31), through its spatial and relational position at the outermost edge of the political spectrum. This location often generates oppositional and reactive formulations, articulated through a sequence of "anti" stances. The extreme-right has been variously described as anti-egalitarian, anti-communist, anti-Enlightenment, anti-materialist, anti-feminist, anti-democratic, anti-parliamentarian etc. These recurring negations outline an ideological domain shaped less by a consistent set of properties than by a shared dynamic of opposition. This approach permits the recognition of ideological proximity without assuming uniformity. Extreme-right ideologies do not uniformly exhibit the same negative features or identical sets of characteristics. However, they can be understood through the concept of a "family of resemblances," whereby overlapping elements

recur across different formations with varying configurations and degrees of intensity.[2] These recurring patterns enable the identification of distinct ideological currents as part of the broader spectrum of the extreme right.

Within this framework, the presence of certain traits in fascist, neo-fascist, and post-fascist ideologies allows for their placement within the wider constellation of extreme-right political formations. Fascism, in this sense, represents one expression within this spectrum. It has been associated with ultranationalism, statolatry, rejection of democracy, militant anti-communism, and a belief in the redemptive force of violence to establish a new political order founded on national rebirth (Bianchi, 2024). While its most paradigmatic forms appeared in interwar Italy and Germany, its ideological influence extended beyond these cases, inspiring movements throughout Europe, Latin America, and Asia (Bianchi; Melo, 2023). Neo-fascist and post-fascist variants reconfigured elements of this ideological repertoire to suit changing historical conditions, while preserving essential continuities with their antecedent.

The relationship between fascist and neo-fascist movements is often one of direct lineage and continuity, as with the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), heir to the Repubblica Sociale Italiana and its leadership group. In other cases, the relationship with the past is mediated, without an explicit claim to a fascist legacy, as seen with the Front National in France. However, what defines these movements is not genealogy but ideology. The neo-fascist ideology of the post-war era updates the preceding one to new political conditions in at least two aspects: ultranationalism and statolatry.

The concept of "nation" in neo-fascist movements ceased to be tied to a territory defined by precise geographical boundaries, such as Italy or Germany. In these new movements, the "nation" was de-territorialized and began to represent a cultural community or a self-referenced civilizational form, such as Europe or Christian civilization (see Copsey, 2020). Already in the late 1920s, a pan-European tendency could be observed, exemplified by Asverio Gravelli's magazine *Antieuropa* and the formation of the Comitati d'Azione per l'Universalità di Roma in the early 1930s (see Cuzzi, 2005). However, the tension between nationalism and universalism persisted within fascist ideology, and the failure of such initiatives indicates the challenges. During the Cold War, however, this universalism found a more favorable political-institutional and ideological terrain, leading to a reinterpretation of the idea of the nation, expanding the "imagined community" beyond state borders.[3] In this context, a "super-nationalism" emerged, defined in opposition to both Wall Street capitalism and Moscow communism, presenting itself as a Third Way (Copsey, 2020, p. 108).

The original statolatry conception of fascism also underwent a mutation in the post-war period. While the defense of authority and order remained central to neo-fascist discourse, it began to intertwine contradictorily with anti-interventionist rhetoric. Once again, one could argue that this shift was prefigured in the liberal and privatizing economic policy of Alfredo De Stefani during Mussolini's early years in power (see Mattei, 2022). However, once economic austerity subdued the workers' movement and reasserted control over the working classes, this policy gave way to strong state interventionism, which became even more pronounced as Italy entered the war. Today, however, an anti-state component is evident in neo-fascist political and economic rhetoric, where criticism of political elites often goes hand in hand with criticism of "big

[2] For a discussion of the notion of "family resemblances," see Wittgenstein (2009, § 67).
[3] On the nation as an "imagined community," see Anderson (2016).

government" and economic interventionism. The relationship between this neo-fascism and economic liberalism remains tense and marked by inconsistencies, yet the denunciation of state regulation of life and morality appears to be a constant.

Post-fascist ideology is defined by the persistence of the main traits of neo-fascist movements' ideologies while renouncing the redemptive nature of violence promoted by a political elite. Ultranationalism, authoritarianism, and anti-communism remain central, along with a worldview in which an embattled imagined community must undergo a purifying rebirth. However, the opposition to liberal democracy and the glorification of violence present in neo-fascist discourse have been replaced by a verbal commitment to the rules of the democratic game. Post-fascist ideology has lost its revolutionary character and become reformist, in a movement analogous to early 20th-century socialism.

This formal adherence to the rules of liberal democracy by post-fascist parties is marked by deep internal contradictions that compromise its substantive content. A central contradiction lies in their embrace of a plebiscitarian conception of democracy, in which political legitimacy is understood to derive exclusively from the direct expression of popular will. Grounded in this interpretation, democracy is confined to the episodic confirmation of the charismatic leader's authority through elections or referenda, while deliberation, institutional mediation, and the safeguarding of pluralism are largely disregarded. The focus is directed toward establishing a direct and unmediated connection between a charismatic leader and the people, while representative institutions such as parliaments, political parties and civil society organizations are marginalized and frequently portrayed as obstacles to the genuine manifestation of popular will.

Closely linked to this conception is a second, equally problematic feature of post-fascist ideology: a redefinition of the people not as a pluralistic and inclusive political community but as a homogeneous and unified entity. This unity is typically articulated in ethnic, cultural, or religious terms, which serve as criteria for determining legitimate membership in the national collective. Political belonging no longer rests on civic participation or legal status but is instead conditioned by identity markers that designate individuals as part of an allegedly authentic national community. As a result, the liberal democratic principles of formal equality before the law and the protection of the human person are undermined. In its place emerges a hierarchical structure of rights, where those recognized as part of the dominant community are granted full legal protection and political recognition, while others, such as migrants, religious minorities, and cultural outsiders, are excluded from full citizenship and subjected to unequal treatment.

The plebiscitarian understanding of democracy and the exclusionary conception of the people function together to reintroduce fundamental aspects of fascist ideology into a formally democratic context. Although expressed through the vocabulary of democracy and popular sovereignty, this model systematically distorts the substance of liberal democratic principles. By prioritizing identity over universality and leadership over representation, it revives authoritarian tendencies within a democratic framework and erodes the institutional foundations of pluralism, equality, and the rule of law.

These contradictions often appear in the political practices of contemporary post-fascist movements. They reveal enduring autocratic and hierarchical tendencies that risk eroding the democratic order these actors purport to uphold. This article,

however, does not focus on those practices. It examines the ideological foundations that support and legitimize them. The aim is to highlight the tension between the formal acceptance of democratic procedures and the enduring presence of authoritarian ideas within post-fascist thought.

From Movimento Sociale Italiano to Fratelli d'Italia

In Italy, the current Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni (see e.g., 2021, p. 21), openly acknowledges her early political engagement in the youth wing of the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), a party founded in the aftermath of the Second World War by veterans of the Repubblica Sociale Italiana, the radical fascist regime that collaborated with Nazi Germany during the occupation.[4] The emergence and survival of the MSI were shaped by Cold War dynamics and Italy's alignment with the United States, which led to the exclusion of communists from government in May 1947. These conditions enabled the MSI to secure space within the postwar political order. By reframing neo-fascist ideology through the discourse of anti-communism, the party succeeded in integrating itself into Italian liberal democracy and achieved notable electoral support. Its peak came in 1972, during a period of intense conflict with student and labor movements. Under the leadership of Giorgio Almirante, and rebranded as Movimento Sociale Italiano – Destra Nazionale, the party secured 8.6% of the vote for the Chamber of Deputies and won 56 parliamentary seats.

Throughout its history, the MSI and its successor formations sustained a deeply ambivalent relationship with liberal democracy. Giorgio Almirante, who led the party until his death in 1988, often expressed formal deference to the republican political system. Nonetheless, the MSI consistently portrayed itself as the legitimate heir to the fascist tradition, reaffirming its core ideological principles (Ignazi, 1996, p. 697). This tension emerged clearly in Almirante's writings, where he described parliamentary democracy as a corrupt, inefficient, and pathological system, disconnected from the genuine interests of the nation (Almirante, 1968). He later broadened his critique to encompass the Constitution, questioning the legitimacy of the institutional framework established following the anti-fascist Resistance (Almirante, 1980).

Despite occasional electoral gains, the party failed to consolidate its position as the principal force of the Italian right or as a dependable partner for Democrazia Cristiana. Its performance remained inconsistent, reaching a low point in the 1991 Sicilian regional elections. Nevertheless, the political context underwent a profound transformation in the early 1990s, creating new opportunities for the MSI-DN. Domestically, the Mani Pulite investigations severely undermined the leadership of the Partito Socialista Italiano and Democrazia Cristiana, long-standing pillars of centrist governments. International developments, including the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Maastricht Treaty, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, also contributed to the reconfiguration of the Italian political landscape and weakened the position of the Partito Comunista Italiano. In this evolving environment, Gianfranco Fini directed the MSI-DN toward a new political trajectory. Under his leadership, the party sought to

[4] The *Repubblica Sociale Italiana* (RSI) revived the pre-1922 fascist program, incorporating certain anti-capitalist or socialist elements, while also adopting strong anti-Semitism (see Franzinelli, 2020). For more on MSI history, see Conti (2013), Sorgonà (2019) e Ignazi (2023).

rhetorically distance itself from its fascist legacy and rebrand as a moderate and institutionally credible right-wing force capable of governing (Conti, 2013, chapter 5.3; Ignazi, 2003, p. 44-45).

Renamed Alleanza Nazionale, the party under Fini transitioned from neo-fascism to post-fascism while retaining the central aspects of its ideology. In the "Premises" to the *Tesi politiche* presented at the MSI-DN National Congress in 1995, Fini stated that the creation of Alleanza Nazionale marked "the conclusion of an era in our political history. It was then that we solemnly proclaimed that Alleanza Nazionale repudiated all forms of dictatorship and totalitarianism and believed in democracy and freedom as unassailable values" (MSI-DN, 1995, p. 4). The most debated phrase in the theses was one asserting that "anti-fascism was the historically essential moment for the return of democratic values that fascism had trampled on" (MSI-DN, 1995, p. 4). However, as demonstrated by a survey conducted at the same Congress by Gianfranco Baldini and Rinaldo Vignati, 61.5% of delegates believed that "despite some questionable decisions, [fascism] was a good regime" (Ignazi, 1996, p. 705 and 711).

The myth of decline and the necessity of national rebirth, characteristic of fascism, was strongly present in those theses, with MSI-DN proclaiming that "Alleanza Nazionale wants to be considered part of a great, libertarian, and peaceful 'conservative revolution'" (MSI-DN, 1995, p. 10). After outlining its program, the theses declared:

> The political and social right must commit itself to promoting the attainment of all these ambitious and stirring objectives as a new, sound governing force, which seeks to demonstrate the essential nature of the 'primacy of politics,' not to manage power as an end in itself, but to realize the true aspirations of Italy's rebirth (MSI-DN, 1995, p. 46, emphasis added).

This palingenetic ideology was not the only connection between Alleanza Nazionale and the fascist tradition. The theses explicitly acknowledged belonging to a political culture that included figures like Vilfredo Pareto, Giovanni Gentile, Ugo Spirito, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Ardengo Soffici, and even Julius Evola, an inspiration for many extreme-right terrorist groups (MSI-DN, 1995, p. 9). This political culture was grounded in the "conjugation of the principles of liberty and authority. One cannot exist without the other and vice versa" (MSI-DN, 1995, p. 9), a formulation rooted in Giovanni Gentile's writings. The result of reconciling a new liberal-democratic profession of faith with the fascist tradition was what Roger Griffin described as a "reformist or democratic fascism" (Griffin, 1996, p. 142).

The electoral effects were immediate, with Fini's party gaining over 14% of the vote in the March 1994 elections. The seats won ensured the party a place in the government coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia.[5] Contrary to leadership expectations, however, the party did not grow further, losing ground in subsequent elections and distancing itself from the dream of becoming the hegemonic force of a

[5] This was the first time the heirs of Italian fascism entered a national government. It was this context that motivated Umberto Eco (1995) to deliver his famous lecture at Columbia University in April 1995. Published shortly thereafter by *The New York Review of Books*, it became one of the most widely circulated essays on fascism. The apocalyptic and alarmist tone of the lecture contributed to the success of its subsequent editions, but the essay does little more than present a list of heterogenous characteristics, falling far short of the new wave of studies on fascism that were gaining significant momentum during that period.

right-wing coalition. Under Fini's leadership, Alleanza Nazionale eventually merged with Forza Italia to form Popolo della Libertà, a coalition of conservatives, neoliberals, and post-fascists dominated by Berlusconi's influence.

Giorgia Meloni, who had been part of the movement since 1992, followed Fini's path, being elected to Parliament for the first time in 2006 under Alleanza Nazionale and becoming Youth Minister in Berlusconi's government in 2008. However, she broke away from Popolo della Libertà in 2012 to found a new party, Fratelli d'Italia, which sought to reclaim the tradition of MSI and Alleanza Nazionale's early years.[6] The programmatic thesis approved at the 2017 Congress in Trieste reflected an overtly ultranationalist worldview. It proclaimed as a central objective the need "to rediscover the value of the 'Fatherland' in contemporary politics" and, through this rediscovery, to "rebuild Italy—and through it, Europe" (Fratelli d'Italia, 2018). The text even invoked Giovanni Gentile, the fascist philosopher who had served as the principal intellectual reference for the founders of the MSI.

The ultranationalism expressed in the Trieste Thesis represented a marked radicalization compared to the ideological orientation of Alleanza Nazionale. Fratelli d'Italia advanced a vision of the nation as a historical and spiritual entity whose continuity extended beyond political boundaries. National identity was not defined by legal or administrative categories but by the intrinsic value of belonging to the Italian cultural tradition. As the thesis asserted, "Italianness has absolute value, independent of the state in which one lives" (Fratelli d'Italia, 2018). In this formulation, the nation was imagined as a civilizational community grounded in shared memory, language, and tradition. It was portrayed as a unifying force that provided historical continuity across time and space, unaffected by the transformations of political regimes or shifting territorial configurations.

The people who composed this nation were described as an organic and cohesive community, unified by common cultural, historical, and moral values. Rather than conceiving the people as a collection of individuals linked by citizenship or equal rights under the law, the party referred to them as "a community of destiny," bound by a shared origin and collective mission (Fratelli d'Italia, 2018). Emphasis was placed on the preservation of tradition, national identity, and cultural heritage, an outlook that reflected a nationalist and communitarian understanding of political belonging. This conception explicitly rejected cultural relativism and liberal pluralism, instead presenting the people as guardians of a historically determined national essence, which, in the view of Fratelli d'Italia, had to be reaffirmed in the face of globalization and external pressures from supranational institutions. These positions were accompanied by strong palingenetic themes. As the document approved in the Congress declared: "Through the *rediscovery* of identity, the *recovery* of tradition, and a *renewed* sense of belonging to the national community, the task is not to return to origins but to undertake a true *regeneration* of the value of the Fatherland" (Fratelli d'Italia, 2018, emphasis added).

Underlying this narrative was a clearly authoritarian conception of democracy and political institutions. Democracy was redefined through the prism of national sovereignty and direct popular legitimacy. Fratelli d'Italia advocated for an authoritarian constitutional reform, undermining the principles of parliamentary democracy. As

[6] Between 2014 and 2017, *Fratelli d'Italia*'s logo included the names of *Alleanza Nazionale* and its symbol, the tricolor flame, as well as *MSI*.

stated in the thesis, the goal was to create "a presidential or semi-presidential republic, with the direct election of the president of the Republic or the head of Government" (Fratelli d'Italia, 2018). This model privileged a strong and centralized executive, reinforcing the direct bond between the leader and the people, and echoed plebiscitarian tendencies. Democratic vitality was not associated with institutional checks and balances, procedural guarantees, or deliberative pluralism, but rather with the assertion of the national will through concentrated leadership endowed with an unambiguous democratic mandate.

The 2017 thesis reaffirmed the party's xenophobic stance, advancing a particularly aggressive anti-immigration rhetoric. It warned of what it called "the ongoing process of Islamization of the European continent" and proposed drastic measures such as a "naval blockade" in the Mediterranean to prevent "illegal immigration." (Fratelli d'Italia, 2018) Despite this rhetoric, the party remained a relatively marginal force within the extreme-right spectrum until the 2022 elections, when it obtained 26 percent of the vote, increasing its parliamentary representation from 32 to 119 deputies and becoming the dominant party in a newly formed extreme-right government. During the campaign, it continued to promote a strongly nationalist identity discourse while simultaneously repositioning its foreign policy. It supported NATO's role in the war in Ukraine and adopted an anti-Russian orientation, a move that surprised many observers and supporters accustomed to its prior Euroskeptic and ambivalent international posture (cf. Ignazi, 2023, p. 445).

This radical stance was reiterated in Fratelli d'Italia's 2022 electoral program, which once again portrayed irregular immigration as a direct threat to "citizens' security and quality of life" (Fratelli d'Italia, 2022, p. 31-32). The party revived the proposal for strict border control, including measures aimed at preventing landings along Italy's coasts. Beyond security concerns, the program sought to elevate its ideological agenda by framing it as part of a broader national renewal, described as a "plan to lift Italy up again." Among the cultural initiatives included were proposals to cultivate "a new Italian imagination" by promoting the legacy of national heroes, organizing historical reenactments, particularly in schools, and projecting "a new Italian Renaissance into the future" (Fratelli d'Italia, 2022, p. 22).

Fratelli d'Italia's ascent to power did not mark a definitive break with Italy's neo-fascist tradition. Although the party presented itself as a democratic political force, its ideological foundations remained closely tied to the legacy of post-war neo-fascism. In a year-end press conference in 2022, just two months after assuming office, Giorgia Meloni emphasized the historical significance of the MSI, claiming that it had "played a very important role in the republican history of bringing millions of Italians defeated by the war into democracy" (Meloni, 2022).

At the same time, Meloni (2022) sought to dissociate herself from explicit ties to interwar fascism, affirming that "the parties representing the right in Parliament have declared their incompatibility with any nostalgia for fascism." However, this rhetorical distancing was coupled with a repudiation of Italy's anti-fascist legacy and an endorsement of what Gabriele Pedullà and Nadia Urbinati (2004) describe as an "a-fascist democracy," a vision of the republic detached from the foundational political principles of anti-fascism. Rather than aiming to reestablish a direct ideological link with Mussolini's regime, Fratelli d'Italia's a-fascism aligns with a form of liberalism marked by deep social inequality and hierarchical principles. According to Pedullà

and Urbinati (2004, p. 75), this political tradition, which was prevalent in Italy on the eve of the March on Rome, willingly legitimized and supported fascist violence against the labor movement.

The authoritarian dimension of this twenty-first-century a-fascism, identified here as post-fascism, was clearly reflected in Fratelli d'Italia's push for constitutional reform based on plebiscitarian and centralizing principles. The proposal aimed to introduce the direct popular election of the head of government, a measure that would significantly alter the institutional structure of the Italian Republic (Consiglio dei Ministri, 2023). This institutional redesign, by concentrating executive power and reinforcing a direct link between the leader and the electorate, moves in the direction of what Pedullà and Urbinati (2024, p. 101) have described as "the autocracy, the caesaristic command."

From the *Front National* to the *Rassemblement National*

In France, Marine Le Pen contested the second round of the 2022 presidential elections as the leader of Rassemblement National (RN), the successor to the *Front National* (FN). The FN originated from the neo-fascist group Ordre Nouveau (ON), which was heavily inspired and supported by Giorgio Almirante's Italian MSI.[7] In the late 1960s, Ordre Nouveau united activists from various extreme-right currents, including the neo-fascist collective Occident, whose members included François Duprat, Alain Robert, and Alain Renault (on Ordre Nouveau and the FN, see Lebourg; Preda; Beauregard, 2014; on FN and fascism, see Milza, 1987. Chapter 8). From these groups, ON inherited a nationalist-revolutionary ideology and a practice of violent attacks against leftist activists.[8] However, ON combined this radical activism with an electoral strategy that yielded modest results in the early 1970s (Lebourg; Preda; Beauregard, 2014, p. 56).

The project of unifying the extreme-right's fragmented movements into a single organization led ON to propose the creation of the Front National as early as 1971. In December of that year, ON leadership held a meeting with the well-known nationalist activist Jean-Marie Le Pen to discuss the front. Le Pen, distanced from the youthful activism of the neo-fascists, had been associated with Action Française during his university years and had collaborated with the Organisation de l'armée secrète (OAS), a terrorist group opposed to Algerian independence. He was elected as a deputy in 1956 under the Union de défense des commerçants et artisans, led by Pierre Poujade, and later supported conservative candidate Jean-Louis Tixier-Vignancour in the 1965 presidential elections. However, ON's initial calls for nationalist unity attracted limited interest.

Despite this, the Front National pour une Unité Française was officially launched in June 1972, in an event that prominently featured the French flag alongside the neo-fascist symbol of the Celtic cross (Lebourg; Preda; Beauregard, 2014, p. 78). The movement formally adopted the name Front National on October 5 of that year, with Le Pen serving as co-president. In addition to ON activists, the FN attracted a

[7] The influence of postwar Italian neo-fascism on its French counterparts has been thoroughly examined by Mammone (2015).

[8] Between January 2, 1971, and May 12, 1973, *Ordre Nouveau* was implicated in 82 acts of public violence recorded by security forces" (Lebourg; Preda; Beauregard, 2014, p. 97).

significant number of Nazi collaborators, including Pierre Bousquet, Roland Gaucher, François Brigneau, Victor Barthélemy, and Léon Gaultier, the latter two being close allies of Le Pen (Kauffmann, 2016, pp. 8, 10, 12; Lebourg; Preda; Beauregard, 2014, p. 76).

The *Déclaration de intention du Front National*, published by ON in 1972, described a "moral and political crisis" and the "intellectual, moral, and physical decline" afflicting France (Ordre Nouveau, 1972, p. 1). Among the causes of this crisis was immigration, which was framed as a threat to national identity: "Guarding the borders will be futile if a peaceful and legal invasion changes the nature and uniqueness of the French population" (Ordre Nouveau, 1972, p. 5). This ultranationalist and authoritarian declaration also expressed a "profound hostility toward communist subversion and its leftist deviations," as well as "opposition to the current regime" (Ordre Nouveau, 1972, p. 6).

The narrative of moral and political crisis became a central theme in Jean-Marie Le Pen's campaign for the 1973 legislative elections. His platform, titled *Défendre les Français*, protested against "administrative injustice and fiscal oppression," "the tyranny of technocrats and mismanagement," "the absolute power of money," "pornography, drugs, and crime," while escalating xenophobic rhetoric by demanding the "immediate expulsion of immigrants convicted of common crimes, 'permanently unemployed' foreigners, and those involved in political agitation" (Le Pen, J.-M., 1973). Despite financial support from Italian neo-fascists, the March election results were disappointing, with only 1.3% of the vote.[9] While ON militants proposed intensifying activism, eventually withdrawing from the FN, Le Pen and his supporters prioritized strengthening the party through electoral means.

The FN's 1974 electoral program marked this strategic shift. Le Pen presented himself as the candidate of the "social, popular, and national right," emphasizing anti-communism and anti-Gaullism. Once again, the "moral and civic crisis" cited in the previous campaign was highlighted. Le Pen declared himself a political force capable of addressing "this decline, of which public opinion—long anesthetized—is now beginning to awaken," and against which "there is only one remedy: the creation of a mystic of public salvation, with new men and new methods" (Le Pen, J.-M., 1974). Without ON's influence, the campaign introduced some liberal economic proposals, advocating for reducing the state's role in the economy: "denationalize what can be denationalized and reduce the bloated public workforce" (Le Pen, J.-M., 1974). Nevertheless, Le Pen garnered only 0.7% of the vote.

François Duprat, a writer with Nazi sympathies and self-described nationalist-revolutionary, was instrumental in reshaping FN strategy. He combined anti-democratic rhetoric with electoral collaboration with traditional right-wing parties. However, electoral outcomes remained lackluster. Following Duprat's assassination by a car bomb in 1978, the FN increasingly adopted a reactionary nationalist profile, emphasizing anti-communism, anti-statism, the death penalty, and opposition to abortion laws. These shifts alienated the more activist neo-fascist and neo-Nazi factions, who left the party, paving the way for a transformation that would take decades to complete (Milza, 1987, p. 346). This reorientation coincided with the entry of Jean-Pierre Stirbois and his "solidarist" faction in 1977.[10]

[9] According to Kauffman (2016, p. 11), Le Pen's campaign posters were printed by the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI).

[10] Starting in 1967, a "solidarist" current emerged within the French extreme-right. This movement opposed both liberal individualism and socialist collectivism, advocating for a "third way" positioned

The 1970s were a period of political marginalization for the *Front National* (FN). However, during this time, the party deepened its anti-immigration ideology, which became increasingly central to its platform. After what Jean-Marie Le Pen referred to as the party's "desert crossing," this political program began to yield results in a context marked by economic crisis and the socialist government of François Mitterrand's immigration policies.[11] In the 1980s and 1990s, the Front National experienced steady electoral growth, gradually expanding its support base from local contests to national prominence. This trajectory culminated in the party securing 15.2% of the vote in the 1997 legislative elections (Stockemer, 2017, pp. 16ff).

The subsequent years brought internal crises and conflicts, culminating in the expulsion of Bruno Mégret, the party's strategist and leader of its moderate wing, at the end of 1998. This division contributed to the FN's poor performance in 1999, but Jean-Marie Le Pen made a dramatic comeback in the 2002 presidential elections, securing 16.2% of the vote and advancing to the second round. It was during this period that his daughter, Marine Le Pen, began to gain prominence within the party by advocating for the *dédiabolisation* (de-demonization) strategy, which modernized its political discourse. Gradually, the party's platform shifted to combine its traditional anti-immigration and law-and-order rhetoric with more popular policies aimed at combating unemployment and increasing wages.

In 2011, Marine Le Pen was elected president of the FN, succeeding her father. To secure this position, she had to confront the influential Bruno Gollnisch, a staunch defender of the FN's traditional ideology, who was supported by militants from *L'Oeuvre Française*, a neo-fascist and anti-Semitic organization led by Pierre Sidos, which had been allied with the FN since 2007 (Camus; Lebourg, 2017, p. 158–159). Gollnisch's defeat marked the FN's definitive transition into the realm of post-fascism. Once at the helm, Marine Le Pen deepened the party's transformation, yielding rapid results. This shift accelerated in the following years, culminating in the FN's emergence as France's leading political force in the 2014 European elections and the most prominent extreme-right party in Europe at the time (Stockemer, 2017, p. 25).

The FN's electoral gains reflected changes in its political discourse, which took on a more personalist tone, emphasizing Marine Le Pen's leadership over the party's identity. It also adopted a strongly anti-elite and anti-globalist profile. In her 2012 book promoting her candidacy, Marine Le Pen denounced "an increasingly smaller and richer minority" with "extraordinary salaries, scandalous bonuses, tax-free capital gains," and "ever-growing power and wealth" (Le Pen, M., 2012, p. 10). She declared, "The forgotten people I fight for are the low-paid workers, employees, public servants, laborers, the middle classes, retirees, and unemployed youth and seniors" (Le Pen, M., 2012, p. 18). At the same time, the FN sought to reconcile these shifts with its nationalist, xenophobic, authoritarian, and anti-system image. Conspiracy theories, such as portraying immigration as "an economic weapon serving big business," were not absent from its rhetoric (Le Pen, M., 2012, p. 81; see commentary by Camus, 2013;

against the "totalitarian Marxism" of the Soviet Union and the "international capitalism" of the United States. Solidarists organized during the 1960s and 1970s through various groups such as *Mouvement jeune révolution*, *Mouvement solidariste français*, *Action populaire*, and *Groupes action jeunesse*. Founded in 1975, the *Union solidariste*, led by Sirbois and Michel Collinot, was characterized by strong anti-Atlanticism, distrust of neoliberalism, pronounced racism, and a refusal to form coalitions with other right-wing forces (see Camus, 1996, p. 33–34).

[11] On the "traversée du désert," see Erwan Lecœur (2003, p. 29–47).

Ivaldi; Delwit, 2012). The 2012 platform also relied heavily on myths of national rebirth. According to Marine Le Pen: "Leading the French people on the path to rebirth is the reason for my candidacy and my entire political struggle" (Le Pen, M., 2012, p. 8).

The cost of this transformation was significant. In 2015, the FN's political bureau expelled Jean-Marie Le Pen, citing his repeated anti-Semitic statements. Despite internal disputes, the FN continued to grow electorally. In the years that followed, Marine Le Pen reached the second round of the presidential elections twice: in 2017, after winning 21.3% of the vote in the first round, and again in 2022, under the rebranded Rassemblement National (RN), where she secured 23.2% of the first-round vote.

The Rassemblement National's 2022 electoral platform sought to present itself as "a reasonable path to guarantee the French people the legitimate protection of the Nation" (Le Pen, M., 2022b, p. 3). This path included a comprehensive overhaul of the state, with Marine Le Pen asserting: "Our country is unique because it was the State that forged the Nation. Therefore, the path to renewal lies in the State's re-foundation, both in its missions and its functioning" (Le Pen, M., 2022b, p. 4).

The stakes, according to Le Pen, extended beyond social policy to the realm of civilization itself: "What is at stake today, given the current state of our country, is no longer a social choice but a civilizational one" (Le Pen, M., 2022b, p. 34). This framing emphasized the necessity of a "re-foundation to reconnect with France's vocation, as an example to the rest of the world and the homeland of a people reclaiming their destiny" (Le Pen, M., 2022b, p. 31).

The RN's proposals against immigration took on even more extreme dimensions in 2022. The party advocated for constitutional reform and a referendum to block "any population policies aimed at altering France's identity" and to permit the expulsion of foreign criminals or delinquents, as well as judicial exclusion from French territory (Le Pen, M., 2022b, p. 8). The platform included specific legislation targeting "Islamic ideologies, which constitute the true totalitarian threat of modern times" (Le Pen, M., 2022b, p. 9). The goal, as stated, was to "eradicate Islamism" (Le Pen, M., 2022a, p. 18). This new emphasis on Islamophobia represented a departure from the RN's 2012 platform, where such themes were less pronounced. By 2022, anti-Islam rhetoric had become central to the party's identity and electoral strategy, reflecting an intensified effort to frame the Muslim population as a fundamental threat to French national identity.

The Rassemblement National's 2024 legislative program reaffirmed the party's foundational principles, presenting them as the basis for a sweeping project of national renewal. This vision was articulated through the call for a comprehensive "restoration of order" in institutions, public finances, the economy, education, and daily life (Rassemblement National, 2024, p. 2). At the center of this agenda stood an idealized conception of the nation as "a fraternal and solidaristic reality," grounded in "the feeling that is nothing other than love for France and for the French people," (Rassemblement National, 2024, p. 2). This affective conception of belonging supported a rhetoric of national urgency. The program claimed that "the vast majority of the French refuse to resign themselves to seeing France continue on the path of renunciation and decline." In response, it called for "a great effort of recovery and unity in all areas of national life," asserting that "national union is the condition for civil peace" (Rassemblement National, 2024, p. 20).

Building on this ideal of unity, the program asserted the majority of the people expressed in the election as the only legitimate source of authority. The electoral process was portrayed as a sacred moment of affirmation, one that demanded absolute submission to the expressed will of the majority: "The people will speak [...] and everyone will be required to respect their choice, to accept and consent to their will in accordance with the inviolability of universal suffrage" (Rassemblement National, 2024, p. 2). This understanding of democratic practice emphasized the ratification of a general will, conceived as singular and indivisible, rather than as the outcome of negotiation among diverse and potentially conflicting interests.

In line with this vision, political institutions were portrayed as instruments for directly translating the will of the people into state action, without the interference of mediating bodies. The Rassemblement National pledged to "use all the political and institutional levers that the Constitution gives to the government and its majority to implement the project desired by the French people" (Rassemblement National, 2024, p. 2). Executive authority was thus legitimized as the sole authentic expression of popular sovereignty, while opposition and partisan debate were dismissed as illegitimate disruptions of national unity and the will of people. This plebiscitarian vision promoted a direct and hierarchical relationship between leaders and citizens. The program reinforced this conception by proposing to place the people "at the heart of political decision-making" and to reserve for them, by referendum, "the exclusive power to amend the Constitution" (Rassemblement National, 2024, p. 14).

This reconfiguration of democratic life was accompanied by a restrictive and exclusionary conception of political membership. Immigration was framed not simply as a policy issue but as a civilizational crisis. According to the program, the lack of control over immigration "led to communitarianism and separatism" (Rassemblement National, 2024, p. 10). The text warned of a "migratory submersion," echoing extreme-right conspiratorial discourses of demographic threat.[12] In response, the party advocated a series of measures designed to curtail both legal and illegal immigration. Several of these proposals were to be subject to constitutional referenda, underlining their foundational status in the party's political vision. These initiatives codified a model of national belonging that prioritized cultural conformity and ethnic homogeneity, explicitly linking the right to participate in public goods with presumed civilizational affiliation.

Taken as a whole, the program articulated a vision of democracy stripped of its conflictive and pluralist dimensions. Political participation was reduced to the periodic affirmation of unity. Dissent and diversity were construed as threats to order rather than as expressions of democratic vitality. State institutions were tasked with consolidating a culturally defined moral community rather than accommodating a multiplicity of voices. In place of a deliberative and inclusive polity, the French post-fascism advanced a plebiscitarian, hierarchical, and xenophobic political project, grounded in emotional nationalism and enforced through mechanisms of exclusion.

[12] About the conspiratory theories of "great replacement" see Ekman (2022).

Conclusion

This article has examined the political trajectories of Fratelli d'Italia and Rassemblement National, underscoring their historical connections to fascist and neo-fascist movements and the ideological continuities that persist within their political identities. The historical analysis and programmatic texts reviewed indicate that both parties can be situated within the post-fascist tradition, characterized by an ultranationalist and xenophobic worldview. Central to their discourse are narratives of national crisis and decline, followed by promises of regeneration and civilizational rebirth. Additionally, the analysis reveals that their participation in electoral processes is not accompanied by a commitment to pluralistic democracy. Instead, both parties articulate a plebiscitarian and hierarchical vision of political authority, grounded in a restrictive and exclusionary conception of the people. Such perspectives compromise core democratic principles, including the universality of rights and the intrinsic value of the human person.

Nevertheless, these parties do not represent the totality of contemporary radical or extreme right politics. Post-fascism coexists with a broader constellation of ideological currents that occupy adjacent positions on the extreme-right spectrum. Although these movements often exhibit overlapping values and rhetorical strategies, they are not reducible to one another. Their convergence in public and scholarly discourse arises not from mere confusion but from observable commonalities in their imaginaries, vocabularies, and political goals.

As argued at the outset of this article, the extreme right is most effectively understood through the lens of family resemblances that emerge at the far end of the ideological spectrum. Rather than being defined by a single doctrinal core, its various manifestations are linked by recurring features that appear with differing intensity across contexts. This framework allows for the identification of shared ideological foundations while preserving analytical sensitivity to internal variation. These affinities are most clearly articulated in opposition to an imagined adversary. In this sense, the extreme right is unified by its rejection of communism, democratic participation, egalitarianism, and the expansions of political and social rights achieved through the major revolutionary upheavals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Traces of this oppositional logic can be found in diverse formations, from post-fascism to authoritarian conservatism, theocratic traditionalism and reactionary monarchism.

What distinguishes fascism, neo-fascism, and post-fascism within this broader field is their foundational reliance on myths of national or civilizational collapse and the vision of a radical rebirth. Unlike reactionary movements such as Action Française, which sought to restore a pre-revolutionary order, or conservative ideologies committed to the preservation of existing structures, these currents are oriented toward the creation of an entirely new political and social order. This imagined transformation, often entrusted to a revitalized elite, rests on the conviction that preserving the future of the nation or civilization requires a break from the past. It is this revolutionary and regenerative ambition that sets them apart within the broader landscape of the extreme right.

The analytical model proposed in this article may also offer valuable insights for examining extreme right movements beyond Europe. In countries such as Brazil, the United States, and India, political forces have emerged that articulate narratives of national decline, mobilize ultranationalist sentiments, and advance exclusionary

conceptions of the people. Despite their distinct historical and cultural contexts, these movements often display similar ideological configurations, including ultranationalism, anticommunism, hierarchical visions of society, mythic narratives of restoration, and plebiscitarian leadership styles.[13] However, determining whether the term "fascism," with or without prefixes, applies to these cases requires careful empirical investigation. As this article discusses, such classifications should be grounded in thorough historical and discursive analysis, rather than relying on superficial analogies or simplified comparisons.

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