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# ONLINE HATE SPEECH AND THE RADICAL RIGHT IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC: THE ITALIAN AND ENGLISH CASES

Manuela Caiani, Benedetta Carlotti and Enrico Padoan 

*Social media is considered a particularly conducive arena for hate speech, a form of communication often linked to the radical right. The goal of this study is to offer an empirical contribution that comparatively explores the presence and features of hate speech in the social media discourse of the radical right (leaders and parties) in Italy and the UK during the first year of the pandemic. This mixed-methods study analyses 21,360 tweets using wordcloud analysis (to conceptually map the social media discourse of the radical right and mainstream parties), topic modelling (to identify the main topics of the radical right's tweets and how they relate to Covid-19) and formalised content analysis (to better understand how hate speech is related to the virus). We find that radical right leaders have managed to bring exclusion-oriented issues to the agenda at this time of crisis, albeit in different ways, by emphasising different understandings of in-groups and out-groups in relation to Covid-19.*

**KEYWORDS** hate speech; radical right; Covid; topic model analysis; Italy; United Kingdom

## Introduction

In June 2016, the EU Commission issued a “Code of Conduct” for Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter and YouTube aiming to counteract the proliferation of hate speech online. Hate speech is defined as “the public incitement to violence or hatred directed to groups or individuals on the basis of certain characteristics, including race, colour, religion, descent and national or ethnic origin” (EU Commission 2016). The study of hate speech is not new, but the widespread use of the Internet has increased its urgency since this medium can encourage “instant responses, gut reactions, unconsidered judgments, off-the-cuff remarks, unfiltered commentary and first thoughts” (Brown 2018, 304). Research on online hate speech (e.g. cyberbullying, sexual violence online) pays special attention to right-wing extremism (Waqas et al. 2019). The Internet may indeed offer a powerful tool for radical right organisations to reach followers, connect with like-minded groups, spread ideology (Caiani and Parenti 2013), poisoned speeches and spread fake news (Klein 2020). Moreover, social media can enable citizens to participate actively in online discussions and express their opinions (Zuckerman 2014). Analysing social media as an arena for the diffusion of hate speech would, therefore, be fruitful.

Some scholars argue that hate speech tends to increase in time of crisis, such as in the case of the current Covid-19 emergency. Pandemic times are times of scapegoating on the others, the poor, the migrants, accused by right-wing politicians of spreading the virus. In this era of post-truth relativism, news and discourses are increasingly politicised

and sometimes used to delegitimise political and other social opponents (e.g. minorities) (Della Porta 2020). Although the topic (of hate speeches and the radical right) has led to growing normative concern among academics and journalists, empirical research on the topic is still scarce. Furthermore, studies that compare different types of radical right actors in different countries are rare. This study seeks to address this gap.

In this article, we address these issues by exploring the relationship between radical right (RR) political actors and online hate speech during the Covid-19 crisis. We aim to understand if and how hate speech emerges and thrives. We use the term “radical right” to refer to groups that exhibit in their common ideological cores the characteristics of nationalism, xenophobia (ethno-nationalist xenophobia), antiestablishment critiques and socio-cultural authoritarianism (law and order, family values) (Mudde 2007). This definition includes populist and non-populist radical right organisations and parties that explicitly refer to the fascist past (like the Italian case of Fratelli d’Italia). We adopt a comparative approach focusing on Italy and Great Britain—two European countries severely hit by the pandemic—and investigate the presence and the forms of hate speech in the social media discourse (i.e. Twitter posts) of radical right leaders and parties during the first year of the pandemic (for a total of 21,360 tweets). The assumption is that the Covid-19 pandemic created an even more fertile breeding ground for hate speech, broadening the political and discursive opportunities for the radical right. We examine similarities and differences between the two countries and different types of radical right actors, as well as the specificities of the radical right (as opposed to mainstream) social media discourse in times of crisis. The study uses a mixed-methods approach, including a word cloud analysis of tweets, a topic modelling and a formalised content analysis to disentangle the framing (Snow and Benford 1992) of Covid-related hate speech.

We find that the Covid-19 emergency has offered the radical right of both countries an opportunity to elaborate on and spread their hate speech online. RR leaders brought exclusion-oriented issues and frames to the (Covid-related) agenda, although in different ways; they emphasise different understanding of “Us” and “Them.” These findings have important implications for our understanding of the role of RR discourses in times of crisis and facets of the internal RR milieu.

Section 2 explains our theoretical approach; Section 3 details the method and sources; Sections 4 and 5 offer the empirical analysis; and Section 6 concludes.

### **Theory: RR Online Hate Speech and Mobilisation**

The Internet is considered a particularly fertile arena for right-wing hate and extremist groups (due to the so-called “filter bubbles,” the trivialisation of political debate, etc.) (Estellví and Castellví 2020). Various studies focus on RR actors’ use of social media and online forums for propaganda and recruitment (Caiani and Parenti 2013), leading to engagement in offline extremist groupuscules (Mammone, Godin, and Jenkins 2013) and hate crimes (Chau and Xu 2007). Despite RR groups’ denials, studies demonstrate that these groups are prominent hate speech producers (Pettersson 2020; Sakki and Pettersson 2016). In particular, social media allows right-wing actors to express their ideological stances and disseminate their political messages, including derogatory and discriminatory opinions (Ben-David and Matamoros-Fernández 2016; Engesser et al. 2017). Social media tools (such as “likes” or “shares”) are inherently conducive to the rise of hate speech

since they algorithmically reproduce homogeneity (Ben-David and Matamoros-Fernández 2016); RR blogs discursively construct “otherness” (Sakki and Pettersson 2016). These political forces target-specific minorities by adopting discursive strategies (such as generalisation) to portray ethnic “outsiders” in terms of difference, deviance and threat—an example of cultural essentialism (Wood and Finlay 2008). In sum, social media allows the radical right to reach audiences for several different purposes, including the diffusion of their political positions. By establishing an alternative social and digital media sphere, RR actors spread their ideology and conspiracy theories without the filters of traditional media.

On the other hand, populism as a style of communication has been related to political and social polarisation (McCoy and Somer 2019), and the Internet, in particular, is said to play an important role in that (Krämer 2017). Populist communication—on and offline—often centres on excluding out-groups, promoting in-groups and anti-elitism (Ekström, Patrona, and Thornborrow 2018). Some scholars interpret Trump’s discourse through lens of hate speech because of his constant attacks on ethnic minorities (Hallin 2019). Online, right-wing populists tend to use an “amateurish yet authentic” style, often including “impoliteness and political incorrectness [...] name-calling, insults and stylistic devices such as all-caps and exclamation marks” (Enli 2017, 58).

This style makes an impact: exposure to right-wing populist social media content negatively influences citizens’ attitudes towards immigrants and multicultural issues (Wirz et al. 2018; Heiss and Matthes 2020). This can stimulate in-group thinking and conformity and make discussions with people of different political views rarer and more hostile (Hameleers and Schmuck 2017). As Chetty and Alathur (2018, 114) argue, “the social networks have a significant role in racism and are the sources to understand it [and they] provide a context for learning, challenging and addressing issues related to racism.”

Although a direct link between RR anti-immigrant communication and political engagement has not yet been proven (Hameleers et al. 2018), the relationship between RR politics, use of social media and hate speech remains a timely topic. However, little empirical assessment explores this nexus. Comparative research is scarce (Engesser et al. 2017) and the existing studies mainly focus on blogs and forums (Mammone, Godin, and Jenkins 2013) and survey data (Hameleers et al. 2018). Scholars have to cope with the methodological challenges of processing large amounts of data (e.g. tweets). Recently, Klein and Muis (2019) analysed the Facebook pages of four Western European RR parties, movements and communities (in the UK, the NL, DE and DK) and found that unofficial pages are more likely to explicitly target ethnic minorities and less likely to attack the political establishment than official party pages, and followers’ comments adapt to such content. Moreover, political leaders and elites help shape the online sphere encouraging or discouraging hate speech (Kalsnes and Ilebaek 2020). As a consequence, focusing on the online communication of RR political parties and leaders, as we do in this study, is crucial to understanding if and how hate speech propagates on the Web. We aim to appraise the degree and forms of hate speech of the RR in Italy and the UK in the context of today’s global health crisis.

Conceptually, we understand “hate communication” to be the expression of sentiments that represent hate, negative attributes (i.e. “linguistic qualifiers”) that may incite violence or reflect hate and forms of discrimination against or blame towards political, cultural or social minorities and actors. We analytically break down “public incitement to violence or hatred directed to groups or individuals” into different “degrees” of hate ranging from direct calls for violence (i.e. tweets that explicitly call for violence) to delegitimation (i.e.

tweets against adversaries and their proposals, which resembles “blaming” in populism studies) (for our operationalisation, see the next Section).

We are guided by the hypothesis that we should expect a significant presence of hate speech features in the RR’s social media communications due to the exogenous shock of the Covid emergency. From an empirical point of view, we include various types of right-wing organisations, since they are a collective of far-right actors that displays a considerable degree of diversity (i.e. tradition, cognitive resources, values) despite or beyond a comparable ideological profile (Castelli Gattinara and Pirro 2019); we evaluate RR and mainstream parties and disentangle leaders from broader parties; we assuming that different groups will exploit the opportunities and constraints of the context in different ways (McCarthy, Zald, and McAdam 1996), as Internet use is shaped by offline identity (Caiani, Della Porta, and Wagemann 2012). Although the pandemic hit both of our cases hard, Italy and the UK are characterised by different “political and discursive opportunities” (Della Porta and Diani 2020) for RR discourses related to the health crisis. Therefore, we expect that hate speech will take different forms (in terms of issues, targets and in/out-groups) in the two countries.

### Method, Sources and Cases

We rely on a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative (topic modelling, wordclouds) and qualitative analysis. The paper examines RR parties’ and leaders’ tweets (as unit of analysis,  $N = 21,360$ ) published during the first year of the Pandemic (January–December 2020). For Italy, we analysed the populist right-wing (Zulianello 2020) “League” party and its leader Matteo Salvini and the heir to the old fascist party, “Brothers of Italy” and its leader Giorgia Meloni; for the UK, we analysed the RR Brexit party and its leader Nigel Farage. We also analysed all the tweets produced in 2020 by the most important mainstream parties in the two countries: the Labour party (and its leader Keir Starmer) and the Conservative party (and its leader Boris Johnson) in the UK and the Five Star Movement (5SM) (and its leader Luigi Di Maio) and the Democratic Party (and its leader Nicola Zingaretti) in Italy.

To automatically retrieve tweets, we relied on R (Rtweet, which deals directly with the Twitter API)<sup>1</sup>, and we constructed 12 corpora (see Table A in the Appendix). We pre-processed the tweets according to standard procedures (e.g. elimination of stop-words, lowercasing, punctuation, etc.) and explored them with wordcloud and topic modelling approaches. The former provided us with a visual representation of the most frequently recurring words: the more frequent the word, the bigger its size in the visualisation. These patterns suggested specific communication (or conceptual) maps for each actor.

We used the Latent Dirichet Allocation (LDA) algorithm for topic modelling, which allowed us to identify the most important topics in the tweets. LDA follows two core principles: first, it treats every document as a mixture of topics, so each document may contain words referring to different topics in any proportion (e.g. words in Document 1 might be 90 per cent related to topic X and 10 per cent related to topic Y). Second, every topic is defined by a mix of words, and words can be shared between topics.<sup>2</sup> In other words, LDA finds the mix of words associated with each topic and determines the mix of topics that describes each document in the corpus (for details, see Tables C and F in the Appendix).

The topic modelling helped us identify the RR's tweets related to Covid-19, and we used content analysis to determine the presence, degree and characteristics of their hate references (namely the "public incitement to violence or hatred against specific categories of actors"). We used a formalised codebook (Table D in the Appendix), which included the following variables meant to assess five main dimensions:

- (1) sentiment (1 if a hate sentiment is present and 0 if absent; as well as the "radicalness" of these hate references); we indeed decided to differentiate the type of sentiment expressed in the tweets according to degree of "radicalness" (attributing the values of zero, 0.5 and 1, see Table D in the Appendix) in order to account for the cultural specificities of the sentiment of "hate" and the capacity for concept-travelling (e.g. within a polarised political culture, as in the Italian case, the denigration of political adversaries and their proposals can constitute hate speech, although of a less radical type than an explicit incitement to violence);
- (2) out-group (the type of actor targeted in the tweet) (for overall results, see Table G in the Appendix);
- (3) in-group (the type of actor protected in the tweet) (for overall results, see Table I in the Appendix);
- (4) issue (the substantial topic of the tweet, e.g. culture, health, etc.) (for overall results, see Table H in the Appendix); and
- (5) linguistic qualifiers (the adjectives, adverbs, etc.) used to describe and justify the expressed sentiment and out-group actors.

For the classification of the variables in-group and out-group, we referred to Caiani, Della Porta, and Wagemann 2012 (see also Schworer 2021). We conducted reliability tests between coders on the sample of statements.

Both Italy and the UK were severely affected by Covid-19 in the first year of the pandemic. These countries possessed the first and second highest number of deaths in Europe at the end of 2020<sup>3</sup>, so we would, therefore, expect health crisis to be widely debated and politicised.

However, the strength of the radical and populist right differs between the two countries. In Italy, the RR was in opposition when the pandemic began. The right-wing populist League had the support of about 30 per cent of citizens after the fall of 5SM government, and the RR Fratelli d'Italia was on the rise, with 11 per cent support (*YouTrend*, January 31, 2020). Italy was the first European country crippled by the coronavirus. Although a state of emergency was declared at the end of January 2020, both leaders and medical professionals underestimated the outbreak. Strict public health measures were not implemented promptly; instead, regions were initially left to deal with the virus, thereby creating a fragmented approach (Falkenbach and Caiani 2021). Miscommunications and miscalculations wasted precious time, eventually resulting in a strict and lengthy country-wide lockdown that had dramatic socio-economic effects (Falkenbach and Caiani 2021). Although trust in Prime Minister Conte was high, parties disagreed with each other and politicised the pandemic (Falkenbach and Caiani 2021). Populist RR parties, such as the Brothers of Italy (led by Giorgia Meloni) or Salvini's Lega, regularly criticised the government for its weak leadership and the EU for its lack of solidarity.

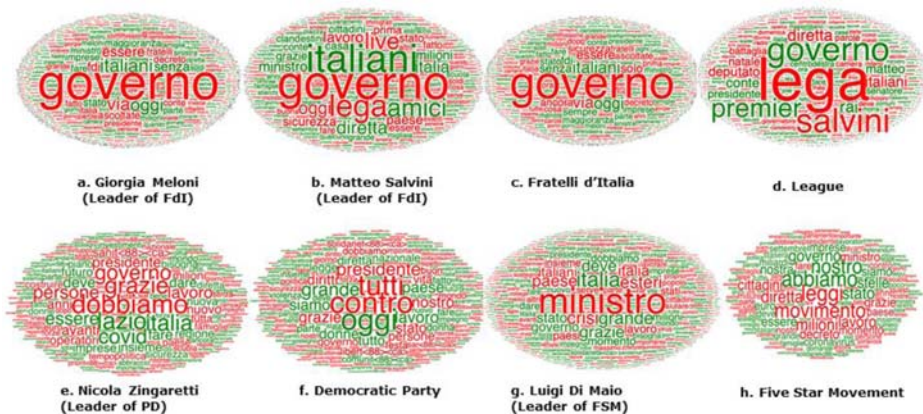
The government's responses to the crisis were even more contradictory in the UK. The first Covid-19 case in the UK was reported on 31 January 2020, and the first measures (closures of cafes, pubs and restaurants) were applied on 20 March. Boris Johnson's

Conservative Party was in government since the 2019 elections (when it won 43 per cent of the vote and a majority in Parliament) and still maintained relatively strong support (*Opinium*, January 15, 2020). Although the UK had more time than Italy to assess and address the situation, it initially pursued “herd immunity,” attempting to avoid the economic consequences of lockdown at the estimated human cost of half a million deaths (Tormey 2020). When the government finally did institute a lockdown, Labour considered it “insufficient” (*LabourList*, March 23, 2020), while Nigel Farage decried it as a step towards a “police-state” (*Telegraph*, March 30, 2020). In May, the government gradually relaxed restrictions and modified its slogan to “Stay alert. Control the Virus. Save Lives” (Conservative Party’s Official Website, May 10, 2020). Instead of putting the state at the centre of its strategy, the UK government “devolved the responsibility to individuals. Many began to query the competence of the regime” (Tormey 2020, 50–51). Despite claiming success for Brexit, Boris Johnson saw his popularity decline and Labour’s increase (*The Times*, December 10, 2020).

Therefore, we expect to find similarly high levels of hate speech in the online communications of the RR in both countries, but with some differences in form and articulation. We hypothesise that the Italian RR tweets criticise the corruption of political elites, but in the UK, we expect to find a stronger emphasis on the (Brexit) definition of the problem and its enemies and allies. Both countries could offer favourable contexts for xenophobic frames related to Covid-19, but we expect to find variation across different types of right-wing actors (populist vs. RR).

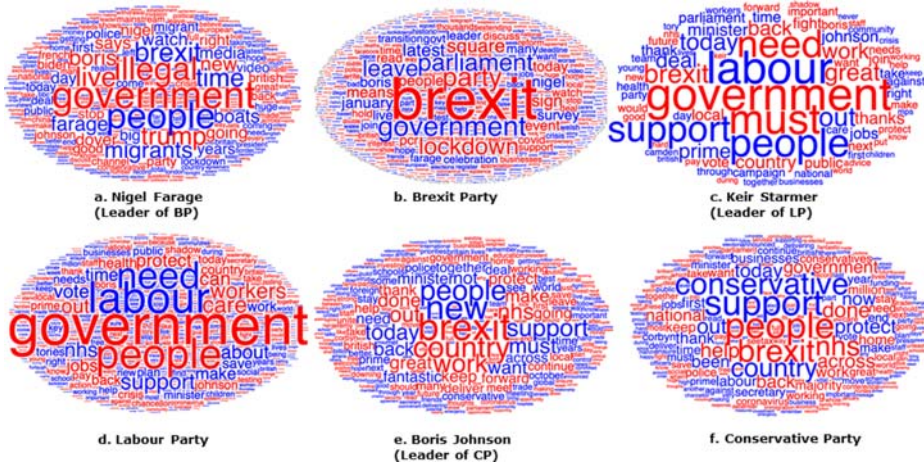
### Wordcloud Analysis

The wordclouds generated by content from the Twitter posts of Italian and UK RR and mainstream parties (Figures 1 and 2) illustrate characteristics of social media communication from the first year of the pandemic. Each actor’s wordcloud can be read as clusters of recurring concepts, with larger words occurring more frequently.



**FIGURE 1.**

Wordclouds of the Tweets from the main RR (and mainstream) Italian parties’ and leaders’ Twitter official accounts (2020). Abbreviations: DP = Democratic Party; FSM = Five Star Movement; FdI = Fratelli d’Italia



**FIGURE 2.** Wordclouds of the Tweets from the main RR (and mainstream) British parties’ and leaders’ Twitter official accounts. Abbreviations: BP = Brexit Party; CP = Conservative Party; LP = Labour Party

As it is visible from the figures above, in the British case they are: “government,” “people,” “illegal,” “Brexit,” “live” for Farage. The Brexit party uses the following top words: “Brexit,” “government,” “party,” “parliament” and “lockdown”. As for the mainstream, Boris Johnson and his party top words are: “Brexit,” “new,” “country,” “people” and “work”; “people,” “support,” “brexit,” “conservatives,” “NHS”. On the other hand: “government,” “Labour,” “must,” “people,” “need”; and “government,” “Labour,” “people,” “need,” “care” for the Labour party and its leader.

The maps of the Italian parties’ and leaders’ communication (Figure 1) demonstrate a clear differentiation between the RR (populist and not) and other mainstream groups. The social media discourse of the RR (exemplified by the League and Fdl, Figure 1(a)(d)) falls into four categories: anti-government, anti-mainstream party, in-group protection and broader RR claims. The first cluster (1) of main recurring words (i.e. “government,” “away,” “premier”) depicts an antagonistic relationship between the Italian government (the most frequent word in the RR’s tweets) and the citizenry, employing the typical dichotomy imagined by populist groups. The top recurring words are: “government” (often coupled with “State”), “Italians,” “away,” “today,” “be” for Giorgia Meloni, while for Salvini they are: “government,” “Italians,” “League,” “friends” and “live.” Also their parties use most frequently similar words: “government,” “Italians,” “away,” “today,” “be” in the case of Fdl; “League,” “government,” “Salvini,” “Premier,” “live,” in the case of League (see Figure 1). Criticisms of the government use descriptors such as “incompetent,” “liar,” “uninterested to the interests of the citizens.” This category also includes calls for action, exemplified by recurring words such as “live,” “to do” (in Salvini’s case), and “today” (in Meloni’s tweets), which seems to emphasise a link between strong leadership and the ability to raise the country.

The second cluster differentiates the RR from the mainstream parties and Premier Conte: it associates RR parties and their leaders with positive descriptors (e.g. “great,”

“popular,” “leader”), which recalls the saviour archetype typical of populist rhetoric. Conversely, the mainstream parties, which recur as “the Left,” “Conte,” “majority” and “Minister,” are coupled with verbs such as “must” and “listen to.” Here an opposition between the political forces of the “making” (i.e. the RR) vs. those of the “talking” seem to be suggested.

The third cluster identifies categories in need of protection (such as “families,” “workers,” “Italians”/“Italy,” “citizens,” often referred to as “friends”). Other categories are: “work,” “home,” “security,” “millions,” “Italy” (often coupled with words such as “big” and “again,” especially in the social media discourse of Meloni), “families,” “job,” “to defend,” “businesses,” as well as (especially in the League’s party discourse) the reference to aspects which are part of the popular Italian culture (such as “Xmas,” the “Rai,” Italian public TV service). The leader of the party is here referred to frequently and described as “deputy,” “lonely” and “fighting.”

Finally, the more peripheral fourth cluster refers to typical core values and topics of the radical right, such as “immigration,” “immigrants,” “undocumented immigrants,” “landings,” “ports,” “security,” “family,” “schools,” “young,” “diseased people,” “violence,” “national,” “history,” language of renewal (“stop talking...,” “tomorrow” and “intervention” are especially common in FdI tweets) and references to the EU as an enemy (“MPs,” “reforms,” “EU Commission,” “responsible”). Interestingly, explicit references to the pandemic and Covid (e.g. “pandemic,” “covid,” “virus,” “epidemic,” “coronavirus”) are rare in the Italian RR’s tweets, accounting for about less than 5 per cent of the total (see Table E in the Appendix).

In addition to these clusters, we note the RR’s use of a vocabulary of “dramatization” with the abundant use of adjectives, verbs and adverbs, such as “without,” “over,” “only”/“lonely,” “always” and “again,” as well as the language of acrimony as its main emotional component (Salmeila and von Scheve 2018).

By contrast, the mainstream parties focus more on positive emotions (such as joy and pride) and motivational language (like calling for action referring to the country’s imminent recovery). Italy’s mainstream political parties’ (Figure 1(e)–(h)) tweets also fall into four main clusters. The mainstream parties PD and the M5S and their leaders used more frequently the following words: “we must,” “Lazio Region,” “thanks,” “Italy” and “government”; and “against,” “today,” “everybody,” “big,” “president.” While di Maio and its party uses mainly the following words: “Minister,” “Italy,” “crisis,” “big,” “foreign affairs,” “laws,” “we must,” “movement,” “our,” “live” (see Figure 1). The first cluster encompasses joyful and hopeful exhortations to the rebirth of Italy (including recurring concepts such as “we,” “must,” “great,” “now” and “today”). The second cluster positively refers to the government and its actions (e.g. “thanks,” “government,” “Lazio,” “people,” “before”), unlike the elite/citizen antagonism of the RR’s tweets to the third identifies groups that should be defended (with an emphasis on “work”/“job,” “Italy,” “people” and “future”). Finally, the fourth cluster demonstrates an inclusive position towards “women,” “world” and “immigrants” (as opposed to the RR’s nationalistic framing). Mainstream parties also make more explicit references to Covid-related words (such as “pandemic,” “covid,” “virus,” “epidemic,” or “coronavirus”) than their RR counterparts (for details, see Table E in the Appendix).

A different picture emerges from the wordcloud analysis of the UK’s parties’ and leaders’ tweets (Figure 2): the social media sphere comprises three different camps, the RR (Figure 2(a,b)), the opposition (Labour) (Figure 2(c,d)) and the Conservatives (Tories)

(Figure 2(e,f)). Each camp articulates somewhat different visions of the situation (Snow and Benford 1992) but makes some overlapping points. The RR's tweets fall into four main clusters. The first cluster demonstrates a prominent anti-government approach that instrumentalises Covid (and the lockdown strategy) to mobilise the party's Brexit supporters (e.g. "lockdown," "government," "party" and "people" are associated with "Brexit," which occurs 147 times in the BP account and 72 times in Farage's). The Brexit Party, in particular, emphasises the celebration of the Brexit campaign and event, with recurring words such as "square," "leave," "celebration" and "historic". The second is a conservative/anti-multiculturalist cluster (like "Trump," many (anti-)Chinese sentiments, the Black Lives Matter movement associated with "mob," "police," "Marxist" and "Left," and anti-migration concepts, such as "illegal\*," "migrants," "boats," "beach" and "Dover"). The third cluster relates to the pandemic and categories of people to be defended ("crisis," "wrong," "jobs," "pubs"/"pub-workers," juxtaposed with "scientists" and "evidence"). The final, peripheral cluster focuses on the typical RR topic of nationalism (e.g. "Britain," "British," "country," "national," "the UK's flag"). In general, the RR seems to use Covid-related topics to mobilise more traditional frames related to the Brexit/anti-Brexit cleavage. In addition to criticising the UK's lockdown strategy, the BP and Farage often tweet about highly divisive issues (which resemble the core values of the so-called "alt-right": conservatism, anti-multiculturalism and anti-migration) in their social media public discourse. The RR casts the lockdown in negative terms, but otherwise refers to Covid less than the mainstream parties (about 3 per cent of tweets compared to the mainstream's 15 per cent) (see, Table E in the Appendix).

The Tories' tweets tend to cluster around three main themes: a caring/empowering trend that suggests positivity and gratitude ("people," "need," "support," "care," "protect," "new," "can," "help," "thank"), a "rally-round-the-flag" discourse that casts unity (with the government) as necessary for defeating the pandemic (e.g. "Coronavirus," "virus," "spread," "follow," "support," "forward," "government"), and a call for individual responsibility ("stay," "everyone," "important" and "difficult," but also "remember" and "advice"). These last two clusters suggest a tension between politicisation of the government's pandemic response and citizens' responsibilities during the crisis.

Labour's tweets focus on three different clusters. Like the RR, Labour employs anti-government discourse, but it focuses on Covid instead of Brexit (e.g. "government," "must," "people," "need"). Like the Tories, Labour also uses a caring/empowering discourse (e.g. "support," "protect," "care," "fight," "can," "country," plus some Labour-inflected specificities, like an emphasis on "workers"). Third, the Labour Party appeals to preserving social rights ("school," "social," "rights," "health"), as well as to governmental efficiency ("testing," "plan") and to the resilience of the British social fabric (e.g. "communities," "work," "jobs"). The Labour Party criticises the government without questioning the lockdown strategy. In sum, British political actors' Twitter feeds demonstrate three different communication strategies during the pandemic.

### The RR's Tweets' Topics

When focusing on only the RR in the two countries, the topic model analysis shows that the various right-wing actors mobilise partly different, and sometimes concurrent, topics in their tweets during the first year of the pandemic (table F in the Appendix). In

particular, 12 main topics (on a total of 21,360 tweets) have been found (7 in Italy and 8 in the UK): they are, “immigration,” “COVID-19,” “national pride,” “criticism to the government,” “self-promotion,” “Trial to Salvini and personal event,” “socio-economic themes” (in Italy); “the Brexit deal,” “the post Brexit transition period,” “the COVID-19 pandemic,” “inner politics and EU criticism,” “self-promotion,” “immigration,” “China and right protection issues” and “US presidential elections” (in Britain).

Among them the Covid-related tweets (partially or completely related to the pandemic) are a total of 1464, namely approximately 20 per cent for the UK and 16 per cent for Italy. These numbers alone indicate that the topic of Covid plays a moderate to significant role in the social media communication of the RR, compared to other topics. However, further analysis shows that the RR in both countries tends to address the pandemic (its causes, its solutions, the calls for action related to it) as intertwined with other topics (Table C in the Appendix). In the UK, Farage and the BP talk about Covid while addressing Brexit, the Brexit transition period, domestic politics/EU criticism, US presidential elections, civil rights protections, immigration and self-promotion. The Italians address immigration, national pride, self-promotion, criticism of the Italian government, Salvini’s legal issues and economic themes while talking about Covid. By bridging between the novel health emergency and more traditional topics, the radical right seems to be instrumentalising the Covid-19 crisis, using it to (re)frame their typical claims in a way that resonates better in the context of the pandemic.

Hate speech is a substantial and consistent (as emerged by our longitudinal analysis, available upon request) component of the RR’s tweets about Covid. In Italy, hate speech occurred in about 24 per cent of the RR’s Covid-related tweets; the figure was roughly 21 per cent in the UK. Of the tweets containing hate speech, roughly 54 per cent (13 per cent of the total) contained less severe hate speech, namely language denigrating political adversaries and their proposals (Table B in the Appendix). 26.4 per cent of Farage’s tweets constituted a symbolic and material incitement to violence against specific categories of “enemies” (political, social and cultural); in Italy, 24.3 per cent of Meloni’s tweets and 24.2 per cent of Salvini’s tweets contained this type of language.

By examining the contextual and contingent dimensions (Della Porta and Diani 2020) of the emergence of right-wing hate, namely the issues and targets (i.e. out-groups) of the Covid-related tweets (Table G in the Appendix), we find that most are directed towards political enemies (e.g. trade unions, other political parties, etc.) in both countries (about 87 per cent of all RR Covid-related tweets containing hate speech). More specifically, in the United Kingdom 76 per cent of Farage’s Covid-related tweets containing hate speeches tweets and 99 per cent of the Brexit party and, in Italy, 82 per cent (Salvini) and 91 per cent (Meloni), are directed against “political actors” as outgroup. Other targets in the UK include socio-cultural actors (4.7 per cent), immigrants and supranational institutions (both 3.9 per cent); in Italy, the RR also targets European institutions (4.5 per cent) and immigrants (3.3 per cent).

Socio-cultural actors targeted by the UK’s RR are mainly the Black Lives Matter Movement (against which “the behaviour of the police is not as strict as against the other demonstrations of British citizens against the lockdown measures”), “Antifascist groups” (considered to be “appalling people” and “murderer mobs”) and some progressive media outlets (i.e. The Guardian), attacked for their “pro-lockdown” positions and for being “distant” from the “real” needs of British citizens during this emergency (e.g. “gauche caviar”). Actors coded as “supranational institutions” targeted by the UK’s RR are

mainly “China” (accused of causing Covid) and the WHO (“... another corrupt, globalist organisation”). Violent tweets against China are also found, however, in the Italian RR, described as “liars,” “infectors” and “colonizers” (with the complicity of the Italian government). The Italian RR often labelled the EU, with regard to the Covid situation, as the “Troika” (and distant from citizens, autocratic), “non-existent,” “killer of the (Italian) state” and a “tool owned by Germany and France for impoverishing Italy.” As for the immigrants, they are often equated to “terrorists”/“terrorism” (for example, in Farage’s tweets); in Italy, the RR describes them as “clandestine,” “free riders” (“migrants calmly arrive” in our country and “don’t escape from any war!” as opposed to the “poor” Italians kept in their homes by the lockdown and on which “the Italian government imposes fines, e.g. to runners!”), as well as “spreading the virus” (e.g. “they want to impose masks [on] our children, while thousands of migrants and hundreds of infected people are arriving ...”) and, in accordance with a more traditional pre-Covid accusation, as Italian welfare shoppers “benefiting from governmental privileges at the expenses of Italians.”

The UK’s RR indulges in personal attacks on political actors. The Brexit Party and Farage frequently name Prime Minister Boris Johnson (who they accuse of being “weak” and “insecure”), some Labour Party MPs, Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon (“she has gone mad ... drunk on power,” Farage’s tweet) and Welsh First Minister Mark Drakeford (presented as a “Grinch,” “puritan,” “maniac,” “trying to be macho ahead of Sturgeon” and “draconian”).

The Italian RR also tweets out personal attacks (rather than general and/or institutional criticism) on their political adversaries. Salvini, for example, targets governmental and institutional personalities as well as leftist politicians when talking about Covid (e.g. Domenico Arcuri, the commissioner for the Covid emergency; Lucia Azzolina, the Minister of Education; Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte; Campania’s governor Vincenzo De Luca; the “Left”; the Italian state agency for pensions) as the RR often depicts their political opponents as “elites captured” (by supranational forces), “useless,” “very bad minister(s) outraging the schools,” “opportunistic,” “wasteful” and “disastrous” in a strategy that may be described as “political bullying” (Fieschi 2019). These attacks sometimes take on a gendered component. For example, Salvini tweets of Azzolina, the Minister of Education, “her problem is not her lipstick, [it] is her inadequacy to do her job.” The populist right deploys a vocabulary similar to the one it uses to address immigration issues, describing the government as “illegal” or “submitted to Chinese interests.”

However, in tweets that, at least partially address the pandemic, the RR in Italy and the UK direct hate speech towards slightly different secondary topics (Table H in the Appendix). In the UK, hate speech proliferates when the RR links Covid-19 and socio-economic issues (85 per cent of relevant tweets); in Italy, hate speech occurs when Covid-19 is related to both socio-economic (61 per cent) and other political issues (23 per cent). In the acrimonious tweets concerning political issues, the Italian RR mainly attacks the Italian government for its “autocratic” management of the crisis, “not listening to the opposition” (i.e. the radical right itself) and for the “excessive power delegation” to commissioners and technocrats (as Salvini says in a tweet: “if we are a Republic based on the Commissioner Arcuri or on the Conte’s “task force,” then change the Constitution!”). It is also often equated with the Chinese Communist “regime.” Leaders of the RR parties in both countries also publish hate speech when they refer to Covid-19 and immigration (about 9 per cent of Farage’s relevant tweets, 9 per cent of Meloni’s and 7 per cent of Salvini’s).

The RR often attacks the EU and its socio-economic management of the crisis, especially in Italy (e.g. “... this is not a Union, this is a lair of serpents and jackals,” Salvini’s tweet), by strongly criticising and delegitimising the European Stability Mechanism (e.g. “Let’s talk about real life!,” again Salvini). In the British case, pandemic-related tweets containing hate speech directed towards socio-economic issues tend to attack the government’s lockdown measures, which are described as “worse than the disease” and motivated by “questionable scientific evidence.” Farage, in particular, frequently refers to China as the “culprit” of the pandemic and devotes several tweets to attacking President Emmanuel Macron and France for its border policy.

Finally, the Covid emergency seems to give to the RR in both countries not only an opportunity to re-frame traditional enemy categories and justifications, but also a chance to strengthen appeals to their bases (i.e. in-group identification) (Table I in the Appendix).

A predominance of Covid-related tweets produced by the Italian and the English radical right contain the references to an “in-group” (85 and 72 per cent, respectively), or actors that appear in need of defence or protection from an antagonistic out-group category. The most frequently recurring in-group actors are the “nation”/“own country” of the tweets’ authors (58 per cent of cases in the UK and 51 per cent of cases in Italy). Usually the “nation” is described as “citizens” or “families of the country” (especially in the Italian RR), “forgotten by the state” (heightening a tension between the nation and institutions), and also “desperate” (personifying the country), “expecting seriousness from the government” and “Christian” or “British traditional.” In the Italian RR, the second most frequent in-group referent is the extreme right itself (often also referred to as the generic “us”) (in about 25 per cent of relevant tweets). In the UK, the second most frequent in-group referents are members of radical right forces and socio-cultural actors (about 15 per cent of relevant tweets each). The latter includes “students” (“virtually imprisoned-by the lockdown measures- whilst paying thousands in fees,” per Farage), “experts” against the lockdown measures and who support the immediate goal of herd immunity, and categories of “forgotten ill people” (those sick with diseases other than Covid-19 as well as “poor” or “disabled children”). Actors of the radical right present themselves as the “only alternative” (as Farage frequently tweets) to the entire party system (which entirely “[backed] lockdown measures”) and as the “true opposition,” whose action is necessary to save “the democratic system.” In the Italian case, the RR presents itself as a “responsible” actor advancing concrete, “common sense proposals” and serving as an “example” when governing at the subnational level (just to provide an example: “While the government debates on money and distribution of offices, in Sardinia we consistently check Sardinian people’s health. Thank you, governor Solinas!”), as well as the “defender” of Parliament against the government (which, it argues, is “ruling by decrees”). Conspiracy theories and related vocabulary are also present in these tweets (e.g. forcing “non-positive people into isolation,” “alternative medical treatments” that the government does not supposedly want to implement, etc.), as are descriptions of people as “victimised,” against whom someone is “conspiring.”

We must also note some differences between RR actors. In Italy, the traditional RR (represented by Meloni) frequently refers to itself as an important in-group actor (26 per cent): here the focus is on traditional RR voters and ideology (e.g. Italians, “Italianness”) and more rarely on specific categories affected by the pandemic; conversely, the populist RR Salvini focuses on other socio-economic categories (such as “family,” “businesses,” “health workers,” “parents,” “school principals,” “precarious teachers,” “unemployed

workers," "self-employed workers" and "merchants"), who "worry for their health and job" and are "true heroes," "poor," "precarious," "hard-working" and "deserving of the country's gratitude." In fact, Salvini often tends to highlight how he intends to protect "deserving" categories, in line with the economic populism typical of the populist RR (Otjes et al. 2018); it is also remarkable the inclusion, within such "deserving" categories, of constituencies that are not usually associated to the "typical" RR constituencies, such as "health workers" and "precarious teachers." In Britain, Farage appears almost totally focused on the nation and nationalism as an identity category (or in-group) in his tweets (more than 76 per cent of relevant tweets), while the BP comes closer to Salvini's strategy of appealing to specific sectors, such as: "self-employed workers" affected by the lockdown measures, "companies" and "businesses," and the "private sector," all described in highly emotional tones as "going out of business," "hugely" and "permanently damaged."

### **Conclusion: The RR Between "Hate Speech" and "Political Bullying"**

Conspiracy theories and hate news "have spread like a snowstorm across the political scene on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond" (Bergmann 2020). Our study demonstrates that the pandemic has given the RR a political opportunity for spreading hate speech and attacking their political adversaries more broadly. Our mixed-methods analysis has shown that the RR in both Italy and the UK inserts a significant amount of hate speech in their tweets and tends to instrumentalise the pandemic to attack their traditional enemies. This result does not seem to be linked to the RR's role in the opposition because it varied in our two selected countries; instead, it can be related to the differentiation between mainstream parties' responsibility for dealing with the pandemic and the RR parties' responsiveness. This social media strategy implies that RR parties, instead of enacting long *durée* visions, "sympathetically respond to the short-term demands of voters, public opinion, interest groups, and the media" (Bardi, Bartolini, and Trechsel 2014, 237). Within fragmented media ecology, such as the Internet-based social media arena, it is possible for (populist) radical right leaders and parties to bypass traditional media institutions and challenge their legitimacy in the social arena (Hallin 2019, 14).

Our study also stresses that the role of radical right leaders is key to popularising polarisation and conspiracy theories. As we demonstrated, RR leaders and parties have managed to bring exclusion-oriented issues to the agenda, using the Covid topic independently or in combination with other, more traditional RR claims. These groups, therefore, occupied public space and restricted opportunities for progressive framing and inclusionary or solidaristic visions for solutions to the health crisis.

In addition to confirming our hypotheses about the toxicity of the RR's social media presence, our study also stressed some specificities across countries and types of actors. We differentiated between right-wing nationalism/nativism and right-wing populism (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2020) by noting divergences between the tweets of Salvini, Meloni and Farage. As a multi-organisational actor (Caiani, Della Porta, and Wagemann 2012), the populist right in Italy is characterised by hate speech against political elites (a strategy of "political bullying," Fieschi 2019), but immigrants and immigration matter more than elites to the nativist right. While the populist radical right (exemplified by Salvini and Farage) refers to the "articulation of unsatisfied demands" (Laclau 2005), the traditional radical right (like those led by Meloni) puts a stronger emphasis on the nation as a

unifying concept. However, Farage continues to insist on the UK/EU cleavage. In this regard, we confirm that the RR is far from a monolith, presenting itself instead as a complex galaxy composed of different ideological tendencies, mobilising around different issues and using distinct strategies of action and discourse.

In sum, to counteract an “infodemic,” we must examine the so-called “super-spreaders” with large audience bases and the ability to shape the public sphere. Hate speech and toxic discourse are not limited to political topics, and they can bridge ideological issues (e.g. Brexit, European integration). These findings have important implications for understanding the role of radical right-wing discourses in a “post-fact” era, where populism can manifest beyond typical issues such as immigration and oppose facts verified by knowledge-producing elites like scientists and experts (Waisbord 2018, 2–3). This study confirms that radical right (populists) seem to endorse an “arrogance of ignorance,” or appeals to common sense and anti-intellectualism that mark a return to pre-modernist or pre-Enlightenment thinking (Wodak 2015, 5).

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## NOTES

1. For more details, <https://cran.r-project.org/web/packages/rtweet/rtweet.pdf>.
2. To find the right number of topics to be associated with a specific corpus, we combined quantitative and qualitative techniques. Firstly, four metrics to minimize and/or maximize the topics number are applied (Rajkumar et al. 2010; Deveaud, SanJuan, and Bellot 2014), see the online appendix (figure A–D). Having applied the fit measures, a qualitative analysis of the most salient words in topic have been done (see Table F in the Appendix) to qualitatively “label” the found topics. This iterative approach continues until the “right” number of topics is found. Then, the document-topic probabilities are estimated ( $\gamma$ =gamma) indicating the estimated proportion of words from document  $x$  generated by each topic. COVID-19 related documents are considered as those with a  $\gamma \geq 25\%$ .
3. <https://www.interno.gov.it/it/speciali/coronavirus>.

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## SUPPLEMENTAL DATA

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2021.1922191>

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