

Joint Master in EU Trade and Climate Diplomacy

Brothers of Italy and Vox: Two Faces of Right-Wing Radicalism in Contemporary Union?

Supervised by: Maria Elena Cavallaro

Carlotta Martinetti

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Statutory Declaration

I hereby declare that I have composed the present thesis autonomously and without use of any other than the cited sources or means. I have indicated parts that were taken out of published or unpublished work correctly and in a verifiable manner through a quotation. I further assure that I have not presented this thesis to any other institute or university for evaluation and that it has not been published before.

*26 June 2025 **Martinetti Carlotta***

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The writing of this thesis has been faithfully accompanied by a constant emotional whirlwind, very much in line with most experiences that concern me. I therefore wish to sincerely thank all those who had the patience to stay close to me during these days and I thank them deeply also for their kind, though not always affectionate, words.

A special thanks goes to my family, for allowing me to fully experience this academic journey, which turned out to be more formative than I could have ever innocently expected.

I conclude by dedicating this thesis to my sister, hoping it may make her proud and perhaps, one day, even inspire her in some way.

Abstract

This thesis provides a comparative analysis of the Brothers of Italy (FdI) and Vox, examining how both parties instrumentalise the unresolved legacies of Italian fascism and Spanish Francoism to inform their political strategies and institutional development. The study contends that these historical references are not merely symbolic but are central to how these radical right-wing parties establish legitimacy and position themselves within national and European politics. Using qualitative methods, including critical discourse analysis of speeches, manifestos and parliamentary activity from 2012 to 2023, the study contrasts the Brothers of Italy's approach of symbolic moderation and ideological rebranding with Vox's open affirmation of authoritarian pasts and confrontational style. These strategies have yielded different outcomes: FdI has integrated into Italy's mainstream right, contributing to political stabilisation, whereas Vox has intensified political fragmentation in Spain by mobilising around cultural grievances and national unity. At the EU level, FdI engages institutionally through the European Conservatives and Reformists group, balancing ideological firmness with tactical cooperation. By contrast, Vox largely rejects legislative engagement, using the European Parliament as a platform for cultural confrontation and transnational alliances. This research sheds light on how radical-right parties adapt authoritarian references to reshape political systems, showing that responses to the past continue to influence the future of democracy in Europe.

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Introduction

Europe has navigated persistent winds of adversity in recent years. Within a global landscape marked by a confluence of economic fragility, geopolitical realignment, cultural fragmentation, institutional distrust and pandemic aftershocks, radical right parties have transitioned from the marginal protest movements to enduring structural forces within Europe's democratic architecture. Where scholars once debated their "flash party" ephemerality, figures like Giorgia Meloni (Brothers of Italy, FdI) and Santiago Abascal (Vox) now helm or critically influence governments, demonstrating an unprecedented capacity to institutionalize their agendas. This transformation transcends electoral success; it represents a fundamental recalibration of political legitimacy across the continent. They have proven capable not only of capitalising on crises but also of increasingly defining their terms, reframing complex challenges through narratives of civilisational threat, national sovereignty and identitarian reclamation. This trend has been further confirmed by the recent European Parliament elections held in 2024: parties aligned with the galaxy of right-wing radicalism, notably the Identity and Democracy (ID) and European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) groups, secured over 25% of seats, cementing their role as indispensable, norm-shattering actors in EU governance. This ascendancy cannot be dismissed as transient "populism" nor contained within reductive "extremism" paradigms. Rather, it signals a profound ideological metamorphosis of the European right, characterised by the systematic normalisation and gradual incorporation into mainstream political life of once-radical positions. Policies demanding border militarisation, ethnonational preference, judicial overhaul and historical revisionism, once confined to the political fringe, now permeate mainstream conservative discourse. Parties like Germany's AfD, France's National Rally and Sweden Democrats exemplify this convergence, blurring boundaries between traditional conservatism and radical right ideology through shared policy agendas and, increasingly, governing coalitions. Crucially, this normalisation operates not merely at the level of policy but through the reconfiguration of symbolic and historical boundaries, rendering previously taboo discourses politically viable. FdI and Vox represent paradigmatic responses to the legitimacy deficit inherent in radical-right genealogy: FdI pursues integration through historical ambiguity while Vox leverages disruption via explicit reclamation. This dichotomy offers unparalleled insight into normalisation's contingent

pathways. Both embody the radical right's institutionalisation trajectory yet manifest starkly divergent strategies. Indeed, if FdI governs Italy as the dominant force in a cohesive right-wing coalition, having sanitised its post-fascist lineage to achieve broad electoral appeal; Vox, while pivotal to Spanish governance regionally and nationally through parliamentary support, remains an ideologically purist disruptor, weaponising explicit Francoist nostalgia. This contrast, integration versus confrontation, offers a critical lens to dissect the radical right's adaptive repertoire. Both parties leverage crises (austerity, migration, Catalan separatism), deploy sophisticated digital mobilisation and champion "national conservatism." Yet, their relationship to authoritarian historical legacies reveals a core, underexplored dimension of their political identity and strategy. Fascism (Italy) and Francoism (Spain) represent not merely historical epochs but active sites of memory politics: reservoirs of symbolism, trauma and contested legitimacy that radical right parties must navigate to secure present-day credibility. Understood here as the strategic manipulation of symbols, narratives and institutional actions to rehabilitate or ambiguate ties to authoritarian regimes, memory politics functions as a critical legitimisation toolkit for the radical right. What remains underexplored, however, is the question of how these parties actively manage their toxic historical inheritances to build legitimacy within liberal democratic framework. This question transcends historical curiosity; it probes the core mechanisms enabling the radical right's ideological normalisation. Neglecting this dimension risks misdiagnosing the radical right's resilience. Their success hinges not just on policy but on addressing the deep-rooted crisis of legitimacy stemming from their historical ties to authoritarian regimes. FdI's reframing of national identity within a democratic framework and Vox's revival of a proud, unrepentant nationalism offer sophisticated, yet divergent, responses to this challenge responses that warrant systematic comparison. This thesis bridges this gap through a structured comparative analysis of FdI and Vox, centring on how each party negotiates its authoritarian past to construct contemporary political legitimacy. It argues that memory politics is not ancillary but constitutive of the radical right's normalisation project. By interrogating this ambivalent relationship with the past, the thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of how radical right parties seek legitimacy, construct identity and reshape democratic norms not only within their national contexts but also at the European level.

To interrogate this, the thesis employs a multi-scalar comparative framework:

- Chapter 1: it examines the distinct historical, socio-economic and institutional ruptures enabling FdI and Vox. It contrasts Italy's dual collapse (Tangentopoli, PdL implosion, austerity/migration crises) with Spain's unfinished transition (Pacto del Olvido, PP corruption, Catalan secessionism), revealing how national trauma shapes divergent memory strategies for overcoming authoritarian stigma: FdI's sanitisation versus Vox's reclamation.
- Chapter 2: it analyses how divergent memory politics shaped institutional trajectories. It demonstrates how memory management determines institutional outcomes: strategic ambiguity enabled FdI's hegemonic consolidation while Francoist instrumentalisation entrenched Vox's polarisation and fragmentation in Spain, paralysing cross-bloc cooperation. This divergence underscores how managing the past determines whether radical-right ascendancy stabilises or disrupts democratic systems.
- Chapter 3: it investigates how nationally rooted memory politics translate within the EU arena, particularly via the ECR group. It analyses how FdI's "Eurorealist" pragmatism and Vox's "civilisational alarmism" refract their historical narratives onto debates on sovereignty, migration and identity. Crucially, it assesses whether nationally rooted memory narratives foster cohesion or friction within transnational spaces, testing the portability of illiberal legitimisation strategies.

By exposing how illiberal pasts are repurposed for present-day legitimacy, this thesis provides a framework for diagnosing the radical right's durability and a warning about democracy's adaptive vulnerability when foundational norms are incrementally eroded. By dissecting how radical right parties weaponise, obscure or rehabilitate the past, it provides a critical framework for understanding the radical right's enduring impact on European democracy's normative foundations and future trajectory. The management of authoritarian memory is not a historical footnote; it is a frontline in the contest over Europe's political soul.

Literature Review

Over the past two decades, the European political landscape has been characterised by the rise of radical right-wing parties that challenge the foundations of liberal democracy, promote nativist agendas and criticise the institutional framework of the European Union. Within this broader trend, Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia, FdI) in Italy and Vox in Spain have emerged as emblematic expressions of a new phase of right-wing radicalism in Southern Europe. Despite differing historical trajectories and national context, both parties express opposition to globalisation, European integration, multiculturalism and liberal cosmopolitan values.

This literature review engages with a broad corpus of scholarly publications, including peer-reviewed journal articles, edited volumes and working papers, primarily in the fields of comparative politics, party studies, political theory and European integration studies. Significant contributions to this field include works by Tarchi (2023), Bressanelli & De Candia (2023; 2025), Ventura (2022), Vassallo & Vignati (2023), Ferreira (2019), Moreno (2021) and Rama et al. (2021). These sources have been selected on the basis of their comparative insights and methodological rigour.

A central axis of scholarly debate concerns the ideological labelling of FdI and Vox. Existing literature diverges significantly on terminology, reflecting broader uncertainties in the field. FdI, is variously categorised as *extreme right* (Bressanelli & De Candia, 2023), *radical right* (Tarchi, 2023; Ventura, 2022) or *populist radical right* (Bruno & Downes, 2024). Similar terminological pluralism exists with Vox, with authors alternatively describing it as *extreme right* (Moreno, 2021), *radical right* (Ferreira, 2019), or *populist radical right* (Rama et al., 2021). Some authors challenge the term *radical right* altogether, suggesting that it legitimises actors who formally respect democratic principles while undermining foundational liberal norms (Tarchi, 2023; Forti, 2022). Others favour more neutral designations such as *national-conservative* (Vassallo & Vignati, 2023). This thesis adopts Cas Mudde's conceptualisation of the radical right as an ideology combining nativism, authoritarianism and populism. Mudde's framework is preferred for its analytical precision in cross-national comparison and its explicit utility in deconstructing how historical memory is weaponised to advance nativist and authoritarian agendas, a core focus of this study.

A significant body of work has focused on the historical continuity of FdI with the Italian Social Movement (Movimento Sociale Italiano, MSI) and National Alliance (Alleanza Nazionale, AN), often interpreted as evidence of a post-fascist heritage (Ignazi, 2021; Parlato & Ungari, 2021). Scholars note the centrality of former MSI/AN militants, such as Giorgia Meloni, in the current leadership, often referred to as the "Atreju generation" (Vassallo & Vignati, 2023). Yet scholars characterise FdI's ambivalent relationship with this legacy as a strategy of *sanitisation* (Ferrari, 2021; Vassallo & Vignati, 2023): retaining selective symbols (e.g., the tricolour flame logo, references to MSI founder Giorgio Almirante) while systematically purging overt fascist associations, rebranding FdI as a mainstream conservative force and pursuing international legitimacy through alliances like the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR).

In the case of Vox, scholars have highlighted the instrumental reappropriation of Francoist symbols, this process defined in this study as a *reclamation* (Altozano & Llorente, 2018; Tarchi, 2021): the deliberate rehabilitation of Francoist iconography, narratives (e.g., celebrating Franco's "anti-communism") and policy frameworks (e.g., centralism versus regional autonomy) as positive foundations for Spanish identity (Altozano & Llorente, 2018; Tarchi, 2021). The notion of *post-fascism* (Piccolino & Puleo, 2023) has been employed to account for the party's synthesis of authoritarian legacies with democratic legality and new strategic narratives. Vox's formation as a splinter from the Popular Party (Partido Popular, PP) has been interpreted as a response to the crisis of Spanish conservatism, giving rise to what has been termed the PP's *radical soul* (Innerarity & Giansante, 2025).

Despite the breadth of existing research, there are several gaps in the literature. A comparative analysis of Brothers of Italy and Vox remains limited, as the majority of studies focus on a single party within its national context and seldom engage in systematic cross-national comparisons, particularly concerning their divergent historical memory strategies (*sanitisation* vs. *reclamation*) and strategic evolution. Despite the extensive analysis of historical memory manipulation in both cases, the literature is lacking a coherent comparative framework to assess how *sanitisation* and *reclamation* function politically (e.g., legitimising agendas, mobilising bases, reshaping national identity) across distinct institutional contexts. A particularly significant gap concerns the case of Vox, where limited research has explored the discursive and institutional

mechanisms enabling Vox to breach Spain's long-standing resistance to far-right populism.

This thesis will address the identified research gaps through three integrated contributions: firstly, it will advance comparative scholarship by systematically analysing FdI's strategy of sanitisation (selective symbol retention paired with fascist legacy purge) against Vox's reclamation (active rehabilitation of Francoist narratives and iconography), examining how these divergent memory approaches shape their political origins, discursive legitimation and coalition bargaining dynamics. Secondly, it will develop a novel framework demonstrating how these strategies serve distinct political functions: sanitisation enables FdI's institutional integration and conservative alliance-building within Italy's constitutional order, while reclamation fuels Vox's anti-system mobilisation and identity polarisation in Spain. Thirdly, it will provide the first comprehensive analysis of Vox's breakthrough mechanisms, interrogating discursive tactics (e.g., framing migration as "colonisation" or weaponising laicism against Islam) and institutional opportunities (e.g., PP's corruption crises and Catalan separatism) that eroded Spain's historical anti-far-right barriers. Collectively, this research will extend Mudde's radical-right framework to institutional behaviour, examining both parties' impact on EU policymaking through their roles within the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group.

Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative and comparative approach, aimed at analysing complex political phenomena in which historical, cultural and institutional variables play a central role. This design is optimal for interrogating how FdI and Vox instrumentally reinterpret their authoritarian legacies; a process embedded in historical context and institutional constraints. The employment of a comparative approach facilitates the analysis of the similarities and differences between the political parties known as Brothers of Italy and Vox. Their selection is theoretically strategic: as parties navigating distinct modes of historical legitimation (sanitisation vs. reclamation) within comparable Southern European democracies, they offer a critical test of how memory politics shapes radical-right institutionalisation. This method is particularly efficacious in illuminating the congruences between the two parties' programmatic and ideological orientations, whilst concomitantly offering insights into the political and institutional contexts in which they function. The data was collected through a documentary analysis of primary and secondary sources. Using critical discourse analysis (CDA), we examine linguistic strategies, symbolic representations and narrative framing in primary sources, tracing how historical references legitimise contemporary agendas. Primary sources cover 2012–2023 (FdI's founding/Vox's pre-2018 emergence to present), selected for their articulation of historical narratives (e.g., speeches commemorating fascist/Francoist events, manifestos addressing national identity). ECR documents (2019–2023) were included where they engage sovereignty, identity or European history. These sources are complemented by a broad base of secondary sources, consisting of academic articles, reports from research centres, publications in specialist journals and studies dedicated to the evolution of the radical right in Europe. The materials were selected through academic databases such as Google Scholar and through the official website of the European Parliament, which is used for checking up-to-date institutional data. While providing depth, this approach faces limitations: reliance on public-facing documents may overlook internal strategising; CDA's interpretative nature risks subjectivity. To mitigate this issue, triangulation of findings across source types is employed, alongside contextualisation of rhetoric against policy actions.

1. THE ORIGINS OF BROTHERS OF ITALY AND VOX

This chapter traces the divergent historical origins of Brothers of Italy and Vox, revealing how unresolved national crises shaped their ideologies. FdI emerged in 2012 from Italy's dual collapse: the Tangentopoli scandal (1990s) that destroyed traditional parties and the 2011 austerity/migration crises under Monti. It sanitised its post-fascist roots (symbolised by the tricolour flame) by reinterpreting them as a form of national pride aligned with democratic values, appealing to economic despair while avoiding authoritarian associations. Vox, born in 2013, sprang from Spain's unprocessed Francoist legacy ("Pact of Forgetting") and the PP's corruption scandals (Gürtel case). It explicitly reclaimed Franco-era symbols and memory politics, drawing on narratives of national unity and anti-communism and weaponising the 2017 Catalan crisis to fracture conservatism. Crucially, FdI sought legitimacy through historical ambiguity, enabling later coalition-building while Vox embraced radical desanitisation, ordaining its disruptive kingmaker role. Both exploited conservative vacuums but their contrasting relationships with toxic pasts predetermined their strategies.

1.1 The Italian Case: The Genesis of *Fratelli d'Italia*

1.1.1 From the Collapse of the First Republic to the Party System Crisis (1994-2013)

The year 1994 marked a significant turning point in Italy's political landscape, signifying a departure from the prevailing political system that had been in place since the establishment of the so-called First Republic. The latter had been characterised by the presence of strongly ideologically motivated and organised political parties, including the Christian Democrats (Democrazia Cristiana, DC), the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano, PCI) and the Italian Socialist Party (Partito Socialista Italiano, PSI). The erosion of this model began following the *Tangentopoli* scandal (1992-1994) and the

Mani Pulite investigations¹. The exposure of a system rife with corruption and malpractice resulted in an irreversible loss of trust in traditional political parties among the electorate, thereby undermining their democratic legitimacy. From this moment onward, a long-term process was initiated, continuing to the present day. This period was characterised by the emergence of lighter, personalised and leader-centric parties, which were devoid of the classic militant structure and were increasingly oriented towards political marketing. In this scenario, Silvio Berlusconi and Go Italy (Forza Italia, FI) embodied the archetypal model of this novel party configuration. The Italian political scene was becoming increasingly mediatised, with a focus on communication and the visibility of the leader, at the expense of grassroots participation, political formation and ideological cohesion. These new parties tended to establish weak and unstable relations with an electorate that was becoming increasingly volatile. They are often classified as personal parties, the fate of which is closely linked to that of their founder. In numerous instances, the end of the leader's tenure coincided with the dissolution of the party itself. In this sense, the year 1994 is significant as it marks the transition from a party system that was ideologically cohesive and structured or, to use an analytical concept, "contracted", to one that was more fluid, fragmented and personalised. The process of party deconcentration was thus inaugurated, understood as a loss of organisational identity and functional coherence of the parties. This phenomenon is widely regarded as representing one of the most significant elements in the evolution of the Italian political system in the period following the end of the First Republic. Starting in 2010, this process of decomposition and recomposition underwent a new phase, marked by the implosion of the traditional centre-right, which had until then found a fragile but effective synthesis in the People of Freedom (Popolo della Libertà, PdL)². The progressive weakening of Berlusconi's leadership, internal tensions and loss of consensus marked a deep crisis in the moderate conservative front. This dynamic gave rise to an area of political instability

¹ Tangentopoli refers to the set of investigations by the judiciary between 1992 and 1994 that uncovered a vast organised system of corruption used by all parties to finance their activities and, in many cases, to enrich individual politicians and leaders. The term "Mani Pulite" refers to the first and largest of these investigations

² A political party founded in March 2009, formed from the merger of the two largest centre-right parties (Go Italy and National Alliance) and smaller groups aligned with them.

in the space of the right, which lacked a unitary reference and was looking for new forms of representation. In a context characterised by widespread mistrust towards elites, electoral volatility and growing demand for political identity, the conditions were established for the emergence of new forces capable of assuming the dispersed legacy of the centre-right. The redefinition of the political and symbolic boundaries of the Italian right did not take place immediately but developed gradually, intertwining with economic, social and cultural factors that would emerge strongly in the following decade.

1.1.2 The Economic and Migration Crisis (2011-2018)

Between 2011 and 2013, Italy was still reeling from the global financial crisis, which had exposed deep structural weaknesses and pushed the country to the brink of financial collapse. In late 2011, the Berlusconi government was forced to resign under pressure from the markets and European institutions, paving the way for the formation of a technical government led by Mario Monti. The government, which has been termed the “government of unpopular choices³”, initiated a substantial programme of structural fiscal, social security and labour market reforms. This programme was inspired by an agenda of austerity and consolidation of public accounts, in accordance with the demands of the European institutions. Among the most emblematic measures was the Save Italy decree (decreto Salva-Italia), a symbol of the adoption of strongly austerity-driven policies. Monti’s decree (youth unemployment 38%, GDP -2.8%) became the empirical bedrock legitimising FDI’s anti-EU sovereignty claims and conservative reclamation project.⁴ The idea of an externally imposed sacrifice, in the name of a technocratic logic that is alien to the will of the people, took root in a significant part of public opinion. The Monti government was perceived by many as the expression of a limited sovereignty, “commissarised” by Brussels. This contributed to a pervasive sentiment of frustration and resentment towards national and supranational elites, thereby reinforcing a prevailing climate of growing disaffection towards the European Union. The crisis allegedly

³ Come andò con Monti, dieci anni fa. (2021, February 5). *Il Post*. <https://www.ilpost.it/2021/02/05/governo-monti-bilancio/>

⁴ ISTAT, Italian Statistical Yearbook 2013, Labour and Employment section.

revealed a rift between the “people” and the European institutions, who were blamed for the loss of sovereignty and national decline.

Concurrently, the so-called “migration emergency” escalated, exacerbating the sense of bewilderment and insecurity experienced by a significant segment of the population. The onset of the Arab Spring in 2011 and the subsequent collapse of several North African regimes resulted in a significant increase in landings along the Italian coastline, with over 63,000 arrivals recorded in 2011 alone, to over 170,000 in 2014, 153,000 in 2015 and over 181,000 in 2016. In 2013, approximately 45,000 migrants attempted the Mediterranean crossing Italy and Malta⁵. This represented the highest number of arrivals recorded in the two countries since 2008, with the exception of the 2011 peak, attributed to the 2011 Libyan crisis. Italy has frequently found itself obliged to manage migratory flows independently, a situation compounded by the ineffectiveness of the European system of redistribution of asylum seekers and the suspension of certain agreements with third countries. In a period characterised by economic crisis, social precarity and the perception of an absent Europe, slogans such as “Italians first” began to circulate insistently, being adopted by various political actors to intercept discontent and build an identity platform. This rhetoric, often lacking detailed policy substance yet tapping into powerful anxieties about identity and belonging, found fertile ground in a society characterised by polarisation, laying the cultural and symbolic foundations for the rise of political forces capable of articulating and representing this sense of disquiet.

1.1.3 The Birth of Brothers of Italy: Crisis, Conservative Reclamation and Symbolic Continuity

The formation of Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d’Italia, FdI) in December 2012 must be understood as a direct consequence of the political fragmentation and ideological recomposition that began in the early 1990s. In a highly volatile political scenario, where Silvio Berlusconi's institutional figure and political expression were losing support, a window of opportunity opened for the emergence of a new party on the Italian parliamentary right.

⁵ Data sourced from International Organization for Migrations show that a total of 42,925 individuals were received by Italy, with Malta receiving 2,804 individuals in the same year.

It was within this vacuum that Brothers of Italy was founded by Giorgia Meloni, Ignazio La Russa and Guido Crosetto, all previously associated with Berlusconi's PdL. Their departure was motivated by a perceived lack of internal democracy within Berlusconi's formation and a growing need to re-establish a political project anchored in national conservative identity. The new party positioned itself as a response to the crisis of political representation and the erosion of ideological clarity, aiming to give voice to those disoriented by technocratic governance and supranational impositions.

Initially presented as Brothers of Italy – National Centre-Right (Fratelli d'Italia – Centrodestra Nazionale), the party made its electoral debut in the 2013 general elections as part of the centre-right alliance, securing a modest yet symbolically relevant presence in Parliament⁶. The name itself evoked strong nationalist sentiment, taken directly from the first words of the Italian national anthem and signalled the movement's intention to root its identity in traditional and patriotic values. In the following years, the party underwent a symbolic evolution, first adopting the name Brothers of Italy – National Alliance (Fratelli d'Italia – Alleanza Nazionale) to explicitly reconnect with the post-fascist political tradition and eventually settling on Brothers of Italy in 2017.

From the outset, FdI distinguished itself by promoting a blend of national conservatism, social identity politics and Euroscepticism. It articulated a narrative that powerfully resonated with segments of the electorate alienated by socio-economic fallout of austerity policies, mass migration and perceived threats to national sovereignty stemming from supranational governance. This discourse not only reflected but actively amplified broader anxieties triggered by the lingering economic crisis and the intensifying challenges of managing migration flows. Crucially, this appeal tapped into deep-seated discontent, positioning FdI as the inheritor of a distinct political tradition. In this climate of dissatisfaction with traditional elites and supranational institutions, FdI offered a political space explicitly for those demanding a reassertion of cultural identity and stronger national leadership, thereby channelling widespread economic, social and governmental malcontent into a movement visibly rooted in Italy's post-fascist political lineage.

⁶ In that instance, the Brothers of Italy party obtained 1.96 per cent of the total vote and secured nine parliamentary seats.

This symbolic evolution was accompanied by a visual reaffirmation of ideological continuity with Italy's post-war far right. The party's logo prominently features the tricolour flame (*fiamma tricolore*), a historically charged symbol that originally appeared in 1946 with the founding of the Italian Social Movement by former fascists. The flame's contested origins, variously interpreted as referencing Mussolini's tomb or partisan resistance, allowed FdI to ambiguate its fascist lineage while retaining the symbol's emotional resonance. Though the MSI acronym and explicit references to National Alliance were eventually removed from the emblem, the decision to maintain the flame underscores the party's complex relationship with its political heritage. While Giorgia Meloni has publicly denied any association with fascism, claiming the symbol reflects the "democratic right's journey," its presence continues to evoke the historical trajectory from which FdI emerged.

1.2 The Spanish Case: The Emergence of Vox

1.2.1 The Unfinished Transition and the Crisis of the Political System (1978-2015)

Following Francisco Franco's death in 1975, Spain's democratic transition, led by Adolfo Suárez (1976 – 1981), prioritised stability over rupture. Crucially, it utilised Francoist institutional structures and personnel, fostering a fundamental continuity with the authoritarian past. This evolutionary approach, while pragmatic for securing elite consensus, came at a profound cost: the so-called Pact of Forgetting (*Pacto del Olvido*). This implicit agreement suppressed public reckoning with Francoist regime crimes and trauma in the name of national reconciliation and avoiding renewed conflict. Mainstream parties, including the ascendent left, Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*, PSOE) and Spanish Communist Party (*Partido Comunista de España*, PCE) acquiesced to this historical amnesia to gain political legitimacy within the new system. Consequently, the foundations of Spanish democracy were laid not on a clean break but on institutional and symbolic continuities with Francoism. This "unfinished transition" ensured the persistent undercurrent of Francoist ideology and nostalgia within Spanish political culture. This approach was sometimes defined with the polemical expression of general amnesia within the Cortes themselves, while a 1999 manifesto spoke explicitly of agreed amnesia (*amnesia pactada*). Consequently, the new Spanish

state was established on the foundations of the former regime, marking a continuity rather than a rupture with the authoritarian past. The Transition was the result of a process guided from above by the political elites, who favoured the path of agreement and moderation. The prevailing sentiment amongst the general public, bearing the imprint of the civil war's traumatic memory, embraced this discourse, opting for stability and eschewing polarisation and extremism. Nevertheless, the failure to establish a definitive rupture with the Francoist past resulted in the persistence of significant rifts within Spanish political culture, enabling the symbolic and ideological survival of elements associated with Francoism in subsequent years.

In this context, it is possible to read the emergence of political forces inspired, more or less explicitly, by that historical legacy. The Popular Alliance (Alianza Popular, AP), founded in 1977 by prominent Francoists known as “the magnificent seven” (los siete magníficos), became the primary vessel for this continuity. Among them was Manuel Fraga Iribarne, Franco's former minister and a key figure in the process of re-founding the party, which in 1989 became People’s Party (Partido Popular, PP). The ideology of the AP and, to a certain extent, of the new PP, continued to reflect the legacy of Francoism, promoting values such as respect for tradition, opposition to progressivism and a securitarian vision of the state. This was evident, among other things, in strong support for the Catholic Church and a conception of public order that, according to some critics, sacrificed individual freedoms on the altar of security.

Since the 2000s, latent tensions arising from the transition process, which had remained unresolved, have become intertwined with an increasingly evident crisis of the two-party system, centred on the People’s Party and Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party.

The prevailing disillusionment with the established parties was further exacerbated by the gravity of corruption scandals that came to light, particularly within the conservative faction. The Partido Popular has been profoundly impacted by the emergence of the Gürtel case, described as one of the most significant political scandals in the annals of Spanish democratic history. In May 2018, the Audiencia Nacional ruled that senior PP officials had amassed significant wealth through a sophisticated network of bribery and money laundering activities, in collaboration with criminal networks. The consequences were immediate: the government of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy fell and the PP suffered a collapse in its political and electoral credibility. In 2020, a further development

emerged, known as Operation Kitchen (caso Kitchen or Operación Kitchen), a spy operation conducted to intercept Luis Bárcenas, former party treasurer and a central figure in the scandal. It was discovered that Bárcenas maintained accounting documents that could substantiate the existence of a clandestine system of recording illicit payments to high-ranking members of the PP.

Concurrently with the scandal, there was a marked increase in dissenting voices within the party. A significant proportion of members, particularly those who align with conservative and nationalist ideologies, accused Rajoy of lacking sufficient assertiveness on matters of paramount importance, including the management of the Catalan and Basque dossiers. His “too passive” response to escalating pressure for independence, in conjunction with the apparent reluctance to implement more stringent measures against regional politicians, was interpreted by a segment of the party as a manifestation of weakness⁷. The issue of prison policies concerning members of the terrorist group ETA also generated strong internal tensions⁸. This stood in stark contrast to Italy’s Tangentopoli rupture: Spain’s “unfinished transition” ensured Francoist nostalgia remained a latent political resource, later weaponised by Vox.

1.2.2 Economic and Identity Shocks (2011-2018)

The sovereign debt crisis had a particularly severe impact on the Eurozone and especially on the Spanish economy. By 2011, the country's public deficit had reached 8% of GDP, while the banking system, heavily exposed to real estate speculation, was experiencing significant instability. Spanish banks held approximately €470 billion in real estate related assets, whose value had been declining steadily, with no signs of recovery in the near future. The erosion of market confidence in the Spanish state's ability to meet its financial obligations resulted in an increase in the yields on government bonds and a general deterioration in financing conditions.

⁷ Riccardi, N. (2022, December 7). La Patria che qualcuno voleva rompere: la nascita di Vox. *Eurobull.it*. <https://www.eurobull.it/la-patria-che-qualcuno-voleva-rompere-la-nascita-di-vox?lang=fr>

⁸ Riccardi, N. (2022, December 7). La Patria che qualcuno voleva rompere: la nascita di Vox. *Eurobull.it*. <https://www.eurobull.it/la-patria-che-qualcuno-voleva-rompere-la-nascita-di-vox?lang=fr>

This economic turmoil had considerable societal consequences. For the first time since 1990, Spain experienced a decline in its resident population, as reported by the National Statistics Institute. The exodus of 216,000 foreign residents in 2012, a direct consequence of economic implosion, provided Vox's "nation in peril" rhetoric with tangible evidence of national decline. The collapse of the real estate sector and rising unemployment prompted a significant number of economic migrants, especially from Latin America and Eastern Europe, to return to their countries of origin. As Albert Esteve from the Centre for Demographic Studies in Barcelona observed and as stated by Radio Nacional de España, Spain had become a less attractive destination due to the lack of employment opportunities. The global economic downturn devastated the foundation of Spain's economic model, heavily reliant on a real estate sector that had expanded far beyond actual demand fuelled by easy credit. This expansion was abruptly and dramatically reversed. This was characterised by an economy in which the purchasing power growth was primarily driven by consumer credit rather than by actual wage increases.

The labour market suffered dramatically: by the first quarter of 2011, the unemployment rate had soared to 21.3%, up from just 8% at the end of 2007. The hardest-hit groups included young people, women and immigrants, many of whom either returned to their home countries or, in the case of young Spaniards, sought opportunities abroad.

Efforts to stabilise the financial system placed further strain on public finances. By the end of 2012, Spain's public debt had risen to 84% of GDP, increasing further to 88.2% by mid-2013. This rapid growth in debt was driven by direct interventions to support the banking sector as well as Spain's financial contributions to European rescue mechanisms. In the midst of this profound crisis, the cohesion of Spain's social fabric began to erode. In 2013, *El Confidencial* sought to elucidate the mounting support for the Catalan independence movement, identifying the economic crisis as a key driver, given that over 670,000 people were unemployed in Catalonia alone. In the face of the widespread disillusionment with conventional political parties, the independence movement emerged as the sole political entity capable of offering a sense of hope to numerous Catalans grappling with adversity. This pervasive sense of crisis and national vulnerability created fertile ground not only for regional separatism but also for radical nationalist movements promising to restore a perceived lost unity and strength. While FdI framed sovereignty as

a defence against EU-imposed austerity, Vox positioned it as a matter of cultural survival against internal “enemies”.

1.2.3 The Birth of Vox: Capitalising on Crisis and Reclaiming the Past

Forged in the crucible of Spain's unresolved historical trauma, systemic collapse, economic devastation and territorial fracture, Vox emerged in December 2013, explicitly positioning itself as the radical inheritor of the nation’s unprocessed authoritarian legacy. It offered a purist alternative for the PP's disillusioned Francoist-nostalgic base, comprising voters alienated by Rajoy's apparent moderation, perceived weakness on nationalism challenges and the party’s widespread corruption scandals. Vox filled the void left by the PP's crisis, forcing a deliberate "shift to the right" grounded in aggressive Spanish nationalism and authoritarian populism.

Under the leadership of Santiago Abascal, a former PP member and the founder of the nationalist Fundación DENAES⁹, Vox employed symbols resonating powerfully with the iconography of the Francoist era. Abascal orchestrated highly symbolic actions to assert the party’s uncompromising nationalism. In 2013, he unfurled a massive Spanish flag on the Rock of Gibraltar, a British territory central to a long-standing territorial dispute, resulting in his arrest by British authorities. This carefully choreographed act of defiance perfectly encapsulated Vox’s confrontational stance on national sovereignty and territorial integrity. The adoption of the Osborne bull (Toro de Osborne) as the party’s emblem further reinforced this ideological lineage. The iconic black bull silhouette, ubiquitous along Spanish highways, is deeply tied to Franco-era nationalism. Vox's choice served as both a nostalgic nod to an idealised, unified, traditional Spain and a clear signal of its ideological roots.

The October 2017 Catalan independence referendum, declared illegal by the central government in Madrid and met with a forceful police intervention, proved catalytic for Vox. The party's ferocious, uncompromising defence of Spanish unity resonated deeply with voters nationwide alarmed by the perceived existential threat to territorial

⁹ The DENAES Foundation (acronym for "Defense of the Spanish Nation", Fundación para la Defensa de la Nación Española) is a Spanish private foundation founded in 2006. Its objective is to recuperate and promote from civil society the knowledge and vindication of Spain, of its historical, political, social and cultural reality.

integrity. This crisis atmosphere propelled Vox into the national spotlight and fuelled its first major electoral success: in the December 2018 Andalusian regional election, a traditional left-wing stronghold, Vox shocked the establishment by winning nearly 11% of the vote.

Ideologically, Vox champions an aggressive Spanish nationalism with clear authoritarian undertones. Its platform includes the radical proposal to abolish Spain's Autonomous Communities system and immediately revoke Catalan autonomy, including banning secessionist parties from elections. This stance represents a fundamental assault on the foundational compromise of the 1978 Constitution, which enshrined regional autonomy and linguistic diversity as pillars of Spain's democratic transition.

Crucially, Vox actively rehabilitates elements of Spain's Francoist past. It vehemently opposes the 2007 Historical Memory Law (which condemns Francoism and mandates the removal of its symbols), dismissing it as divisive. The party also staunchly defended keeping Francisco Franco's body enshrined at the Valle de los Caídos, framing opposition to Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez's successful exhumation effort as a defence of Spanish unity. These positions signify not merely conservatism but a deliberate project to rehabilitate Spain's Francoist past, redefine the nation's historical narrative and legitimise core aspects of its authoritarian legacy, thereby normalising previously taboo ideologies.

1.3 Divergent Legacies, Convergent Crises – The Historical Roots of Contemporary Right-Wing Nationalism in Italy and Spain

The emergence of Brothers of Italy and Vox, though despite a decade-long temporal separation and distinct national contexts, demonstrates a significant convergence. The origins of both parties are traced back to unresolved historical traumas and systemic crises that have undermined the trust in democratic institutions, capitalising on ideological gaps left behind by collapsing mainstream conservatism. However, a divergence in their trajectories becomes evident when considering their utilisation of history, their navigation of political inheritance and mobilisation of disaffection. The formation of FdI in 2012 occurred within the context of Italy's dual collapse. Firstly, the implosion of the First Republic during the Tangentopoli period (1992–1994), dismantled the post-war party system centred on the DC and its rivals, notably the PCI and resulted in Berlusconi's

volatile personalist system. Secondly, the 2011–2013 austerity crisis, epitomised by Monti’s EU-imposed Save Italy decree, soaring youth unemployment (38%) and GDP contraction (2.8%), combined with the “migration emergency” (181,000 arrivals in 2016) to produce a potent narrative of national humiliation. The founders of FdI, namely Meloni, La Russa and Crosetto, who had previously been members of Berlusconi’s party, positioned themselves as guardians of “national conservative identity”. They reframed the party’s MSI/AN lineage through a process of symbolic alchemy, retaining the tricolour flame, a post-fascist emblem but rebranded it as a symbol of national pride and loyalty to democratic institutions. This process enabled them to distance themselves from fascism while preserving the emotional resonance of Italy’s sovereigntist right. This enabled FdI to channel economic desperation and cultural anxiety into a palatable project of conservative reclamation, appealing to those alienated by technocracy and migration without triggering democratic alarm bells. In contrast, the emergence of Vox in 2013 can be attributed to Spain’s reluctance to fully address its past: the 1975–1978 “Pact of Forgetting” effectively maintained Francoist institutions within democratic framework, thereby creating a persistent reservoir of authoritarian nostalgia. When the PP collapsed under corruption scandals and Rajoy’s perceived weakness on Catalan separatism, Vox emerged as the radical inheritor of a suppressed legacy. Santiago Abascal, a disaffected PP member, openly embraced Francoist symbols, like the Gibraltar stunt and the Osborne bull and rejected historical sanitisation, opposing the 2007 Historical Memory Law and framing Catalan autonomy as betrayal. Its 2018 Andalusian breakthrough (11%) was catalysed by the Catalan crisis, transforming Vox from fringe to indispensable by offering purist nationalism to those disillusioned. Crucially, both parties transformed crises into identity projects but through inverse historical strategies. FdI sought legitimacy by softening its roots and broadening appeal, while Vox pursued power through unapologetic historical reclamation. Their divergent economic contexts further shaped their paths: FdI linked sovereignty to economic emancipation while Vox to cultural defence. While both emerged from systemic collapse, FdI institutionalised radical-right energy through historical ambiguity, Vox radicalised conservatism through explicit historical reclamation. These dynamics show how unresolved histories and elite failure fuel nationalist projects, with integration or disruption hinging on how the past is wielded.

2. SHAPING NATIONAL POLITICS – INTEGRATION AND IMPACT

This chapter compares how Italy's Brothers of Italy (2018–2022) and Spain's Vox (2018–2023) ascended from marginal forces to systemic influencers. Vox's extended pre-governmental timeline isolates its ascendance dynamics from governance realities, paralleling FdI's pre-victory trajectory. FdI achieved hegemonic consolidation through strategic integration: absorbing fragmented voters (ex-League/M5S supporters, abstainers) via cross-class appeals and sanitised nationalism; leveraging parliamentary opposition to build credibility and displacing rivals to unify Italy's right. By 2022, it revived bipolar politics while normalising its agenda. Vox pursued ideological disruption: mobilising a niche base (male, Catholic, educated voters) with ultra-nationalist rhetoric (anti-autonomy, "Reconquista"); weaponising legislative and symbolic warfare (repealing memory laws, imposing regional *condiciones*) and fragmenting Spain's right by forcing PP's radicalisation. Unlike FdI's coalitional pragmatism, Vox entrenched polarisation and governance deadlock. Ultimately, FdI gained power through institutional co-option while Vox exerted influence through confrontational kingmaking, reshaping their democracies via divergent logics of integration vs confrontation.

2.1 The Italian Case: From Political Marginalisation to Electoral Dominance (2018–2022)

2.1.1 Electoral Mobilisation Strategies and Consensus Building

Since its debut, Brothers of Italy has successfully developed a highly effective political strategy that has rapidly secured substantial electoral support on a nationwide scale. From 2018 to 2022, FdI engineered its unprecedented electoral surge, gaining 19.8 percentage points nationally¹⁰, through a tripartite strategy targeting fragmented electorates, deploying resonant narratives and leveraging digital-personalised mobilisation.

¹⁰ The third largest electoral increase in the history of post-war Western Europe according to CISE data.

According to Demopolis data, FdI successfully absorbed disillusioned voters from League, M5S and Go Italy, as well as a significant portion of previous abstainers, showcasing its cross-spectrum appeal. Through precision targeting, Meloni emphasised pro-SME messaging, which resonated strongly with entrepreneurs and self-employed workers, over 30% of whom identified with FdI, according to survey data. Similarly, her personalised image and focus on motherhood and traditional values helped the party gain 24% of female voter support, despite its conservative positions on abortion and LGBTQ+ rights.¹¹ In addition to the aforementioned factors, an anti-establishment narrative was employed, enabling the party to position itself as the disciplined and credible alternative to its declining populist rivals. Capitalising on a leadership vacuum in the centre-right, the strategy tapped into the institutional and economic discontent of key demographics. To unify this diverse base, FdI constructed emotionally charged narratives combining populist nationalism with cultural conservatism. A “national sovereignty vs. globalism” frame portrayed Brussels as a threat to Italian autonomy; the “security vs. irregular immigration” narrative linked crime to migration (an issue cited as a priority by 41.2% of voters)¹² while later evolving to pragmatically welcome Ukrainian refugees but reject “illegal” arrivals¹³. A third axis, “traditional identity vs. degenerate progressivism” mobilised themes of motherhood, Christian values and patriotism in opposition to what the party framed as “gender ideology” and “cancel culture”. Meloni’s assertion that “defending values is a revolutionary act¹⁴” encapsulated this fusion of tradition and subversion. These emotionally charged narratives addressed widespread economic anxiety while deliberately downplaying redistribution demands, prioritised by only 15.3% of voters.¹⁵

¹¹ Tech, T. (2022). *TikTok Tactics, Far-Right Influence and The Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni*. The Influence Industry Project. <https://influenceindustry.org/en/explorer/case-studies/italy-meloni-tiktok/>

¹² Valbruzzi, M., & Ventura, S. (2023). *Fratelli d'Italia and Lega What Is the Recipe for Success of Italian populism?* <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/rom/20026.pdf>

¹³ Bottura, B. (2023, August 17). *An Ethnopolitist Response to Crises: Fratelli d'Italia's Discourse Shifts Following Covid-19 and the War in Ukraine*. Authlib. <https://www.authlib.eu/fratelli-ditalia-ethnopolitist-response-crisis/>

¹⁴ As she stated in the Atreju rally in 2021.

¹⁵ Valbruzzi, M., & Ventura, S. (2023). *Fratelli d'Italia and Lega What Is the Recipe for Success of Italian populism?* <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/rom/20026.pdf>

Mobilisation was amplified through digital agility and the personalisation of leadership. Meloni outperformed rivals in online presence, branding herself as the “queen of social media” and using social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and Facebook to forge emotional connections and bypass traditional outlets. Her use of “gentism (gentese)¹⁶, relatable content (e.g., selfies, cooking videos and animal interactions) and memes (e.g., "Are you Meloni? You have to melon") created an appealing accessible persona. Strategic TikTok use targeted Gen-Z voters, while Telegram groups and algorithmic engagement tactics boosted message visibility. This digital agility also enabled swift, adapting messaging such as shifts from populist EU critiques to “European solidarity” during crises and geo-strategic positioning on migration.

2.1.2 Opposition as Strategies: From Marginality to Institutional Leverage

During the period before Brothers of Italy came to power, the party adopted a calculated strategy of radical opposition. This transformed parliamentary marginalisation into political capital through three pillars that enhanced its credibility by institutionalising itself, reclaiming its historical roots and entrenching itself in the territory. Under the Conte and Draghi governments (2019–2022) the party refined a cohesive model of dissent that leveraged institutional mechanisms to boost its legitimacy and visibility. The party strategically distanced itself from both the left and the centre-right, both participating in technocratic governments, to position itself as the only institutional opposition. Its rejection of the Draghi government in 2021 marked the apex of this positioning. In doing so, the party accelerated the decline of Italy’s centrist institutions and positioned itself as the dominant right-wing force. This parliamentary opposition was strategically constructive. Rather than engaging in systematic obstructionism, the party leveraged oversight roles securing the presidency of COPASIR (Parliamentary Committee for

¹⁶The term “gentese” is employed to denote a linguistic register that is readily comprehensible to the general populace; indeed, it is a register that is characterised by its accessibility. Typically, the language employed in the domain of politics is characterised by the utilisation of numerous technical terms, which often remain comprehensible to a limited segment of the population (Treccani, “gentese”, 2008).

In Italy, the term “gentese” emerged during the final phase of the First Republic, a period marked by pervasive mistrust of the political establishment. This change can be attributed to the need to attract an electorate that was becoming increasingly detached due to language that was too complex, which did not allow for a clear and full understanding of political proposals (Treccani, "gentese", 2008).

Security) for Senator Adolfo Urso despite holding minimal seats (6.1%)¹⁷ and making extensive use of motions, inquiries and question time to scrutinise COVID spending and migration pacts. While FdI avoided taking executives roles to preserve its anti-establishment identity, it nonetheless accepted influential parliamentary positions, such as vice-presidencies and oversight committee leaderships, justifying these choices with a call to "serve the state outside the palace logic"¹⁸. As the sole formal opposition to Draghi, FdI combined incisive rhetoric with procedural engagement, cultivating credibility through institutional presence rather than blanket obstruction. Concurrently, FdI engaged in a symbolic battle for historical legitimacy. It openly claimed continuity from MSI to the National Alliance, while sanitising this lineage. At its annual "Atreju" forum, Meloni presented the party's identity as grounded in national sovereignty, conservative principles and a renewed attachment to the republican foundations of the Italian state. She portrayed FdI as defenders of national identity and democratic values, committed to preservation rather than reaction. The tricolour flame symbol and events celebrating right-wing intellectuals facilitated a "critical reflection on national history," weaponising memory politics against perceived leftist cultural hegemony. This narrative positioned the party as defenders of cultural rootedness against what it framed as a leftist rejection of national history. Territorially entrenchment expanded FdI's institutional footprint, securing regional presidencies (e.g., Abruzzo 2019) and gradually expanding its presence in areas previously dominated by the League.

However, the party's apparently uncompromising opposition masked a more nuanced institutional strategy. This tactical ambivalence allowed FdI to simultaneously cultivate institutional legitimacy and maintain its outsider appeal.

¹⁷ FdI obtained the COPASIR chair in June 2021 after the League joined the Draghi government. Since the law mandates the position be held by the opposition, FdI, as the only remaining opposition party, successfully claimed it.

¹⁸ Fabio Rampelli served as Vice-President of the Chamber of Deputies in the 18th Legislature and again in the 19th Legislature; Ignazio La Russa served as Vice-President of the Senate during the 18th Legislature and Giovanni Donzelli was appointed Vice-President of COPASIR, the parliamentary committee responsible for overseeing the secret services.

2.1.3 Systemic Impact: Reconfiguring the Italian Right and Bipolarism

The pre-government phase of Brothers of Italy precipitated a fundamental reconfiguration of the Italy's political architecture through interdependent transformations that collectively reshaped the right and revived bipolar competition after a decade of fragmentation. Central to this restructuring was FdI's hegemonic realignment within the centre-right coalition, which progressively displaced Matteo Salvini's League. The latter's regionalist-populist model entered a crisis due to governance failures (e.g., triggering the fall of Conte I's in 2019) and electoral decline (falling from 34% in 2019 EU elections to 9% nationally by 2021). In contrast, FdI advanced a cohesive national-conservative project that unified traditional Catholic voters, post-fascist constituencies and disaffected entrepreneurs. This internal reordering redefined the coalition's power dynamics: the League was downgraded from senior to subordinate partner, while Go Italy was progressively absorbed as a symbolic relic, allowing FdI to set the coalition's strategic priorities on immigration, national identity and fiscal sovereignty. The coalition increasingly revolved around FdI's ideological framework, compelling allies to adjust their platforms to maintain relevance. This shift capitalised on the strategic implosion of rival populist projects, notably the League's credibility evaporated after chaotic governance with the Five Star Movement, while the latter itself fragmented after administering technocratic-led EU recovery funds, enabling FdI to position the centre-right as Italy's sole cohesive bloc. This transformation extended beyond party structure to the wider political discourse, where FdI catalysed a shift in narrative boundaries. Simultaneously, FdI executed the institutional normalisation of radical-right positions through ideological alchemy: transmuting hard euroscepticism into a palatable "Eurorealist"; repackaging welfare chauvinism¹⁹ as "fiscal sovereignty", framing cuts to citizenship income cuts as a cultural defence against "undeserving migrants" and embedding socially conservative positions (e.g., opposition to LGBTQ+ adoptions and

¹⁹ Welfare chauvinism refers to a political ideology that supports maintaining or expanding welfare provisions for a country's native population while simultaneously advocating for the restriction or exclusion of such benefits for immigrants or perceived outsiders. It is rooted in a form of nativism that defines entitlement to social support based on criteria such as citizenship, ethnicity, or cultural identity. This position blends traditionally left-wing economic preferences for social protection with right-wing nationalist or exclusionary views, thus transcending the classic left-right divide.

surrogacy) within narratives of national identity and traditional values. This contributed to a broader cultural counter-offensive that portrayed progressive values as threats to social cohesion, intensifying polarisation across moral and identity lines. This recalibration integrated formerly marginal stances into the democratic mainstream, preserving a nuanced and strategically ambiguous identity that simultaneously combined oppositional anti-elitism ("globalist elites betraying the nation") paired with parliamentary discipline.

Crucially, FdI's territorial conquest reshaped electoral geography: it expanded from 56.2% municipal presence in 2016 to securing regional presidencies (Abruzzo 2019, Marche 2020), achieving double-digit polling support by 2021 and displacing the League even in its northern heartlands by 2022, a "nationalised" realignment that captured disaffected M5S voters across southern Italy. The resultant coalition unity, marked by FdI's 2021 appropriation of Go Italy's symbolic legacy, resuscitated bipolar competition by marginalising M5S's anti-system disruption and forcing a stark left-right polarity, evidenced by the 2022 election's bipolar recomposition, paradoxically accompanied by 63.9% abstention, reflecting profound disillusionment not with left-right clarity but with party credibility and system responsiveness after years of instability. On the opposing front, the Democratic Party struggled to construct a credible counter-narrative, while M5S was strategically neutralised: first by institutional compromise during the Draghi government, then by ideological fragmentation, leaving FdI uncontested as the principal protest vehicle on the national stage.

2.2 The Spanish Case: from Marginalised Protest to Systemic Actor (2018-2023)

2.2.1 Electoral Mobilisation Strategies and Consensus Building

Vox's electoral mobilisation strategy targets a distinct socio-demographic constituency. Analysis conducted by Centre for Sociological Research (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, CIS) reveals a statistically significant male predominance (60.1% male voters), peak support among the 25-54 age cohort and notably lower penetration among the youngest (18-25) and oldest (55+) demographics, who favour traditional parties. The electorate is notably characterised by one of the highest proportions of voters with tertiary

education among radical-right parties (approximately one-third, depending on the election year), alongside one of the lowest rates of voters without formal qualifications. Paradoxically, this group exhibits elevated unemployment and low student representation, an apparent contradiction explained the over-representation of middle-aged individuals with educational credentials but weak labour market attachment. Further distinguishing features include a significant over-representation of self-identified Catholics (77.8% vs. 69.3% average) and an over-representation of single individuals contrasted with an under-representation of widowed persons.²⁰ This contrasts sharply with FdI's entrepreneur-focused appeal: while Meloni courted SMEs (37% support), Vox's niche mobilisation prioritised ideological purity over class-based outreach, reflecting its ultra-nationalist core. In contrast to FdI, whose approach included the establishment of a cross-party coalition targeting those who abstained, Vox pursued a strategy of consolidating a socio-demographic niche, comprising males, Catholics and educated individuals. This approach entailed a sacrifice of electoral flexibility in favour of ideological orthodoxy.

Ideologically situated on the far-right spectrum, Vox mobilises support through polarising narratives centred on staunchly conservative and ultra-nationalist tenets. Core ideological appeals emphasise an exclusive Spanish national identity, vehement rejection of the autonomous state model in favour of centralisation (particularly salient regarding Catalonia)²¹, opposition to institutional feminism (advocating repeal of gender violence legislation and rejection of quotas in favour of traditional family and pro-natalist policies) and the securisation and cultural framing of immigration as an "invasion"²². The party employs an authoritarian, anti-establishment rhetoric, while limiting classic populist "people vs. elite" tropes, Vox promotes a selective anti-elite discourse centred on political and cultural elites (e.g. feminists, separatists, EU bureaucrats) rather than economic ones. Digital mobilisation is considered a key component of strategic planning, characterised by a pervasive and multi-platform presence. This is particularly evident in the realm of

²⁰ Centre for Sociological Research (CIS), 'Post-election regional elections in the Autonomous Community of Andalusia', study no. 3236, December 2018-January 2019.

²¹ The Catalan crisis of 2017 is considered the main factor behind Vox's rise. The party presents itself as the main defender of Spaniards against the threat of secessionism, proposing the illegalisation of pro-independence parties.

²² Aranda Bustamante, G. C. (2023). El retorno de lo reprimido: el dispositivo "civilizacional" de VOX.

Instagram, where the mobilisation has garnered significant attention, particularly in regard to follower engagement. Furthermore, the mobilisation utilises prominent social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Telegram and fringe platforms like Gab, which, although not officially used by Vox, are frequented by segments of its online support base and are known for hosting far-right discourse. The dissemination of content employs a simplified messaging strategy, confrontational language and militaristic metaphors to construct a stark in-group/out-group dichotomy (national identity/tradition vs. left/elites/immigrants/feminists). Santiago Abascal's charismatic leadership proved instrumental: fostering a narrative of authenticity and fortitude intertwined with policy agendas to elicit fear, indignation and pride. This phenomenon is further compounded by a deliberate "strategic amateurism" aesthetic in audiovisual content, which simulates spontaneity while adhering to a calculated logic designed to optimise virality and user affective engagement.

2.2.2 Opposition Strategies and Institutional Legitimacy

Vox strategically deploys parliamentary, institutional and symbolic instruments to advance its national-conservative agenda within the Spanish democratic framework, pursuing dual objectives of maximising institutional influence and promoting ideological hegemony through a methodical approach. Central to this discourse lies legislative contestation, wherein Vox systematically puts forth the repeal of laws that are perceived as ideologically adversarial. This includes the Historical Memory Law²³, which is characterised as a form of "manipulating history" and portrayed as ideological manipulation that betrays the spirit of constitutional transition and reconciliation; the Trans Law (*Ley Trans*)²⁴, seen as a "threat to women and children" and the LOMLOE (Organic Law Amending the Organic Law of Education)²⁵ education law, denounced for

²³ According to Article 1, this law aims to recognize and expand the rights of those persecuted for political, ideological, or religious reasons during the Civil War and the Dictatorship, promote moral reparation and memory recovery and foster social cohesion around constitutional values and freedoms.

²⁴ The 2023 *Ley Trans* allows legal gender self-identification in Spain from age 16; minors need parental or judicial approval. It bans conversion therapy but does not recognize non-binary identities.

²⁵ The *LOMLOE* (2021) replaces the *LOMCE* and updates the *LOE* to improve educational outcomes, promote equity, child rights, gender equality, sustainability and digital skills, while eliminating tracking in secondary education and strengthening vocational training.

causing "degeneration". Notably, Vox consistently attributes a progressive ideological intent to these legislative actions. Concurrently, it employs constitutional appeals (e.g., against LOMLOE) as formal legal challenges. In regional government negotiations, Vox leverages its pivotal position for conditional coalition-building, imposing identity-driven demands such as abolishing subsidies to NGOs, implementing a "parental PIN²⁶", expelling irregular immigrants, establishing a Ministry of Family and Birth, repealing gender violence/LGBT protections and promoting symbolic commemorations (e.g., elevating the fall of Granada, 2 January 1492, as a national turning point) to restore a perceived "national normality". Where FdI used opposition to position itself for national power, Vox's uncompromising regional demands, especially its anti-autonomist agenda, entrenched systemic fragmentation, impeding cross-bloc consensus. While criticising the politicised renewal of the Consejo General del Poder Judicial (CGPJ), Vox has nonetheless demonstrated pragmatic flexibility on other institutional issues, relegating dissolution of regional autonomy to a long-term goal (thus enabling coalitions in Madrid and Murcia) and accepting public funding to operate "on equal terms" despite its foundational rejection of the system. This tactical flexibility on institutional procedures, while maintaining rigid ideological demands, exemplifies Vox's dual strategy: leveraging system tools to dismantle system norms. Furthermore, it utilises parliamentary scrutiny as an ideological tool, submitting written questions to generate politically charged discourse (e.g., probing Historical Memory Law beneficiaries for links to ETA/GRAPO). Simultaneously, Vox engages in symbolic politics centred on historical memory, framing the repeal of the Historical Memory Law as essential for "reconciliation" against divisive progressive narratives. The party is also actively constructing a national identity around the "Reconquista", advanced through institutional acts (e.g., commemorating the Catholic Monarchs in Aragón) and incisive communication (e.g., the "First notice" tweet)²⁷. The "Reconquista" narrative instrumentalises Spain's imperial past to normalise authoritarian memory: by glorifying 1492 as a moment of Catholic unity and territorial purity, Vox

²⁶ The "parental pin" is a provision that enables parents to withhold their consent for their children to participate in supplementary activities that are an integral component of the school curriculum. It is notable to mention that has faced judicial opposition in some regions.

²⁷ Vox called for repealing the Historical Memory Law, warning "First notice" after a vandalized statue of socialist leader Largo Caballero, sparking backlash from the left.

implicitly rehabilitates Francoist centralism. This selective historiography weaponises nostalgia, framing progressive memory laws (e.g., Historical Memory Law) as divisive while positioning Vox as the guardian of Spain's "essential" identity. However, this strategy rivals perceive as inciting division. While not strictly parliamentary, Vox amplifies its reach through extra-parliamentary alignment with movements such as police unions (e.g. Jusapol/Jupol), whose demonstrations echo Vox's securitisation agenda and enable integrated mobilisation across institutions, streets and media.

2.2.3 Impact on the Spanish Political System (Pre-Government)

The advent of Vox has had a profound impact on the political equilibrium of Spain, accelerating the ongoing fragmentation of the party system initiated by Podemos' rise in 2015, catalysing the ideological realignment of the centre-right and exacerbating ideological and emotional polarisation, despite the party's not yet having assumed national governmental power. This rise marks a pivotal phase in the erosion of Spain's historically imperfect bipartisanship (PSOE-PP alternance), thereby consolidating a fragmented landscape dominated by four or five national actors. Vox represents a third political force, having secured 15% of votes (52 seats) in 2019. This has enabled the party to exert decisive influence, electorally weakening the PP, a party already experiencing strains due to internal conflicts (e.g. Casado-Ayuso) and acting as an indispensable regional and municipal kingmaker (e.g. Andalusia, Madrid). Vox's kingmaker role engineered systemic change: by forcing PP's programmatic convergence on identity issues (centralism, anti-feminism), it redefined Spanish conservatism's boundaries. This tactical radicalisation fragmented the right, paralysing cross-bloc cooperation and institutionalising polarisation as the new logic of Spanish democracy. The result of Vox's influence is that the PP has been compelled to adopt a strategic radicalisation through programme convergence, particularly on cultural and identity issues. This contrasts with FdI's consolidation of Italy's right: Vox fragmented conservatism (PP radicalisation), while FdI unified it (absorbing League voters), highlighting divergent coalitional logics. This dependency renders the formation of future national centre-right coalitions contingent upon Vox, a prospect complicated by Vox's staunch centralism and anti-autonomist positions, which hinder alliances with regionalist/nationalist parties and perpetuate political impasse (evidenced by failed PSOE-PP negotiations to circumvent Vox). The party's most significant pre-governance impact, however, lies in the

intensification of polarisation: its radical stances have reopened settled debates (e.g., feminism, decentralisation), tripled the share of citizens holding extremist positions over three decades and fuelled a 30.6% surge in emotional polarisation (2021-2024). Leader Santiago Abascal epitomises this divide as Spain's most polarising figure, eliciting intense hostility from the left and fervent loyalty from supporters, thereby eroding democratic discourse and fostering authoritarian sentiments and institutional distrust. Crucially, Vox has engineered a substantive discursive shift on core issues: advocating abolition of the autonomous system, redefining "gender violence" as "domestic violence", opposing multilingualism and historical memory laws, attacking media legitimacy and normalising previously marginal xenophobic immigration rhetoric, legitimising such attitudes and shifting Spain's political centre of gravity rightward. Presenting itself as the sole custodian of threatened Spanish nationalism (versus Catalanism/multiculturalism), Vox blends ambiguous historical references (occasionally evoking Francoist nostalgia) with ultra-conservative socio-moral and ultra-liberal economic agendas, firmly embedding itself within the international far-right network characterised by cultural warfare and institutional discreditation.

2.3 Divergent Pathways to Power – Coalitional Integration vs. Ideological Confrontation in Italy and Spain

The differing paths of Brothers of Italy and Vox between 2018 and 2023 highlight two distinct models of right-wing ascendance, with each party reshaping its respective political system through a unique logic of mobilisation, opposition and systemic impact. FdI employed a strategic integrative approach to engineer hegemonic consolidation within Italy's centre-right, absorbing fragmented electorates (disillusioned League/M5S voters, abstainers) through cross-class appeals, including segments like entrepreneurs and female voters despite socially conservative positions, unifying them under emotionally charged yet pragmatic narratives ("national sovereignty vs. globalism," "security vs. irregular immigration") that downplayed redistribution. It is crucial to note that FdI transformed parliamentary marginality into legitimacy through institutionalised dissent, leveraging oversight roles (COPASIR presidency), accepting vice-presidencies while rejecting government posts and sanitising its post-fascist lineage through a rhetoric centred on respect for republican institutions and

national unity, particularly showcased at events like Atreju. This calibrated opposition, reinforced by regional gains, enabled FdI to assume a hegemonic position within the coalition, thereby subordinating Salvini's League and reviving bipolar competition by 2022. The success of this strategy was evident in its ability to transform radicalism into a more moderate and appealing form of "Eurorealism", rebranding welfare chauvinism as "fiscal sovereignty" and integrating anti-LGBTQ+ policies into mainstream discourse. The reconfiguration of the Italian right around a disciplined national-conservative project effectively marginalised populist rivals and capitalised on systemic disillusionment, as evidenced by the significant abstention rate of 63.9%. Simultaneously, Vox pursued ideological purity through mobilisation of niche groups and systemic disruption, thereby fragmenting Spain's political landscape. It targeted a specific demographic core (60.1% male, 77.8% Catholic, tertiary-educated but unemployed voters) with polarising ultra-nationalist appeals: centralism against autonomy (Catalonia), anti-feminism ("invasion" securitisation of migration) and "Reconquista" historical revanchism. The digital strategy employed by the party has been shown to encourage confrontation through the use of "strategic amateurism" on social media platforms and fringe ecosystems such as Gab and Telegram, where sympathisers and ideologically aligned activists circulate confrontational narratives and militaristic metaphors. This has resulted in the fostering of affective loyalty among supporters of Abascal, stemming from the perception of his "authenticity." In contrast to the coalition-building approach adopted by FdI, Vox employed a strategy of symbolic-legislative warfare, characterised by demands for the repeal of Historical Memory and Trans laws, the imposition of identity-driven conditions in regional coalitions (e.g., parental PINs, anti-NGO policies) and the instrumentalisation of constitutional appeals. This uncompromising stance compelled the PP to adopt a more radical programme on identity issues, thereby fragmenting Spanish conservatism and hindering the formation of cross-bloc governance. Vox's role as a kingmaker has been shown to have led to an increase in emotional polarisation (a 30.6% surge), a shift in Spain's ideological centre rightward and normalisation of authoritarian discourse. However, its rigid opposition to autonomy and its rejection of cross-ideational dialogue have led to institutional deadlock, in stark contrast to the unifying institutional pragmatism exhibited by FdI. Ultimately, FdI is a prime example of right-wing power through integration, characterised by its mastery of coalitional politics, sanitisation of

radicalism and exploitation of institutional voids to become a governing force. Vox represents a paradigm of disruption, shown in its prioritisation of ideological purity over broad electoral. By leveraging polarisation, the organisation has been able to redefine the boundaries of conservatism boundaries from external governmental perspective. FdI's revived bipolar stability stemmed from the absorption of rivals, whereas Vox's trajectory entrenched political fragmentation. The legitimisation sought by Meloni through procedural engagement was contrasted by the weaponisation of symbolic confrontation by Abascal. These divergent pathways reveal how nationalist forces shape democracies by adapting to institutional opportunity: through integration, as in FdI's case, or confrontation, as with Vox.

3. CONTESTING EUROPE – RADICAL RIGHT STRATEGIES IN THE EU ARENA

This chapter analyses the divergent EU engagement strategies of Brothers of Italy and Vox. FdI evolved from hard Euroscepticism to strategic integration, leveraging the ECR group for institutional influence, balancing tactical compromises (e.g., accepting EU funds) with ideological rigidity on sovereignty and borders. Vox pursues symbolic confrontation, using EU forums for civilisational alarmism ("Islamist invasion," "gender ideology") while systematically disengaging from legislative work and building alternative legitimacy via alliances with Orbán, Milei and Trumpist networks. While both reject federalism, FdI seeks reform from within the system, whereas Vox weaponises the EU as a stage for disruption while projecting power beyond it. This chapter uses 2022 as the reference period for FDI, whereas the reference period for VOX is extended to 2023 to allow for a more accurate comparative analysis.

3.1 The Italian Case: Between Protest and Strategic Integration

3.1.1 Evolving Euroscepticism: From Rupture to Selective Reform

During the 2014 European Parliament elections, Brothers of Italy – National Alliance adopted a radical Eurosceptic stance, demanding Italy’s withdrawal from the eurozone and the Fiscal Compact²⁸ and European Stability Mechanism (ESM)²⁹. The party labelled the euro as a “factor of disintegration”, proposing its “regulated dissolution” while seeking alliances with “Euro-critical” forces. This platform coupled economic sovereignty, including a fundamental revision of the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP)³⁰

²⁸ It is a 2012 international agreement between member states of the eurozone that aims to enhance fiscal responsibility within the region. A notable feature of the agreement is its requirement for member states to maintain a balanced structural budget and ensure its incorporation into national legislation, thereby promoting fiscal discipline at the national level.

²⁹ Permanent fund established in 2012 to provide financial assistance to eurozone countries in difficulty, replacing previous temporary mechanisms.

³⁰ A set of fiscal rules established in 1997 that requires Member States to maintain deficits below 3% and public debt below 60% of GDP.

to dismantle austerity constraints deemed punitive to Italy, with “intelligent protectionism³¹”, the defence of Europe’s Christian heritage and the implementation of highly restrictive migration policies, all framed as essential safeguards against identity erosion and external threats. This 2014 agenda represented a clear strategy of rupture with core EU structures, driven by post-crisis discontent and an ideological commitment to absolute national control over economy, borders and cultural identity. By the 2022 general elections, however, FdI underwent a profound and strategic transformation in its European discourse, significantly moderating its most radical positions. This marked a strategic shift from rupture to critical engagement, advocating for reforms aimed at enhancing the EU’s “efficiency and proximity to citizens” through a selective integration approach. This entailed the pursuit of “more Europe” in areas deemed strategically advantageous to national interests, such as defence via permanent structured cooperation (PESCO)³² and the tripling of Frontex³³ resources for border security. Concurrently, there was an insistence on “less Europe” in areas perceived as invasive infringements on national sovereignty, including the SGP fiscal rules, EU budgetary oversight and migration policy, where it sought the repatriation of asylum procedures and refugee quotas. The prevailing objective remained national sovereignty, particularly with regard to economic and budgetary policies. This was most evident in the continued demand for a major revision of the Stability and Growth Pact and EU economic governance rules. The party argued for a shift in the emphasis decisively away from rigid budgetary constraints towards fostering growth, employment and strategic public investment, effectively seeking to dismantle the austerity paradigm embedded in existing rules. This transformation was driven by electoral pragmatism, which recognised the political toxicity and economic peril of Italexit’s and its institutional socialisation within the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group, which provided a platform for

³¹ The term "intelligent protectionism" (protezionismo intelligente) advocated targeted tariffs against non-EU goods violating labour/environmental standards, subsidies for strategic sectors (e.g., steel, agriculture) and "Buy Italian" procurement rules, blending economic nationalism with selective globalisation resistance

³² It is an EU initiative launched in 2017 to promote the structural integration of the armed forces of 26 Member States, as provided for in the Treaty of Lisbon (Article 42.6 and Protocol 10).

³³ EU agency established in 2004 to coordinate the patrolling of external borders and support Member States in border control and the return of irregular migrants.

credible reformist positioning. By reframing Euroscepticism as constructive criticism rather than destructive rejection, FdI transitioned from a protest movement into a viable party of government. However, its vision of a “Europe of Nations” fundamentally contested the EU’s supranational trajectory by prioritising intergovernmentalism and national legal primacy.

3.2.2 Strategy within the European Institutions: From Marginal Actor to Key Player

Brothers of Italy meticulously engineered its transformation from marginality (failing to surpass the 4% threshold in 2014, denying it committee roles and legislative influence) to a consequential European actor by 2022, leveraging surging domestic popularity (6.5% in 2019, more than 20% nationally by 2021). The 2018 accession to the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group proved transformative, chosen deliberately over the more radical and isolated Identity and Democracy (ID) group housing allies like the League and National Rally. This move granted FdI critical advantages: enhanced legitimacy through association with governing parties like Poland’s PiS, tangible institutional access including committee vice-presidencies and amplified bargaining power and an ideologically “Eurorealist³⁴” platform that facilitated pragmatic opposition to federalism without incurring pariah status. FdI aggressively capitalised on this foothold through Giorgia Meloni’s ascent within the ECR ecosystem, becoming co-chair of the ECR Party in 2019 and its president in 2020, marking the first Italian to lead a pan-European conservative party, generating significant strategic dividends: she successfully resisted Matteo Salvini’s pressure for an ECR-ID merger by publicly emphasising ECR’s commitment to “respectable conservatism” and institutional credibility versus ID’s populist disruptive tendencies, cultivated bilateral channels with centre-right European People’s Party (EPP) figures on shared anti-federalist and security priorities and elevated FdI’s continental profile through high-level speaking roles at major conservative forums. This institutional pragmatism was quantifiably reflected in FdI’s 2019-2022 voting

³⁴ It is a term used to describe political actors who support EU membership but advocate for reforms that restore greater national sovereignty, especially in areas like fiscal policy, migration and legal autonomy. It is frequently used and created by the European Conservatives and Reformists group.

cohesion patterns³⁵: over 90% alignment with ECR group discipline, a remarkably high 74% alignment with the mainstream EPP (contrasting sharply with just 53% alignment with the ID group), demonstrating disciplined coalition-building. Critical compromises illustrated adaptive calculus: abstaining on the Recovery and Resilience Facility³⁶ (despite opposing EU debt mutualisation) to avoid blocking €191.5 billion in Italian pandemic funds; supporting REPowerEU³⁷, despite most ECR members abstaining, to secure energy diversification amid Ukraine war fallout and backing the EPP-championed Digital Markets Act³⁸ to curb U.S. tech giants, aligning economic nationalism with centre-right interests. Yet this operational flexibility coexisted with unwavering ideological rigidity on foundational principles: FdI unapologetically championed treaty revisions to enshrine the primacy of national law over EU competences in economic governance and judicial cooperation, though it carefully reframed such proposals to avoid the stigma of “hard Euroscepticism” or Italexit narratives; maintained a migration hardline (rejecting ECON’s “Attracting Skills” report over “pull factor” fears and opposing human rights clauses in EU migration deals as sovereignty violations under “Italians First”) and resisted EU social policies (LGBTQ+ rights, Green Deal regulations) as cultural imperialism. This strategic duality, tactical cooperation on EU mechanics paired with doctrinal inflexibility on sovereignty, identity and borders, exemplified FdI’s mastery of institutional game theory: penetrating mainstream circles via ECR credibility while mobilising its base with uncompromising

³⁵ Bressanelli, E., & De Candia, M. (2025). Fratelli d’Italia in the European Parliament: between radicalism and conservatism. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 17(1), 61-80.

³⁶ It is the central pillar of the EU’s post-COVID recovery plan, NextGenerationEU, providing financial support to member states through grants and loans to implement reforms and investments aimed at fostering economic resilience, green and digital transitions.

³⁷ It is the EU’s plan to reduce energy dependence on Russia, boost renewable energy and improve energy efficiency and security, launched in 2022 after the invasion of Ukraine.

³⁸ It is an EU law that regulates large digital platforms to prevent anti-competitive practices and promote a fair and open market.

rhetoric, a balancing act that normalised its agenda within EU structures without diluting its radical core³⁹.

3.2.3 European Alliances: Balancing Ideology and National Interest

FdI's 2022 electoral victory cemented its role as a key European actor, necessitating a balance between ideological alliances and governance pragmatism. Within the ECR, it fortified ties with Poland's Law and Justice (Sprawiedliwość, PiS), bonding over a pro-Atlantic stance, expressing firm opposition to Russia and a strongly conservative approach to social and cultural issues. This alignment has resulted in consistent parliamentary cooperation, particularly in the defence of Poland and Hungary against critical EU resolutions concerning the rule of law. Both parties interpret these resolutions as ideologically motivated exercises in judicial activism. A notable example of ideological alignment, albeit not formally consolidated within a shared organisational framework, is the relationship with Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség), the party led by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Although Fidesz is not formally affiliated with ECR, it is evident that both parties share a common agenda on several issues, including the centrality of the traditional family, the defence of Europe's Christian roots, opposition to immigration and criticism of centralised decision-making in Brussels. However, Orbán's ambiguous stance towards Russia, particularly following the invasion of Ukraine, has strained relations not only with FdI but also with PiS, complicating prospects for Fidesz's potential accession to the ECR group. Another key partner is Vox, the radical right-wing party in Spain and a full member of the ECR. The cooperation between Vox and FdI is grounded in a common platform marked by identity politics, sovereignty and a restrictive approach to immigration. Vox leader Santiago Abascal has repeatedly praised Giorgia Meloni for advancing the vision of "a Europe of free and sovereign nations", thus reinforcing the Mediterranean axis through shared sovereigntist priorities. As will be analysed in greater depth in the following section, Vox represents not only a central ally of FdI within ECR but also a major actor in the evolving landscape of right-wing European politics. Parallel to this network of

³⁹ The party's uncompromising rhetoric on issues such as migration, national identity and cultural sovereignty is more prominently deployed in domestic political arenas than in Brussels, where institutional discipline and coalition logic require greater restraint.

ideological alliances, FdI has demonstrated an increasing propensity toward institutional pragmatism, particularly since entering government in 2022. The primary objective has been to safeguard Italy's national economic and strategic interests while avoiding direct confrontation with EU institutions, instead opting for a strategy of selective cooperation. A paradigmatic example of this approach is the management of Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR)⁴⁰. While FdI had initially voiced criticism regarding certain conditionalities imposed by the EU, once in power the party refrained from pursuing a comprehensive renegotiation, preferring instead targeted technical adjustments to ensure the continued disbursement of funds. This pragmatic orientation is also reflected in FdI's parliamentary behaviour. According to voting pattern analyses, FdI has shown increasing alignment with the European People's Party (EPP), signalling a willingness to build stable channels of dialogue with the dominant political bloc in the European Parliament, including the Commission led by Ursula von der Leyen. The decision not to join the more radical Identity and Democracy group, often overtly Eurosceptic, further illustrates FdI's strategy of tactical moderation. In particular, divergences over relations with Russia have contributed to the failure of attempts to merge ECR and ID into a broader sovereigntist front. Despite this pragmatic shift, FdI and the ECR group continue to uphold firm positions on certain ideological red lines, foremost among them the defence of national legal sovereignty. Their criticism of EU institutional activism, particularly in the judicial sphere, was evident in their minority stance on the European Parliament's report on Hungary, which they deemed excessively politicised and based on subjective interpretative criteria. Consistent with this position, FdI has proposed a constitutional amendment in Italy that would formally establish the primacy of national law over EU law in the event of a conflict, echoing the Polish constitutional model.

⁴⁰ Italian programme (2021-2026) financed with approximately €191.5 billion from the EU and €30.6 billion from national funds, part of Next Generation EU, aimed at boosting growth, digitalisation, green transition, infrastructure, healthcare, education and social cohesion through 6 missions, 66 reforms and 150 investments.

3.2 The Spanish Case: Disruptive Sovereignty and Ideological Intransigence

3.2.1 Rhetorical Strategy: Absolutist Sovereignty and Civilisational Alarmism

The rhetorical strategy employed by Vox is anchored in a firm defence of national sovereignty and a civilisational narrative that frames the European Union as a threat to traditional values. At its core, the party advances the belief that the primacy of national law must categorically supersede that of supranational institutions, especially the EU. In line with this perspective, the party has advocated for a repeal of pivotal EU treaties, most notably the Treaty of Lisbon and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. This position is underpinned by the assertion that these agreements have resulted in an excessive centralisation of power in Brussels, thereby compromising the autonomy of member states. Vox's proposal entails a return to unanimous decision-making processes and the re-establishment of national veto rights, asserting that the EU institutions possess only delegated, revocable authority from sovereign states. This framing reinforces a nationalist conception of Spain's identity, which the party situates as historically prior to and morally superior to its EU membership. It's important to note that Vox's Euroscepticism is framed not merely as a legal-political critique; rather it is part of a broader cultural war. The party has been known to depict the EU as both bureaucratically overreaching and ideologically estranged from what it perceives to be Europe's true cultural and moral heritage⁴¹. This paradigm frames Brussels as a bureaucratic entity advancing radical agendas detached from European citizens' values. Europe's decline, as articulated in its discourse, is not merely a matter of institutional erosion but rather a civilisational shift, marked by the gradual dissolution of its Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian foundations. In this context, Santiago Abascal has issued warnings of an "Islamist invasion" portraying the EU's inability to regulate migration as a threat to "the

⁴¹ de Miguel, B. (2023, July 21). *A Coalition with Vox Would Give Eurosceptic Governments the Weight Necessary to Paralyze the EU*. Agendapublica.es; Agenda Pública. <https://agendapublica.es/noticia/18741/coalition-with-vox-would-give-eurosceptic-governments-weight-necessary-to-paralyze-eu>

true Europe.” Vox's discourse on the “reconquest” of Europe, which is intricately interwoven with Spain's historical imaginaries, elucidates a clear in-group versus out-group dichotomy. The former is used to delineate a sense of European identity that is in opposition to non-European influences, particularly Islam. This cultural exclusivism is also evident in its opposition to multiculturalism, which the party perceives as a relativist project with the intention of diluting national cultures and eroding collective historical consciousness. In a related manner, Vox articulates an unyielding opposition to what it designates as "woke culture" and the ideological dominance of gender politics and identity-based movements. This alarmism is also evident in the discourse surrounding multiculturalism, LGBTQ+ rights and gender ideology. These elements are identified as rhetorical symbols of a post-national agenda rather than mere policy disputes. Consequently, Vox intertwines legal absolutism with civilisational protectionism, thereby constructing a dual threat narrative in which the EU is positioned as both a juridical overreach and a cultural danger. Although ostensibly in favour of EU membership, the party's rhetorical calls for deep structural change effectively represent a de facto rejection of the current integration framework.

3.2.2 Institutional Strategy: Symbolic Resistance, Not Governance

Vox's institutional strategy within the European Union framework exemplifies a model of symbolic resistance rather than constructive engagement. While formally participating in the structures of EU governance, most notably as a member of the European Conservatives and Reformists group, Vox adopts a posture of conditional Euroscepticism. In contrast to other parties that explicitly advocate for withdrawal via Article 50 TEU, Vox refrains from calling for Spain's exit from the EU. Within the European Parliament, Vox's activity aligns poorly with conventional metrics of legislative engagement. Its Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) appear to regard the institution as a site for ideological contestation and cultural warfare rather than a site for the development of policy. This ideological orientation is exemplified by the party's repeated attacks on what it terms the “climate religion,” its rejection of EU-level environmental regulations and its promotion of “green patriotism” rooted in national rather than European identity. Similarly, the campaign led by Vox against what it terms “gender ideology” and multiculturalism occupies a prominent position in its parliamentary discourse. The party's

positions are consistently characterised by a defence of traditional Christian values, the nuclear family unit and national borders. This manifests in a resistance to migration policies and the perceived Islamisation of Europe. These themes are further accentuated by a media strategy that prioritises visibility, confrontation and simplified dichotomies (e.g., "the people" vs. "the elites"), thereby converting the Parliament into a symbolic battlefield rather than a deliberative arena. This disengagement is exemplified by two prominent Vox MEPs, Jorge Buxadé Villalba and Hermann Tertsch. According to a ranking based on committee performance and legislative activity⁴², Buxadé scores 32 out of 100, while Tertsch scores even lower, at 26. Their respective participation in key parliamentary functions reflects a limited commitment to procedural governance. For instance, Tertsch was present at fewer than half (54 out of 117) of the Foreign Affairs Committee (AFET) meetings, a particularly telling figure given the strategic importance of this committee within EU external policy. While Buxadé recorded 133 plenary speeches during his tenure on the Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs Committee (LIBE), it is imperative to contextualise this numerical activity. Rather than indicating substantive policy contribution, such speeches often serve as instruments of rhetorical performance, aiming at domestic audiences and echo chambers rather than inter-institutional negotiation. The discrepancy between discursive visibility and legislative output validates the party's inclination towards discursive prominence over substantive influence.

3.2.3 Transnational Alliances: Isolation, Purity and Extra-EU Projection

Vox's transnational engagement strategy cannot be simply categorised as isolationism. Instead, it reveals a complex matrix of selective alliances, ideological purification and ambitious projection beyond the European Union. Rather than experiencing retreating its "Patriotic Alliance" vision or distancing itself from key figures such as Giorgia Meloni and Viktor Orbán, Vox has actively consolidated and expanded its ties with ideologically

⁴² EUWatch (2024, June 6). Beyond rhetoric: A closer look at the work of the members of the European Parliament – EUWatch <https://www.euwatch.be/beyond-rhetoric-a-closer-look-at-the-work-of-the-members-of-the-european-parliament/>

aligned right-wing populist and sovereigntist forces that share its ideology across Europe. Simultaneously, it has forged new, high-profile connections globally in order to circumvent traditional EU frameworks and establish an alternative structure of legitimacy. Within Europe, Vox primarily operates through the European Conservatives and Reformists group, leveraging its membership alongside Meloni's Brothers of Italy for a significant strategic advantage. Meloni's explicit political endorsement of Vox during the Spanish election, in which she declared that a Vox-influenced government would "propel change in Europe" and that "the hour of the patriots has arrived", underscores a fundamental alignment. ECR co-president Nicola Procaccini's congratulatory message which framed Madrid as the next victory after Rome and Brussels further cements this partnership as central to Vox's European strategy. This ECR alliance gives Vox a degree of cover within the mainstream conservative movement and potential access to institutions, contrasting with its more volatile relationship with the far-right Identity and Democracy group. Meanwhile, Vox is cultivating an increasingly close and highly visible alliance with Viktor Orbán's Fidesz, despite its unattached status. This relationship goes beyond mere rhetorical affinity, evolving into coordinated strategic action. The reciprocal praise is effusive: Abascal lauds Orbán as a "freedom fighter" who "saved Hungary from communism", while Orbán publicly exclaims "Viva Vox!" and declares shared "winds of change". Crucially, their collaboration extends to concrete political planning. Vox MEPs consistently defend Fidesz in Brussels. This dual approach, leveraging institutional power through the ECR/Meloni alliance while maintaining radical sovereigntist solidarity with Orbán, enables Vox to maximise its influence and ideological resonance without fully embracing the most hardline ID positions. The relationship with Marine Le Pen's National Rally exemplifies Vox's ideological purification and pragmatic boundary-setting. Although Abascal is hailed as a "dear friend" of Le Pen's and there are significant programmatic overlaps exist on immigration and asylum, a critical divergence emerges on core EU issues. Vox positions itself as "less anti-European" than the RN, explicitly rejecting Frexit and euro exit despite advocating a radical "deep revision" of the EU. This stance reflects its conditional Euroscepticism. More significantly, a clear strategic difference emerges regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine. While both parties have historically been labelled "pro-Putin", Vox has adopted a distinctly supportive stance towards Ukraine. The party has endorsed the shipment of military aid and the acceptance

of refugees, a position that sharply contrasts with the more ambiguous or Russia-aligned stances prevalent in other parts of the European far-right. Beyond Europe, Vox is actively building an alternative network for global right-wing legitimacy and ideological projection, deliberately bypassing traditional EU channels. Its strategic embrace of Javier Milei in Argentina is paradigmatic of this approach. Milei's appearance at a Vox festival in Madrid, where he echoed Vox's attacks on "gender ideology," indigenous rights, ecology and inclusive language. Vox reciprocated with effusive praise, presenting Milei as a vital partner in the fight against the "left and the woke." This connection is institutionalised through Vox's Fundación Disenso and its ideological construct, the "Iberosphere". This envisioned community of Iberian and Latin American nations, united by a shared cultural heritage, is weaponised through initiatives, such as the "Carta de Madrid," which aims to combat "narco-communism" and support opposition figures in Venezuela, Cuba and Bolivia. Furthermore, Vox explicitly emulates and builds alliances with Trumpism. Abascal mirrors Trump's rhetoric verbatim, particularly with regard to political violence and targeting antifascist movements (he has even endorsed their designation as terrorists). Its climate change denialism is modelled on the "Trump playbook," portraying environmentalism as a globalist conspiracy. Vox actively seeks to strengthen ties with "conservative right-wing forces in Europe and America". This global networking, combined with the creation of parallel media outlets such as the "La Gaceta de la Iberosfera" and analytical structures such as Fundación Disenso, enables the projection of power and values beyond the EU. Vox is calling on the EU to engage with the "Iberosphere" on its own terms, presenting it as a battleground for freedom against communism. This would allow Vox to redirect EU attention and resources according to its own ideological priorities.

3.3 Divergent Pathways of Right-Wing EU Contestation – Integration vs. Confrontation

The divergent strategies employed by Brothers of Italy and Vox exemplify two fundamentally different models of right-wing engagement with the EU, unified by a sovereigntist critique but distinguished by their respective praxis. FdI demonstrated a mastery of strategic integration, evolving from radical protest (2014 euro exit demands) to "selective integration" within the European Conservatives and Reformists group under

Giorgia Meloni's leadership. This course of action was met with widespread acceptance, resulting in the attainment of mainstream legitimacy, EPP alignment (74% voting cohesion) and institutional leverage. FdI has been observed to exhibit institutional game theory, with tactical compromises (e.g., securing RRF funds, REPowerEU) coexisting with unwavering rigidity on national legal primacy, migration and cultural conservatism. This duality enables FdI to exert influence over policy development within the system, leveraging ECR alliances (PiS, Vox) and pragmatic Fidesz connections to advance national interests while concurrently reshaping the EU from a credible governing position. In contrast, Vox is representative of symbolic resistance and civilisational confrontation. Its absolutist sovereignty, as evidenced by its demand for treaty repeal and its civilisational alarmism, manifesting in its portrayal of the EU as an existential threat, translate into deliberate institutional disengagement. The exceptionally low MEP performance scores (Buxadé 32/100, Tertsch 26/100) and high level of absenteeism (e.g., Tertsch missed more than 50% of AFET meetings) and the utilisation of plenary addresses for domestic rhetoric (i.e. discourse on "climate religion" and migration panic) suggests an overreliance on rhetorical strategy over practical governance measures. While in the ECR, Vox focuses on radical solidarity with Orbán's Fidesz and constructs alternative legitimacy beyond the EU via the "Iberosphere", deep ties with Milei, Trumpist emulation and Fundación Disenso. This project utilises power through global right-wing networks centred on cultural struggle, circumventing the Brussels-based institutions. It is evident that FdI is pursuing a strategy of influencing the EU through disciplined internal participation, thereby demonstrating the radical right's governing potential. Vox is engaged in a relentless campaign that delegitimise the EU, leveraging the stage of the European Union for a performative insurgency. The party derives its influence primarily from disruptive rhetoric and transnational ideological alliances operating outside traditional EU confines. The divergence of these perspectives highlights the diverse spectrum of contemporary right-wing Euroscepticism, which can be categorised as either a reshaping or a rejecting of the prevailing system.

Conclusions

To regard the legacies of fascism and Francoism as museum artefacts, anachronistic remnants crystallised in a distant past, is not only a historiographical fallacy but a politically dangerous misjudgement. This misconception obscures the enduring vitality of authoritarian residues embedded within contemporary democracy structures. These historical residues, akin to dormant seeds beneath the surface of democratic life, are poised to germinate when conditions are propitious. Southern Europe, with its unresolved historical traumas, functions as an optimal environment for their proliferation. The underlying motivation for this study was to ascertain the extent to which contemporary right-wing political movements are a product of the prevailing socio-political climate in the Mediterranean region, or whether they represent an independent political initiative, detached from the authoritarian tradition. Early findings in this research made it impossible to overlook a conscious nod to Mussolini and Franco. If symbols are considered the most effective means of conveying a message, as they facilitate understanding, reduce cognitive effort and activate deep emotional patterns, their appropriation by Brothers of Italy and Vox, through the tricolour flame and the Osborne bull, respectively, constitutes not nostalgic revivalism but a calculated symbolic operation aimed at emotional mobilisation and identity construction. The tricolour flame, historically linked to the Italian Social Movement and the Osborne bull, a commercial monument that has become a symbol of national identity, function as strategic emblems, designed to bypass critical reflection and inscribe themselves in the collective imaginary. If these cases demonstrate that symbols are veritable Trojan horses capable of bypassing critical thinking, then the decisive question is: how did these authoritarian seeds take root in 21st-century European democracies? The vulnerability of the system is exposed by the fact that these seeds did not grow despite the presence of democratic institutions but rather by exploiting structural and moral flaws within them. While certain areas of European democracy have demonstrated resilience and capacity of self-correction, the persistence of unresolved historical legacies continues to provide fertile ground for illiberal revival in others. This regional vulnerability persists despite broader European resilience, proof that unprocessed history becomes illiberalism's growth medium. The formation of FdI occurred in the period following the collapse of Tangentopoli, a time characterised by

widespread mistrust in established political parties and technical governments, exemplified by figures such as Monti and Draghi. The FdI positioned itself as a bastion of identity, seeking to counteract the prevailing sense of instability. Vox's revanchism, for its part, has found nourishment in the fault lines never repaired by the Pact of Oblivion, in the corruption of the Popular Party and in the systemic shock of the Catalan trauma: elements that have provided the ideal terrain for the toxic reactivation of Francoism as a means of combatting supposed "national dissolution". This is the point at which the significant paradox that Europe continues to grapple with is exposed: democracies that suppress rather than critically confront and integrate their authoritarian pasts surrender symbolic authority to the heirs of the regimes they never fully confronted. The reactivated symbols, purified flames and reclaimed bulls, are not merely aesthetic gestures but rather propagating mechanisms for institutional illiberalism. The originality of FdI and Vox does not lie in a banal nostalgia for the past but in their ability to transform memory into cutting-edge political technology. The decision of FdI to join the ECR represents the zenith of this strategy of achieving institutional legitimacy. Its involvement in prominent bodies such as COPASIR serves to affirm FdI's institutional ambitions and its claim to represent a legitimate force within the framework of the state. By contrast, Vox has adopted a more antagonistic posture, positioning itself as a challenger to supranational authority. It has sought to delegitimise the European Union by portraying it as an anti-identity and technocratic entity. This strategy has included turning national and European institutions into platforms for disseminating disruptive messages, engaging in calculated absenteeism, as evidenced by MEP Hermann Tertsch's absence from 54% of the AFET committee meetings and cultivating transnational alliances with figures such as Orbán, Milei and Trump-aligned actors, with the aim of constructing an illiberal counterweight to mainstream European integration. This suggests that memory is not merely a passive legacy but rather an active process of production, akin to a narrative workshop where instruments of power are forged and political genealogies are restructured. FdI and Vox leverage historical memory by recognising the pivotal relationship between the dominion over the historical narrative and the effective utilisation of democratic legitimacy. The strength of these groups lies not in ideological fidelity to a totalitarian past but rather in their capacity to actualise and reshape the codes of that past, rendering them compatible with the present. Consequently, the tricolour flame that remains the logo of Brothers of

Italy at Palazzo Chigi and the Osborne bull that features prominently at Vox rallies, are not mere folkloric relics but symbols of gradual normalisation of illiberalism within democratic systems. The implications of this phenomenon extend beyond mere historical considerations, as they are of existential significance. If we permit memory to persist as the favoured laboratory of illiberalism, the future risks becoming the past that has not been fully interred. Consequently, the response must not be passive removal or ritual commemoration; rather, it is an authentic symbolic decontamination: a critical work of dissection, dismantling and deconstruction of every sanitised symbol and every claimed rhetoric. In the 21st century, the authoritarian legacy no longer manifests itself in a uniform manner; rather, it assumes a guise of normality. Brothers of Italy and Vox are not merely vestiges of the past; rather, they are a manifestation of the latent forces that have insinuated themselves within the fabric of our democracy. Understanding this dynamic is not merely an academic imperative, it is a civic obligation central to the preservation of liberal democracy.

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