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MAINSTREAMING MUSSOLINI

How the Extreme Right Attempted to 'Make Italy Great Again' in the 2018 Italian Election

Julia Ebner

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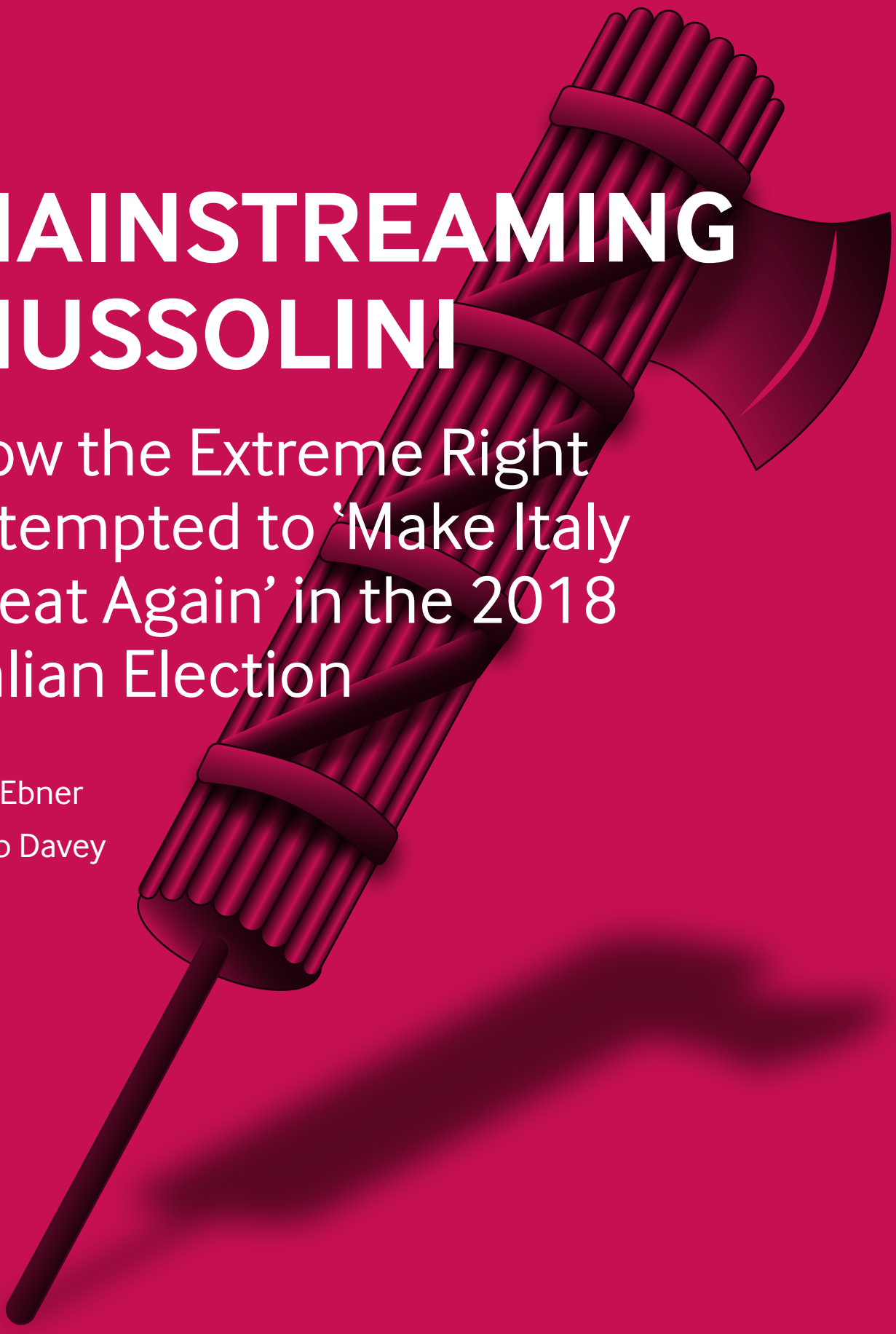

About this paper

This briefing paper documents attempts by Italian extreme-right activists to influence the recent Italian elections in their favour. It highlights how these activists are adopting an increasingly international perspective, influencing and being influenced by the international alt-right, and adopting tactics similar to those deployed in recent European elections, including the German election.

About the authors

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Executive Summary

This briefing is based on a combination of social media analysis and six weeks of research inside over a dozen Italian extreme-right encrypted chats and channels on Telegram and Whatsapp. These included neo-fascist and white nationalist Italian-language groups such as '/mas/', 'L'eco sansepolcrista', 'Sinistra Nazionale', 'La Voce del 1919', 'Onda Italico', 'Fvtvrismo', 'Biblioteca Apocrifa', 'Magazzino Infografico', 'Noi, fascisti', 'Casapound Italia Basilicata' as well as multi-language channels such as 'Defend Europa News' and 'Il Quadrato – Per l'internazionale Rivoluzione Fascismo'.

Key Findings

- In the run up to the election on 4 March 2018 several Italian extreme-right groups were organising on the Telegram chat application, sharing materials, memes and coordinating their strategic communication efforts to influence the election outcome in favour of Lega and the Brothers of Italy.
- Messaging boards such as 4chan and 8chan served as multi-lingual recruiting hubs that navigated readers to closed chat groups used for further radicalisation and the coordination of targeted information operations. Influencer operations seeking to bring about attitude and behaviour change among the Italian public were then launched on mainstream platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.
- The Italian extreme right was exchanging knowledge with American alt-right activists and European extreme-right groups. They self-identified as 'Italian alt-right', often mimicking both the vocabulary and the tactics of the American alt-right. Likewise, extreme-right activism in Italy is inspiring an international range of extreme-right activists who hope the country will become the staging ground for a race war.
- Similar to the American, French, Dutch and German elections, as well as the upcoming Swedish election, we found evidence of international collaboration around both meta-political and militant mobilisation efforts. We are witnessing a maturation of tactics and the adoption of standardised practice for influence operations.
- Although our research concludes that Italian extreme-right attempts to influence the online discourse lack the sophistication of those staged in the run-up to other elections, it nevertheless reveals that Italian activists are increasingly aware of the tactics which are being employed globally. This suggests that the international extreme right is building not only an ideological consensus, but also a strategic one.

Aim

The aim of this briefing is to draw attention to the tactics deployed by extreme-right activists globally in the run up to the Italian elections. It seeks to situate Italian influencer campaigns within the broader trends of internationalisation and mainstreaming of extreme-right activism[1], and examine the extent of grassroots operations in comparison to those used in the run-up to the German election.[2]

Methodology

The insights provided in this briefing are the result of a combined quantitative social media analysis and qualitative ethnographic research in extreme-right communication channels. The quantitative research relies upon a suite of commercial and bespoke social-listening software, mapping trends in the volume and providence of social media data. The qualitative research relies upon over two years' digital ethnographic research on fringe digital platforms, and an intensive six-week deep-dive into closed chats set up by extreme-right activists to influence the Italian election.

Context

On 4 March 2018 Italy went to the polling booths for the general election. The result was a huge boon to populist parties, with the Five Star Movement gaining the greatest share of votes with over 32%. However, this success was mirrored with major gains by Matteo Salvini's The League, which achieved over 17% of the vote compared to just 4% in the last election.

According to a survey conducted in September 2017, more than 70 percent of Italians believe that too many migrants live in Italy. Due to its geographic location, Italy has been hit harder by the migration crisis than most other European countries, with more than 600,000 migrants having arrived by sea since 2014.[4]

In addition to that, Italy's economy is still suffering from the consequences of the 2007/08 financial crisis. The country has the Eurozone's highest unemployment rate at 11 percent and the second highest debt burden following Greece.[5]

Background

The League

La Lega (formerly La Lega Nord) is a political party which was founded in the early 1990s. They initially demanded the secession of Northern Italy from the less wealthy Southern part of the country. However, since Matteo Salvini became its leader in 2013 the party has shifted its attention away from its separatist ambitions to embrace an agenda focused almost exclusively on nationalist and anti-immigration policies, dropping the 'Nord' from its name in the run up to the 2018 elections. The Rise and Mainstreaming of De-radicalisation

Brotherhood of Italy

The Brotherhood of Italy are a national-conservative, anti-EU party that is part of the centre-right alliance, which also includes former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia and Matteo Salvini's Lega. The party is an offshoot of the more moderate wing of the National Alliance (1995–2009), the successor party of the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement.

Forza Nuova

Forza Nuova is a far-right party founded by Roberto Fiore and Massimo Morsello, two exiled neo-fascist militants who lived in London during the 1980s and 1990s. The party takes a strong anti-immigrant stance and joined forces with another neo-fascist party, Tricolour Flame, to form the 'Italy for the Italians' coalition for the 2018 elections.

Casa Pound

Casa Pound is a neo-fascist political party and social movement with a large following on social media (263,000 followers on Facebook). They have been accused of inciting and carrying out violence against foreigners and left-wing activists. Casa Pound's success is partly based on its provision of social services, community work and its counter-cultural appeal.

> "The Italian extreme right was exchanging knowledge with American alt-right activists and European extreme-right groups. They self-identified as 'Italian alt-right', often mimicking both the vocabulary and the tactics of the American alt-right."

International Alt-Right Mobilisation – The Influence of Luca Traini

In early February Italian far-right extremist Luca Traini went on a shooting spree against African migrants, injuring six in Macerata. Traini was found to have a copy of Mein Kampf at home, was a member of Italian far-right party Lega Nord and ran for office in the municipal elections of Macerata. Following this incident, we observed a notable uptick in discussion of Italy on international gathering places for the extreme-right, in particular on 4chan and 8chan's /pol/ boards.

Traini's actions became a rallying point for extreme-right activists. He became a 'hero', and the embodiment of the race war which the global extreme right believes is not only forthcoming, but desirable. This focus on Traini translated into a number of memes which applauded his activities.[6]

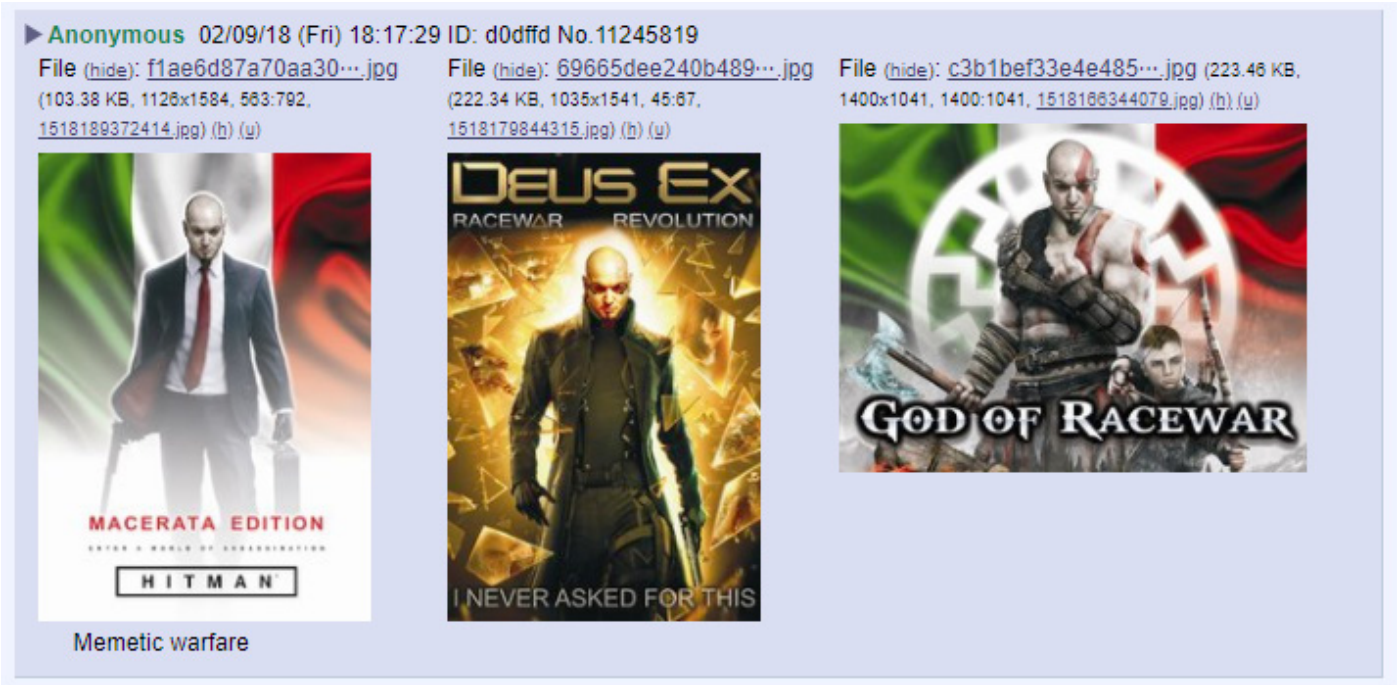


Figure 1.
A series of memes portraying Traini as the titular characters in a number of popular violent video grames

Following the attack there were several attempts to orchestrate what they referred to as a 'psyop' to promote Traini as a hero. One of these sought to copy the format of the notable 'It's OK to be white' campaign, which encouraged individuals to print fliers bearing that title and spread them around university campuses, with the intention of triggering conflict between left-leaning and conservative students. The campaign hit at least eight campuses in the USA and in Canada, and succeeded in generating online conflict, whilst furthering tensions between left- and right-wing groups.[7] It is not clear whether the Traini 'psyop' was specifically initiated by an Italian activist, or whether the poster came from another nation, but by mimicking a popular campaign which was born in America this provides a demonstration of the internationalisation of extreme-right activities. This instance also demonstrates how extreme-right activists are increasingly looking abroad for inspiration, with a number of individuals asserting that the case has hardened their resolve to become involved in racist violence.

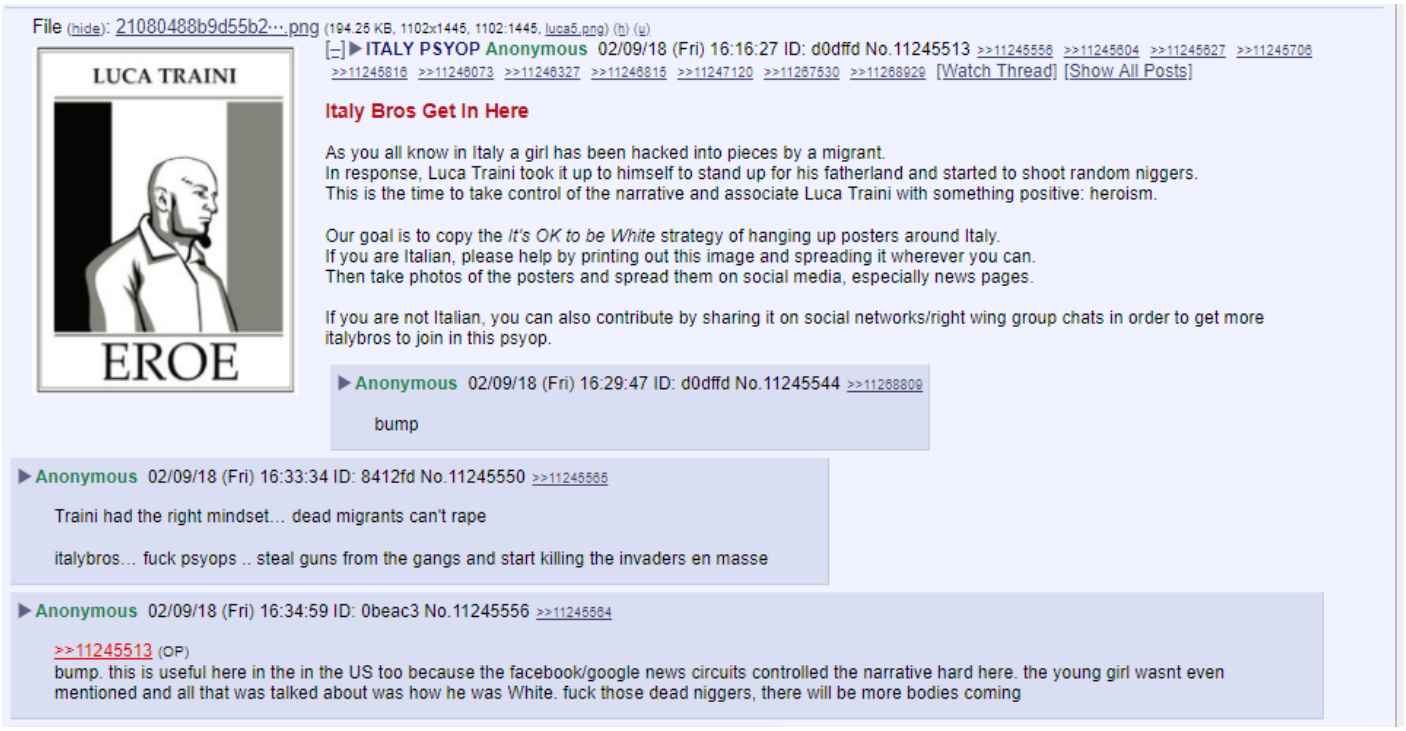


Figure 2.
Screenshot of a Luca Traini 'psyop' discussion

The impact of this meme was, it turns out, fairly minimal, and our analysis of social media data suggested that far-right activists failed to make the term trend. Nevertheless, discussion of Italy on far-right image boards reflected an uptick in support for Traini – known in alt-right circles as the 'Traini effect'. Furthermore, although unsuccessful, the attempt to copy a successful American campaign by Italian activists demonstrates the maturation of an international consciousness around tactics which have previously worked well for extreme-right activists.

As Figure 3 shows the 'Traini effect' also caused a spike in focus on Italy and Italian issues on image-boards used by the alt-right, a trend which continued in the run-up to the elections. This demonstrates how internationalisation is a mutual process, and, as Italian activists look to the propaganda successes of their allies in the United States as inspiration, the American extreme right uses the prospect of racially motivated violence and terrorism in Europe as ideological fuel to build a global consensus around extreme-right ideology. Here, news stories which suggest the Traini attacks were well-received in Italy serve as focal points for the reinforcement of the shared ideal that European society is on the brink of collapse along racial and religious divides, a narrative which is popular across a range of global far- and extreme-right groups.

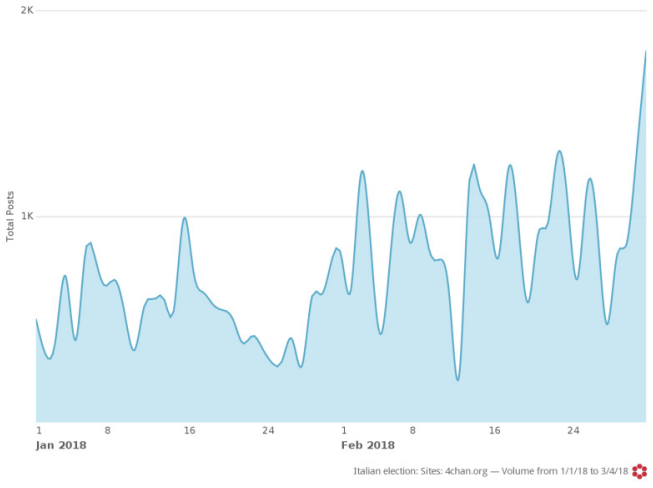


Figure 3.

Discussions of Italy on 4chan in the months of January and February 2018 showing spikes in discussion following the Traini attack on 3 February

Figure 4.
Screenshot of discussions about the 'Traini effect'

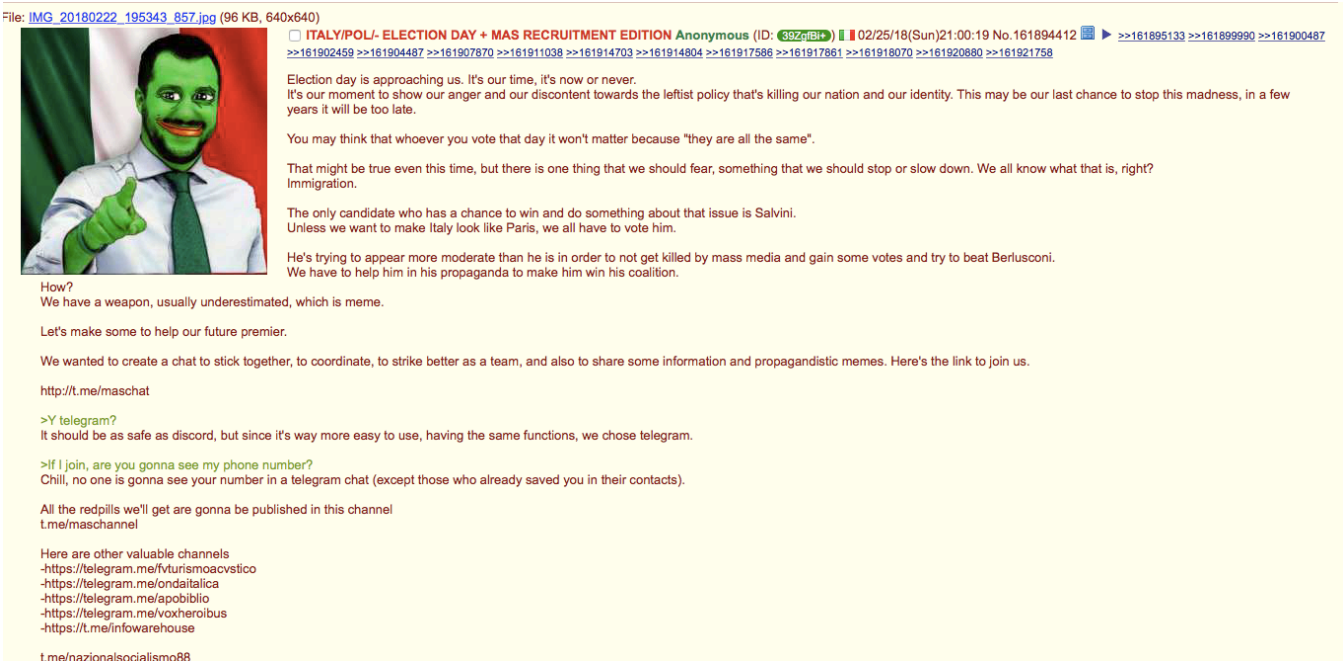
Recruitment for Italian Election Influencer Operations

Whilst the Traini attack served as a rallying point for the international extreme right, there is also evidence that Italian activists have been learning from their global counter-parts. Online activity among extreme-right groups, which has been observed and analysed by ISD in the run-up to the US and German elections[8], has shown that small groups of extremist activists can have a tangible influence on online conversation in the run-up to elections. ISD analysis has also shown that the 'playbook' of tactics employed by these activists is ambitious.[9]

The media ecosystem used for recruitment, mobilisation and coordination around the Italian election follows the same pattern as previous extreme-right election campaigns: The extreme right uses 4chan and 8chan messaging boards as a multi-lingual recruiting hub that navigates interested readers to closed chat forums, which are then used for further coordination and radicalisation. In a number of discussions on both 4chan and 8chan (such as that highlighted in Figure 4) we observed threads specifically started to recruit Italians for information operations in the run-up to the election. English speakers called on Italian users "to help him [Salvini] in his propaganda and make him win his coalition", linking to closed Telegram channels they had created to coordinate information operation activities and share 'propagandistic memes'.

The tactics employed by activists on the forums, including the funnelling of users onto closed, encrypted chats, suggests that some of the recruiters had also been involved in previous manipulation campaigns carried out in other countries. Where the Italian election differs from some of the other campaigns we have analysed is in platform choice. Whilst activists coordinating in the run-up to the German election, and a range of extreme-right groups in the USA coordinate on the gaming chat channel Discord, which allows for tight community organisation, Italian activists prioritised the use of Telegram chat (which has been notably used by Islamist groups including ISIS), and WhatsApp.

As shown in Figure 5, Italian activists rationalised this divergance as being linked to Telegram's ease of use, which suggests that the Italian extreme right may have a history of organising on this app, something which is supported when it is considered that Telegram is the third most widely used chat app in Italy after WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger.


File: IMG_20180222_195343_857.jpg (96 KB, 640x640)

ITALY/POL/- ELECTION DAY + MAS RECRUITMENT EDITION Anonymous (ID: 39ZrIBI+) 02/25/18(Sun)21:00:19 No.161894412 >>161895133 >>161899990 >>161900487 >>161902459 >>161904487 >>161907870 >>161911038 >>161914703 >>161914804 >>161917586 >>161917861 >>161918070 >>161920880 >>161921758

Election day is approaching us. It's our time, it's now or never.
It's our moment to show our anger and our discontent towards the leftist policy that's killing our nation and our identity. This may be our last chance to stop this madness, in a few years it will be too late.

You may think that whoever you vote that day it won't matter because "they are all the same".

That might be true even this time, but there is one thing that we should fear, something that we should stop or slow down. We all know what that is, right?
Immigration.

The only candidate who has a chance to win and do something about that issue is Salvini.
Unless we want to make Italy look like Paris, we all have to vote him.

He's trying to appear more moderate than he is in order to not get killed by mass media and gain some votes and try to beat Berlusconi.
We have to help him in his propaganda to make him win his coalition.

How?
We have a weapon, usually underestimated, which is meme.

Let's make some to help our future premier.

We wanted to create a chat to stick together, to coordinate, to strike better as a team, and also to share some information and propagandistic memes. Here's the link to join us.

http://t.me/maschat

>Y telegram?
It should be as safe as discord, but since it's way more easy to use, having the same functions, we chose telegram.

>If I join, are you gonna see my phone number?
Chill, no one is gonna see your number in a telegram chat (except those who already saved you in their contacts).

All the redpills we'll get are gonna be published in this channel
t.me/maschannel

Here are other valuable channels
-https://telegram.me/fvturismoacvstico
-https://telegram.me/ondaitalica
-https://telegram.me/apobiblio
-https://telegram.me/voxheroibus
-https://t.me/infowarehouse

t.me/nazionalsocialismo88

Figure 5.
Screenshot of the Recruitment Edition on 4chan

Strategies, Tactics and Coordination of the Italian Extreme-Right in Encrypted Chats

With the aim of analysing the strategies and tactics employed by Italian online influencers, we conducted six weeks of digital ethnographic research across a dozen Italian far-right and extreme-right encrypted chats and channels on Telegram and Whatsapp.

We monitored a range of Italian language groups including '/mas/', 'L'eco sansepolcrista', 'Sinistra Nazionale', 'La Voce del 1919', 'Onda Italico', 'Fvtvrismo', 'Biblioteca Apocrifa', 'Magazzino Infografico', 'Noi, fascisti', 'Casapound Italia Basilicata' and multi-language channels such as 'Defend Europa News' and 'Il Quadrato – Per l'internazionale Rivoluzione Fascismo'.

Platform Choice

The use of Telegram and WhatsApp instead of Discord chat channels may have limited the impact of the campaigns. The structure of Discord allows for the gamification of information operations, including the stratification of many different chat channels in the same server. By prioritising Telegram (which was chosen because of how user-friendly it is, organisers lost some of these desirable features, potentially limiting the impact of their operations.

Activities of these extreme-right groups included:

Dissemination of Pro-Fascist Literature

Some channels such as 'L'eco Sansepolcrista' and 'Biblioteca Apocrifa' focused on the distribution of PDFs and links to literature on fascism and national socialism, and the glorification of Mussolini and Hitler.

Political Campaign Amplification

Almost all of the extreme-right groups shared the programmes of Lega, Casapound, Brothers of Italy and Forza Nuova or linked to official Facebook and Twitter pages of the parties or party members to help amplify their reach and impact on social media. The Casapound Italia channel itself was mainly used to share Casapound propaganda, posts and news.

Information Operations

The Telegram group /mas/, which counted over 100 members on the day before the election, and its corresponding channel, were among the most active such groups that mimicked the tactics of previous elections. The self-described 'Italian alt-right, pro-white pride' chat group became a coordination and sharing hub for memetic warfare and disinformation campaigns used to shape the online discourse and influence the election in Lega and Brothers of Italy's favour. The group stated their mission to be "a serious chat that sets several objectives, including the exchange of redpills, [and] the creation of memes relevant to the channel".

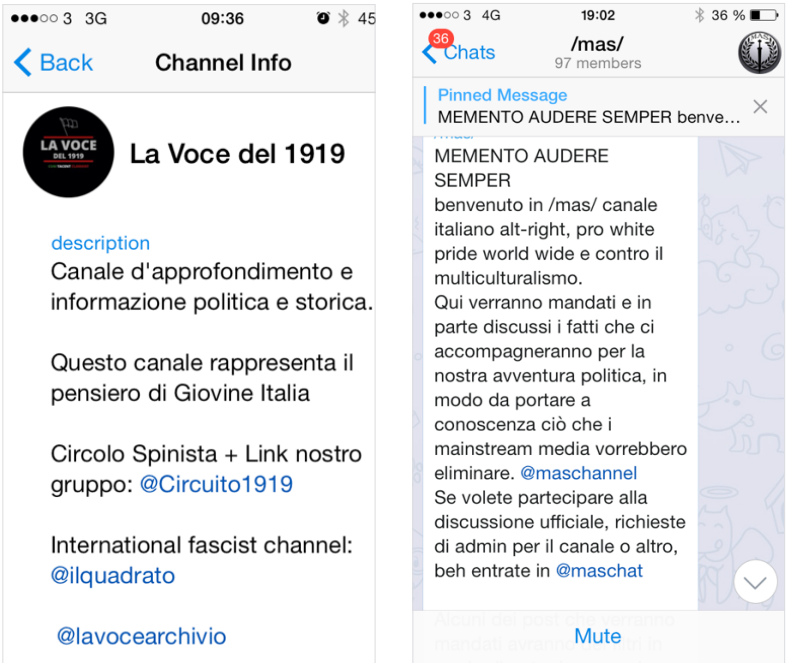


Figure 6.
Screenshots of extreme-right Telegram channels

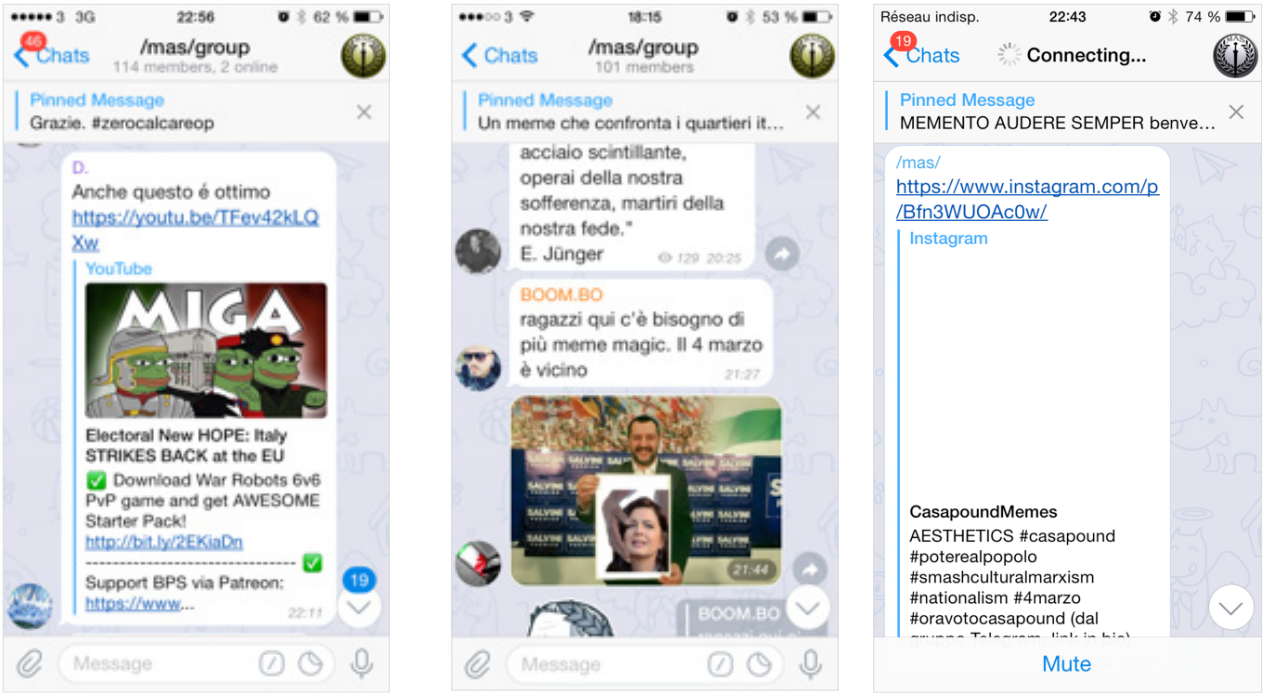


Figure 7.
Screenshots of pro-Lega and pro-Casapound operations of the /mas/ channel

By strategically spreading collected articles, memes and hashtags on mainstream social media platforms, the group aimed to 'redpill the normies' (radicalise people with mainstream views) and determine the topics in the online discourse. Some groups even circulated political opinion polls by age, class and other demographic data to analyse how to best target specific audiences with their propaganda. "Remember to spread normie propaganda", read a post that linked to a Facebook page called 'Battaglione Memetico' ('Memetic Warfare') and had over 500 likes and followers on the day before the election. An Instagram account runs under the same name.

Figure 8.
Screenshots of Facebook page 'Battaglione Memetico' ('Memetic Warfare')

Outreach Activities

Influencer activities discussed in the encrypted extreme-right groups were not limited to online information operations. Extreme-right activists also coordinated their offline outreach and campaign activities to convince young people at schools, universities and work places of their ideologies. Our ability to assess the impact of this is limited, but users self-reported modest successes (e.g. "I have redpilled my friends, so we have 6 more votes for Matteo").

Figure 9.
Screenshot of discussions on offline 'redpilling' activities

International Connectivity of the Italian Extreme-Right

The mirroring of tactics and strategies previously used in the US election campaigns, the use of alt-right vocabulary and references such as 'Kek', 'cuckleft', 'normies' and 'redpilling' and the self-identification as 'Italian alt-right' all indicate a degree of information exchange and knowledge sharing on an international level.

Many of the monitored groups forwarded and shared materials from and links to American alt-right channels such as 'Identity Evropa' and 'Alt Right Shitlords' and other international extreme-right groups on Telegram such as 'Blood and Honour' and 'White Resistance', demonstrating the global interconnectedness of the online activists.

We also found that some Italian channels had direct connections to international players of the extreme right and overlapping membership with non-Italian Telegram groups. For example, 'Il Quadrato', a Telegram group created to connect "fascists from all over the world united for the fascist revolution", links directly to its Italian-focused sister channel 'La Voce del 1919', which self-describes as "the first channel for political, historic and cultural counter-information, xx" ("il primo canale di contro-informazione politica, storica e cultruale"). 'La Voce del 1919' counted close to 500 members on the day before the election. Likewise, the channel /mas/ also attracted non-Italian members: "I'm sorry not to speak Italian, this has been misguided. I can collect memes and things."

> "The use of common terminology and tactics suggests that international extreme-right activists are building not only an ideological consensus, but also a strategic one."

Impact of the Extreme-Right Influencer Operations

In order to understand the impact of attempts to cause a shift in online discourse we utilised a social listening tool to analyse discussion surrounding a number of key hashtags which far-right activists plotted to promote over Telegram chat.[10] Examining the providence of those seeking to promote these terms suggests that the first largest country outside of Italy driving discussion on these topics was the USA (with 7% of total traffic), providing some support for the hints of international collaboration in the run up to the election. However, an analysis of the traffic surrounding these terms revealed only very few unusual spikes in activity, which in other elections helped researchers identify attempts to coordinate activity.[11]

An explanation here likely relates to the platform choice of these activists. Whilst Twitter was a particularly popular target for disruption in the run-up to the German election (something which is potentially related to the ease at which Twitter traffic can be analysed, and thus impact measured), Italian activists prioritised activity on Facebook and Instagram, which are more difficult to analyse. In addition to this, the fact that these individuals chose to organise on Telegraph rather than Discord (Telegraph lacks some of the community features of Discord) may have limited their ambitions to effectively deliver influence on campaigns with the same efficacy as those who organised in the run-up to the German election.

Whilst the choice in platform has limited our ability to measure the impact of these attempts this does not, however, mean that we should negate the importance of this activity. Although our study indicates that these attempts lack the sophistication of those employed in the run-up to other elections, this nevertheless reveals that Italian activists are increasingly aware of the tactics which are being employed globally. The use of common terminology and tactics suggests that international extreme-right activists are building not only an ideological consensus, but also a strategic one as well.

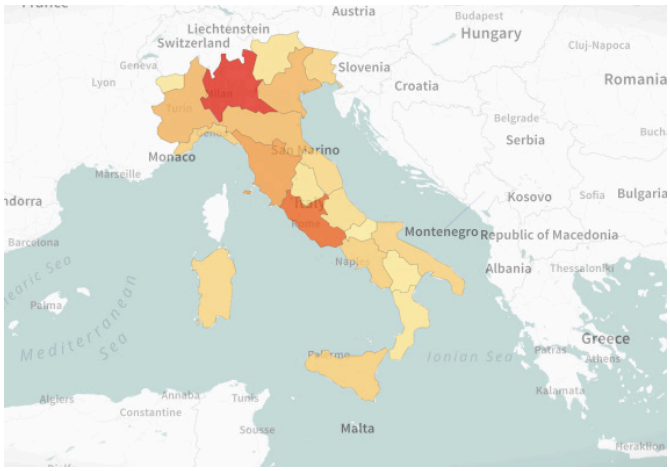


Figure 10.
Map outlining geographical location within Italy of support for far-right terms online

Conclusion

This research project found evidence of mutual learning and ideological reinforcement among extreme-right activists on a global level. We observed the Italian extreme right seeking to align themselves with their international counterparts on a tactical level and starting to build a common lexicon to describe their activities. This points towards the development of a more cohesive and coherent extreme-right ideology globally. Equally, as the far and extreme right in Italy grow in prominence, they will continue to serve as inspiration for their international counterparts.

It is difficult to measure the impact generated by extreme-right activists seeking to manipulate and control the narrative in the run up to the Italian election. The tactics employed by Italian activists to organise naturally limited their ability to effectively stratify and orchestrate their actions, whilst the platforms where a majority of their activity was delivered are difficult to effectively analyse quantitatively. However, it nevertheless remains the case that far- and extreme-right groups enjoyed successes in this election.

Perhaps most importantly, the results of the Italian election could be taken to suggest that xenophobic sentiment has been mainstreamed in Italy to the point that fringe mobilisation and activism is unnecessary. If this is the case then we perhaps need to reconceptualise how we address the issue of growing isolationism and intolerance in our societies. Although fringe extremists will continue to mobilise around these issues we should not paint all who have these views with the same brush. Rather we need to consider what methods we can employ to limit the impact of extremist voices in mainstream political discourse, and be aware how these groups are attempting to achieve influence online, even when these tactics are limited in their impact.

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7. *Ross (2017)*
8. *Davey and Ebner (2017)*
9. *Davey, Saltman and Birdwell (2018)*
10. *This analysis looked at the following phrases which far-right activists attempted to promote: #stopmigrazzione #stopmigranti #stopinvassione #stopinvasione #saveitalia #4marzovotolega #votolega #4marzovotosalvini #votosalvini #oravotocasapound #salvinipremier #miga #primagliitaliani #forzanuova*
11. *Davey and Ebner (2017)*

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