

Borders as the ultimate (de)Fence of Identity: an ontological security approach to exclusionary populism in Italy and Spain

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Abstract: This paper looks at the discursive construction of the concept of border and its interaction with identity in two exclusionary populist movements: *Lega* in Italy and *Vox* in Spain. The study, based on the analysis of an *ad hoc* selection of discourses by the two parties' leaders, applies clause-based semantic text analysis to detect the main discursive representations of the “us” and the “others” as threatening ontological security and the performative role played by borders as the ultimate (de)Fence for identity. Results show that Matteo Salvini focuses his discourse on the manipulation of physical space, representing Italy as the space for Italians and proposing to “close the borders” as the only way to stop the “invasion”. Santiago Abascal, on his side, constructs Spanish identity as inherently and proudly “anti-Islamic”. Borders, therefore, are inviolable for those considered incompatible with local values, namely “Muslims”, represented as a “natural threat” to Spanish identity.

Keywords: Populism, Ontological Security, Borders, Political Discourse, Spain, Italy

Introduction

The importance of borders and boundary drawing for national identity has long been recognized in scholarly research (Betz, 2001). As Laine (2016) points out, while globalization has caused the institutional crumbling of borders, increased interdependence, and cross-border activities, the model of identity and society remains primarily anchored in national, space both at theoretical and popular levels. The paradox of borders in the contemporary globalized world, thereupon, is that their symbolic significance has increased exponentially, while the state's ability to control them has declined (Ganster and Lorey, 2005).

Exclusionary populism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), in particular, is well known for twisting grievances of the citizens, capitalizing on identity lines, by problematizing the gap between “us” and “them”, identifying as “enemies” those who threaten to transgress those set borders. This paper adopts Sarah Green's concept of “borderness”, understanding borders as processes and acts of the imagination rather than physical objects. Borders are both generated by, and/or help to generate, the classification system that distinguishes people (Green, 2010). This idea is put in dialogue with Eberle's promising application of Ontological Security Theory (2019), based on Giddens (1991) definition of Ontological Security, as the “confidence that

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most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments” (1991, p.4).

By doing so, this work assumes that capitalizing on and appealing to people’s ontological insecurities caused by globalization and the consequent waves of immigrations, populist actors narratively construct borders as the ultimate (de)fence for identity.

In order to test these assumptions, the paper looks at the discursive construction of the concept of border and its interaction with identity in two exclusionary populist movements: *Lega* in Italy and *Vox* in Spain.

The selection of the two parties responds to a *per genus et differentiam* (Sartori, 1991) logic: both parties belong to the same party family and have been defined as “political entrepreneurs” (Avanza, 2010) of xenophobia, but show some differences and operate within divergent political contexts.

Both Italy and Spain are “newcomers” of immigration (Allievi, 2012) and, due to their geographical position, have been at the center of the so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015. Moreover, the two countries share an authoritarian fascist past; nonetheless, while the first has been widely recognized as “the promised land of populism” (Tarchi, 2015), the second is witnessing a new —and for many analysts unexpected— rise of this form of politics. As for the two parties, while *Lega*, being a long-established party, has been studied from many perspectives (Cervi & Tejedor, 2021), *Vox*, because of its newness, is still quite understudied (Ferreira, 2019).

Theoretical framework

Exclusionary populism

Populist parties have ceased to be marginal actors to compete with traditional political parties, entering different governments worldwide: according to a study by the Pew Research Center (2018), in Europe, about one-fifth of the electorate votes for a populist party, whether on the left or the right.

Many authors attribute this new populist wave to the decline of political ideologies caused by the collapse of traditional cleavages (Kriesi, 2014; Mair, 2006), the erosion of class society, and to the “political malaise” (Tilly, 2008), which manifests itself in the loss of traditional affective ties between voters and parties (Canovan, 1981; Urbinati, 1998), the alienation of ordinary citizens from traditional party politics (Mudde, & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Mair, 2006) and their consequent lack of interest and distrust towards politics and politicians (Tilly, 2008; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008).

Defining populism, however, is not an easy task (Cervi, 2019). Like many terms in the lexicon of political science, populism is marked by a high degree of contestability, to the extent that acknowledging the contested nature of populism has become an axiomatic feature of literature on the topic (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014).

Amongst the different approaches, Ernesto Laclau’s (2005a; 2005b) conceptualization of populism as a political logic has probably made the greatest impact, contributing to the formation of the so-called Essex School’s discursive approach, which considers populism a discursive framework, “that simplifies the political space by symbolically dividing society between ‘the people’ and its other” (Panizza, 2005, p. 3).

Other authors consider populism as a strategy: Weyland, for example, defines it as “a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, institutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers” (2001, p. 14).

More recently scholars focusing on the growing importance of mediatization of the political, understand populism as “a political communication style of political actors that refers to the people” (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007, p. 322). Within this stream of research, Moffitt and Tormey (2014) have gone further suggesting that research should concentrate on the performative elements of the phenomenon.

In any case, the most accepted definition is the one that sees populism as a “thin centered” ideology (Mudde, 2004, p. 543), depicting a society ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “a set of elites and dangerous others”, who are “depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity, and voice” (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008, p. 14). The idea of “people” is at the center of populism: people form a community, a place where they feel safe and where there is mutual trust, a place where it is clear who is “one of us and who is not” (Bauman, 2001, p.12). The definition of the *élite* can also vary - although it usually includes politics, media, financial, judicial, and intellectual *élites* accused of being incompetent and selfish - yet the central claim that a group of *élites* is oppressing the people and seeking to undermine their rights and voice does not change (Kriesi, 2014; Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008). Populism, therefore, is based on a Manichean perspective (De la Torre, 1997) that combines the positive valorization of the people, with the denigration of their enemies, guilty of the current (undesirable) situation the people live in.

The most important contribution of this approach is that recognizing the “thinness” of populism allows to differentiate it from “thick-centered” or “full” ideologies -such as fascism, liberalism, and socialism-, which provide more far-reaching ideas about social transformation. In other words, populism by itself is too insubstantial to provide a blueprint for societal change, and in consequence, needs to be attached to a thick ideology by populist politicians. Thus, this approach can show how populism can be found alternatively merged with forms of nationalism, liberalism, socialism, federalism, or conservatism. In Stanley’s words, “the thinness of populism ensures that in practice it is a complementary ideology: it does not so much overlap with as diffuse itself throughout full ideologies” (Stanley, 2008, p. 107).

When the nodal points of populism acquire meaning through the articulation with nativism (Betz, 2001, 2003), exclusionary populism (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007) emerges. Nativism can be defined as a combination of nationalism and xenophobia, an exclusionist, ethno-nationalist notion of the nation “grounded in a particular historically evolved culture and system of values that must be preserved and defended” (Betz, 2003). This nativist stance implies that exclusively members of the native group (the nation) should inhabit states and non-native elements (persons and ideas) threaten the homogeneous nation-states causing fear of a loss of identity as a result of being “overrun” by culturally alien foreigners (Mudde, 2004).

In this sense, if populism revolves around the vertical distinction between elites and people, nativism is concerned with the horizontal distinction between who belongs to the nation and who does not (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Stanley, 2008). In particular, through this articulation, exclusionary populism can systematically exclude from the category of the “pure people all the “others”, that in socioeconomic terms might be close to the “ordinary people”, by presenting them as “non-pure”, hence threatening. In other words, the elites are perceived as residing “above” the people and the “others” are located “below” the people (Kriesi, 2014; Mudde, 2004), representing, hence, a burden, if not a threat that conspires -normally together with or with the direct or indirect help of the *élite*- against the “people” (Panizza, 2005, pp. 16-17).

Exactly as for “the people” and “*élites*”, the composition of the “others” may vary according to the context and the discursive opportunities (Koopmans & Statham, 2010). In recent years, as Inglehart and Norris summarize, at the heart of the populist rhetoric in the Western world is the promise of relief and redemption from anxieties and fears arising from contemporary events

such as “boatloads of migrants and refugees flooding into Europe, images of the aftermath of random acts of domestic terrorism in Paris, Brussels, and Istanbul” (2016, p.11). Accordingly, immigrants, especially Muslim immigrants, are chosen to embody the perfect “others”.

Ontological security theory, narrative, and “home”

Ontological Security Theory is based on the premise that the human capacity for agency rests on responses to existential anxieties (Giddens, 1991). Since these anxieties are a fundamental element of existence and thus cannot be eradicated, agents confront anxiety and make it ‘manageable’ through routinized behavior and practices, which enables the otherwise chaotic world to be made predictable, manageable, and even reassuring (Mitzen, 2018).

Amongst these practices, the most important are the narratives and routines of self-identity that define and locate the self in the social world and in relation to others, establishing a sense of biographical continuity (Browning, 2019).

Specifically, a particular notion of “home”, perceived as a material space or environment laden with emotional meanings, is seminal to locate the subject in time and space, representing a place of roots and belonging, upon which identities can be constructed (Kinnvall, 2004). Thus, the psychological need of ontological security appears to be intimately tied to the material environment, where the “home” becomes a bordered container of the Self, stabilizing the self spatially by giving it an endpoint, a location with a hard border between inside and outside (Mitzen, 2018).

In particular, as Mitzen (2006, 2018) explains, the idea of home operates at two levels: the micro-level in which home is a personal place to which we feel attached; and the macro-political level of the political projects that organize our lives and to which we feel we belong. At the micro-level home is a refuge or haven in a world that can feel overwhelming or uncertain (Mitzen, 2018). At the macro level, home becomes the “homeland”, related to specific places related to nationhood (Kinnvall, 2004). Accordingly, societies, nations, and states are often narratively represented as “fortresses” (Della Sala, 2017, p. 554) whose borders/walls provide reference points for physical and social boundaries. So any movement invoking the idea of “a direct primordial relationship” (Kinnvall 2004, p. 763) between people and a specific territorial homeland implies that people are secure within its borders, which represent the main protection against the “outside” uncertain and changing world.

Following this logic, society must “strengthen its walls” like a besieged city”, against the “destabilizing effects of changing patterns of global mobility” (Kinnvall, 2004, pp. 744), represented by the “others”, the intruders. In this way identifying and securitizing threatening others, like immigrant communities (Mitzen 2006), provides a clear basis for (re)establishing a sense of self-identity (in terms of who we are and who we are not) and an ordered cosmological worldview (Browning, 2019). As seen, all these processes take a narrative form (Pérez Tornero et al., 2021). Narrative, from the perspective of ontological security, is seen as a sense-making device that allows conceptions of stable selfhood to be projected, even protected, across time and space (Kinnvall, 2004).

Jacob Eberle (2019), drawing, among others, on Glynos’ (2008) definition of fantasy, connects narrative with fantasy understood not a veil of ‘false consciousness, rather as a filter that reduce anxiety by showing subjects ‘their place’ in the world providing them the ‘security of being’ (Kinnvall 2004: 746), that is at the heart of the ontological security literature. According to Glynos (2008, p. 283), fantasy has “a narrative structure involving some reference to an idealized scenario promising an imaginary fullness or wholeness (the beatific side of fantasy) and, by implication, a disaster scenario (the horrific side of fantasy)”.

Taking an ontological security perspective on exclusionary populism, then, can help understanding how particular emotions are capitalized by populist politicians, investigating

both the structural and the affective reasons why individuals and collectives experience ontological insecurity as well as the emotional responses to these feelings (Steele and Homolar, 2019).

In particular, recalling the idea of home as “ontic space” (Ejdus, 2018) and pairing it with Green’s concept of “borderness”, borders can be seen as construction within these fantastic scenarios, rather than physical objects, that are both generated by, and/or help to generate, the classification system that distinguishes people (Green, 2010). In other words, borders can narratively dramatize as the physical (or imagined) scenarios of fantasy and terror, becoming the symbolical locus of identity construction.

Once this basic notion is adopted, thus, not only is the concept of the border broadened and deepened as the *locus* of identity, it is also put into closer contact with the issue of migration and the possibility to categorize subjects as regular/irregular, legal/illegal, with important symbolical, legal and political consequences.

Lega and Matteo Salvini

Lega Nord, originally born as an ethno-regionalist party defending the secession of the Northern region, called Padania, has been one of the most successful regionalist parties in Europe, participating in right-wing government coalitions led by Silvio Berlusconi in 2001-2006 and 2008-2011 (Caiani and Graziano, 2016). In this institutional stage, the party became federalist, insisting, in particular, on fiscal federalism, to allow the North of Italy to retain its income. In 2013, after an internal crisis - due mainly to corruption scandals that directly involved the leader - Matteo Salvini became the new Secretary.

Although anti-immigrant political arguments have long been at the center of the campaigning of the party it was under the new leadership that the regionalist party embraced Italian nationalism eliminating the suffix "Nord", to become only *Lega*, taking a turn to the right (Brunazzo & Gilbert, 2017). The nationalist push of Salvini demanded a change of paradigm: the great enemy to be opposed were no longer the southerners, but the foreigners, immigrants, against whom directing the faults of the economic crisis and social insecurity (Albertazzi, Giovannini and Seddone, 2018), aligning the party with other European populist right movements, such as French *Front National* or Germany’s *Alternative für Deutschland*.

In the 2018 electoral campaign, the fierce opposition to immigration became the focal point of Salvini’s communication (Cervi & Tejedor, 2020). Under the new slogans "Stop Immigration!" and "Defend Italians from the invasion" migrants, especially Islamic communities and irregular immigrants, framed through increasingly explicitly xenophobic and racist positions, became the target.

In the same year *Lega* and *Movimento 5 Stelle*, with a combined vote representing the absolute majority of votes (D’Alimonte, 2019), formed a coalition government. Matteo Salvini, appointed Minister of the Interior and Deputy Prime Minister (Cervi, 2020a), responsible for migration policy, had the opportunity to promote Law Decree n. 113, approved on 4 October 2018, which intended to limit the migratory flow and to impose de facto abrogation of protection on humanitarian grounds (Cusumano & Gombeer, 2020; Geddes & Pettrachin, 2020).

Vox and the Spanish exception

Until recently, right-wing populist parties have been absent or irrelevant in Spain: for this reason, the irruption of Vox can be considered the end of the so-called Spanish exception (Alonso and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015). The party, born in 2013, as a radical schism of

conservative Popular Party, ran for the first time in the 2014 European elections, without getting representation. In the same year, Santiago Abascal became the leader.

Vox participated in the 2015 and the 2016 elections scoring 0.23% and 0.20% of votes respectively. Only in 2017, after the terrorist attack of Barcelona, and coinciding with the independence struggle in Catalonia, Vox tripled the number of its affiliates in Spain (Ferreira, 2019). In the regional elections of Andalusia of December 2018, the party obtained 12 seats, becoming a fundamental piece to form a right-wing government led by the Popular Party. In the general elections of April 28, 2019, Vox entered the Congress of Deputies for the first time, with 24 seats (10.3% of the votes), while in the second voting, on November 10, the figure was multiplied obtaining 52 seats (Cervi & Tejedor, 2021).

The party expresses a nativist ideology based on the fight against anything deemed alien and threatening to national cohesion – from the inside Basque and Catalanian “separatism” and from the outside immigration, especially Muslim immigration - for the ultimate purpose of achieving a uni-national and uni-cultural state (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019). This exclusionist vision of the nation is expressed through hard-core positions against immigration, recalling other parties of similar ideological and populist positions such as France’s Front National, or *Lega* itself.

Methods

An ontological security lens reflects a social constructionist approach to subjectivity, highlighting the constitutive role of discourse and narratives (Andrews, Kinnvall, & Monroe, 2015) and drawing attention specifically to the emotional underpinnings of those narratives. Aligning with the methodological choices made by Hawkins and colleagues (2019) and Cervi and Tejedor (2021), three main criteria have been followed in the selection of the discourses: comparability (same type of election, actors, and momentum) availability, and relevance (measured through media resonance).

In order to analyze the narrative, 24 speeches by leaders of the two parties, Santiago Abascal and Matteo Salvini, during the last three elections (General, Regional and European) have been selected (4 discourses for each politician in each campaign).

Accordingly, we have selected: 1) the opening and the closing speeches of each campaign, which not only represent the same momentum but also are the most symbolically relevant; 2) the two most “famous” (Hawkins et. al, 2019) discourses of each campaign, understood as the most resonant in the media.

Verbatim transcriptions have been analyzed following Franzosi’s (2009) model of clause-based semantic text analysis, using a standardized codebook, including qualitative and quantitative variables.

A first intercoder reliability test was implemented on a subset of the data (10%) to identify codes that required refinement, and the final intercoder reliability test, applied to the full dataset, met the kappa > 0.80 standard for all the variables (Cohen, 1960).

Clause-based semantic text analysis organizes the information contained in narrative texts by exploiting the structural properties of narrative. The text is reformulated into a set of clauses, termed semantic triplets (Franzosi, 2009), comprising the elementary syntactic components of language: subject, verb, and object. In other words, the unit of analysis (the statement) is broken down into the following analytical categories: “Subject-actor”, “Verb-action” and “Object-actor”.

In every instance, coders capture semantic triplets into databases, subsequently probed to identify frequencies of social actors registered as subjects and objects, as well as their qualitative features and interactions expressed in verbal form. By displaying the grammar of a

story, this model allows the identification of concepts, preserving the centrality of agency (actors and their actions) in social-scientific explanation of social reality, but also disclosing relations among the concepts, by coding both the words and their position combinations of actions and objects in the statement.

As suggested and proven by Aslanidis (2018) and Cervi et al. (2021), semantic triplets can be excellent tools for decoding populist discourse, in particular exclusionary populist discourse, since the core exclusionist populist message is essentially based on two main actors, “us” and “the others”, who are expected to function as subjects (and/or objects) of semantic triplet clauses.

Therefore, through this method, not only it is possible to identify general themes emerging in the clauses, but it also allows devoting strong attention to qualitative variables (i.e. adjectification and linguistic qualifiers), to grasp the meaning of the keyframe elements and the context of their production.

Consequently, inspired by Caiani and Della Porta’s (2011) approach, frames have been re-aggregated using Kuypers’ model (2010), which distinguishes between a Defining a Diagnostic and a Solution Frame. This type of framing analysis is particularly helpful since it allows not only to display the narrative structure, showing how idealized scenarios promising an imaginary fullness or wholeness and disaster scenario (the horrific side of fantasy) are manipulated, but also to stress out borders’ role in the narrative construction.

Results

The “Us” actor

Table 1 displays clauses and linguistic qualifiers of the “Us” values.

Table 1. The “Us” values

| <i>Variable</i> | SALVINI | ABASCAL |
|---------------------------|---|---|
| Subject | <i>The people</i> | <i>The people</i> |
| Definitions | Italy (58); Italians (55); The People (53); Us (44); Workers (34); Families (31); Home (28) . | <i>España Viva</i> (35); Homeland (26); Compatriots (26); Spaniards (25); Home (22); Borders (22); families (13); Workers (8) . |
| Positive attributes | Good, normal (48); hard-working (22); honest (12). First (6) | <i>Espanoles al cuadrado</i> (31); great history (29); proud of their identity (21); Historical figures (<i>Fernando III El Santo, Isabel la Católica, etc.</i>) (12) First (5) |
| Negative attributes | Tired (31); angry (29); Poor (16); concerned (11); worried (8); <i>Terremotati</i> (7) | Hopeless (43); worried (31); in need (23); unemployed (12) |
| Positive actions (desire) | Work hard (28); do their best (19); want (18) ; need (15); | Want (26); need (21); deserve (13) |

| Object | Home (32); borders (26) | Order (36); protection (27); borders (23) |
|-------------------------|--|--|
| Negative actions (fear) | Are fed up (31); suffer (24); have enough (21); don't know how to earn a living (15) | Suffer (29); have enough (28); don't know how to earn a living (19) |
| Objects | Immigrants (89); Invasion (54) ; Political class (53), politicians (34) | Invasion (76) ; Left (71); Political class (55), politicians (43) |

In Salvini's discourse, the "Us" is mainly defined by the metonymy "Italy", representing all the Italians, or "home". Italians are also defined as "friends", "the people", openly as "us", "families" and "workers" and positively charged through the use of adjectives such as "good" or "honest", representing the "virtuous and homogeneous people" (Canovan, 1981), characteristic of populism. This becomes specifically evident with the frequent reference to the lexical universe of "work" (with the words "work" or "workers" present, multiple times, in all the analyzed discourses). This semantic field bears an intuitive positive connotation, however, in this case, it is important to note that Article 1 of the Italian Constitution states that "Italy is a democratic republic, founded on work" (1948), allowing the politician to capitalize on the idea that that work is a key characteristic of "italianity".

"L'Italia è fatta di milioni di lavoratori adorabili e insostituibili"
 "Italy is made of millions of adorable and irreplaceable workers"
 (Matteo Salvini, 02/05/2019. Radio interview, RTL102,5)

In addition, the people are defined as "normal": as we will analyze in the next section, this allows creating a dichotomy between what is "normal" (us), and what is not, thus wrong (them). Italians are represented in pain, because of the political élite and because of the immigration "invasion". Borders, as we will analyze in the next section, are also a defining feature of both Italy and Spain.

Abascal uses the same personalizing metonymy substituting Spain for Spaniards, but drawing more on classical patriotic pride (*La España viva*) and a mythological representation of the homeland. The word "homeland" is the most used, together with and "*Los españoles*" (Spaniards) and "compatriot". "Families" and "workers" are also present, nonetheless, identity seems to be the center of the definition of *hispanidad* (being Spanish).

"Somos la España Viva... con su Soberanía, su Identidad y sus Leyes"
 "We are the "living Spain" with its sovereignty, its identity and its laws"
 (Santiago Abascal, 12/11/2018. Tv Interview, Trece Tv)

Spain is accordingly represented through a wide recall to foundational myths, especially *Fernando II El Santo* (Ferdinand II of Castile) or Isabella I of Castile, defined as *Isabel la Católica* (Isabel the Catholic), both related to the conquest of al-Andalus and *La Reconquista*. By marking the importance of *La Reconquista* (when the Catholic Kings defeated the Muslims, bringing Spain back under the "Catholic flag"), Abascal can suggest that Spanish identity and its almost ontological incompatible with Muslim values.

Finally, the leader depicts Spaniards suffering, using almost the same linguistic qualifiers as the ones used by Salvini: people are in trouble because of the political élite and because of the immigration “invasion”.

The “them” actors: immigrants as the “others”

Table 2 displays clauses and linguistic qualifiers of the “Immigrants” values.

Table 2. Immigrants. The main “them” actor

| <i>Variable</i> | Description | Description |
|-------------------------|--|--|
| Subject | <i>Immigrants</i> | <i>Immigrants</i> |
| Definitions | Supposed refugees (45); Immigrants (41) ; <i>clandestini</i> (illegals) (38) ; Those (21); mass (15); Invasion (54) | Foreigners (55); Immigrants (43); Muslims (42); mass (21); Invasion (76) ; <i>Avalanche</i> (8) |
| Positive attributes | | Hispano-American brothers (12); Legal (10); Christian (8) |
| Negative attributes | Criminals (26); delinquents (21); animals (11); drug dealers (10); not normal (8) | Criminals (44); incompatibles (36); rapist (11); <i>manadas</i> (gangs) (9) |
| Positive actions | | come here to integrate (17), contribute (11), adapt (11), accept (9) |
| Objects | | Homeland (10); Spain (9) |
| Negative actions (fear) | Invade (45); Intrude (34); Steal (24); exploit (17); sell drugs (12); bring war (8); rape (5); Terrorism (8) | Invade (55); Steal (41); rape (24); exploit (23); come in without permission (12) Terrorism (11) |
| Objects | Home (23); Italy (22); borders (21) ; Ports (19); geographical names (15) | Home (30); borders (28) ; geographical names (24) |

Matteo Salvini’s construction of the “other” is almost entirely based on the distinction between “real refugees”, fallaciously defined as people who “run away from a war” and *clandestini*, illegals, who “pretend to be refugees”. So, his predominant linguistic qualifier for immigrants is “these supposed refugees”, an expression pronounced multiple times, in all the discourses.

This dichotomy between “real” and “fake” refugees allows the speaker to build an almost automatic distinction between “legitimate” refugees, those who run away from a war and consequently deserve to be helped, and those who do not, because their countries are not in a warzone. Along the same lines, portraying immigrants as fake, thus not trustworthy, and “not normal” (compared to the Italian “normality”), and lacking any positive connotation, allows to openly criminalize them.

“Se apriamo i porti questi fenomeni rimangono in Italia a spacciare droga”
 “If we open the ports these *dudes* (in a negative tone) will stay in Italy to smuggle drugs”
 (Matteo Salvini, 20/08/2019. FacebookLive)

Indeed the non-legitimate refugees, those not escaping from any war, coming with doubtful intentions, are perpetrating an illegal “invasion”.

Abascal’s definition of immigrants is also based on a distinction: in this case, the distinction draws on identity, religion, and culture.

“No es lo mismo una persona que viene de Colombia que tiene nuestra cultura y nuestra lengua que alguien que venga de un país islámico.”
 “A person coming from Colombia, sharing our language and culture is different from someone who comes from a Muslim country”
 (Santiago Abascal, 22/05/2020. Tv interview, Espejo Publico, Antena3)

“Good” immigrants are represented by *nuestros hermanos hispanoamericano* (“our Latin American brothers”) who are depicted as sharing common linguistic and cultural traditions (especially Catholicism), and as such apt “to integrate and help the country grow”; “bad” immigrants are mainly identified with “Muslims”, portrayed as a threat to the Spanish way of life, since their religion and culture are seen as incompatible with Spanish values.

“Sabemos lo que tienen en la cabeza... son incompatible con nuestra manera de vivir”
 “We know what they have in their mind...they are incompatible with our way of life”
 (Santiago Abascal, 01/12/2019. Public meeting, Madrid.)

Arising from different premises, the strategies of criminalization seem very similar to the ones used by Salvini. Immigration is an unacceptable invasion, linked to terrorism and criminality. Immigrants perfectly embody the fear that lies at the center of the ontological insecurity, the invasion, and the consequent end of the homeland. Accordingly, the situation is, represented as a “war” by both politicians.

“Estamos en guerra”
 “We are in a war”
 (Santiago Abascal, 01/12/2019. Public meeting, Madrid.)

“Questi non scappano dalla Guerra ma la Guerra ce la portano in casa”
 “They (immigrants) do not run away from war: they will bring war to our homes”
 (Matteo Salvini, 28/05/2019. Public meeting)

The role of Borders

As previously mentioned, Table 1, representing the “Us” value, shows how borders are a clear defining part of the nationhood in Abascal’s discourse, who openly compares borders to the wall of a house and defends that a nation cannot survive without securing its borders.

“Las fronteras son las paredes de nuestra casa y nuestra casa es España!”
 “Borders are the wall of our house. And our house is Spain!”
 (Santiago Abascal, 30/10/2019. Public meeting, Ceuta.)

“Una nación sin fronteras no es una nación y una nación con fronteras porosas, mal defendidas y mal protegidas tarde o temprano dejará de serlo porque las fronteras están para proteger nuestra seguridad, nuestra libertad, nuestra prosperidad y nuestra identidad”

“A nation without borders is not a nation and a nation with porous or poor-defended borders will soon stop being a nation because borders are there to protect our security, our freedom, our prosperity, and our identity”
(Santiago Abascal, 01/12/2019. Public meeting, Madrid.)

Salvini, on his side, while not openly using the term “borders” to define the “us”, recalls the idea of borders while referring to home, which is represented by Italian geography.

“Casa mia comincia a Bolzano e finisce a Lampedusa”

“My home starts in Bolzano and ends in Lampedusa”

(Matteo Salvini, 28/05/2019. Public meeting)

In accordance, borders are often represented as doors or by the synecdoche “ports”, which, in last years, have become the theater of immigrant arrivals, the entrance door to Italy.

“La politica delle porte aperte e porti aperte causa morti”

“The politics of open doors and open ports causes death”

(Matteo Salvini, 28/05/2019. Public meeting)

In the narrative construction, moreover, borders are both objects of desire and fear. People desire and ask to defend the borders as the only (de)fence against the “others” intruding on the homeland.

“España quiere que su hogar sea defendido y aquí estamos”

“Spain wants his home defended. Here we are”

(Santiago Abascal, 31/10/2019. Public meeting for the beginning of the Campaign)

“Difendere i confini, espellere i clandestini”

“Defend the borders, expel the illegals”.

(Matteo Salvini, 01/03/2018. FacebookLive)

Borders are represented as home’s fences, becoming not only the theatres for performing the resistance to the alleged invasion but the materialized *locus* of identity. Thereupon, it is possible to state that both politicians construct a “border-based” identity, in which borders are openly (in the case of Abascal) or indirectly (in the case of Salvini) constructed as the demarcation line defining “home”, marking the difference between who is “us” and who is not.

The relationship framework

The isolation of the items corresponding to the “Us” and the “Them” actors allows understanding the relationship between them and their role in the narrative construction. Following Kuyper’s model (2010), we can distinguish among a Defining, a Diagnostic, and a Solution frame.

The defining frame: Italy belongs to the Italians/ Spain belongs to Spaniards

The defining frame can be retrieved in the construction of the “us” value and it is perfectly summed up in the nativist stance “*Prima gli italiani*”, “Italian first”, or “Spanish first”. Italians and Spaniards are, and must be, sovereign of their territories, and of their homeland’s borders.

Nonetheless, Italians and Spaniards are living hard times. Of note is Salvini’s recurrent mention to *terremotati* (see Table 1), referring to citizens who suffered from earthquakes in different regions of the country, that are still striving to rebuild their homes and to the “4 million Italians who in poverty” (sentence retrieved in all the discourses). Spaniards too are represented as going through unemployment, job losses and lack of public help (that goes to immigrants).

Indeed, anyone who loves the homeland has the moral duty to concentrate on these Italians or Spaniards that are going through a difficult situation and to “protect” them against the invasion.

“I quattrini, invece di darli ai clandestini, usiamoli per aiutare i terremotati italiani”
 “Instead of giving money to the illegals, let us use it to help Italians who suffered an earthquake”

(Matteo Salvini, 05/18/2019. Public meeting, Milan)

“La sanidad para quien estén pagando: los españoles!”
 “Public healthcare for whom is paying for it: Spaniards!”

(Santiago Abascal, 22/05/2020. Tv interview, Espejo Público, Antena3)

The diagnostic frame: the invasion

The diagnostic frame dramatizes the horrific side of fantasy, the disaster scenario represented by the invasion. From a spatial perspective, both Italy and Spain are represented as a limited space, unable to host everyone who wants to get in. Italy/Spain are spatially limited, they do not have enough space to “store” the overwhelming amount of immigrants that want to get in. Moreover, as seen, people are already struggling with poverty, as a consequence they cannot afford coping with the avalanche of people, coming with doubtful intentions (or openly incompatible with “us”). The immigrant invasion is, consequently represented both as an interest-based threat and an identity-based threat (Hogan & Haltinner, 2015).

Capitalizing on economic and security anxiety immigrants are portrayed committing crimes and “stealing” people’s money and resources.

“Un’invasione come quella organizzata, voluta e finanziata in questi anni, porta allo scontro sociale”

“An invasion like the one organized, wanted and financed in recent years, leads to social conflict”

(Matteo Salvini, 03/02/2018. Press conference.)

“Esto no es inmigración: es una invasión!”

“This is not immigration: it is an invasion!”

(Santiago Abascal, 31/10/2019. Public meeting, Ceuta)

From an identity perspective, the invasion is framed as immigrants taking over the “home” values to impose their (dangerous) ones. The identity based threat is basically embodied by Muslim immigrants in both politicians. The only difference is the intensity: while Abascal

centers all his discourse on identity and the fear of Islamization of Europe, Salvini prefers to deal more on a general criminalization of immigrants.

“No queremos una Europa islamizada. Hace unos días los musulmanes pidieron al Rey que España pida perdón por la Reconquista. No vamos a pedir perdón, vamos a iniciar una nueva Reconquista”

“We do not want an Islamized Europe. A few days ago, Muslims asked the King that Spain apologize for the Reconquista. We are not going to ask for forgiveness, we are going to start a new Reconquista”

(Santiago Abascal, 04/10/2019. Public meeting, Cordoba)

The solution frame: borders as the de(fences) of both the homeland and people’s identity

The solution frame displays the populist’s recipe to solve the problem, or what Glynos (2008) defines as the beatific side of fantasy, promising an imaginary fullness or wholeness.

Under the nativist premise that Italy/Spain belongs to Italians/Spaniards, and that the people have the right to defend their home by deciding who gets in and who does not, and acknowledging that people are experiencing an “invasion”, the only solution to stop it and to reach the above-mentioned imaginary fullness is to “close the door” for good, securing the borders, to bring back order and “normality”.

So borders, are first of all depicted as the physical containers of the “homeland”, as fences or concrete walls, recalling Della Sala’s (2017) metaphor of the society as a “fortresses”. The same as the walls of a mediaeval fortress are depicted in history books, fairy tales and in our shared cultural fantasy as tall, strong and built to defend the city from the attacks of barbarian hordes, modern fences must be as strong as possible in order to stop the “other’s” invasion, and, thus, defended using any means, including violence.

“Lo Stato è casa mia, entri se ti conosco”

“The State is my home, so you are only allowed to come in if I know you”

(Matteo Salvini, 02/05/2019. Radio interview, RTL102,5)

“Sostituire le inefficaci alambradas y concertinas por una construcción de hormigón que por su grosor, resistencia y altura haga impenetrable e infranqueable las fronteras”

“Replace the existing useless fences with a concrete big, resistant structure high enough to make borders insurmountable and inexpugnable”

(Santiago Abascal, 31/10/2019. Public meeting, Ceuta.)

“(Hay que)...militarizar de forma permanente la frontera española”

“It is necessary to militarize the Spanish border”

(Santiago Abascal, 31/10/2019. Public meeting, Ceuta.)

However, strangers who cross over into people’s “homeland” are not only perceived as endangering people’s material interests, but also their social unity, ethno-cultural homogeneity, violating the sacred cultural taboo of “home” and identity. In this way borders become (de)fences, the symbolic threshold protecting individual selves against the extreme ontological insecurity, expressed by a sense of heightened threat and existential anxiety (Kinnvall 2004), that strangers at the gate elicit. Consequently, not only the “people” have the sacred and inviolable right to decide who to allow into their homes, but a country that is unable to protect

their borders, their culture and their habits from an external invasion, fails at being a proper “homeland”.

“Debemos proteger nuestras fronteras, nuestra soberanía y nuestras raíces... Los países que no tienen fronteras seguras dejan de ser una patria, igual que una casa sin paredes dejan de ser un hogar”

· We must protect our borders, our sovereignty and our roots.... Countries without secure borders stop being a homeland, the same as a house without walls stop being a home”

(Santiago Abascal, 31/10/2019. Public meeting, Ceuta.)

Conclusion and discussion

The first results of our analysis show that both discourses share the classic characteristics of exclusionary populism: the representation of a virtuous people, threatened by the invasion of “others” that intrude the sacred “homeland”, the sovereign space of natives.

In this sense, our findings align with other studies in the same (Cervi 2020b; Cervi and Tejedor, 2021) and in other political contexts (Krzyżanowski, 2020; Hameleers, 2019; Krzyżanowski, 2018; Hogan and Haltinner, 2015), showing how different exclusionary populist movements display recurrent discursive patterns, especially when it comes to what Ruth Wodak (2015) calls the “rhetoric of exclusion”.

Focusing on how the concept of space is manipulated and how the homeland is depicted as both spatially limited and the place for the sovereignty of the “pure people”, our results also stress out how borders lie at the heart of this narrative, representing simultaneously the ultimate (de)fences against the invasion, the physical and symbolic cusp between the people and the rest, and, thus, the marker of sovereignty (Kallis, 2018).

Along these lines, our findings confirm the existence of a sort of inextricable link between the exclusionary populist’s conception of sovereignty with the physical, legal, and symbolic performance of sovereignty at the border (Kallis, 2018), already pointed out, among others, by the growing stream of literature about “re-bordering” in Orban’s Hungary (see, for instance, Tóth; 2021; Korte, 2020; Pap & Reményi, 2017). Accordingly, more comparative research (Vaughan–Williams, 2012) should be devoted to analyze how borders are narratively constructed to become the locus of identity construction and the perfect discursive opportunity (Koopmans & Statham, 2010) to advocate full bio-political control over the bodies of those arriving (Kallis, 2018).

Most importantly, our study has applied an ontological security approach that allows to deconstruct narratives and re-connect them with existential anxieties, proving that such an approach can represent both a solid theoretical background and a helpful empirical tool to disclose how populists manufacture those profitable discursive opportunities (Koopmans & Statham, 2010).

Concretely, recalling the idea of home as “ontic space” (Ejdus, 2018) and pairing it with Green’s concept of “borderness”, borders can be, therefore, seen as construction within these fantastic scenarios, “empty signifiers” (Laclau, 2005a) that, properly attached to specific existential anxieties and appealing to fantastic scenarios, can be filled with meaning to provide a classification system to distinguish people (Green, 2010), providing a sense of security that makes individuals feel protected against the “destabilizing effects of changing patterns of global mobility” (Kinnvall, 2004, pp. 744).

In our case, Salvini, insisting on the immigrants status of illegals seems to capitalize more on “interest-based threats” (Hogan and Haltinner, 2015), basing the construction of the threat

on economic and security anxiety. In accordance, borders become the entrance door to the limited place people call home. Vox, drawing on classical patriotic pride and a mythological representation of the homeland, focuses on “identity-based threats” (Hogan & Haltinner, 2015), anxiety of identity distinguishing between “good” immigrants, Latin Americans, and “evil” immigrants, Muslims, not compatible with Spanish identity, culture and traditional way of life. The construction of borders changes accordingly: they are solid fences against those (Muslim) who are not compatible with Spanish values, and open doors for those (Latin American brothers) who want to contribute to the wellbeing of “home”.

Therefore, although the emotional side is already well studied by populism scholars (Moffitt, 2015), especially by the specific literature about exclusionary populism (Hameleers, 2019; Betz, 2003, 2001), we agree with Kinnvall’s (2018) call to integrate the ontological security into the study of populist discourse, to grasp populists’ ability to activate emotions and emotional reactions. In particular, as previously mentioned, by connecting populist discourses with existential anxieties help disclosing how when these movements invoke the idea of “a direct primordial relationship” (Kinnvall 2004, p. 763) between people and a specific territorial homeland, they can succeed by conveying that people are secure only within inside the borders that protect “us” against the threat of an uncertain and changing world.

Last but not least, if the recurrent references to sovereignty in populist discourse suggest deepening the role of sovereignty in populist mobilization (Basile & Mazzoleni, 2020), this stream of research would also benefit from an ontological security approach allowing to view borders as places for identity construction also in terms of sovereignty, focusing on how they can might be staged as (de)fences of popular sovereignty against the diktats of global governance (Kallis, 2018).

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