

# Italian Politicians' Usage of the Fairy Tale Model for the Electoral Campaign: An Analysis of the Immigration Issue on Instagram

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## ABSTRACT

The relationship between storytelling and politics is not new; it dates back to ancient Greece, where narratives served as vital tools for mediating the exchange between rulers and the ruled. As scholars have argued, our societies are saturated with stories that do more than entertain: They shape how we think, behave, and relate to the world. Fairy tales occupy a unique place within this narrative ecology. They are often the first stories people encounter in childhood, and thus subtly encode cultural values and ideological assumptions. In the digital age social media is now the central platform for political expression, identity formation, and public discourse: it has also widened the social, cultural, and political implications of fairy tales due to their potential to influence susceptible audiences with prejudice. No longer confined to the realm of childhood, fairy-tale motifs now circulate widely in political messaging, often repurposed to reinforce prejudices or sway opinion. This article focuses on the framework of fairy tales and political narratives, specifically how such narrative strategies were employed by five Italian political leaders during the campaign leading up to the general election of September 25, 2022. Through the issue of immigration, it analyzes how Enrico Letta (Partito Democratico), Silvio Berlusconi (Forza Italia), Giorgia Meloni (Fratelli d'Italia), Matteo Salvini (Lega Nord), and Giuseppe Conte (Movimento 5 Stelle) crafted and disseminated their messages via Instagram, using storytelling, implicitly or explicitly, to frame their political positions and appeal to voters.

**Keywords:** Fairy Tales, Social Media, The Italian Election, Instagram, Immigration.

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## INTRODUCTION

The pervasive influence of social media in contemporary society is undeniable. Liberals often champion it as a democratizing tool that amplifies citizen voices, while for others, social media is an extension of traditional media's propaganda functions, which is indeed a research topic that has occupied scholars for much of the past century.

Social media was initially designed with a focus on enhancing public participation and civic engagement. Over time, it has evolved into a conduit for the real voices of societal discourse, eventually becoming an influential platform that actively shapes public opinion and reframes political narratives. Its capacity to amplify specific voices is especially potent when it

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comes to politically-charged issues. Within this dynamic, political actors started to increasingly use these platforms to craft targeted messages to build consensus as propaganda tools. Although the strategic use of propaganda predates modern communication technologies (Auerbach & Castronovo 2013), scholarly attention to the mechanisms of it intensified with the rise of mass media in the twentieth century, and for good reason. Propaganda studies has traditionally positioned media—whether it’s radio, television, newspapers, or film—as essential conduits for ideological dissemination. In their influential *Manufacturing Consent*, Herman and Chomsky (1988: 33) define propaganda fundamentally as a phenomenon that “requires the collaboration of mass media”. Similarly, Ellul (1965) highlights how propaganda heavily relies on mass media for its disseminating abilities. These foundational insights remain salient today: the logic of propaganda, once mediated through analog channels, now finds new expression in the algorithms and virality of social media.

Contemporary forms of propaganda often manifest through narrative structures, particularly in political speeches and on social media, where narratives, ideologically filtered and presented by ideologically biased selections of information, serve persuasive ends. Toolan (2001) underscores the inherently political nature of the “narrative” notion as a vehicle for ideological expression due to its dependence on situational and cultural contexts. Narratives resonate with wide audiences precisely because they dramatize and render complex political issues in a more emotionally accessible and visually concrete context. But for narratives to exert persuasive power, there are some key rhetorical criteria to meet: they must be clear, concise, and credible, while simultaneously presenting a *deliberately partial* account of events (Ottmers 1996).

In the contemporary digital era, characterized by the pervasiveness and influence of media consumption, the capacity to critically analyze and interpret media messages constitutes a fundamental competence for both individuals and society. Media literacy, in this respect, provides the analytical tools necessary to discern implicit messages, ideological biases, and underlying agendas within media discourse (Orfanidou & Panagioutou 2023).

This article is essentially an examination of how different political figures leverage narrative on social media to amplify the political messages of their own parties, which eventually leads to wider polarisation between the point of views even on the same events and stories. While doing this, it analyses specific fairy-tale motifs that are embedded to the political discourse on social media platforms. Because immigration is a long-standing fault line in Italian political discourse, this article focuses on this particular controversial issue.

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## Narratives and Fairy Tales

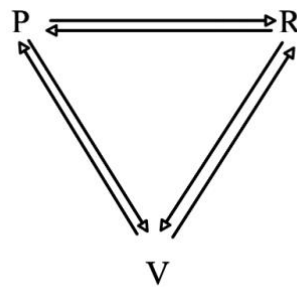
The influence of narrative in contemporary media is pervasive: it reshapes the presentation of information, controls its perceived truthfulness, and thus has a crucial role in constructing meaning and framing public interpretation. This influence becomes especially powerful in political and social contexts, where competing ideological agendas are at play. This essay focuses on how five Italian party leaders employed narrative strategies on social media to frame the issue of immigration in the lead-up to the 2022 general election, with a focus on the gap between the motivations of each party. To do so, it draws on one of the most recognisable narrative frameworks: the fairy tale model, with particular reference to Karpman's Drama Triangle, which served as a consensus-achieving tool for party propaganda and for bolstering their legacies. Through this lens, the study reveals how fairy tale structures serve as mechanisms for reinterpreting news stories in line with their own political agendas.

The Drama Triangle was introduced by Stephen B. Karpman (1968) as a way to map the shifting interpersonal dynamics that occur within what Eric Berne (1964) termed "psychological games". In his foundational work on transactional analysis, Berne described these games as recurring sequences of social transactions that culminate in a predictable emotional outcome, or "payoff". Building on this, Karpman identified three core roles: the Victim, the Persecutor, and the Rescuer. These roles are not fixed but fluid positions within a relational script, each associated with recurring emotional patterns—what transactional analysis refers to as "racket feelings" that range from fear, sadness, helplessness, and despair (typical of the Victim) to malignant anger and triumph (typical of the Persecutor) to concern and compassion (typical of the Savior). The following section elaborates on each of these roles and considers how they are strategically adopted within political narratives

Karpman's Drama Triangle study offers a framework to understand the relational dynamics at the core of psychological "games", particularly evident in individuals with severe psychopathological conditions such as borderline and dissociative disorders. In summary, his model illustrates how interpersonal transactions often mirror the archetypal interactions found in classical tragedies and fables: those between savior and victim, or victim and persecutor. Each "player" in the Triangle typically gravitates toward a favourite role, one they habitually occupy and spend most of their time. Central to Karpman's theory is the idea that all three positions in the Dramatic Triangle involve forms of mutual and self-devaluation. In further transactions, there is a dual level to the communication: a social level and a psychological level;

so the roles of the Triangle also manifest on the former to conceal the latter, which becomes explicit during a sudden and dramatic role reversal in the interaction.

For instance, the *Savior* spends a significant amount of time assisting others, seeking to avoid feelings of weakness and inferiority associated with the *Victim* role, while simultaneously nurturing a sense of self that perceives others as inferior. In contrast, the *Persecutor* (P/V) sustains their position by demeaning and explicitly humiliating others as a form of self-defense against their own potential victimhood. Finally, the *Victim* minimizes their own agency and abilities, positioning themselves as powerless and dependent. According to Ivaldi (2004), victims are often drawn either to rescuers, whom they idealize, or to persecutors, who validate their internalized belief that they deserve mistreatment.



[ Fig. 1. Karpman 1968:40]

Karpman suggests that fairy tales can unconsciously plant these rigid, limiting scripts by showing only stereotypical roles and outcomes (e.g., someone must always be a helpless victim needing rescue, or problems are always solved by magic). A person who is said to be “living in a fairy tale”, he notes, typically has a simplified worldview with few dramatic characters (Karpman 1968: 39). In this light, the connections between fairy tales, the Drama Triangle, and their strategic use on social media by political leaders becomes particularly interesting, especially in relation to manipulation, persuasion, and the manufacture of consensus.

The cultural power of fairy tales has long been a subject of scholarly inquiry, with researchers examining how these stories shape collective imagination, establish ideological frameworks, and function as instruments of socialization. A striking example lies in the case of the Brothers Grimm, whose tales contributed significantly to the construction of German national identity—an identity later weaponized in Nazi propaganda campaigns (Totibazde 2019)

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From this perspective, Jack Zipes' (2006) insights are particularly instructive. He argues that fairy tales serve as instruments for shaping a nation's cultural identity while fostering in audiences a sense of hope for political and social transformation. Beneath the surface of familiar tropes such as romance, heroism, and chivalry, Zipes suggests, lie subtler political undercurrents—narratives of power, struggle, and imagined futures that subtly shape collective values and aspirations.

### Political Fairy Tales

When comparing McLean's definition of politics as "*the art and science of governing*" (2001: 339) with Beard's view of politics as "*the art of playing*" (2000: 3), a deeper truth about the political sphere emerges from what initially appear to be two distinct concepts. Governance is not merely administrative but performative: it is a ritualized game of participation and rule-following, yet one that equally depends on symbolic acts, storytelling, and the construction of political identity. Political power, in this light, is sustained not only through policy but through narrative performance.

In the meantime, folk and fairy tales continue to shape both the real and imaginative lives of individuals and communities over centuries, and sometimes through political acts. As Zipes (1975) notes, the magic of these tales lies in their capacity to reveal inner truths: showing people and creatures not only who they are, but who they might become, which actually offers a script for interpreting power, morality, and destiny.

Larson (2003) adds that as core elements of mythical storytelling, narrative, mystification, and mobilization serves a dual political function when combined. On one hand, it can control shared representations among different social groups; on the other, help paint a non-verbal political self-portrait. In modern election campaigns, this theatricality finds a new stage: social media. Acting as the contemporary agora, these online platforms foster public discourse, allowing citizens to participate, deliberate, and align themselves with, or against, political narratives. The significance of social media in disseminating political information and serving as a tool for populist movements or parties has been noticeable throughout Europe, as with everywhere else. The case of Italy's 5 Star Movement illustrates this shift well with its rise fueled not by traditional media, but by digital storytelling and strategic use of online platforms (Gerbaudo 2017).

In this context, social media has become a fertile ground for the dissemination of narratives and fairy tales. No longer confined to the realm of childhood and bedtime stories, fairy tales now carry a wide range of social, cultural, and political weight, particularly due to their ability to reinforce stereotypes and shape perceptions among persuadable audiences (Cmeci 2016).

Historical precedents further illustrate how the fairy tale model, especially the Drama Triangle, can be employed to authorize and legitimize acts of war. A classic example to this is the Gulf War, where U.S. President George H. W. Bush strategically framed the conflict using narrative tropes that cast Gulf countries as the enemy and positioned America as the heroic defender. By tapping into deep-seated prejudices and familiar story patterns, such framing rendered military intervention both justifiable and morally imperative in the public imagination.

During the nineteenth century, the fairy tales collected and published by the Grimm Brothers served as a mirror reflecting German culture through their narratives. According to Tatar (2004), many writers of the period viewed it as a patriotic duty to disseminate these stories to a broader public. At the same time, Murphy (2000) notes that the Grimm Brothers deliberately expanded their intended audience beyond children to reach the wider German populace. Seeing themselves as “patriotic folklorists,” the Grimms aimed to preserve rural traditions and national identity—an ambition that, decades later, facilitated the appropriation of their tales for Third Reich propaganda. Their work, therefore, was never simply a literary project for children; it played a formative role in shaping national consciousness, instilling hope in audiences, and suggesting that change could come to existing political or social conditions. In this context children’s works operate as carriers of ideology, shaping the minds of their audience—whether by reinforcing dominant norms or by challenging them—through both direct and indirect means (Erdem Ayyıldız 2025).

As Zipes (2007) argues, fairy tales possess a dual capacity: while they entertain through elements of magic, miracles, and happy endings, they also inspire the belief in transformation, subtly altering audiences' perceptions of reality and possibility. Recognizing the central role that fairy tales played in shaping politics, Ness (2018), on the other hand, proposes a tripartite categorization of political fairy tales: (1) *expressly political* tales, crafted with an overt political agenda; (2) *subversively political* tales, where authors critique political atmosphere using traditional fairy-tale motifs; and (3) *accidentally political* tales, which acquire political meaning over time, even if not initially intended. It is within this framework that this paper examines the

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adaptation of fairy tale structures on social media by contemporary political actors, particularly focusing on expressly political narratives.

### **Political Narratives on Social Media**

The role of communication and media in shaping public opinion is fundamental: they provide interpretative frameworks that help individuals make sense of current events and forge connections to collective experiences (Castells 1996). Within the political sphere, media is not a channel of information, but rather a public platform where societal narratives are constructed, disseminated, and consumed. It offers a symbolic map of social dynamics that guide public perception and shape collective behavior (McQuail 2018). This ongoing anthropological journey through political space can mold the collective imagination with tangible real-life consequences.

Narration, in this context, serves a pedagogical function because it synthesizes unconscious experiences, organizes them within symbolic structures, and fosters both understanding and engagement. Whether framed as fables, tragedies, or accounts of disaster, stories that are embedded within a structured framework help individuals find meaning within complex realities. Personal narratives, in particular, allow people to tell their own stories and thus reinforce social bonds and cultivate belonging. It is important to note that storytelling is always a collaborative process between the narrator and the audience, and a dynamic exchange of knowledge and emotions. It ultimately creates communicative texts that depict real or fictional events and within a symbolic framework for emotional and identity-related purposes. As Postill (2018) emphasizes, storytelling is central to the communicative processes that sustain and transform societal life. Because narratives simplify complex historical events into consumable spectacles (Zipes 2015), storytelling is vital in the interpretation of social realities, often recasting politicians as heroic figures likewise to those within fictionalized narratives, and where comedians can become leaders of political movements. As Schmitt (2018) argues, political myths emerge from the creation of shared narratives that lend meaning to political experiences, prioritizing the emotional and symbolic resonance of the story over its factual accuracy. These cultivated and shared values foster a sense of belonging among members of a certain community, aligning individuals with the narrative.

Yuval-Davis (2006) has conducted in-depth studies on the themes of belonging and its associated politics. Belonging, she argues, is a dynamic process, produced and regulated

through specific power relations. It is performative in nature, requiring continuous, repetitive practices that connect together individual and collective behaviors, thereby constructing identity narratives and emotional attachments (Bell 1999; Fortier 2000).

Yuval-Davis (2006) also emphasizes that belonging is inherently tied to social locations, and it involves the construction of both individual and collective identities and attachments. In this view, belonging also involves hierarchies of value and recognition.

Crowley (1999) links belonging explicitly to the concept of boundaries, especially those that define political communities by distinguishing between “us” and “them”. Within this context, Anderson’s (1991) concept of the “imagined community” becomes particularly relevant: members of a nation, though largely unknown to one another personally, are bound by one shared mental image of communal identity. This is why constructing boundaries requires an active and situated imagination.

The politics of belonging have become central to contemporary political agendas worldwide, particularly in debates over migration rights, residence, employment, and future planning. This research highlights the earlier discussions and perspectives of belonging, with a particular focus on the right to migrate and the persistent construction of boundaries between “us” and “them”.

Within this framework, the relationship between politics and the media system reveals two critical points. First, political actors actively seek to conquer media spaces to secure visibility and craft clear, coherent narrative structures that resonate with the public imagination. Second, the media itself frames politicians as content, objects, and performers within its spectacle, resembling a Dionysian dramatization of the body and identity (Colamedici & Gancitano 2021). In this way, the media carries a quasi-salvific function that offers a cognitive horizon capable of bridging the gap between the rulers and the governed. Communication thus becomes the paradigmatic expression of the postmodern spirit: a “non-place” where experiences are mediated through masks, simulacra, and representations, forming the symbolic connective web of contemporary society.

National elections demonstrate how the structures of fairy tales continue to animate the communication and information arena. It is within this arena that citizens engage with evolving movements of opinion, shaped by the stories they are told (Zipes 1979). In this symbolic battleground, political identities are not just asserted but actively reimagined and redistributed toward diverse publics, each capable of assimilating electoral promises into their own

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imaginative landscapes (Engesser et al. 2017). Because narratives are central to elections, the campaign rhetorics essentially operate as a powerful architecture of the imagination. Through storytelling, politicians create bridges between abstract policy domains (“work”, “taxation”, “immigration”) and the everyday hopes and fears of the electorate.

### **Populism**

The term populism captures a disillusionment with the traditional, party-based political system. It is not interested in representing specific interests or sectors but rather claims to embody the will of the entire people. This claim is often fueled by resentment toward historical power structures that have become increasingly self-serving for elites and disconnected from the public (Groshek & Koc-Michalska 2016). Rather than articulating specific demands for change, populism channels generalized societal discontent, an affective force that has now taken on global dimensions, absorbed and reshaped within political spaces through symbolic representations centered around the metanarratives of the voter-spectator.

Within this atmosphere, every political party attempts to build a narrative bridge: a symbolic framework that positions voters within a solvable storyline of the issues at hand. Populism, however, tends to emerge most forcefully during political-institutional instability or socioeconomic fragmentation, where the existing structures are perceived by the public as failing. The discursive framework of populism, shaped within specific contexts, typically rests on two foundational pillars: one, the binary opposition between “the people” and “the enemies of the people”, often cast as political, economic, or financial elites; and two, a populist ideology that claims to give voice to an otherwise silenced majority. As Laclau (2005) suggests, populism promises to be a mechanism for amplifying the voice of “the people”, but always through the construction of an antagonistic “other”—a category that may include immigrants, refugees, or other marginalized groups.

Müller (2016) further argues that populists are not only anti-elitist but also fundamentally anti-pluralist, asserting that they alone represent the true will of the people, and only they are able to solve the societal issues. But in contrast, populists may align with elites in such situations, especially if they are considered part of the elite community themselves who guide the people. Moreover, Müller observes that populists often frame political situations as existential crises and threats to justify extraordinary measures and consolidate their governance under the banner of popular will.

Nobbio (1987) suggests that the recent success of populism across Europe is closely linked to the retrenchment of the welfare state, rising immigration, and the Euro crisis. Among the populist movements in Europe, Italy's 5 Star Movement has gained widespread recognition both nationally and internationally and come to occupy a central place in the Italian political landscape. Beppe Grillo, the movement's founder, criticizes the Italian political establishment, known as the *casta*, framing rival candidates as corrupt, self-serving, and morally bankrupt. In contrast, he portrays the *grillini*, members of his movement, as the authentic representatives of the Italian people (Müller 2016).

Over the past decade, the populist approach has expanded dramatically, enabling a new generation of political leaders to define their own "anti-establishment" credentials. In this transformation, social media has served as a critical tool that mobilizes political emotions and creates echo chambers. Through algorithmic aggregation, dispersed audiences are drawn into concentrated flows of content that reinforce and amplify political narratives (Flew & Iosifidis 2019; Gerbaudo 2018).

This atmosphere does not let storytelling to stay merely as a rhetorical device for crafting engaging political narratives; it has evolved into a form of governance itself. In an era characterized by post-factual social reorganizations, politics must compete with the infinite number of narratives present in public debates. These narrative constellations, composed of fragmented yet symbolically charged statements, generate powerful emotional and identity-based experiences around politically resonant issues.

In today's landscape, political leaders need to be able to manage a team of interpreters and carefully craft their own narrative to translate the symbolic demand of the public into something more concrete within the communication system. As Pirazzini (2016) highlights, the ability to manage narrative has become a central skill in politics, particularly in mobilizing voters around specific issues. Storytelling, therefore, is significant on both social and individual levels; because it has the potential to instigate social change while simultaneously fulfilling the individual's innate desire to tell their own stories (Aydın 2021).

The cultural logic of political narratives relies on a web of connections. It forges emotional and narrative bridges between politicians and voters; it fuses universal archetypes with local political issues through symbolic engines; it recasts political figures by threading past historical events into the present; and it relies on distribution platforms, both online and offline, to spread these narratives across multiple media ecosystems (Calloni 2016). Within the Italian

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context, the 2018 general elections are a case study of the populist dynamics at work. Italy was able to decipher the resentment by the populists towards policies and against elite-driven policies and their monopolization of capital distribution. Politics, as a symbolic arena, renders conflict into a consumable spectacle where complex struggles are stereotyped, stylized, and commodified through engaging images.

### **The Political Perspectives on Immigration Narratives and How Italian Politicians Utilize Political Fairy Tales in Discussing Immigration Issues**

Italy has long occupied a strategic position in global geopolitics as a link between Europe, the East, and Africa. Over the past several decades, it has experienced significant flows of migration, driven by a combination of political, economic, and geographical factors. Today, immigration remains one of the most debated and divisive issues in Italian public discourse, fueling deep divisions between political parties and further polarizing interpretations of itself. Particularly in the lead-up to election, it has consistently occupied a focal place on parties' political agendas.

Fairy tales, with their archetypal narrative structure often organized around the roles of savior, victim, and persecutor, provide a good lens for examining political storytelling. These roles are sometimes romanticized or dramatized to be adapted as political tools to frame complex realities. This article adopts the fairy tale framework, and with that the roles used in it, to explore how political parties, particularly populist movements, have reimagined immigration narratives to serve their agendas. Populism, in this context, has not only intensified Italy's longstanding political polarization but also deepened the divisions among party leaders and fragmented public perceptions of immigration. It is within these dynamics that the savior/victim/persecutor triangle emerges as a revealing interpretative model.

The following section will provide an overview of the five Italian political parties analyzed in this study, outlining their ideological orientations and examining how each party addressed immigration within their electoral programs.

### **The North League-Lega Nord and the Immigration Programme**

The League's ideological cornerstone has long been its fight against terrorism and irregular immigration. The party rejects the idea that migration is a structural, ongoing phenomenon; instead, it frames migration as an emergency that demands urgent, securitized responses. Unlike the left-wing parties advocating for the abolition of restrictive immigration laws, Salvini's

League promotes a reinforcement—albeit without detailed specification—of the existing Bossi-Fini law. It also plans the introduction of new security decrees as a regulatory tool to address illegal immigration and enhance public and urban safety. In line with its recent public stances, the League’s electoral program strongly opposes proposed reforms such as *ius soli* and *ius scholae*, which seek to broaden pathways to citizenship.

In terms of international cooperation, the Northern League emphasizes strengthening the controversial Memorandum of Understanding with Libya and maintaining support for the so-called “Libyan coastguard,” despite widespread reports from global media and human rights organizations documenting serious abuses against migrants by the Libyan coastguard. The party further proposes the establishment of patrols and hotspots in Libya—particularly in areas under Mohammed al-Menfi’s authority—and in neighboring Tunisia. Additionally, it suggests incentivizing asylum applications to be filed in migrants’ countries of origin or at Italian diplomatic missions abroad. Cooperation with Turkey under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is also prioritized, recognizing Turkey’s critical role in managing migratory flows into the European Union. Domestically, the League frames immigration as a politically charged issue in direct opposition to the Democratic Party government, which it blames for the surge in migration. A similar rhetorical strategy is employed for the employment issues, with criticisms directed at the Jobs Act reforms of the current government. This communicative conflict has a role in interpreting the cultural dimension of electoral discontent, channeling dissatisfaction against elite political representations. Through these narratives, Salvini constructs an against-elitism narrative centered on the protection of national interests and a reassertion of sovereignty (Lega per Salvini Premier 2023).

### **Partito Democratico- Democratic Party and the Immigration Programme**

The secretary of Enrico Letta's party focuses on the reception and integration of immigrants particularly through the lens of the labor market. The party proposes establishing an agency to coordinate migration policies, responsible for coordinating migration policies and facilitating the integration of migrants into both society and the workforce. In line with the broader center-left coalition, the Democratic Party advocates for the abolition of the Bossi-Fini law known for its restrictive approach to immigration and its tight regulation of irregular workers. In its place, the party proposes a new immigration law that would prioritize employment-based migration, with guidance and support from third-sector organizations to assist in entry and integration processes. However, the proposal remains vague in its details, leaving several practical aspects unresolved as it's unclear how these organisations are expected to collaborate with the state in

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managing migration flows. But it is clear that in contrast to The League, the Democratic Party aims to enhance the reception and integration system (Sai) (Partito Democratico 2023).

### **Stars Movement-Movimento 5 Stelle and the Immigration Programme**

The programmatic document of the Five Star Movement addresses immigration with notable conciseness. The party advocates for the establishment of a European mechanism to manage migratory flows and coordinate search and rescue operations, emphasizing the need for greater solidarity and equitable distribution of migrants among EU member states. Domestically, the Movement supports the introduction of *ius scholae*—a pathway to citizenship granted upon the completion of one or more educational cycles in Italy. Through this proposal, the Five Star Movement signals a conception of citizenship grounded in academic achievement rather than in the unconditional recognition of fundamental rights, irrespective of the migrant's broader social or humanitarian circumstances. In doing so, the party positions itself between humanitarian concerns and a merit-based approach to integration, which is an ambivalent stance within Italy's broader political landscape on immigration and citizenship (Elezioni politiche 2022-Programma M5S 2022).

### **Forza Italia and the Immigration Programme**

Formed in 2013 following the split of the *Popolo della Libertà*, Forza Italia outlines several key points on immigration within its program. The most concrete proposal is the call for a “European Marshall Plan of Aid for Africa,” aimed at maintaining collaboration with North African states. Silvio Berlusconi insists on the need for a compulsory redistribution of migrants across European Union member states, coupled with the establishment of a common framework for managing repatriations (Forza Italia 2023).

### **Fratelli D'Italia and the Immigration Programme**

Giorgia Meloni's party draws upon a familiar narrative that has long circulated within Italian political discourse: the conflation of immigration and security. In the *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI) program, these two issues are explicitly linked, suggesting a direct correlation. Meloni discusses the need to maintain agreements with North African states and advocates for a fairer redistribution of migrants across European countries. The party's immigration proposals don't offer much new and reiterates familiar positions including calls to block migrant landings to curb trafficking, to restrict the activities of NGOs perceived as facilitating illegal immigration, and to offer incentives for the return of Italians living abroad. Through a QR code embedded in

campaign materials, Meloni elaborates further on immigration and security policies, focusing on proposals such as expanding municipal video surveillance, combating urban degradation, and reinforcing the *Safe Roads* operation. Aside from a generic mention of promoting the “social and labor inclusion” of regular immigrants, the program offers little in the way of concrete proposals for managing the broader migratory phenomenon (Fratelli d’Italia 2023).

### **Methodology**

In recent decades, many European Union countries have witnessed a significant rise in right-wing populism. A similar scenario has played out in Italy, particularly linked to the emergence of the Five Star Movement and other parties. To better understand the diffusion of populism within Italy, it is helpful to compare it with similar political movements across Europe over the past twenty years. Initially, Italian scholars struggled to recognize populism as a domestic phenomenon; once its presence became undeniable, however, there was a tendency to overattribute political developments to populism's influence.

The electoral successes of the populist right in other European countries undoubtedly influenced the change in attitude. Consequently, the term “populist” came to be widely applied to a variety of actors, phenomena, and discourses, often with negative connotations (Lanni 2011). As Biorcio (2012) notes, the negative associations came with the “populism” term were ultimately utilized to undermine grassroots mobilization and popular appeals, framing them as simplistic or dangerous. The triumphs of the populist right in Europe and the growing success of populist leaders, parties, and movements in Italy over the past two decades were influential in this shift.

Although immigration has long been a central issue in Italian politics, largely due to the country’s strategic geographical position, recent decades saw its prominence only increasing, driven by factors such as economic crises, media influence, and the rise of populist movements. This is why migration policy is the consensus of the people and the main interest of narrative, and thus crucial to the Italian politics. Also, when analyzing how these parties approached immigration, particular attention must be paid to the language and imagery they deploy, as these elements are crucial to framing public perception and shaping political narratives.

The results of the 2022 Italian general elections sparked widespread debate, particularly given the ascent of the most right-wing government Italy has seen since the fascist era. The factors contributing to the success of the right-wing coalition, with particular focus on campaign strategies surrounding migration, are an exploration point in this article. It focuses on an

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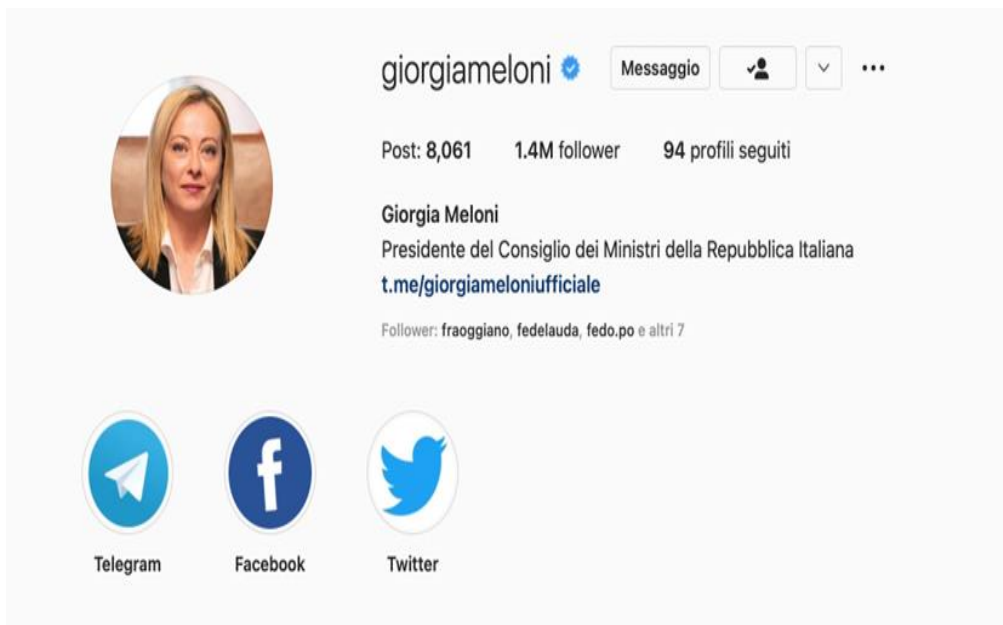
analysis of social media campaigns in the lead-up to the 2022 elections, specifically examining the official Instagram profiles of five major political leaders. The dataset consists of all Instagram posts published by the five selected political leaders (Enrico Letta, Giorgia Meloni, Matteo Salvini, Silvio Berlusconi, and Giuseppe Conte) between August 1 and September 25, 2022, that explicitly or implicitly addressed the issue of immigration. The article combines content analysis with critical interpretation, linking the narratives disseminated by political leaders to their respective party platforms and by using three main coding criteria: (1) thematic framing of immigration (security, humanitarian, economic, or cultural dimensions), (2) rhetorical strategies (use of victim/savior/persecutor roles, emotional vs. rational appeals), and (3) symbolic or visual elements. Special attention is given to the way migration-related posts construct symbolic boundaries between 'us' and 'them,' as theorized by Crowley (1999).

This article essentially examines the Instagram activity of Italy's five most prominent political figures: Enrico Letta (Partito Democratico, PD), Silvio Berlusconi (Forza Italia, FI), Giorgia Meloni (Fratelli d'Italia, FdI), Matteo Salvini (Lega Nord, LN), and Giuseppe Conte (Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S). Immigration-related posts shared by these leaders are analyzed and broken down, with a particular focus on language, rhetorical strategies, and their connection to each party's broader electoral platform. The aim is to clarify each leader's position on immigration and to map their roles within the dramatic triangle model of *Savior*, *Victim*, and *Persecutor*.

### **Giorgia Meloni- Fratelli D'Italia**

Giorgia Meloni, currently serving as the President of the Council of Ministers of the Italian Republic, is the first woman in Italy's history to occupy this role and the only female political leader included in this study. Representing right-wing, nationalist-conservative, and Christian principles, Meloni has distinguished herself as a major figure in the contemporary Italian political landscape.

Post: 1. Giorgia Meloni's Instagram official page [[@giorgiameloni](#)]<sup>1</sup>



Post: 2. Giorgia Meloni against Enrico Letta<sup>2</sup>



<sup>1</sup>Meloni, G. [[@giorgiameloni](#)] (n.d.)[Account]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/giorgiameloni/> (Accessed: May 5,2023).

<sup>2</sup> Meloni (2022 August,29)

‘Evidently the left is annoyed by the fact that someone wants to stop the trafficking of human beings to Italy.’

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### Post: 3. Giorgia Meloni pointing out the opposite vision of Letta <sup>3</sup>



Regarding immigration policies, Meloni maintains a particularly sharp opposition to her principal rival, Enrico Letta, leader of the Democratic Party (PD). Their divergent positions are especially visible in their interactions, under the comment sections on social media. For example, in response to an Instagram post by Letta (Meloni 2022), Meloni sharply criticized immigration flows as tantamount to human trafficking, using reposts to underscore the ideological divide between *Fratelli d'Italia* and the *Partito Democratico*.

In her own communications, Meloni consistently frames immigration as a security crisis and emphasizes the urgent need to block arrivals, particularly from eastern routes. Her posts related to immigration on Instagram focus on having her major rival repost by using images of both leaders and sentences in evidence. She strategically juxtapose images of herself and Letta, physically and symbolically reinforcing the political polarization between their positions. By doing so, she not only demarcates her ideological stance but also reinforces the broader narrative of safeguarding national borders against external threats. Meloni's rhetorical style on social media further aligns with broader populist strategies. She adopts an accessible, colloquial language that fosters intimacy with her followers, blurring the traditional distance between

<sup>3</sup>Meloni (2022 August,19)

Letta: 'Meloni accuses me of discrediting Italy abroad because I expose the choices of her party in Europe with deeds? On the same day she speaks of 1. the obligation of suretyship for foreigners; 2. naval blockade outside our borders; 3. PNRR to be renegotiated. Three follies for those who observe us from outside.'

Meloni: 'In summary, today Letta is keen to let it be known that for the PD: 1. fraudulent "open and close" activities registered to non-EU citizens should not be disturbed; 2. mass illegal immigration must not be stopped; 3. the PNRR must not be adjusted to inflation and the ongoing energy crisis, exacerbated by the war in Ukraine. I thank the secretary of the PD for clarifying these issues. Fratelli D'Italia is the complete opposite of this'.

political leader and citizen. This linguistic approach serves to strengthen the emotional bond between Meloni and her digital community, simultaneously personalizing and spectacularizing her political persona. Through Instagram, Meloni has effectively amplified her image and messaging, constructing echo chambers that magnify her narrative, influence public perceptions, and deepen political loyalty among her supporters.

Within the framework of Karpman's Drama Triangle, Giorgia Meloni's political narrative positions her primarily in the role of the *Savior*. This is evident in her strategic use of language: rather than referring directly to *immigrants*, she frames the issue around "*human trafficking*," evoking associations with illegality and violations of human rights. By doing so, she shifts the conversation away from the humanitarian plight of migrants and toward the criminal dimensions of migration management. She also reinforces her commitment to protecting Italian borders and promoting a strong sense of national identity, which were evident in her political agenda. In this narrative structure, she casts *Italy* and *Italians* as the *Victims*, endangered by uncontrolled migration and governmental inaction. Interestingly, *immigrants* and the victims of trafficking are also portrayed as victims, but specifically of the rival party's political vision, which Meloni accuses of failing to protect both national and human rights.

The sole *Persecutor* in her dramatization is the opposing political force, particularly the Democratic Party, which she blames for jeopardizing the security and wellbeing of both Italians and migrants. Through this configuration, Meloni constructs a political narrative that legitimizes her role as the only figure capable of delivering salvation, or in other words, as *The Savior*, both to the nation and to those imperiled by failed immigration policies.

### **Enrico Letta- Partito Democratico**

Enrico Letta currently serves as the secretary of the Italian center-left Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, PD), a political force founded on October 14, 2007, grounded in reformist and social democratic principles.

As previously mentioned, Letta's perspective on immigration stands in stark contrast to that of Giorgia Meloni. In one of his Instagram posts (Letta 2022), he juxtaposes an image of himself with a quote from Meloni, prominently positioned at the center, followed by his own reaction placed at the end—visually emphasizing their ideological divergence. Another post shares a fragment from an institutional journal, spotlighting public consensus regarding *ius scholae*. The accompanying graphic reveals that support for *ius scholae* is strongest among PD voters, while opposition predominantly comes from the electorates of the Lega Nord and

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Fratelli d'Italia. To further underline his position, Letta features a high-profile image of influencer Khaby Lame, who recently obtained Italian citizenship, though not through *ius scholae*. In this post, Khaby's image dominates the composition, symbolically representing the paradox of an internationally recognized figure who, until recently, lacked formal citizenship rights in Italy. By invoking Khaby Lame's story, Letta tactically appeals to broader sentiments about inclusivity, merit, and national identity. (Letta 2022)

Within the framework of Karpman's Drama Triangle, Letta and the PD position themselves in the role of *Savior*, advocating for immigrants and non-EU citizens in Italy, who are portrayed as *Victims* of an exclusionary and outdated system. In contrast, the opposing right-wing parties assume the role of *Persecutors*, resisting reforms aimed at expanding citizenship and inclusion. Through this narrative structure, the PD frames itself as the political force committed to rescuing those marginalized by existing policies and structures.

### Post: 4. Enrico Letta's Instagram official page<sup>4</sup>



<sup>4</sup> Letta, E. [@enricoletta] (n.d.) [Account]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/enricoletta/> (Accessed: May 5, 2023).

Post: 5. Letta against Meloni<sup>5</sup>



Post: 6. Ius Scholae<sup>6</sup>



<sup>5</sup> Letta (2022, August 19).

This is how Giorgia Meloni discredits us in the world: 1. obligation of surety for foreigners; 2. naval blockade outside our borders; 3. PNRR to be renegotiated. Three follies for those who look at us from the outside. Meloni accuses me of discrediting Italy abroad because I expose the choices of her party in Europe with deeds? On the same day, she speaks of: 1. the obligation of suretyship for foreigners; 2. naval blockade outside our borders; 3/ PNRR to be renegotiated. Three follies for those who observe us from outside.'

<sup>6</sup> Letta (2022, August 25).

The future is IUS SCHOLAE, the Italians promote it. Two thirds of Italians are in favor of citizenship for those who complete the school cycle. Only League and FDI voters are opposed. Two thirds of Italians agree with the introduction of the #IUS SCHOLAE, a proposal that is in the #PD program. #Meloni and #Salvini are so obsessed with #immigration that they don't realize that for Italians to grant citizenship to minors who attend a school cycle of at least 5 years in Italy is simply right. They are elbow to elbow, on the school benches, when they play and team up, with our daughters and our sons. We want to approve it because those who study in Italy are Italian. On September 25, with the #vinconoleidee Democratic Party, Italy wins.

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## Post: 7. Khaby Lama<sup>7</sup>



## Silvio Berlusconi- Il Popolo della Libertà' -The People of Freedom

Silvio Berlusconi, a dominant figure in Italian politics for over three decades, served four terms as Prime Minister during his long career.

The *Popolo della Libertà* (PdL, The People of Freedom) was a center-right political party founded on March 29, 2009, through the merger of Italy's two major center-right forces: Berlusconi's *Forza Italia*, rooted in Christian-conservative and liberal ideologies, and Gianfranco Fini's *Alleanza Nazionale* (National Alliance), which carried a national-conservative orientation.

Throughout his political trajectory, Berlusconi consistently positioned himself as the representative figure of the PdL, leveraging his personal image as a guarantor of stability and leadership during electoral campaigns. His role extended beyond that of a candidate; he acted as a unifying symbol among Italy's fragmented right-wing parties, consolidating support and presenting himself as the indispensable mediator within the center-right coalition.

<sup>7</sup> Letta (2022, August 18).

Khaby Lama, 22 years old, in Chiavasso (in that of Canavese which welcomed him when he was 1 year old) took the oath, becoming an Italian citizen. Welcome!

With the *Ius Scholae* it would have happened 11 years ago and we would be a more civilized country.

Khaby Lama would have also avoided any sleazy afterthought of those who accuse him of having received citizenship by virtue of his followers.

He would have become a citizen of a country where rights are rights and do not depend on fame, talent or bank account. A civilized country indeed.

Post 8: Silvio Berlusconi's Instagram official page<sup>8</sup>



Post 9: Forza Italia's political programme<sup>9</sup>



In his Instagram posts, Silvio Berlusconi remains consistent with his campaign program, summarizing its key points and reinforcing them with his personal signature, which is now a longstanding symbol of him trying to win the electorate. Since the beginning of his career, Berlusconi has employed the act of signing as a performative gesture, representing a personal pact with the Italian people. (Berlusconi 2022)

<sup>8</sup>Berlusconi, S. [@silvioberlusconi\_official] [Account]. Instagram. [https://www.instagram.com/silvioberlusconi\\_official/](https://www.instagram.com/silvioberlusconi_official/) (Accessed: May 5,2023).

<sup>9</sup> Berlusconi (2022, August 11) Program for Italy.

More Italy in Europe. More Europe in the world. Strategic infrastructures and efficient use of European resources. Institutional, justice and public administration reforms according to the Constitution. For a fair tax. Family and birth support. Security and fight against illegal immigration. Health protection. Defense of work, business and the economy. Welfare state and support for the needy. Made in Italy, culture and tourism. The challenge of energy self-sufficiency. The environment, a priority. Agriculture, our history, our future. School, university and research. Youth, Sport and Social.

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Regarding immigration, Berlusconi and his party maintain a relatively neutral stance, prioritizing other political and economic issues over migration policy. Nevertheless, he underscores the importance of enhancing security measures and combating illegal immigration, framing these concerns within a broader discourse on public safety rather than humanitarian obligation. Compared to the other parties analyzed, immigration occupies a less prominent place in Berlusconi's electoral messaging, reflecting a strategic emphasis on different thematic priorities.

### Matteo Salvini- Lega Nord- North League

Matteo Salvini is the president of *Lega Nord*, formally known as *Lega Nord per l'Indipendenza della Padania*. The party is characterized by its right-wing, federalist, populist, and conservative orientation. Salvini's slogan, "*Italians First*," encapsulates his hardline stance against immigration in Italy. It was this stance that made him one of the most vocal opponents of the current influx of immigrants to the country.

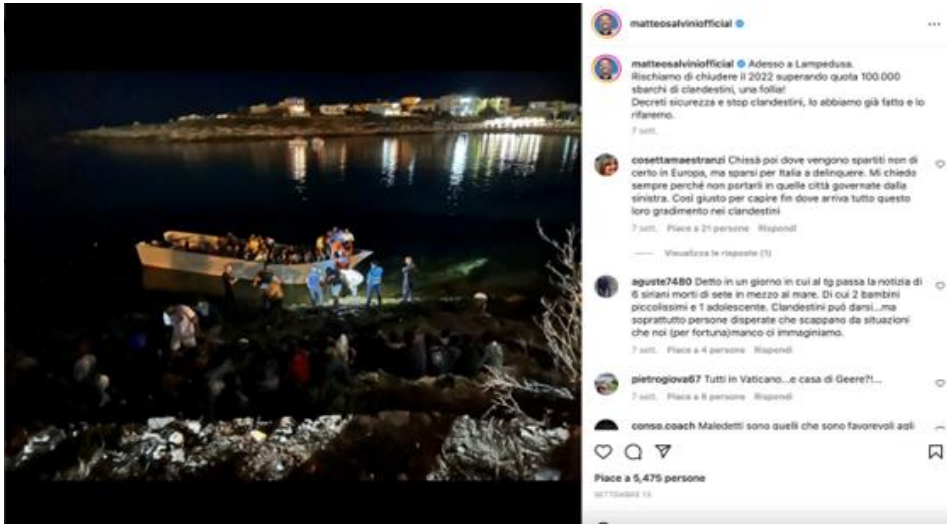
#### Post: 10. Matteo Salvini's Instagram official page<sup>10</sup>



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<sup>10</sup>Salvini, M. [@matteosalviniofficial](n.d.) [Account]. Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/matteosalviniofficial/?hl=it> (Accessed: May 5, 2023).

**Post: 11. Matteo Salvini's Post about landings in Lampedusa<sup>11</sup>**



**Post: 12. Matteo post about migrants<sup>12</sup>**



<sup>11</sup>Salvini (2022 September,13) Now in Lampedusa. We risk closing 2022 by exceeding 100,000 illegal landings, crazy!Security decrees and clandestine stops, we have already done it and we will do it again.

<sup>12</sup> Salvini (2022 August,27)

Migrants, 30 landings in Lampedusa in less than 24 hours.

Whoever chooses the League chooses border defense and security. Whoever chooses the Democratic Party chooses mass immigration and chaos. On September 25, the floor is up to you.

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## Post: 13. Matteo Salvini's about landings<sup>13</sup>



Among the leaders analyzed in this article, Matteo Salvini has the largest following on Instagram. Salvini, and by extension *Lega Nord*, adopts the most radical stance on immigration compared to the other political figures considered here. Immigration has consistently remained at the core of his political agenda, and he stands out as the leader with the highest number of posts dedicated to this issue.

In his Instagram posts, Salvini repeatedly highlights the challenges associated with migrant disembarkations, focusing in particular on the situation faced by islands like Lampedusa, which he portrays as overwhelmed by the influx of arrivals. His policies have always had a focus on Italy borders, reinforcing his familiar slogan, “*Italians First.*” A prominent feature of his narrative is his opposition to NGO rescue ships, which he accuses of facilitating irregular immigration by assisting boats in distress along the Mediterranean routes.

Salvini's Instagram feed, as can be seen in the images above, is populated with repeated images of ships carrying migrants at sea, consolidating the perception of an ongoing and large-scale crisis. This visual repetition functions rhetorically to emphasize the scale and urgency of the situation. In an attempt to add weight and a serious tone to his posts, Salvini often

<sup>13</sup> Salvini (2022 September,1)

In 24 days Goodbye Lamorgese!

Lampedusa, 31 landings in 24 hours: 1800 in the hotspot that explodes.

31 landed only yesterday in Lampedusa. A worldwide disgrace!

Whoever chooses the League chooses security, courage and honor. Defend the borders, sea Italy.

#September25Ivoteleague

supplements these images with reposted newspaper articles and succinct captions that highlight the number of migrant arrivals within specific timeframes. Through these strategies, Salvini constructs a narrative of emergency, presenting immigration not as an isolated issue but as a continuous and destabilizing threat to national security.

In one of his Instagram posts, Matteo Salvini uses a colloquial and familiar tone, characteristic of his broader communication strategy, by adding an emoji alongside the phrase “*In 24 days, goodbye Lamorgese!*” At the time, Luciana Lamorgese served as the Minister of the Interior, and Salvini’s comment was a clear reference to the upcoming elections on September 25. Through the use of colloquial language, emojis, and direct messaging, Salvini fosters an outgoing and intimate atmosphere, strengthening the sense of proximity between himself and his followers.

Notably, Salvini is the only leader among those studied who explicitly references the September 25 election in his Instagram campaign, promoting the hashtag *#25settembreiovotoLega* (25 September I Vote Lega). This strategy aims to frame the election as a direct, participatory act where “the voice of the people” will decisively influence Italy’s future.

Salvini’s posts often resemble an ongoing conversation with his followers, as he engages with them to construct an image of a community. Rather than merely presenting his political vision, he seeks to create the perception that the challenges and issues raised—particularly immigration—are matters being addressed collectively, through the will and action of the Italian people for the wellbeing of the nation.

Applying Karpman’s Drama Triangle to Salvini’s narrative on immigration, his role aligns with that of the *Savior or Rescuer*. Italians are portrayed as the *Victims*, whose safety, culture, and rights are under threat, while immigrants are frequently cast in the role of the *Persecutors*, or in other words, agents of instability and danger. Supported by Lega Nord’s broader platform, this framework asserts a nationalist defense of Italians’ rights, framing immigration as an existential threat to be actively repelled.

### **Giuseppe Conte- Movimento 5 Stelle- 5 Stars Movement**

Giuseppe Conte, who served as Prime Minister of Italy from 2018 to 2021, now leads the *Movimento 5 Stelle* (M5S), a party founded by comedian and blogger Beppe Grillo and web strategist Gianroberto Casaleggio. The Five Star Movement is typically characterized as populist, anti-establishment, and environmentalist,

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## Post: 14. Giuseppe Conte's Instagram official page<sup>14</sup>



Interestingly, among the leaders analyzed in this study, Conte appears the most neutral regarding the immigration issue. Throughout the sample period, he did not publish any posts addressing immigration on his official Instagram account. This absence is notable, given that immigration has historically been one of the key issues for the Five Star Movement—not only during past election cycles but also since the party's founding. Conte's silence on the topic suggests a strategic choice to sidestep polarizing debates during the 2022 campaign, positioning himself and the party outside the more overtly antagonistic narratives adopted by other political actors.

## CONCLUSION

This article has aimed to demonstrate how the structures and narratives of fairy tales can shape political storytelling when analyzed through the lens of Karpman's Drama Triangle. By varying the roles of *Savior*, *Victim*, and *Persecutor*, political actors are able to reframe the same phenomenon, which is immigration in this case, through radically different lenses, and thus reshaping public perception and emotional responses. The political consequences of these narrative framings: how the victim-savior-persecutor structure not only mobilizes emotions but also risks simplifying complex issues, shaping voting behavior through polarization and undermining democratic deliberation by privileging affect over argument and by weakening the capacity of democratic institutions to mediate diverse perspectives, ultimately narrowing the space for pluralism and compromise.

<sup>14</sup> Conte, G. [@giuseppeconte\_ufficiale] (n.d.) [Account]. Instagram [https://www.instagram.com/giuseppeconte\\_ufficiale/?hl=it](https://www.instagram.com/giuseppeconte_ufficiale/?hl=it) (Accessed: May 5, 2023).

Italy's political landscape over the past two decades has been marked by a notorious instability, with twelve different governments coming to power. The most recent government was dissolved prematurely on July 21, 2022, leading to general elections held on September 25, which actually resulted in the lowest voter turnout in Italian Republican history. Giorgia Meloni's *Fratelli d'Italia* secured 26% of the vote, emerging as the leading party and making Meloni the first woman to head an Italian government. Meloni's success can be attributed, in part, to her consistent political messaging and strategic use of social media, which offered voters a sense of clarity, strength, and security during a period of deep uncertainty. Her ability to craft a coherent narrative while framing herself as a defender of Italian identity resonated with an electorate seeking reassurance.

Notably, the two most successful parties, *Fratelli d'Italia* and *Lega Nord*, shared a clear and uncompromising stance on immigration. Both portrayed Italians as victims of uncontrolled migration and societal disruption, while immigrants were framed as the cause of these insecurities. In doing so, they romanticized a victim narrative that fueled nationalist sentiment and deepened political polarization. These fairy-tale-like structures which are casting Italians as endangered heroes and migrants as threats allowed leaders to mobilize emotional support without necessarily addressing the complex, structural roots of Italy's challenges.

By framing immigration through simplified fairy-tale roles, politicians are able to emotionally mobilize citizens, yet at the cost of reducing complex socio-political dynamics into binary moral conflicts. Such narrative framings can directly shape voting behavior: voters may be less inclined to evaluate concrete policy proposals and more prone to align with the leader who embodies the role of "savior" against imagined threats. In this sense, emotional storytelling does not merely persuade—it restructures the 'democratic' arena by privileging affective identification over rational deliberation.

In contrast, the Democratic Party offered a counter-narrative, emphasizing the plight of migrants and Italy's moral responsibility to extend rights and protection to the vulnerable. Within this framing, Italians were positioned not as victims, but as agents of humanitarian solidarity. The stark contrast between these narratives further polarized public opinion and underscored the symbolic battleground over national identity.

Italy's prolonged economic crisis was also a fertile ground for discontent, but it was the clarity and emotional resonance of right-wing narratives amplified through social media that transformed dissatisfaction into political momentum. Leaders like Meloni and Salvini mastered

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the art of narrative construction in the digital arena, reaching voters who increasingly consume political content through personalized online spaces rather than traditional media.

The posts analyzed in this study reveal a consistent rhetorical strategy: constructing symbolic boundaries between “*us*” and “*them*.” Immigration is portrayed as an existential threat to national stability and identity. Through these symbolic narratives, right-wing leaders have not only politicized migration but also redefined the emotional terrain of Italian politics.

Among the leaders examined, Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini stand out for their prolific social media activity. They have cultivated digital communities where political participation feels intimate and personalized. By embedding voters within simplified, emotionally charged narratives, they foster a sense of belonging that strengthens political loyalty and deepens ideological divides.

Ultimately, this study shows that political storytelling, especially when structured around familiar archetypes like those found in fairy tales, remains a force in shaping public consciousness. In a fragmented and mediatized political landscape, narrative clarity, emotional resonance, and symbolic boundary-making have become key tools for those seeking both to win elections and to define the collective imagination of the nation itself.

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