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Italy: Russia's Influence over Far-Right Offline and Online

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The political, economic, and cultural ties connecting Russia and Italy date back to the Cold War era when Italy had the largest communist party in Western Europe, threatening NATO unity.[1] In the 1960s, the centrist Christian Democrats paved the way for economic agreements with the Soviet Union on oil, via the Italian state-owned company Eni[2] on gas which is still in place today.[3] This shows that Italy's positive attitude towards Russia has not been the interest of a specific party, but political and economic relations with Moscow developed both under Italy's right and left governments.[4] Due to this widespread indulgence towards Russia, Italy is perceived as one of Europe's "Russia understanders" with approval across different political cultures.[5] Yet within the Italian political landscape, the modern far-right has positioned itself as the primary supporter of Vladimir Putin's Russia by depicting it as the geopolitical alternative to Euro-Atlantic institutions.[6] As a matter of fact, the rise of far-right parties in Italy has offered Russia new opportunities to exploit their pro-Russian rhetoric[7] and anti-EU sentiment, fuelled by views of patriotism, anti-immigration, anti-LGBTQ+, and anti-establishment.[8]

This chapter showcases how Italian far-right parties would not have needed to be directly aligned with Russia to effectively do Moscow's bidding via their anti-EU attitudes.[9] Following the Crimean annexation in 2014, Russia has utilised the voices of Italian far-right parties, like Northern League (LN), Brothers of Italy (FdI), and Forward Italy (FI), to further the growing pro-Russian ecosystem through economic and political deals, strong institutional relationships, and mutual interests, which have led these parties to support Russia's geopolitical

aspirations, condemn sanctions against Russia, and decry the EU and NATO.[10] This ecosystem legitimises Russia's politics through relationships with like-minded politicians and consequent agreements,[11] such as Russian officials hosting LN members in Crimea, Italian far-right leaders meeting with Putin in Moscow, and the formal cooperation agreement between United Russia and LN.[12] The political openness towards Russia is backed by mutual economic interests that have led Prime Minister Mario Conte to sign bilateral economic agreements with Russia valued at 1.5 billion euros in 2018,[13] and have brought hundreds of Italian businesses to invest in the Russian market over the years[14] representing today the 6.3 percent of international businesses actors present in Russia.[15] The scope of this research is to assess Russia's influence on the Italian far-right landscape, and the role played by cyberspace in furthering such influence. The research also aims to evaluate the risks of violence that these influences may lead to, with particular attention to the risks of violent extremism.

As a result of the 2022 elections, Italy's government is led by the centre-right coalition headed by Giorgia Meloni's Fdl,[16] and includes the aforementioned LN[17] and FI.[18] This new coalition has raised concerns internationally for two main reasons: firstly, the current administration is the first in Italy's postwar history whose majority partner, FdI, is rooted in the post-fascist tradition; secondly, the inclusion of parties sympathetic to Russia, LN, and FI, could enhance Russia's influence over the Italian political landscape in general and its right-wing elements in particular.[19] For instance, LN leader, Matteo Salvini openly expressed his sympathies for Moscow by wearing Putin T-shirts in the European Parliament in 2015 and in Red Square in 2017.[20] The former leader of FI, Silvio Berlusconi, was among the strongest advocates of Russia's membership of the G8 and bringing it into the NATO Alliance.[21] During a popular television show in September 2022, Berlusconi attempted to justify the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and there are recordings of him talking to FI supporters and a member of the parliament in which he claimed that "Putin had been forced into war and that he only wanted to replace the Zelensky government with well-mannered people."[22]

Regarding the extreme far-right New Force (FN),[23] in 2014 and 2015, its leader Roberto Fiore participated in conventions in defence of the traditional family organised by the Kremlin and was among the ten leaders from European extreme far-right parties invited to a Russian Conservative International Forum sponsored by the Kremlin in Saint Petersburg.[24] Since Russia's annexation of Crimea, a few FN voters and sympathisers have been in Ukraine to defend Russia's stances and,

in some cases, even fight for Russia.[25] Some of these individuals are still in Ukraine; their involvement in the ongoing conflict and activities, particularly online, will be discussed later in this paper.

Meloni's FdI appears to lack direct ties with the Kremlin, which has facilitated the sudden shift from advocating openness towards Russia and opposing European economic sanctions against Russia,[26] in line with far-right ideology, to firmly condemning Russia's war on Ukraine and sanctions.[27] This shift is mostly due to economic factors that render attempts to buy gas from Russia mute as this has become impossible under the new EU sanctions, but also political ones, such as the new government's determination to remain in the EU and NATO's good books.[28] Due to such policy shifts, FdI will not be a part of this analysis, but its trajectory raises some interesting points for future research, namely, under what circumstances a given radical right actor might opt away from Russia. The chapter will thus shed light on Russia's influence on LN led by Matteo Salvini and generally on the Italian far-right milieu within the online ecosystem, using FN supporters as an example of actors directly influenced via cyber means.

The Case Studies

The above contextualisation provides insights into the two main focuses of this chapter, which are addressed through two case studies. The first case study analyses Russia's political influence on LN by exploring the political activities carried out by its members and supporters, as well as several Russians belonging to Putin's close circle.[29] As will be shown, the questionable relationships and veiled accords established over the years brought LN and United Russia, Putin's party, to sign a formal political agreement of collaboration in 2017.[30] The case analyses how such collaboration is backed by pro-Russian cultural organisations based in Italy,[31] and it is connected to LN's economic interests of overturning European economic sanctions against Russia.[32] This influence is characterised by several layers, which include mutual online propaganda through the think tank Katehon,[33] and a Russian attempt to illegally fund LN's political campaign through an inconclusive oil trade. Beyond this direct political influence, the case study examines Russia's indirect political and cultural influence upon LN's anti-gender values to assess the risks of violence stemming from the normalisation of harmful narratives and stigmatisation of "othering" pursued by the Kremlin and LN.[34] The choice of this specific topic is linked to the recurring online and

physical violence against the LGBTQ+ community, and the backsliding of inclusive social policies which is occurring in Italy.[35] The decision to analyse the Russian influences over LN, instead of other aforementioned Italian far-right parties, derives from the abundance of evidence, which is publicly available and allows for a thorough analysis of the Russian influence over Salvini's party, be it political, cultural or financial.

The second case study discusses the cyber influence that Russia can indirectly exert upon the Italian far-right milieu through the ideologically motivated cyberattacks of a decentralised network of malicious actors and the risks of online radicalisation into violent extremism stemming from such influence. To narrow down this topic, the case covers a series of cyberattacks delivered by pro-Russian hacktivist collectives against Italy's institutions' websites because of its opposition to the invasion of Ukraine,[36] and it assesses how these cyber operations are perceived by FN's voters to evaluate the presence of indirect political and cultural influence. In this context, FN supporters are used as an example of far-right actors that could be potentially influenced by pro-Russian hacktivists through cyber means and information operations. The anonymous nature of cyberspace makes it difficult for this research to present the existence of direct Russian influence over the FN community via cyber means, but the example of FN is discussed to shed light on a growing trend that sees the pro-Russian hacking community and the Italian far-right milieu engaging online, sharing information, and overall influencing each other. Through the analysis of these two communities on Telegram – FN voters as an example of an Italian far-right actor, and pro-Russian hacking collectives – the case study identifies overlaps in sharing of the pro-Russian and pro-war content, hate speech, and sharing of the content produced by the Italian foreign fighters fighting for Russia against Ukraine. As will be shown, the Italian far-right milieu and the pro-Russian hacking community share ideological affinities, particularly on the Russo-Ukrainian war, and indirectly influence each other by amplifying pro-Russian news. Additionally, these online communities may be a breeding ground for far-right and extreme groups or individuals with low cyber skills, where they could learn how to deliver cyberattacks from the pro-Russian hacking collectives in the name of Russia's interests. The case determines the indirect logistical influence these malicious actors could have by organising military cyber exercises and offering cyber tools, leveraging existing cybercrime as a service model.[37] Given the ideological affinity of these communities, further research into Telegram's private channels and dark web forums could reveal ongoing collaborations. What

is evident from this research is Russia's lack of interest in avoiding the interrelations of similar communities online because of the benefits it may gain, and the implications that ideologically motivated cyberattacks, borderline content, and online violent extremism have on the offline world.

Both case studies are discussed in detail in the following sections, which include a threat analysis of Russia's influence and an assessment of the risks stemming from this. The chapter also presents current measures in place to counter such influence and reduce its impacts. Finally, the chapter provides recommendations on how to prevent and counteract the effects of Russian influence, particularly leading to ideologically motivated cyberattacks and far-right violent extremism online.

Research Methodology

This chapter relies on desktop research into the relationship and influence between Russia and the Italian far-right, and on a review of the existing literature. The qualitative research uses a combination of keywords inherent to the topics of discussion.[38] Further, it gathers information through open-source intelligence and text analysis of websites, and public Telegram channels related to pro-Russian hacking collectives or individuals, Italian far-right groups or individuals, and known Italian foreign fighters. The research was limited to Telegram due to its wide use by far-right and cybercriminal actors.[39] Further findings supporting this chapter's topics could be identified on social media platforms such as Discord, Gab, and MeWe, to name a few,[40] dark web forums or websites,[41] or channels and groups, oftentimes private, maintained by other Italian far-right actors, such as Casa Pound.[42]

Case Study 1: Russia and Salvini's LN

Today LN is one of the main far-right parties in the Italian political landscape, where it is part of the current centre-right coalition government with FdI and Forza Italia.[43] Despite LN losing 3.2 million votes during the 2022 election, a significant drop compared to the 5.7 million votes obtained in the previous election,[44] and obtaining only 23 seats in the Chamber of Deputies,[45] its leader Matteo Salvini maintains a loyal electorate through the motto "Italians first."[46]

Previously known as Lega Nord, LN underwent a process of ideological transformation after Salvini became leader in 2013, shifting the party into the far-right nationalist party of today.[47] This transformation led to the endorsement of anti-Europeanism sentiments, anti-immigration positions, and the defence of the heterosexual family as the fundamental unit of society.[48] In this context, Salvini became the symbol of European sovereignty in Italy, with millions of followers on social media platforms where he transforms anger into public consent and uses slogans belonging to Mussolini's fascism[49] such as "So many enemies, so much honour" ("*Tanti nemici, tanto onore*").[50]

The overall anti-democratic stance taken by LN brought a shift of its electorate to the extreme right,[51] making it an appealing ally for Russia's interests in Europe. Over the last few decades, LN's voters have reflected this anti-democratic stance by expressing a loss of trust in the parliament, ineffectiveness of moderate political positions, and dissatisfaction with democratic institutions.[52] Beyond the condemnation of democracy and Europe's liberal forces, there is evidence of LN's members spreading racist and xenophobic propaganda, as well as pushing for homophobic policies in order to defend the so-called *Italian identity* (white, Catholic, heterosexual).[53] Such negative narratives foment the anti-democratic perceptions of LN's voters, which could lead to systemic discrimination against specific communities like immigrants and the LGBTQ+. This approach is aligned with Russia's strategy of political warfare which includes meddling in the internal affairs of European states to promote alliances with anti-democratic actors,[54] with the ultimate scope to cause societal divisions and disruptions at the European level.[55] In several circumstances, Salvini has publicly adulated Putin and portrayed Russia as a bastion of sovereignty and cultural conservatism against the forces of liberalism damaging Europe.[56] As such, the Russian influence over LN could potentially further radicalise the party, which would attract more extreme supporters and consequently, radicalise the existing electorate via the provision of harmful narratives. A drift towards more radical politics could be accompanied by even more stringent opposition to the sanctions regime against Russia and hinder European efforts to restrain Russian forces.

Russia's influence over LN appears to be multilayered and relies on the ideological affinities between the two sides, impacting LN's political perspectives. It also, however, rests on economic issues and a sense of shared cultural values. Although initially, Russia lacked a declared line of influence over LN, the Kremlin has often shown its intent and capability to be allied with

Salvini's party. For instance, Moscow's media outlets echoed Salvini's complaints against the West's alleged anti-Russian policies.[57] Russian officials hosted LN members in Crimea, and Salvini, together with other LN members, met representatives of United Russia in Moscow, including President Vladimir Putin.[58] Consequently, what enabled the establishment of a more overt Russian influence over LN was the political coordination agreement signed between United Russia and LN in 2017.[59] This case study argues that the combination of veiled and official relationships established between the two sides led to this act of political agreement and ideological understanding. Valid for five years and automatically renewable, the content of this agreement relies on ten essential points, and it is based on the principles of state sovereignty, mutual respect, and mutual non-interference.[60] The parties agreed to organise bilateral and multilateral events, exchange information, and contribute to the unification of all forces in defending traditional values.[61] This agreement formalised the bonds between the two parties and brought advantages to both. On the one hand, it allowed Moscow to assume a more decisive role within Italy and the geopolitical strategies of the EU, where all countries must agree to maintain the embargo against a third-party country like Russia.[62] On the other, it made LN Russia's supporter and guardian of the economic interests of those Italian companies counting on the possibility of trading with Russia.[63] Therefore, this agreement demonstrates the interconnection between the two parties' political and economic interests, which has turned LN into a more fertile ground for Russian influence.

Particularly, these influences emerged through the involvement and relationships established between a few personalities close to LN and associated with the Kremlin, such as Gianluca Savoini, Konstantin Malofeev, and Aleksey Komov.[64] Savoini is Salvini's spokesperson assigned to strengthen the ties with the Kremlin and increase LN's visibility, without ever being a party member.[65] Malofeev is a Russian oligarch and businessman who has joined Aleksandr Dugin, philosopher of the modern Russian right, to gauge European far-right interests in collaborating with Russia.[66] Finally, Komov is Malofeev's associate dedicated to nurturing relationships with European conservatives through participation in relevant events (such as LN's congress where Salvini became the party secretary in 2013) and organisations linked as evidence of the intent to strengthen the Kremlin-LN collaboration.[67] What is peculiar is that most of the profiles mentioned in this case study do not hold official political positions but are close to the ruling elites in Russia or LN.[68]

Together with LN's representatives, Savoini created the Lombardy-Russia Cultural Association (ACLR) in 2014, intended to convey Putin's worldview based on the cornerstones of identity, sovereignty and tradition, while developing trade agreements between Italian companies and Russia.[69] This entity is important to illustrate Russia's influence over LN for three reasons. First, Komov was elected honorary president of the ACLR,[70] which suggests the intent of officialising the collaboration with the Kremlin. Second, this type of entity is not legally obliged to publicise its financial reports, so it is unclear if ACLR may have received money from Russian individuals.[71] Third, ACLR has openly supported Russia's politics by justifying Crimea's annexation and by condemning economic sanctions through online publications and physical demonstrations, often organised with the Russian Embassy in Rome and the Russian Consulate General in Milan.[72] Additionally, the ACLR and LN are headquartered in the same building in Milan[73]. To further promote ACLR's goals and their engagement within it, Malofeev, Dugin, and Savoini have also contributed to fostering the Kremlin-LN relationship by disseminating online propaganda through conservative websites like Katehon.[74] Referred by Dugin as an informational initiative of pro-Russian nature,[75] the think-tank Katehon presents numerous articles proclaiming the collaboration between the Kremlin and LN, praising the leadership of Putin and Salvini and promoting conservative values.[76] Savoini appeared among Katehon's contributors, along with Alessandro Fiore, son of FN leader Roberto Fiore, and he was often interviewed on topics related to the Kremlin-LN relationship.[77]

Similar to ACLR's mandate, the organisation Russian Centre of Science and Culture (*Rossotrudnichestvo*) has facilitated Russia's influence over LN by connecting like-minded politicians and diplomats committed to forging closer cooperation between Russia and LN. "Rossotrudnichestvo is "a leading Russian agency whose main mission is to strengthen Russia's humanitarian influence in the world",[78] and it is represented in 80 different countries.[79] While the organisation officially organises cultural events and language courses, the ultimate goal is to influence public opinion outside Russia. Both ACLR and the Russian Centre of Science and Culture represent examples of Russian soft power aimed to consolidate the Italian far-right's efforts to promote pro-Russian views.[80] All of these references show how Russia's influence on LN emerged in an existing pro-Russian environment, in which key figures connected to the party and the Kremlin acted to build relationships and to create structures designed to further Russia's political influence. These key figures have also attempted to promote

economic interests favouring both the Kremlin and LN's members and voters. For instance, Savoini and Claudio D'Amico opened the consultancy agency Orion in Russia with the goal of expanding the network of Italian anti-sanction companies, and several Italian business leaders voting for LN pushed to maintain trade operations with Russia.[81] For these reasons, Salvini has always advocated for stopping the Western sanctions against Russia, citing the adverse implications on the Italian economy. Although LN has declared its intention to protect the Ukrainian population, the party has not changed its position against the economic sanctions for Russia. [82] The potential financial influence of Russia on LN goes beyond these sanctions, as investigations were conducted into the meeting that occurred at the Metropol Hotel in Moscow, where Russian and Italian counterparts – including Savoini – allegedly agreed to a financial scheme supporting LN's political campaign.[83] This was to be directed through an oil trade agreement and illicitly directed towards LN.[84] The Italian court later exonerated Savoini and the other Italians involved, as the oil sale did not take place.[85] Despite this, the investigation suggests the existence of intent and capability for Russia to promote financial influence to facilitate local political goals supporting its interests,[86] and proves the interconnection between political and financial influences in this context. With the United Russia-LN arrangement still valid today, the parties' intention to collaborate is plausible, and it raises questions about where these influences may lead considering the current Russian military invasion of Ukraine, and the recognition of Russia as an actor that sponsors terrorism according to the European Parliament.[87]

In addition to what was previously discussed, the ideological affinities between Putin's Russia and LN have facilitated the emergence of indirect political and cultural influences, leading to discriminatory discourse, borderline content, and ultimately, violence towards specific communities. A great example is Russia's and LN's anti-gender narratives as they directly pinpoint their ideological affinity to encourage the spread of harmful narratives. It is known that individuals like Dugin, Malofeev, and Komov are actively involved in anti-gender organisations, such as the World Congress of Families (WCF), and have operated to find new allies at the European level.[88] The cooperation with WCF enables the Russian government to act through the local proxy actors and seemingly hide behind an alliance of individuals with similar religious and ideological convictions.[89] On its side, LN is closely allied with the anti-gender network that politically mobilises conservative and pro-life organisations to undermine LGBTQ+ rights.[90] For instance, LN supported the Eighteenth WCF conference taking place in Verona

in 2019 through the endorsement of the then–LN government ministers – Salvini as Minister of the Interior, Lorenzo Fontana as Minister for Family and Disabilities, and Marco Bussetti as Minister for Education – to reinforce the party's position around the natural patriarchal family as the fundamental unit of society.[91] This furthers Russia's end goal of dividing the European member states' opinions on LGBTQ+ issues and leveraging the erosion of the common understanding of fundamental rights and protection of minorities.[92]

LN reveals its ambivalence towards violence through the spread of discriminatory language targeting the LGBTQ+ communities in line with Russia and through the normalisation of harmful narratives and stigmatisation of the *othering*.[93] On the one hand, LN supports individuals and entities that are evidently homophobic and spread offensive narratives.[94] On the other, it shares anti-LGBTQ+ messages, which may not be openly insulting but convey discriminatory opinions and depict the LGBTQ+ community as *other* compared to the community of white, cisgender, heterosexual males used as the basis of LN's nationalist discourse.[95] For instance, Salvini commented on the anti-LGBTQ+ law proposed by Hungarian President Victor Orbán as the liberty of any state to decide on its own school, university organisation, and justice system, while the EU criticised it as a discriminatory regulation.[96] More recently, LN representatives confirmed that Salvini had a conversation with the former paratrooper commander Roberto Vannacci about his book *"The World Back to Front,"* where, among other derogatory messages, he makes homophobic remarks.[97] According to sources, LN representatives have defended Vannacci's right to express his views through his book.[98]

Regarding the use of discriminatory language, LN's pro-family stance is expressed through Salvini and other LN representatives' statements about the necessity of a child to have a mother and a father, which must be reflected in a school education dedicated to fostering the idea of so-called natural family.[99] Beyond the pro-family stance, there are also examples of LN delegates directly spreading derogatory messages against LGBTQ+ people. In relation to the 2015 Gay Pride of Milan, LN members Massimiliano Bastoni and Luca Lepore stated that the city would be the "depressing stage for a few thousand frustrated people, victims of nature's aberrations."[100] In 2018, during a radio show, LN's former municipal councillor in Verona, Alberto Zelger, asserted that "gays are a disaster for the reproduction and conservation of the species."[101] Even though the city council distanced itself from Zelger's remark, it appears he conveyed the opinion

shared by other LN members at the time.[102] These harmful narratives are well aligned with those shared by the Kremlin, which, for instance, released a pro-constitutional reform video to show that a child could be adopted by a same-sex couple if the proposed amendment to article 72 of the Russian Constitution – which defines marriage as a union between a man and a woman – was not accepted.[103]

Russia's efforts to target LGBTQ+ people by normalising harmful narratives lie at the heart of political homophobia connected to its moral sovereignty, as opposed to the decadent West.[104] At the same time, Salvini's narrative around the demographic decline fits into this worldview which also includes Putin's narrative of connecting homosexuality with paedophilia.[105] Perceived symbiosis between the two augments a political and cultural alliance and understanding.[106] The alliance helps increase the risks of violence towards the "others" in Italy.[107] Since 2015, LN has denied LGBTQ+ rights by opposing the implementation of bills on same-sex unions and homophobic violence[108] while changing LGBTQ+-inclusive laws.[109] In 2019, Interior Minister Salvini deleted *parent 1* and *parent 2* from ID documents to restore the traditional *mother* and *father*, and LN is prone to block LGBTQ+-friendly initiatives across Italy such as introducing sex and gender education in school curricula.[110] More recently, Italian far-right parties, including LN, voted against the legislative bill known as the Ddl Zan[111], which aimed to make violence against LGBTQ+ people and disabled people, as well as misogyny, a hate crime.[112] The European Parliament condemned Italy for its anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric,[113] which is aligned with the poor ranking position of Italy for the achieved LGBTQ+ rights (34th out of 49 European countries).[114] Following the ban of the Ddl Zan, hate speech has remained common, even among politicians, and anti- LGBTQ+ hate crimes have continued with physical threats and violence.[115] In 2021, the leading Italian LGBTQ+ association Arcigay recorded 126 incidents of homo-transphobic hatred reported by the mass media,[116] while the project Chronicles of Ordinary Homophobia recorded 70 cases of homophobic violence, consisting of single attacks, multiple attacks (targeting several people together), and murders.[117]

Case Study 2: Pro-Russian Hacking Collectives and Italian Far-Right

As one of the global leading actors in cyberspace, Russia is more than capable of exerting its influence through the leverage of cyber means.[118] However, Russian

cyber policy responds to crises and emerging opportunities, making Russia's cyber approach mostly tactical.[119] This case study explores the cyber influence that Russia indirectly exerts upon the Italian far-right milieu, taking FN and its sympathisers, for example, through the ideologically motivated cyberattacks of a decentralised network of malicious actors. Additionally, this case assesses the risks of online violence and online radicalisation into violent extremism stemming from such cyber influence. Different studies have shown the direct harm of cyberattacks on people and consequent societal impacts,[120] while multi-stakeholder fora agree on the risks of harmful content and online radicalisation leading to offline violence.[121] In such an intertwined world, Russia's influence through cyber means should not be underestimated given its advanced cyber capabilities of delivering cyberattacks affecting both civilian critical infrastructure and military targets and relying on an expert range of cyber actors providing cyber tools and carrying out cyber operations, such as branches of the Russian army and secret service, private companies, and network of hackers and cybercriminal groups.[122]

In this chapter, FN's supporters are used as an example of far-right actors because of their tendency towards a neo-fascist, ultra-nationalist and conservative ideology, often supported by acts of violence. For instance, back in 2015, eighteen members of FN were accused of serious bodily harm, preparation of explosives and aggravated domestic violence.[123] It is thus clear that FN relies on an extreme right-wing and violent electorate, and its members are accused of homophobic political campaigns[124] and recurrence of violence during demonstrations.[125] Due to FN's fascist and racist narratives and incitement to violence, Facebook removed the profiles of administrators of several pages connected to the party, classifying it as a hate organisation.[126]

The involvement of FN in this analysis is also due to its pro-Russian stance. Since 2015, FN is openly supportive of Russia, defined by Fiore as the "third Rome,"[127] and it has facilitated Italian investments in Crimea by organising several business trips.[128] Some of the most known Italian foreign fighters present in Ukraine, but fighting on the Russian side, like Andrea Palmeri, Riccardo Cocco,[129] and Alessandro Bertolini,[130] are former members or sympathisers of FN, which is indicative of the inclination towards violence among FN's voters. Between 2014 and 2016, roughly 50 to 60 Italian foreign fighters were present in Ukraine, while currently, the number has dropped to fourteen.[131] The majority of the Italian

extreme-right foreign fighters have been in Ukraine since 2014, and most deployed on the Russian side of the conflict.[132]

In May 2022, the pro-Russian hacking collective Killnet launched a series of DDoS[133] attacks against the websites of several Italian institutions, such as the Senate, the National Health Institute, and the Ministry of Defence, making them temporarily unreachable.[134] According to the hackers' Telegram channels, these attacks were delivered to punish Italy's opposition to the Russian military invasion of Ukraine.[135] Although these attacks did not bring any serious implications, as the websites were offline for a few hours,[136] Killnet's success was to set a fierce narrative about the war in Ukraine and amplify it through its cyberattacks.[137] Known as hack-for-hire cybercriminals, Killnet became openly vocal in backing Russia's offensive when the war started. The group's goal was to damage Western governments for their absolute support of Ukraine and anti-Russian sentiments.[138] Through a combination of their technological skills and ideological beliefs, Killnet launched ideologically motivated cyberattacks to further Russia's interests even though there are no signs of direct control from Russia.[139] This is aligned with Russia's cyber strategy of leveraging cyberattacks from non-state actors claiming to act on its behalf, while the Kremlin neither contradicts these claims nor intervenes to stop such cyberattacks.

Additionally, disinformation on the war in Ukraine has been disseminated on Italian broadcasting shows by hosting guests like Nadana Fridrikhson – a Kremlin delegate – who asserts Ukraine's "Nazi problem" and denies Russian involvement in the civilian massacre of Bucha, raising the percentage of Italians who do not believe the media on Ukraine.[140] Therefore, the ideological nature of the cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns turns them into force multipliers of political and cultural influence, which are indirectly used by Russia to disseminate pro-Russian values, particularly pro-war discourse. This suggests that the threat of ideologically motivated cyberattacks should not be devalued as unrealistic,[141] particularly in a pro-Russian ecosystem like the Italian far-right milieu.

What this case aims to determine is the potential presence of Russia's influence over the Italian far-right milieu through Killnet's cyberattacks and online activities by reflecting on the example of FN's community. Despite the lack of direct Russian influence over FN through cyber means, this case points out similarities and overlap between FN supporters online and pro-Russian hackers that suggest a growing trend of indirect influences in cyberspace among these

groups, notably the Italian far-right milieu and pro-Russian hacking collectives. With a focus on pro-war discourse, the case analyses the content of public Telegram channels, which are the go-to place for recruiting, seeking donations, and inciting violence against either the Russian or Ukrainian side of the war.[142]

Firstly, this part of the study is based on the content analysis of channels We Are Killnet, Legion, and two other hacker groups or individuals connected to Killnet – HackBeregini and NoName057(16). There are many smaller groups connected to Killnet and Legion that aim to amplify Killnet's messages, while other private channels are used to manage operational activities.[143] All these channels disseminate pro-war content, strongly oppose "Russophobes" with insulting and derisive comments, and either claim or praise the cyberattacks delivered against those actors resisting Russia, declaring them cyber war. These hacking collectives fall within the category of politically motivated hackers, who use aggressive expressions, engage with audiences through various communication channels, and are likely to add photos, videos, and hyperlinks to state their beliefs.[144]

Secondly, Italian far-right activities on Telegram from a larger study[145] have been examined, focusing on the channels related to FN. The FN channel praises the Kremlin and Putin, describing him as the guardian of traditional values and a victim of hate from the West. Several posts claim the need to end economic sanctions against Russia, with organised protests and petitions, and support Russia's geopolitical ambitions over Ukraine. Similar content was shared also by the official Facebook account before being suspended,[146] and now it is shared by the affiliated page Radio Forza Nuova. The other selected channels, like La Terza Roma, share far-right and neo-fascist sentiments combined with anti-NATO, anti-EU, and pro-Russia values to different extents, representing a fertile ground to further Russia's influence over the Italian far-right milieu. The online Italian far-right ecosystem is used for explicitly fascist propaganda, creating cyber-communities of debate and mobilising a political cause,[147] like Russia's aspirations over Ukraine. These channels frame pro-Russia discourse to further pre-existing narratives about the West, claiming that the war is caused by the aggression of NATO and Western governments. As such, FN voters online appear to be prone to spread dissatisfaction about the status quo and incite voters to acts of violence, for instance by disseminating information on the Russo-Ukrainian conflict,[148] often through the posting of borderline content. In this context, FN is used as an example to investigate the topics discussed by the wider Italian far-right community online, overlapping with pro-Russian discourse. The fact that all

these Telegram channels are public suggests the intent of Killnet's community and the Italian far-right community, beyond only FN voters, on disseminating pro-Russian propaganda and increasing societal tensions, which indirectly intensifies Russia's influence and the risks of further violent extremist ideologies online. An additional analysis of the indirect influences is presented in the following paragraphs, outlining some of the potential consequences of such influences.

The final step of this analysis is identifying overlaps between Italian far-right and pro-Russian hackers' channels through mentions and hyperlinks. Previous studies confirm that hyperlinks can be considered indicators of closeness, traces of communication, and means for reciprocal help in obtaining public attention.[149] Following a content analysis of these public channels, the case identified overlaps between four channels, that either openly support FN or far-right values, share pro-Russian and pro-war content, and mention Killnet's channels and news about its cyberattacks as information resources or means to defend the Kremlin. For instance, the channel Gruppo di Sostegno FLN re-shared the news about Killnet's cyberattacks, claiming they were a lie from the Italian government aimed to make Russia the usual public enemy. Few of these channels, like Saker Italia Notizie and Donbas Italia, forbid users to insult Russia and targeted specifically Italian audiences in favour of Russia's invasion of Ukraine by echoing Russian propaganda and by praising the pro-Russian hackers' operations. There are also attempts from these hackers to incite conservative Italians to favour Russia. NoName057(16) posted about the positive reactions from Italian users who actively protested against the "Russophobic policies of their country" and fomenting their dissatisfaction. Although some channels do not openly mention FN, they amplify alike views shared by extreme channels like La Terza Roma, intensifying the influence of pro-Russian views on the Italian far-right milieu.

Another element reinforcing the existing pro-Russian ecosystem is the reference to Italian foreign fighters in some of the channels mentioned previously. Particularly, few of the pro-Russian hackers mention the Telegram channel of Vittorio Nicola Rangeloni as a reliable source of information regarding the war in Ukraine. Even if the role of Rangeloni in Ukraine is unclear, he refers to the Russian invasion as the liberation of a population, and his closeness to the Italian neo-fascist environment is proved by his re-sharing of posts from La Terza Roma. Similarly, few of these channels mention the Facebook account of Andrea Palmeri, fighting against the Ukrainian government since 2014 and FN supporter,

who shares updates about the ongoing war and amplifies the conservative views of La Terza Roma to an audience of more than 5,000 followers. These information overlaps suggest that the Italian far-right milieu, relying on the example of Forza Nuova's supporters online and the Killnet's community, share ideological affinities on the Ukraine war and indirectly influence each other by amplifying pro-Russian propaganda. As such, this strengthens Russia's political and cultural influence over the Italian far right on divisive topics, like the war in Ukraine.

Besides representing a breeding ground for pro-Russian and violent extremist ideologies, these public channels could represent a learning environment for far-right audiences. Taking the example of the FN community, the exposure to the content shared by Killnet may be compelling thanks to the pro-Russian frame, and regardless of the cyber skills needed. Therefore, this case suggests that the pro-Russian hacking collectives could recruit far-right users into delivering cyberattacks to further Russia's interests, and indirectly create a logistical influence favouring Russia. This logistical influence can be established through the cybercrime as a service (CaaS) model, where cybercriminals are hired to attack specific targets or sell cybercriminal tools, infrastructure, and services to the highest bidder,[150] and through cyber military exercises, where users are trained to deliver cyberattacks. While it is difficult to find evidence of CaaS without accessing the dark web and deploying investigative tools, cybercriminals use public communication channels to organise military cyber exercises aimed at recruiting users to join their criminal activities and eventually contribute to their cause. Through its Telegram channel, Killnet communicated about the organisation of cyber military exercises and encouraged its followers to train their cyber capabilities over a list of targets,[151] including Italian infrastructures. In the connected channel Legion, the attack instructions are more detailed, administrators assent to launch attacks, and recruitment posts for new hacktivists are released.[152]

Considering the number of followers these channels have, the spread of their narratives is impactful. With its 11,494 followers, Legion repeatedly called hacktivists to attack Italy because of its opposition to the war in Ukraine, while NoName057(16) shared calls to join their DDoS project with 46,200 subscribers.[153] These groups look both for expert programmers and users with low-cyber skills eager to join their cause,[154] as in these channels it is possible to find tutorials explaining how to deliver DDoS attacks.[155] Particularly, DDoS attacks can be an engaging start for nontechnical users, as they can be performed

through the use of various instruments that can be rented or obtained for free from various attacker groups online.[156] Recently, security researchers detected the Wagner ransomware, a ransomware attack likely targeting Russians and demanding to join the private military corporation Wagner Group, instead of asking for money.[157] Despite the lack of information about ransomware, this example shows how easily malicious cyber tools can be delivered by users with different cyber skills to convey a political message, and potentially recruit new affiliates.

All of the aforementioned examples point to the intent and capabilities of the pro-Russian hacking community to exert logistical influence over an audience's keenness in acting to promote Russia's interests and carelessness regarding the harm caused, like FN voters. The goal of using cyberspace as an attack medium to extend influence and cause harm is aligned with Russia's cyber strategy. While a deeper analysis of the engagement between these communities could provide further evidence of intent, the Italian far-right community could join cybercriminal activities like DDoS campaigns, considering the limited technical skills needed and the availability of training materials offered by Killnet's community. Russia's lack of actions in avoiding pro-Russia-motivated cyberattacks and potential cyber offensive training of far-right audiences raises high concerns about the offline implications of cyberattacks and the likelihood of leveraging cyber means to radicalise and recruit more violent extremist users. Although only a few states currently have the cyber capabilities to cause severe disruptions and physical damage,[158] this case presents the adverse impacts of hacking collectives' operations and the potential connection with the Kremlin. With a growing attack surface, exploitable vulnerabilities, and the weaponisation of cyber tools, the likelihood of ideologically motivated cyberattacks intensifying pro-Russian values, and, indirectly, Russia's influence is a realistic threat to consider with particular attention to increasing far-right activities online.

Existing Measures

As was shown, one of the root causes of Italy's far-right milieu's expansion is the fact that extremist thoughts and ideas are now freely expressed by different "mainstream" political actors. This is happening even though such statements and utterances are effectively unconstitutional. Indeed, article XII of the Italian Constitution affirms that "The reorganization, in any form, of the dissolved fascist

party is prohibited. As an exception to article 48, temporary limitations on the right to vote and eligibility for the leaders responsible for the fascist regime are established by law for no longer than five years from the entry into force of the Constitution.[159] Additionally, the Scelba Law prohibits the reconstitution of fascist parties and regulates the procedures to dissolve such groups, including punishing individual and collective behaviours.[160] These are part of Italy's constitutional and legislative efforts to avoid and limit the spread of neo-fascist ideologies.

Regarding Russia's leverage, as a European member state, Italy has the responsibility to limit Russia's influence through the implementation and respect of restrictive measures against it. They include visa measures and economic sanctions, such as import and export restrictions on Russia aimed to thwart its capabilities to continue the aggression.[161] Although these sanctions are designed to maximise the negative impact on Russia's economy while limiting the consequences for European countries,[162] a few Italian far-right parties like LN have continuously opposed these measures seen as damaging to the Italian economy.

As of January 2019, political parties are prohibited from receiving funding from foreign donors in light of what the Metropol deal could have led to.[163] Additionally, the European strategy includes individual sanctions targeting people supporting, financing, or implementing actions that undermine the territorial integrity and independence of Ukraine.[164] Several individuals were charged in Italy for recruiting fighters to go into Ukraine[165] and others were arrested for participating in "preordained and violent actions aimed at changing the constitutional order or violating the territorial integrity of the Ukrainian government," such as recently for the foreign fighter Alessandro Bertolini.[166]

As previously discussed, Russia exerts its influence also via the dissemination of propaganda and disinformation through media outlets. To counter this, the broadcasting activities of several Kremlin-backed disinformation outlets, like Katehon, are suspended in Europe.[167] Pro-Russian propaganda and disinformation are also widespread among online communities, where this research shows that it is often picked up by far-right users increasing the volume and risks of hate speech and radicalisation of violent extremist views.

In the case of hate speech, the Italian legal framework refers to the Mancino Law, which criminalises hate speech inciting violence and discrimination on a religious, national, and ethnic basis.[168] Civil society advocates argue the need to

expand the protected characteristics in criminal law to include protection for targeted communities,[169] like LGBTQ+ people. Although applicable media legislation prohibits all content that contains incitement to hatred and intolerant behaviours based on "differences of race, sex, religion, or nationality",[170] harmful narratives on divisive topics, like homosexual rights, continue to grow online bringing severe implications to the offline lives of targeted people. The lack of a proper and legal definition of hate crime in Italy tends to exacerbate existing tensions and does not protect the most vulnerable.[171] These concerns must be addressed offline as much as online.

Recommendations

This final section presents a few recommendations that can be adapted to the Italian context to prevent and counter the impacts of Russia's influences and the risks of violence posed by Italian far-right groups, which echo pro-Russian views and are enabled by them. These recommendations aim to respond to the threats posed by borderline content, particularly hate speech, ideologically motivated cyberattacks, and violent extremism radicalisation.

Firstly, the Italian Parliament should apply more fiercely the laws in force, particularly the Scelba Law,[172] and implement the proposed law AC 3074 aimed at introducing the new criminal offence of fascist and Nazi-fascist regime propaganda into the penal code.[173] The proposal also intervenes on current legislation regarding the performance and ostentatious use of symbols and emblems attributable to the contents and methods of the fascist and Nazi-fascists parties.[174] In this regard, FN's neo-fascist stance and its involvement in violent protests in 2021 triggered the Democratic Party to file a motion in Parliament reporting that violence "as a method of political struggle can never be tolerated" and calling for the government to dissolve the FN and all the other groups that refer to fascism.[175] However, the application of the Scelba law is often challenged by the Constitutional freedom of expression, leveraged by the far-right parties to oppose the Democratic Party's motion.[176]

Secondly, the Italian Ministry of Education should be looking into including cybersecurity skills and training in high-schools to foster public resilience and online critical thinking within the younger generations. This could lead to the creation of an educational curricula, then translated into a nation-state implementation program which focuses on enhancing digital and media literacy

to identify pro-Russian fake news, as well as on digital resilience and cybersecurity skills to better understand the cyber threats posed by pro-Russian actors and their offline implications. The educational curricula could be developed with the support of the National Cybersecurity Agency the national cybersecurity authority aimed to protect the national interests in the field of cybersecurity, safeguard security and resilience in cyberspace, prevent cyberattacks and promote awareness. This workstream would require the collaboration with a network of civil society organisations that could bring their expertise in protecting and empowering targeted communities, like LGBTQ+ people. Through this type of collaboration, LGBTQ+ individuals could acquire the knowledge and skills to understand the cyber threats and attackers they face, learn how to recognise a cyberattack, defend themselves, and report any violent actions.

Thirdly, policymakers, practitioners, and tech companies should promote wider use of the redirect method to reduce the spread of harmful content contextually relevant to national growing threats, like the search for pro-Russia and pro-war narratives, hate speech, and local far right content that could lead users to further radicalisation. As an open-source methodology deploying targeted advertising to connect people looking online for harmful content with constructive alternative messages,[177] this method can redirect users searching for pro-war content or far-right supporters to reliable resources, alternative narratives, and non-extremist links, reducing the volume of far-right[178] and pro-Russia propaganda shared. To ensure its effectiveness, this method should be applied to the Italian cultural and political context to address harmful and extreme content searched by local far-right groups, which often echo pro-Russian narratives, as this research shows. Additionally, this method could also be used to redirect users searching for cybercrime-related content to material providing concrete examples of the adverse implications that cyberattacks and cybercrime cause in the offline world. As most of the cybercrime research may happen through dark web sites, the method would require specific plugins and technical changes to effectively work on dark web browsers, like the Tor browser, and bypass anonymous proxies or encrypted tunnels that are not normally set up for clear web sites.

Additionally, Italy must implement the Digital Service Act, designed to improve the removal of illegal content and protect online users' fundamental rights,[179] as incitement of terrorist activity, hate speech, and violence are considered inadmissible content.[180] The most recent measure is the Terrorist Content Online

Regulation, which obliges hosting service providers offering their services within the EU to take down terrorist information from the Internet or restrict access to it within one hour of receiving an order from authorities.[181] While these European measures focus mostly on terrorist content and require application in Italy, national procedures and legislation need to be implemented and strengthened to combat hate crime and hate speech.

Lastly, further research based on the content and thematic analysis of public/private Telegram channels related to the pro-Russian hacking collectives and the Italian far-right community is needed to understand the growing trend of influence between these two groups and assess what the realistic consequences are. The content and thematic analysis on similar groups should be carried out also in mainstream platforms such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), on alternative platforms, like Discord, Gab, and MeWe, to name a few, and in dark web forums and websites. Particular attention is required for the analysis of ideologically motivated cyberattacks delivered by far-right groups in Europe, and of the influence of Russia's advanced cyber capabilities. It is essential to understand the nature of this threat by analysing the volume of far-right ideological cyberattacks, their victims, modus operandi and impacts to assess the degree of connection between online and offline violence.[182] This research would be insightful for P/CVE programs, as it could shed light on the interconnection between the malicious hacking community and the far-right community: on one side, it could analyse the factors that push violent extremist actors to join cyber operations and deliver cyberattacks; on the other, it could explore the factors that may lead the radicalisation process of cyber attackers[183] to far-right violent extremism. Given the Kremlin's involvement in several known malicious cyber operations, it would be worthy to assess the influence of Russia on far-right ideologically motivated cyberattacks, particularly if they target European institutions, causing further political, economic, and societal tensions.

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https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/fratelli-d-italia/. Official party's website: https://www.fratelli-italia.it/.

[17] Lega is a far-right political party supporting populist and Eurosceptic positions. It is the longest-running party in the entire Italian political panorama, as it was founded in 1991 by Umberto Bossi to bring together all the autonomist electoral associations of northern Italy (previously it was denominated Lega Nord). In 2017, Lega per Salvini Premier was created as direct political descendant of Lega Nord, with Matteo Salvini as secretary and leader. In the 2022 political elections, even if Lega lost several consensuses obtaining not even 9% of the votes, it joined the centre-right coalition led by Meloni's government. Source: "Lega Nord", Treccani, last accessed November 2, 2023, https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/lega-nord/. Stefano Pagliarini, "La Lega di Salvini fa il pieno di parlamentari ed è in continua mutazione: da antieuro a partito di lotta e di Governo" [Salvini's League is full of parliamentarians and is constantly changing: from anti-euro to a party of struggle and government], Today, 18 July 2021, https://www.today.it/politica/lega-matteo-salvini.html. Official party's website: https://legaonline.it/.

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