Transnational populist publics in Europe and the United States

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Abstract

International cooperation between radical right populists has escalated over the last decade. Parties and leaders worldwide are increasingly establishing formal and informal connections with likeminded actors. Although we know something about the role of parties and movements in transnationalisation processes, we know little about the role of active publics – that is, those individuals who are highly aware of, and involved in, a particular problem, and who take communicative action, especially over social media. My PhD project addresses this research question: *how do online active publics of the populist radical right (PRR) contribute to its transnationalisation?* Building upon the work of those authors who have identified transnational political users among PRR parties' active publics, my research seeks to understand what their role is in the construction of a shared political and communicative framework that goes beyond national borders. It draws upon key concepts of the literature on transnational social movements to study the transnationalisation of the online publics' discourses and mobilisation. By employing quantitative text analysis and social network analysis of Facebook and YouTube data as well as conducting interviews with party officials, it compares the active publics of four PRR parties: Rassemblement National (France), Fratelli d'Italia and Lega (Italy) and the Republican Party (United States). The analysis will shed light on the transnational interactions among online publics, the prevalent issues and frames that are debated transnationally, and the relationship between PRR parties and their online publics.

Keywords: Populist radical right, transnationalisation, online publics, social media

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In September 2023, Marine Le Pen, leader of the French Rassemblement National (RN), was the guest of honour at the rally of the Italian PRR party, the Lega (League). Introduced by the League's secretary, Matteo Salvini, Le Pen addressed the Italian audience in advance of the 2024 European Parliament elections, that the two parties will approach once more as allies. She said: 'We in France and you in Italy are engaged in the *same fight*. […] We defend our families, children, and history against the threat of *wokism'* (Le Pen, 2023, *emphasis added*). Four months earlier, the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) took place in Budapest. Traditionally hosted by the American Conservative Union across the United States, a special edition of the meeting between right-wing nationalist activists from the US and beyond had been organised in Hungary in May 2023. Many speakers – party leaders, government officials, elected representatives, and journalists - from all over the world took turns on stage: Hungary's PM Viktor Orbán, the leader of Spanish VOX Santiago Abascal, former US Republican senator Rick Santorum, the president of Rassemblement National Jordan Bardella, and many others, while a video message was sent by former FOX News host Tucker Carlson. As Orbán thundered against the alleged threat of migration and 'gender ideology', speakers and activists were welcomed at the Budapest's Bálna (whale) conference centre by an eloquent gateway declaring a '*no-woke* zone' while a festoon was trimmed with the words: 'No country for *woke* men'.

There is a common thread running from Pontida to Budapest, that touches Washington, Madrid, Jerusalem, New Delhi, and more. It tells us that today populist radical right (PRR) parties and leaders are increasingly collaborating at the international level as never before. Contemporary PRR parties are among the most influential political actors in their countries. Once perceived as political pariahs, they have gradually improved their electoral performances and entered governments, and their ideas have become increasingly normalized (Mudde 2019; Castelli Gattinara 2020). Moreover, PRR parties are not isolated anymore. Over the last decade, they have started to cooperate internationally. So far, the literature has largely focused on the internal supply-side dimension of this cooperation, which refers to the parties' choices in terms of international ties and alliances. McDonnell and Werner (2019) studied the strategies and the motivations that guide these parties in choosing to form alliances at the European Parliament (EP) with likeminded actors across the continent. Both de Cleen (2017) and Moffitt (2017) have focused on the theoretical implications of populist parties and leaders attempting to build a transnational people. However, little attention has

been devoted to the people itself, that is, to the publics of PRR actors, the common discourses which emerge among them, and the connections these individuals establish across countries. My research focuses therefore on the active publics among whom the increasingly transnational messages of PRR parties and leaders resonate. I ask the following research question:

RQ: *How are the online active publics of the PRR contributing to its transnationalisation?*

Overall, my PhD project looks at the role played by the online active publics of PRR parties in the construction of a transnational far-right. Those who receive political communication from leaders and parties are not exclusively passive listeners anymore, especially on social media (Bruns and Highfield 2015, Blumler 2016). The active publics' activities are thus to be considered as part of the construction of meaning that is behind a negotiated – and increasingly shared – transnational identity among radical right populists across the world. The theoretical framework guiding my analysis will draw upon the literature on PRR parties, transnational social movements, and political communication. I will analyse the users that gravitate around four cases of PRR: the Republican Party (GOP) in the United States, Rassemblement National (RN) in France, Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) and the Lega in Italy. The research will employ a mixed methodology which includes quantitative text analysis, social network analysis, and interviews with PRR actors involved in communications. The study focuses extensively on the online dimension not only because the Internet favours transnational connections between radical right actors (Caiani and Kroll 2015), but also because it is believed to be the prominent arena in which transnationalisation would develop at the level of the publics (Moffitt 2017). While offline transnationalisation has been studied with reference to PRR political elites (Macklin 2013, McDonnell and Werner 2019), the scholarship on transnational grassroot actions of the far-right shows the crucial role of online connections as communicative and organisational tools (Caiani and Kroll 2015). Thus, if the active publics for the PRR contribute to transnationalisation, we would find evidence studying the online, rather than the offline.

My research makes several contributions to the study of contemporary PRR parties and their online milieux. First, it enhances our understanding of the role that users and communities of users are playing in the transnationalisation of the PRR on social media platforms. It does so by investigating those issues, targets, forms of mobilisation and organisation that are building bridges between different national publics of PRR actors. Second, it helps us explore the

extent to which we can conceive of transnationalisation dynamics – such as the diffusion of frames – as a collaborative project between party elites and their online active publics. In the next two sections, I set out the theoretical background to my study. I then present my cases and the proposed methodology to answer my question. In the conclusion, I discuss the significance and potential implications of the project.

Transnational Populist Publics for Transnational Populist Parties?

PRR parties like the French Rassemblement National and the Italian Lega are considered to adopt nativism, authoritarianism, and populism as their three ideological pillars (Mudde 2019). They see the prosperity and sovereignty of a virtuous national people as being threatened by 'bad elites' – e.g., politicians, the media – and 'dangerous others' – e.g., immigrants (Mudde 2007, Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015). For years, PRR parties failed to cooperate internationally due to competing domestic agendas, personal animosities between leaders, or conflicting ideological positions (McDonnell and Werner 2019). However, this is no longer the case. Several authors have observed how contemporary PRR actors are increasingly engaging outside their nation-states (Zuquete 2015, McDonnell and Werner 2019). As McDonnell and Werner (2019: 197) pointed out: 'Where once they shunned one another, most [radical right populists] are now happy to parade their affinities and shared missions'. This tendency is reflected in the formal alliances at the European Parliament and in more informal connections that are observable worldwide.

PRR parties increasingly cast themselves as part of a 'global political wave, rather than simply acting alone on national stages' (McDonnell and Werner 2019: 219). Some authors have identified a transnational dimension for radical right populists (de Cleen 2017, Moffitt 2017, McDonnell and Werner 2019). Drawing upon Rucht's (1999) discussion of transnational social movements, we might conceptualise this dimension as concerning at least four aspects: issues, targets, mobilisation, organisation. It is worth noting that when one of these takes on a transnational dimension, the others can remain national: i.e., we may observe a national coalition of actors against a transnational target (ibidem). In other words, the transnational level does not replace the local or national arena. In the case of the populist radical right, some issues – e.g., immigration – and targets, such as supranational bodies, increasingly favour transnational interactions between PRR actors (Caiani and Kroll 2015, Froio and Ganesh 2019). We also observe some forms of transnational mobilisation that are more or less institutionalised, and a few tentative transnational organisations, especially

among PRR party youth wings, the party's auxiliary organisations in which young members 'gradually grow acquainted with political and party life' (Hooghe et al. 2004: 196). However, while we know something about the role of parties and leaders in transnationalisation processes, we do not know much about how unorganised individuals that exist around and interact with PRR parties – their *people* – are contributing to transnationalisation.

In the transnational dimension, the people to which PRR parties and leaders appeal are not only a national people. Rather, they are increasingly framed as a transnational entity – that is, as a 'European', or 'Judeo-Christian', or 'Western' people. In this dimension, PRR actors configure an antagonism between the transnational people who resist multiculturalism, and global menaces – be those 'bad elites' or 'dangerous others' – that are undermining their identity (de Cleen 2017). These transnational claims need to resonate with an international audience in order to gauge acceptance, and the Internet is the fastest, cheapest, and most 'viral' way for these claims to spread across borders (Moffitt 2017: 419). However, this online audience cannot be conceived of as just a passive receiver of claims coming from above. In the context of the fourth age of political communication (Blumler 2016) – that is characterised by both the abundance of communication and the fragmentation of the publics – the audience is no longer considered exclusively as an inactive actor targeted by political messages. Changes in communication technologies have extended the opportunities for citizens and civil society to participate in public spheres (Skoric et al. 2016, Blumler 2016, Van Aelst et al. 2017). Contextually, this has favoured the dispersion of these public spheres toward 'disparate islands of political communication' (Dahlgren 2005: 152), that are not under the complete control of the usual gatekeepers, including political parties (ibidem).

Therefore, those individuals that can be described as the *online active publics* of PRR parties might have a role in the transnationalisation of the far-right that is more or less independent from that of the parties. In Grunig's (1990) situational theory, the 'active publics' correspond to that segment of individuals who have a high awareness of the problem and who feel involved in that issue while believing that they can do something to change the situation. Active publics seek and retain information, and take action (Roser and Thompson 1995). Facilitated by digital technologies, unconnected individuals might participate in networks built around particular *issues* (Bruns and Highfield, 2015). But they might also take part of networks built around particular *organisations*, such as political parties (Gibson et al. 2016, Peña and Gold 2023). Contemporary studies on party membership and political

communication have indeed analysed 'the proliferation of alternative forms of partisan affiliation' (ibidem: 2). Communication technologies have fuelled multi-speed forms of partisan activities other than traditional dues-paying membership (Scarrow 2014). It means that parties now offer multiple ways for supporters to affiliate, and supporters can link to the party through social media or websites at low-costs or for free (ibidem). As any other forms of party membership, the online affiliation involves different levels of engagement. One among the active publics might just be following and interacting with the social media pages of a specific party to consume party information and promote party contents (Gauja and Gromping 2020), or rather being formally involved by party elites, and campaigning on behalf of the party (Gibson et al. 2016, Peña and Gold 2023). More active users are a minority of the publics who get in touch with online party communications (Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2019). However, their role is crucial to disseminate partisan messages among less active users, and ultimately to influence political elites' communications (ibidem). To sum up, social media allow for a closer interaction between the public and the party leaders, and that configures a 'broader political communication ecology' (Heft et al. 2023) that links institutionalized PRR actors to their online publics. And, most importantly, digital environments are not tied to national spheres, but they enable communication on a transnational scale (ibidem).

The transnationalisation of the PRR as a collaborative project

Through my research, I will explore how the online active publics' of PRR parties are taking part in transnationalisation using the four dimensions highlighted by Rucht (1999): issues, targets, mobilisation, and organisation. Transnationalisation is seen, at first, as the convergence of different PRR active publics' discourses and actions around shared issues and against common enemies. Moreover, it concerns the 'territorial dimension' (Caiani and Kroll 2015: 334) of the online active publics' mobilisation, that is now arguably extended to the international level. Ultimately, transnationalisation regards the organisational structure of the connections between different PRR parties' active publics across countries. By adopting common issues and frames, and connecting with likeminded others online, active publics contribute to the creation and resonance of a shared identity for the far-right. In terms of issues and targets, the anti-immigration narrative has been found as the topic which is most likely to attract a transnational audience for PRR actors (Froio and Ganesh 2019), and therefore to construct a transnational public. The study will investigate which other issues

(e.g., economy, gender) and targets are relevant in the transnational arena, and with which frames they are discussed among the active publics of different PRR parties.

As regards mobilisation and organisation, a handful of studies have identified unsystematic repertoires of grassroots actions across national boundaries in which online networks of far-right users were able to overcome language barriers and work together towards common objectives. These are related either to the spread of similar visual media, such as memes, across different national far-right communities of users (Doerr 2017, McSwiney et al. 2021), or to the online contestation and hijacking of progressive political campaigns, such as the '120 decibel campaign (120db)' that emerged in opposition to the hashtag #MeToo[1] (Knupfer et al. 2020). However, my aim is to investigate how these transnational digital actions can be understood as a *collaborative project* between party elites and their active publics. From the perspective of political organisations, the online active publics – 'the few who do most of the work' (Klinger et al. 2023: 1894) – might facilitate, intentionally or not, the diffusion of communication, also across borders. In other words, they represent an opportunity to coordinate the diffusion of particular frames across online networks (Klinger et al. 2023). In a context where decentralized digital activism acquires a crucial role for political communication, communication strategies in the online platforms can help parties to disseminate and construct shared interpretative frames, and mobilise publics also across countries (Caiani et al. 2012). I will explore (a) to what extent online active publics have an influence in shaping PRR parties' transnationalisation processes, and (b) how PRR parties strategically aim to pursue a transnational mobilization among their online active publics.

To study those, I rely on a theoretical model that considers PRR parties' characteristics to differently drive my variable of interest – transnationalisation – also among the online active publics. This is because we can conceive of parties' variegated online milieu as one of their organisational faces (Peña and Gold 2023). I considered two classic variables for PRR parties' classification (Zulianello 2020): government experiences and systemic integration. The latter generally refers to the quality of the interactions between a party and its political system: e.g., whether a party is considered as a potential ally for government by the other

[1] The 120db is an online campaign promoted by activists associated with Austrian Identitarian Movement that aimed to create online mobilization around the issue of sexual crimes committed by immigrants. The 120db has been described as an attempt at transnational network building. It allegedly advocates for women's rights in Western society – in so, echoing #MeToo – but with a strong anti-immigration frame. Thus, it ultimately hijacked the scope of #MeToo. It was initiated by a local organisation – the Austrian Identitarians – but rapidly spread transnationally through the hashtag #120db (Knupfer et al. 2020).

parties in the system and present itself as a viable coalition partner (Zulianello 2018). Both variables are related to an overarching variable, party's reputation, that is believed to influence PRR parties' decisions to form international alliances (McDonnell and Werner 2019). I also considered two additional variables to test the variance of transnationalisation processes across the PRR spectrum: the parties' ideological background, in order to better reflect the heterogeneity of contemporary far-right parties[2] (Mudde 2019), and the parties' histories of international connections, i.e., what ties they used to form. These four independent variables inform my case selection, that is discussed in the next section.

Cases and Methods

To answer my research question, I will look at the active publics of four PRR parties: the Rassemblement National in France (National Rally - RN), Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy - FdI) and the Lega (the League) in Italy, and the Republican Party in the US (GOP). The four PRR parties represent diverse cases as they aim to achieve maximum variance along relevant dimensions (Gerring 2006).

The selection builds upon the PopuList (Roodujin et al. 2023), the work of Zulianello (2020), and secondary literature on the PRR. As mentioned, I decided to maximise the differences between my cases according to their government experience, systemic integration, histories of international connections, and ideological background. Among the European right-wing populists, I selected the RN, which has never been in government, is not integrated in its political system, because of its extremist past (Zulianello 2020), and was ostracised on the international arena until recent years (McDonnell and Werner 2019). Given that most PRR parties are now integrated in their political systems (Zulianello 2020), I selected two integrated European parties that differ on the other dimensions of interest. The Lega has been in government several times, has a regionalist populist background[3], and a specific history of

[2] Contemporary far-right varies in terms of ideology. Most relevant far-right groups and parties are radical right. Differently from the extreme right they accept the essence of democracy, such as popular sovereignty, but reject some fundamental aspects of liberal democracy, such as minority rights, rule of law, and separation of powers (Mudde 2019). PRR ideology and positions are now embraced by a variegated set of parties. Alongside the typical cases of PRR, such as the League and the RN, transformed conservative parties, such as the US Republicans under Trump's leadership, or traditionally post-fascist parties, such as FdI, are now widely described as radical right and populist (Arhin et al. 2023, Vampa 2023).

[3] The League has long represented a case of 'regionalist populism' (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2005). Founded by Umberto Bossi in 1991, the initial electoral success lied on the party's ability to address two major issues: the call for autonomy of the Italian northern regions, and the anti-establishment populist sentiment against political elites (Albertazzi et al. 2018). The League has been characterised by populism since its foundation (Mudde 2007). It then turned from regionalism to nationalism after the fall of Bossi as the party leader in 2012 and the election of Matteo Salvini as the new leader in 2013.

international connections with regionalist movements, such as the Catalan movement for independence. Fratelli d'Italia had not accessed any government positions until 2022, has a post-fascist background[4], and no history of international connections. Although three of my cases are electorally successful nationalist populist parties from Western Europe, my research goes beyond the Eurocentric bias characterising the literature on the PRR (Castelli Gattinara 2020), by including the US Republican Party. Unlike the other cases, the GOP is the only one with the background of a mainstream conservative party, and turned to populist radical right positions only in recent years (Bonikowski 2019, Arhin et al. 2023). Moreover, it has regularly been involved in government, and has historical links with other conservative parties across the world.

The project will adopt a mixed methodology approach, involving quantitative text analysis and social network analysis (SNA) of YouTube and Facebook data, and interviews with PRR party officials. The study of transnational connections between far-right organised and unorganised actors through social network and content analysis of Internet data is a commonly employed methodological framework (Burris et al. 2000, O'Callaghan et al. 2013, Froio and Ganesh 2019). Caiani and Kroll (2015) have mixed the analysis of social media data and interviews to study transnational connections among the extreme-right. I will follow this methodological pathway as it allows me to explore the transnationalisation of the online active publics, their relationship with PRR parties, and the parties' communicative strategies when appealing to these transnational publics in a comprehensive framework.

I will create four distinct samples for each of my cases starting from pages and channels of the four parties (GOP, Lega, FdI, and RN), prominent party leaders and officials, and proceeding through snowball sampling. The samples will include channels and pages connected to the four parties. Through SNA, I aim to explore the international relationships of each national network through the analysis of interactions, and to identify whether we observe bridging users between different networks. This can allow me to capture the active publics' contribution in terms of their transnational mobilisation. For example, on YouTube, I can trace commenting patterns of users between channels (Mamie et al. 2021). I will be able to observe the extent to which commenting bases of PRR parties are similar across countries, and whether we can observe migration patterns among users over time – i.e., users

[4] FdI was officially founded in 2012 by Giorgia Meloni, but its ideological core can be traced back to the tradition of the post-fascist right (Vampa 2023), that in Italy was long represented by the Movimento Sociale Italiano (Italian Social Movement, MSI).

consuming and commenting videos from a nationalist populist leader (e.g., Giorgia Meloni) who end up commenting videos from likeminded leaders or parties from another country (e.g., Donald Trump).

Through quantitative text analysis of posts and comments, I will explore the issues and targets around which transnational discussions revolve across PRR active publics speaking different languages. More specifically, I plan to employ structural topic models (STM) to my corpus in order to discover – and, consequently, label – topics, and estimate the relationship of the topics to covariates, such as the type of party, or the year (Roberts et al. 2019). The challenge of modelling with a multi-lingual corpus can be addressed by using machine translation to transfer texts into a single target language and perform a joint analysis of documents instead of analysing them separately (Licht and Lind 2023).

The third step of my data collection involves face-to-face semi-structured interviews with officials from the four parties. This phase will allow me to explore the mechanisms of transnationalisation as an interaction between the parties and their online active publics. Therefore, it will give us a better understanding of transnationalisation both in terms of mobilisation and organisation. Since my research will closely look at the transnationalisation mechanisms as they take place through communication exchanges on social media, the sample will include party officials working in the sectors of campaign and communication strategies, and social media. Interviewees will be chosen in virtue of their status of key informants (della Porta 2014). I will adopt purposive sampling and a snowballing approach to contact participants from the four parties. The interviews aim to explore how parties interact with their active publics to promote a shared transnational identity, and what goals they expect to reach. Elite interviews present some challenges. Ellinas (2021) identifies access as one of the most relevant problems in researching far-right parties. PRR officials are undoubtedly an ‘hard-to-reach population’ who view academics with suspicion (ibidem: 668). However, as Art already argued, echoed by Ellinas (2021) himself, there is ‘no support for the common perception that radical right parties deny access’ (Art 2011: 26). Thus, it should not be surprising that several studies in the field of the PRR have relied on semi-structured interviews over the last few years (see also: McDonnell and Cabrera 2019, McDonnell and Werner 2019, Zulianello 2021, Ammassari 2023).

Conclusion

At a time when leaders such as Giorgia Meloni and Donald Trump are not just national political figures, but they increasingly attract international publics (McDonnell and Werner 2019), and claim to speak also for a transnational people, the study of the PRR should adopt a global perspective. Scholars have underlined the challenges and threats which are posed by populists to liberal democracy (Canovan 1999, Muller 2016). The PRR, while not rejecting the essence of democracy, is hostile to some of its fundamental aspects, such as minority rights, rule of law, and separation of powers (Mudde 2019). PRR parties exercise their power to increase the salience of certain issues on the public debate – e.g., immigration – and to influence policy changes on those matters often inducing mainstream parties to co-opt certain frames of discourse (Akkerman et al. 2016). In this context, Viktor Orbán's words at the 2023 CPAC conference are exemplary: 'Hungary is an incubator where the conservative policies of the future are being tested', he said in front of the US Republicans and their European allies. The abovementioned policy influence has thus promised to extend from the national to the transnational level, as radical right populists increasingly gain electoral success, take prominent positions in government, and cooperate internationally with likeminded actors.

There is even more to explore in this respect. The circulation of far-right communication across borders is said to be creating a transnational solidarity across different national oriented publics (Doerr 2017). The specific role of online active publics of PRR parties on transnationalisation dynamics, however, remains largely to be assessed, and so is the strategy that guides these parties in addressing increasingly transnational publics. By bringing together studies on PRR party organisation and digital affiliation, on transnationalisation processes both offline and online, and on political communication, this research gives insights into the impact of transnational nationalist publics on the global public spheres. Ultimately, it tells us something on the extent to which transnationalisation of the PRR can be conceptualised as a collaborative project between party elites and their online active publics.

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