


Strongwomen? A Comparative Analysis of Gender Discourse in the Electoral Campaigns of Marine Le Pen and Giorgia Meloni

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Abstract

2022 was a momentous year for female leaders in the populist radical right: in the Italian general elections, Giorgia Meloni at the helm of Fratelli d'Italia (FdI), and in the French presidential elections Marine Le Pen at the helm of Rassemblement National (RN) scored meaningful electoral results, despite different outcomes. This paper investigates the ways in which female populist radical right party leaders present themselves as female leaders as well as they frame gender-related questions. So far, the bulk of the theoretical and empirical literature on gender and populism has focused on populist parties' variegated ideological stances and discursive styles on gender, leaving the analysis of populist leadership understudied. This paper contributes to the growing scholarly attention devoted to the case study of Le Pen's female leadership and stance on gender issues, and, to the so-far scarce literature devoted to Meloni's female leadership and gender-related posture. Theoretically, we innovatively rework the existing concepts of hegemonic femininity and of 'strongmen' to create the concept of 'strongwomen'. Methodologically, we use qualitative discourse analysis of the TikTok and Twitter accounts of the two female leaders. We find varying degrees of hostility against abortion and non-binary gender identities, and unanimous promotion of the 'traditional' family, plus the rejection of surrogacy. Meloni and Le Pen are emblematic 'strongwomen': while championing women's rights and extolling their female qualities of compassion and motherliness, they adopt toughness and assertiveness typical of charismatic leaders to push for the pre-eminence of the heterosexual family over LGBTQ+ rights and abortion rights and deploy nativist and masculinist tropes when imposing the view of immigrant women as in need of salvation, and immigrant men as perpetrating women's oppression.

Introduction

In 2022, the populist radical right in Western Europe garnered substantial success at first-order elections. This is not unusual, as populist radical right parties have often enjoyed satisfactory

electoral gains, as well as stints in government. What is distinct about the recent electoral successes of the populist radical right is the prominence of female party leaders who competed to be the heads of their executives. Indeed, Giorgia Meloni in the Italian general elections, and Marine Le Pen in the French presidential elections achieved their best-ever electoral results. Despite the different electoral outcomes and political systems in place in France and Italy, the above-mentioned elections represent a success for women in politics, where they are still underrepresented, especially in leadership positions. However, the articulation of gender-related issues in Le Pen's Rassemblement National (RN) and Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) is often at odds with the advancement of a full set of women's rights and LGBTQ+ rights.

Although Le Pen formally lost to her competitor Emmanuel Macron in the run-off, Meloni scored a resounding victory with 24% of the votes, becoming the first Italian female Prime Minister, and defeating both the opposition leader Enrico Letta of the Partito Democratico (PD), and her coalition partners, Matteo Salvini of the regionalist-turned-populist radical right Lega, and Silvio Berlusconi of the right-wing populist Forza Italia (FI).¹ However, Le Pen experienced only a numerical defeat, since she scored her biggest result ever. Indeed, she gained around 10 percentage points more in comparison with the results of the 2017 elections and defeated the opposition left populist leader Jean-Luc Mélançon, and her far-right adversary Eric Zemmour. In the legislative elections, RN obtained 89 seats, third only to the green party and Macron's party, which enjoys the presidential majority (Ministère de l'Intérieur et des Outre-Mer 2022). This accomplishment has been defined by the French press as a personal victory for Marine Le Pen (see Laratte & Alexandre, *Le Parisien*, 2022; Comte, *Franceinfo*, 2022). Despite the different electoral outcomes, these elections represent a success for women in politics, who are still underrepresented, especially in leadership positions (Matthews & Whiting 2022), despite populist radical-right parties embracing more female members than males (Mudde 2007). However, the articulation of gender-related issues in Le Pen's RN and Meloni's FdI is often at odds with the advancement of female and LGBTQ+ rights.

So far, the bulk of the literature has focused on populist parties variegated ideological and policy stances on gender (see, for instance, Campus 2013; Dietze and Roth 2020; Geva 2018; Snipes & Mudde 2019; Scrinzi 2017). Limited scholarly attention has been devoted to the study of populist radical right female leadership and their gender-related posture. In the European populist radical right, Le Pen embodies both feminine and hegemonic masculinity traits (Aiolfi 2022; Geva 2018). Growing literature has been studying the skyrocketing popularity of Meloni, zooming onto her female leadership and her gender-related ideology and policy (Donà 2020; Cavalieri, De Feo,

¹ For a thorough analysis of the Lega's shift from a northern regionalist party to a nationalist populist radical right party, please see Albertazzi & Vampa (2021).

Giorgi 2023). In this paper, we take this recent literature a step forward, by extending the focus onto the latest elections and introducing the new notion of ‘*strongwomen*’.

Just after Meloni was sworn in as the first female Prime Minister, Giorgi and Loner (2022, p.17) predicted that “Even though her [Meloni’s] being a woman is relevant in her speeches, (...) it is unlikely that this would result in an increasing attention to feminist concerns and an improvement of women’s rights and gender justice”. This paper picks up where Giorgi and Loner (2022) left off. Indeed, this paper aims at contributing to the much-needed literature on the discursive construction of gender-related matters by populist radical right female leaders, by providing a comparative analysis of the case studies of France and Italy, where specifically female populist radical right leaders ran for government in the last year. Therefore, this paper investigates the ways in which female populist radical right party leaders Meloni and Le Pen present frame their leadership and gender-related questions. Without essentialising gender differences, in this paper, we adopt the dichotomous understanding of gender, essential to the populist radical right, in terms of femininity and masculinity.

In order to answer this research puzzle, we conduct a qualitative discourse analysis of a substantial body of data produced in the three months before and after Meloni’s and Le Pen’s elections contested in 2022. Data include the leaders’ Twitter and TikTok posts, their manifestos, and their official speeches given at critical junctures in their respective domestic political scenes. Our core argument is that: *female leadership in the populist radical right takes on typically masculine connotations combined with feminine traits, thus resulting in what we coin as ‘strongwomen’*.

This paper proceeds according to the following structure: first, we propose our working definition of the populist radical right, emphasising its nativism and its relationship with gender. Taking an intersectional approach, then, we dwell on the concept of femonationalism, and the notion of hegemonic femininity. After outlining our methodological rationale, we analyse in depth the Twitter and TikTok posts by Le Pen and Meloni in the three months before and after the elections in France and Italy, respectively. We group our analysis around the themes of the championing of motherhood and the heterosexual family; the staunch opposition to abortion and surrogacy, as well as adoptions by same-sex parents; the promotion of women’s rights, which is entangled with nativism in the form of femonationalism.

The gendered people in the populist radical right

While reckoning the wide array of approaches to populism (Gidron & Bonikowski 2015), in this paper we believe that the ideational approach (reference) is the most apt at uncovering the ideological frames used by Meloni and Le Pen to represent themselves as female leaders and to

articulate the gender question. Mudde defines populism as a thin-centred ideology (Freeden 1979) “that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the pure people and the corrupt elite, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.” (2019, p. 29). The people is articulated around two axes: vertically, through anti-elitism, against political and intellectual elites, and horizontally, through nativism, against the national out-group (De Cleen & Stavrakakis 2017).

A distinctive feature of the populist radical right is nativism. By definition, nativism is the result of the entwining of racism and nationalism (Mudde 2019). Nativism argues that the nation should only be inhabited by the native group, and thus non-native elements are seen as a threat to the national in-group (Mudde 2019). The construction of the non-natives forming the national out-group is best defined through an intersectional approach: they are denied belonging to the ethno-cultural nation, by virtue of their belonging to a different ethnicity, culture, and a different religion (Griffini 2019; Moffitt 2020). Nativism targeting religious groups is evident in the Islamophobia (i.e. unfounded hostility and fear toward Islam) (Kallis 2018) permeating French politics, especially the populist radical right, which believes that Muslims from different ethnicities are not assimilable into Western societies (Mudde 2019).

In recent years scholars made inroads into the enquiry on the relationship between gender and the populist radical right. According to Kováts (2018), the feminist faction that disparages “gender ideology” feeds into the success of the populist radical right, by appealing to its conservative values on gender-related matters. Gender is also instrumentalised by the populist radical right to mainstream themselves (Spierings 2020), by creating a form of “accepted racism” (Hafez 2014), as evidenced in the case of femonationalism, i.e. the use of Western values— like women’s freedoms and rights – to legitimise Islamophobic stances (Mudde 2019; Walia 2021). Femonationalism grew stronger in Europe after events that catalysed fear of Muslims, such as the sadly numerous terror attacks between 2015-2017 in Belgium, France, and the United Kingdom; the harassment of a group of women in 2015 in Germany (Havertz 2021); and the increase in the number of immigrants disembarking on Italian shores in recent years (Walia 2021). The populist radical right’s instrumentalisation of gender matters is not confined to issues regarding women’s ‘Others’, i.e., women not belonging to the national in-group, but is fuelling the growing trend of attracting *some* marginalised groups, like LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) people, to the detriment of non-binary, transgender, and queer people (Foster & Kirke 2022).

The intertwining of populist radical right ideology with femonationalism has been typically observed both within and outside of Europe (see, for instance, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi-Kinval 2019). Within the geographical scope of our study, both the former Front National

(now Rassemblement National) in France, and the former Lega Nord (now Lega) and FdI are infused with femonationalism tainted by nativism. The populist radical right's crusade against the apparent misogyny of Muslim men who force Muslim women to respect Islamic traditions is well exemplified by the concern for women wearing the hijab (Havertz 2021) considered as a threat to Western values (Kallis 2018).

Female leadership and *dédiabolisation*

Charismatic leadership is the hallmark of populism (Weyland 2007). This type of leadership transcends the gender line: Le Pen and Meloni are exemplary cases of populist charismatic leadership, which can take up different forms (Müller [2016](#), p.32–36; Mudde & Rovira-Kaltwasser [2017](#), p.62–78). In the case of Le Pen, she has inherited the charismatic trait from her father Jean-Marie Le Pen; in the case, of Meloni, she is a self-made politician rising as an underdog from the outskirts of Rome. Remarkably, in line with the strategic ambivalence (Wodak 2015) woven into RN's and FdI's discourse, both parties undertook a reconfiguration (also famously known as *dédiabolisation* in the French milieu) of the original party radicalism, which has been progressively and ambiguously softened (Dézé 2012; Revelli 2017; Scrinzi 2017; Wieworka 2013).

Despite this cleansing strategy, Le Pen and Meloni bear some resemblances to the concept of a '*strongman*'. The latter has been elaborated upon by Ruth Ben Ghiat (2020), who identifies key figures in global politics as *strongmen*, i.e. authoritarian leaders who are "impulsive and irascible" (p.11), with "uncommon powers of persuasion" (p.13). Ben Ghiat clarifies that strong female leaders such as Margaret Thatcher and Indira Gandhi cannot be categorised as *strongman* as they were not undemocratic, nor did they seek to challenge democracy in the same way as undeniably undemocratic leaders such as Mussolini, Hitler, Trump, and Putin did. Ben Ghiat (2020) does not overlook the possibility of female leaders being *strongmen*. She suggests that the authoritarian and irritable character of *strongmen* might be mirrored in female leadership figures, especially in Western populist radical right parties, such as Le Pen. However, Ben Ghiat (2020) does not further elaborate on the figure of Le Pen or contemplate the transposition of the notion of '*strongman*' into the related idea of a '*strongwoman*' regardless of undemocratic attitudes.

Theoretical framework

Theoretically, drawing on the previously elaborated concept of *strongmen* (Ben Ghiat 2021) and a reframing of the notion of hegemonic femininity (Schippers 2007), we coin the concept of '*strongwomen*'. First, we depart from the idea of hegemonic masculinity, which is the ability "to protect weak and vulnerable women" (Rommelspacher 2011, p.54), who are key to the reproduction of heterosexual families and of the nation (Rommelspacher 2011; Sauer 2020),

which are two ideological pillars of the populist radical right. Young (2003) postulates that fear of the out-group menacing the integrity of the nation leads to the call for hegemonic masculinity, whereby men are configured as the heads of the household and as responsible for the family, consisting exclusively of women and children. Not only are males seen as being capable of asserting hegemonic power over women, but females have also been portrayed as defenders of male hegemony through hegemonic femininity (Schippers 2007).

Nevertheless, our substantial theoretical contribution takes its distance from arguing that Le Pen and Meloni outright reproduce male hegemonic power dynamics, thus incarnating hegemonic femininity. Instead, we introduce the concept of *strongwomen*, which has so far featured only in Osuna Olivas' mention of "charismatic *strongmen* and *strongwomen*" as typologies of populist leadership (2021). We argue that *strongwomen* emerge from the amalgamation of the assertive and impetuous character traits typical of *strongmen*, with the hegemonic femininity tendency to see men as the protectors of the heterosexual family and the nation, and with the final touch of feminine traits that are strategically deployed in an ambivalent way, i.e., the nurturing and motherly attitudes of women (Geva 2018), and compassion. Hence, stereotypically feminine traits are intertwined with the stylistic and ideological reproduction of hierarchies of race and gender (Geva 2018; Schippers 2007).

Methodological notes

Methodologically, we adopt a comparative case study approach in order to answer our research question about how the female leaders of the populist radical right parties articulate gender-related questions. The choice of Italy and France as case studies, following the most similar system design (MSSD) (see McCormick et al. 2019), is justified by the presence, in both countries, of female populist radical right leaders who ran for elections in 2022, with the caveat that Le Pen ran for the post of President of the French Republic, while Meloni ran for the post of Prime Minister of the Italian Republic, which indicates their different electoral stakes. From these two case studies, it is possible to generalise to other cases of populist radical right female leadership, such as Alice Weidel (former representative of the Alternative für Deutschland, AfD, in the Bundestag) in Germany, and Inger Støjberg (leader of the Denmark Democrats, DD) in Denmark. Our case study is based on the method of difference (Gerring 2007): the cases of Le Pen and Meloni are similar in terms of party family membership and female leadership, but the electoral outcome was different. Although both are *strongwomen*, they express this trait in different ways. While we acknowledge that *strongwomen* may take many forms, in this paper we follow Snipes and Mudde's (2019) approach focusing on a selection of character traits related to femininity (compassion and motherliness) and masculinity (toughness and straight-talking).

Regarding data collection and analysis, this paper applies qualitative discourse analysis (QDA) to a substantial and variegated body of data, including party manifestos, Twitter and TikTok posts, and parliamentary speeches in the period three months before and after the elections in France and Italy. The resulting timeframe is January 2022-July 2022 for the case study on France, and July 2022-December 2022 for the case study on Italy. The resulting sample of data gathered includes around 100 Twitter and TikTok posts; RN and FdI 2022 electoral manifestos; the concession speech given by Le Pen after her defeat, and the victory speech by Meloni elections day; Le Pen's speech after RN's meaningful parliamentary election results in June 2022; and Meloni's maiden speeches in Parliament and the Council of Ministers. This diversified body of data lessens the risk of lack of representativeness and allows us to analyse the complexity of the matter at hand from different vantage points, including official party discourse in manifestos and speeches, and personal party leaders' discourse on social media. Another advantage afforded by using outwardly facing data is objectivity since they do not hinge on researchers' prompts (Harrison & Bruter [2011](#), p.65).

Discourses and social media posts have been examined through QDA, which is especially useful in unmasking discursive tools used by the populist radical right, that belie their strategically calculated civic façade, which results in strategic ambivalence (Wodak [2015](#)). The resulting dataset was coded deductively according to keywords that emerged from the literature on nativism, feminism, and leadership, which were inductively combined with our novel concept of *strongwomen*. However, limitations inherent to the analysis of social media and official discourse is that they portray the image of the leader and the party in a palatable way, to enlarge the electorate. This façade projected by parties and their leaders erases the multiplicity of viewpoints that is possible to gauge through interviews and surveys (Mason 2002). A possible disadvantage of QDA is the subjectivity of the data interpretation (Chilton [2004](#), p.205), which we mitigate by conducting a double-blind analysis of the materials selected (see Harrison & Bruter 2011).

1. Motherhood and the heterosexual family

Both FdI and RN have demonstrated the centrality of the family in the construction of their image. FdI opened its 2022 manifesto with a quote from Pope John Paul II, "the family is the funding element of the society and what makes "a Nation truly sovereign and spiritually strong"" (FdI manifesto 2022, p.5). Analogously, in RN the family is the root of the French social and civilizational model – the first link in the chain of the national community (RN manifesto 2022). Our notion of *strongwomen*, with its intrinsic assertive reproduction of stereotypes related to gender roles, suits well the populist radical right credo preaching the family as the pivot of society, with women dedicated to motherhood within the context of the heterosexual family.

Notwithstanding differences between the two parties examined here, what may ensue is the opposition to abortion rights, surrogacy, and rights for same-sex parents.

1.1 Pro-natalism and Motherhood

In populist radical right parties' manifestos, it is common to find policies that pledge to support traditional gender roles (Akkerman 2015), by encouraging natality and by proposing financial support for younger couples or larger families. This was visible in the former Front National's manifestos when Jean-Marie Le Pen was still at the helm of the party (FN manifestos 2002 & 2007). This legacy continued in both Le Pen and Meloni's manifestos, respectively proposing financial aid to families with more than one child (RN manifesto 2022), and in support of natality (Fdi manifesto 2022).

Specific to Meloni's case, Fdi's approach to family policies is clearly embedded in the social conservative tradition of the populist radical right (Vampa 2023). The centrality of the family in Fdi, both from an ideological and a policy-related perspective, clearly comes through in the bombastic electoral campaign encouraging natality (Fdi manifesto 2022). Meloni, in her maiden speech (2022) in parliament, defined the family as "the primary nucleus of our societies, crib of affections, and where the identity of every one of us is formed". Meloni continues by saying that Fdi means to support natality and, thus, families, in addition to stimulating female employment (Meloni, maiden speech 2022).

However, what distinguishes Meloni even more from her male colleagues is her shrewd deployment of the "mother-card" not only to promote the notion of the family but also to foreground her persona, crystallised both in both womanhood and motherhood. As noticed by Vampa (2023, p.28), the "woman-mother figure is a constant in the social policy model proposed by the Italian right". Coincidentally, the Ministry for Equal Opportunity has now become, under Fdi, the Ministry for Family, Birth and Equal Opportunities, highlighting the party's social conservatism, and the conception of the traditional family, and traditional gender roles, that equate women with motherhood (Vampa 2023). Furthermore, it is a case in point that in the (in)famous 2019 speech in favour of the traditional family Meloni loudly introduced herself: "I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother" (Meloni 2019). Even more so after being appointed Prime Minister, Meloni reiterated her role as a mother and her motherly features, especially in the aftermath of the 26 February 2023 shipwreck in Cutro which saw the death of more than 91 migrants, including 35 children (ANSA Redazione, 27 March 2023). Similarly, at the Senate, Meloni complained to her party fellow Raffaele Fitto about having been labelled as a "murderer concerning her handling of the boat in distress at sea", and she deployed her image as a mother once again to deflect criticisms away from the government's management of the shipwreck in

Cutro (Canettieri, 21 March 2023). Meloni is depicted as the mother of the nation, embodying not only a motherly figure but also ensuring the continuity in heterosexual families as the core of the Italian nation.

On the contrary, Le Pen stands out from Meloni as she does not significantly emphasise motherhood (Snipes & Mudde 2019). Le Pen has so far shown no interest in advocating policies targeted to mothers, and only minimal interest in the issue of motherhood at the beginning of her leadership career in 2011, as a connexion with the roots of the former FN (see FN manifesto 2012; Akkerman 2015). In fact, the latter promoted traditional family relations with the rejection of same-sex partnerships and abortion (Akkerman 2015). In the 2022 RN manifesto, Le Pen eludes the question of motherhood and natality, which become presented inextricably from a nativist vision of the family. The 2022 RN manifesto, in fact, specifies that it is the French family that should receive National Solidarity Benefits, i.e., family allowances and social housing, thus limiting its access to immigrants. It comes as no surprise that in her post-results speech, Le Pen used nationalist tones, reminding that her considerable electoral gains represented the “triumph of the saving idea of the Nation... our one and the only compass is the interest of France and of the French people” (Le Pen, [Europe 1](#), 2022). Nationalism has an ethno-cultural connotation in the case of the RN, and, similarly to what was observed in the case of FdI (Griffini 2019), it becomes entangled with the idea of the family. The nation is envisaged as an extension of the family, as evidenced in a Tweet published in the run-up for the elections and praising “parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents who have paid [for the houses] and built [them]” ([Twitter](#), 27/01/2022). Her emphasis on the roots of the family, and, by extension, of the nation, implicitly hints at the ethnocultural nation, founded and preserved by the forefathers.

The image of the family, hence, takes on a different value from Meloni’s emphasis on motherhood and natality. Le Pen’s image of the family is instrumentalised to drive a symbolic wedge between the French families and the ethnocultural out-group. Yet, though in a different way and to a different degree than Meloni, Le Pen performs the role of “mother of the nation” (Campus 2013) by portraying herself as a tough protector of the nation, which is combined with more feminine overtones referring to the family ambit. As a consequence, Le Pen to a lesser extent, and Meloni to a much greater extent, attempt to balance the so-called “double bind” (Geva 2020), i.e. toughness and assertiveness typical of hegemonic masculinity with more feminine traits. This balancing act results in our notion of *strongwomen*.

As a defining feature of our concept of *strongwomen*, femininity looms large in the populist radical right, regardless of the different articulations of pro-natalism, motherhood, and the heterosexual family in Meloni and Le Pen. In fact, Meloni’s promotion of women touches on the stereotypical feminine characteristics of a motherly attitude and compassion. Meloni’s TikTok

profile features videos in which she takes selfies with “the people” ([TikTok](#), 17/12/2022), and she maternally accepts flowers offered to her from two little girls before a public speech ([TikTok](#), 08/06/2022). Although flowers are not *per se* feminine, women have often been correlated to flowers, which have been employed to describe feminine attributes in literature and art since at least the Middle Ages ([Stott](#) 1992). Moreover, as pink is also used as a marker of gender and sexuality (see, for instance, [Koller](#) 2008), Meloni posted a Tweet in which she puts up a pink-decorated Christmas tree with her daughter Ginevra (Meloni, [Twitter](#) 08/12/2022). Clearly, Meloni emerges as a mother-like figure, and the trinity “Giorgia-woman-mother” has now become emblematic of her identity (Vampa 2023).

Likewise, Le Pen posted on TikTok a video showing her Christmas tree and her cat to the tune of *All I Want for Christmas* ([TikTok](#), 19/12/2022), which is a “soft” move that can easily allude to the deradicalisation of the RN’s party culture (Vampa 2023). Similar to Meloni, Le Pen executes the promotion of women by adopting feminine traits that strength and assertiveness. This becomes apparent, especially on her TikTok profile videos under the hashtag #MomentsdeCampagne (transl. *Campaign Moments*), in which she performs the role of a strong and beloved maternal leader surrounded by people who shout her name and children giving her flowers and hugs (see for instance, [TikTok](#) 14/04/2022; [TikTok](#) 17/01/2022).

Both Meloni’s and Le Pen’s approaches are not only a nod to a stereotyped femininity which is one side of the coin of the *strongwoman*, in addition to the toughness we analysed above. Indeed, they also recall a form of *humanisation* or what can be defined as “compassionate conservatism” ([McDermott](#) 2016). Interestingly, McDermott (2016) observed that in the US the tough and masculine approach appears stronger in the Republican Party while a feminine nature is more visible in the Democratic Party. In the case of Meloni’s FdI and Le Pen’s RN, two conservative parties, these two natures are successfully combined. Therefore, in this section, we are going to explore how gender equality policies and improvement for women’s rights are approached by Meloni and Le Pen, followed by a section concerning Muslim women and anti-Muslim stances embedded with femonationalism, and to conclude, we will give an overview on how the two leaders and parties approach issues concerning equality – particularly for migrants.

1.2. Prescriptive maternity: Anti-abortion and anti-surrogacy

A consequence of the emphasis on the family and motherhood is an anti-abortion and anti-surrogacy stance, which are vehemently advocated in an assertive and aggressive way typical of *strongwomen*. Despite the attempts at moderating the FdI ideology since coming into power (which will be discussed later), Meloni’s radicalism in terms of conservative values emerges

clearly in her anti-abortion discourses, which diverge from Le Pen's more moderate approach to the matter.

Despite the feminist façade, in Meloni's speeches and Fdl's 2022 manifesto, the so-called "prevention of abortion" is accorded great importance. Despite being formulated nebulously, the Fdl's recipe to prevent abortion is offering financial help to pregnant women in financial hardships. Different TikTok posts (see, for instance, [TikTok](#), 16/09/2022; [TikTok](#), 11/09/2022), in Meloni's profile, are dedicated to the issue. In one media appearance (TikTok, 11/09/2022), on *SkyTG24*, Meloni stated that Fdl does not plan to abolish law no.194²— that guarantees women's right to abortion in the first 90 days of pregnancy for health, economic, social or family-related reasons. Fdl's 2022 manifesto also clarified that the party has no intention of preventing the "full application of 1978 law no. 194 on the voluntary interruption of pregnancy" (p. 5). At the same time, the Fdl 2022 manifesto proposed the introduction of a fund to help single women and women in financial difficulties to carry their pregnancy to term" (p. 5). According to Meloni, prevention is a way to defend women's self-determination (TikTok, 11/09/2022), thus neglecting the fact that law no. 194 does not infringe on women's self-determination and their choice not to undergo an abortion. Another motivation brought by Meloni to justify the discourse around the prevention of abortion is the discursive leitmotiv of the pledge to protect human life since its beginnings (Fdl manifesto 2022), which is congruent with the solid Christian foundations of Fdl, identifiable already in the Fdl manifestos since 2014 (Vampa 2023).

As a result of the accent on motherhood, natality, and the prevention of abortion, maternity becomes, therefore, implicitly prescriptive. In this regard, emblematic is the 2019 previously mentioned speech, "I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother, I am Christian. You won't take that away from me!" (Meloni 2019), which became Meloni's *leitmotif* during her rise from being the leader of a small party to the role of Prime Minister (Vampa 2023). Meloni's maternity mantra stands in stark contrast with Simone de Beauvoir's feminist argument that demystifies the portrayal of pregnancy "solely as gratifying, joyous, fulfilling, and the completion of woman's being and which can lead women who are involuntarily childless to experience their situation as a 'lack' or 'loss'" (Brackmann & Scholz 2006, p.66).

On the other hand, Le Pen's silence on these matters speaks volumes about her difference from Meloni. Le Pen does not mention any measures pro or against abortion in her manifestos, public speeches and interventions, Twitter or TikTok accounts. The only time in which Le Pen mentioned the topic was to comment on US anti-abortion laws when she stated that in France no significant party wants to limit women's right to abortion. According to Le Pen, what is imperilling women's

² For the full text of law no. 194, please see: <https://www.documentazione.info/il-testo-della-legge-194-sullaborto-0>

rights in France is Islamism ([Twitter](#), 29/06/2022). This latter point will be developed in the next section on femonationalism.

One point that both Meloni and Le Pen share regarding motherhood-related issues is the opposition to every form of surrogacy. This stance is motivated by concerns about the commodification of women's bodies. As Briggs clarifies, gestational surrogacy is "governed by a particularly harsh logic of the market: those who "rent" their wombs in India, Cambodia, or parts of the United States are almost all of a class that could never hire a surrogate themselves, marking this as a kind of 'biocapitalism'" (2021, p. 108). Meloni makes a point against surrogacy in her Fdl manifesto, as surrogacy is defined as a form of "commodification of women's bodies; this is why we should approve my law proposal to make surrogacy a universal crime" ([Twitter](#), 11/06/2022; [Twitter](#), 23/04/2022). Incidentally, in July 2023, surrogacy became a universal crime in Italy. Without going to such great lengths, Le Pen expresses similar repulsion towards surrogacy, and labels it as a "commodification of women's bodies ignominious for our civilisation" ([Twitter](#), 06/04/2022). This ties in with Brackmann and Scholz's (2006) argument on the embodiment of maternity that is at odds with the practice of surrogacy. We take Brackmann and Scholz's (2006) argument a step further and recognise the populist radical right's view of abortion as the disembodiment of maternity.

These prescriptions on how motherhood must take place, banning abortion and surrogacy, show no hint of emphasis on the typically feminine value of compassion, which would have entailed a greater empathy towards the predicaments of women who, for personal, health, or financial reasons, have to go through abortion or undertake the journey of surrogacy. Compassion, instead, becomes replaced by toughness, which is a typical trait of *strongwomen* (see, for instance, Geva 2018; Schippers 2007). However, the caring and nurturing feminine traits of *strongwomen* are implicit in the populist radical right's weight given to the natural ability of women's bodies to nurture a foetus and care for their offspring.

1.3. Anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes

The compassionate and maternal attitudes of *strongwomen* leave space for a tougher and more hostile approach when dealing with rights for the LGBTQ+ community. In fact, the question of anti-LGBTQ+ stances is often linked by the populist radical right to family issues. In terms of rights for the LGBTQ+ community to marry and adopt, regulations in France are more accepting than in Italy.

Meloni has always championed the traditional heterosexual family, while not being so warm towards LGBTQ+ rights. An emblematic example is when, in a public speech, Meloni was

interrupted by a young man who stormed onto the stage waving an LGBTQ+ flag ([TikTok](#), 02/09/2022) and calling for the LGBTQ+ rights to get married and to adopt children. Meloni's reaction was measured but belied her lack of support for same-sex parents' adoption. Indeed, she responded: "You can have civil unions, so you can do whatever you want" (TikTok, 02/09/2022).

These anti-LGBTQ+ stances, however, sometimes stand at odds with pro-LGBTQ+ discourses. For example, in the 2022 manifesto, Fdi affirms that they do not want to revoke the law on civil unions, even if they mix this pledge with hostility towards same-sex parents' adoptions and surrogacy. The manifesto declares its mission of "Contrasting all discrimination based on people's sexual and sentimental choices, maintaining the law on civil unions, reiterating at the same time the prohibition of same-sex parents' adoptions and the fight against all forms of surrogacy, in the supreme interest of minors" (Fdi manifesto 2022, p.21). A further example of strategic ambivalence to inoculate anti-LGBTQ+ stances whilst passing as tolerant towards the LGBTQ+ community, is when on the Italian TV show *Non è l'arena*, Meloni highlights a gay man's pledge to support Fdi, and comments on it as the demonstration that "the more you desperately try to demonise [Fdi], the more people will be free with us" ([TikTok](#), 15/09/2022). This affirmation reflects the growing trend whereby populist radical right parties attempt to attract *some* marginalised groups, i.e. LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) people to the detriment of non-binary, transgender, and queer people, as well as Muslim people (Foster & Kirke 2022). Indeed, Meloni's discourses ambiguously frame "the issue of personal freedoms (...) in a sometimes-original way within the value system typical of the radical right" (Vampa 2023, p.32).

French law, instead, allows same-sex marriages and adoption since 2013, and accordingly, Le Pen has not vocally opposed them since when they had been allowed (see for instance, FN Manifesto 2012; Akkerman 2015). Interestingly, at the time in which the law was passed, Le Pen was against same-sex marriage and adoption, claiming that a family was composed of a mother and a father, but she supported civil same-sex partnerships (Akkerman, 2015; FN manifesto 2012). However, after 2013, matters concerning the LGBTQ+ community disappeared from Le Pen's discourses and manifestos. In fact, Judis (2016, p.203) describes Le Pen as "twice-divorced, pro-choice and comfortable around gays" which may explain why Le Pen glosses over the topics of abortion and LGBTQ+ rights.

Again, Le Pen's avoidance of anti-LGBTQ+ affirmations is to be understood against the backdrop of the *dédiabolisation* undergone by RN to partially cleanse its radical image (Dézé 2012; Wievorka 2013), resulting in the strategic ambivalence mentioned above. Le Pen's radicalism, however, resurfaces in her strong anti-Muslim stances and her antagonism against veiled Muslim women. Indeed, Foster and Kirke (2022) fittingly describe le Pen as representing *alter-*

progressivism, namely some “socially agreed ‘progressive’ views that ostensibly claim to defend vulnerable minorities [the LGBTQ+ community] from external threats”, such as Islam (Foster & Kirke 2022, p.2).

While we acknowledge Le Pen’s neutrality on the topic of LGBTQ+ rights, we cannot ignore Meloni’s vehement defence of the heterosexual family and strenuous fight against the extension of the existing LGBTQ+ rights now limited to civil unions. This trait of Meloni reveals one strand of the typical *strongwoman* character: toughness and straight-talking (Geva 2018), which recalls the assertiveness and authoritativeness of the *strongmen* conceptualized by Ben Ghiat (2020).

2. What women want

2.1. Rights for (Western) women (only)?

In keeping with the self-projection as *strongwomen*, both Meloni and Le Pen invest considerable energy in putting forward their image as protectors of women, which allows them to herald feminine traits through more masculine language. Despite being two female leaders, Le Pen’ and Meloni’s stances in favour of women’s rights have often been ambiguous.

As explored in the previous section, Meloni has managed to combine pledges for women’s rights with discourses promoting motherhood and against abortion. Besides being a mother, Meloni presents a moderate façade in terms of gender equality, by proposing some measures that can be understood as feminist, such as supportive measures for working mothers, i.e. with nurseries offered in working places (Fdl manifesto 2022). Fdl in the 2022 manifesto proposed to break the glass ceiling that prevents women’s affirmation in workspaces, as well as to contrast the gender pay gap, every form of discrimination, gender stereotypes, and violence against women.

In Meloni’s maiden speech (2022) in parliament, she reiterated that she is the only female Prime Minister in the history of the Italian Republic, saying that she reverently reminds those who “led by example to the ladder that allowed her to break the glass ceiling that is above our heads”. In this speech she remembers those women, calling them by their first name, who have fought and “demonstrated the value of Italian women, as I hope to do as well” (Meloni, maiden speech 2022). However, aside from this speech, in Meloni’s Twitter and TikTok accounts, discourses promoting an improvement in gender equality are scarce. On a 25th of November tweet, on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, Meloni wrote that the government is on the frontline to prevent, fight, and harshly punish violence against women and

femicides. Although it goes beyond the scope of this paper, on the same occasion, Le Pen tweeted,

In this international day against violence against women, I have a thought for every woman victim of sexual or physical violence. We have one duty: protect them and sanction those who are guilty of such acts. (Twitter, 25/11/2023)

Again, on March 8, International Women's Day, both leaders expressed their concern about violence against women. Meloni published a long declaration on the [government website](#) (Governo Italiano 2023), in which she thanks the courage of women who fought throughout history and remembers those women who have been killed, recalling her maiden speech in Parliament. Incidentally, Meloni released an interview with the magazine *Grazia*, stating that if women work hard every day, there are no limits for them (Grilli 2023). This alleged liberal approach, however, masquerades FdI's attempts at limiting civil rights and gender equality. Indeed, in the same interview, Meloni expressed her antagonism against the so-called "gender ideology" of which women would allegedly be the first victims in favour of transgender identities. Same-sex parents' adoptions are similarly stigmatised by FdI (Griffini 2023).

Despite Le Pen's tweets on March 8 and on November 25, the leader of the RN is quieter on these matters as she avoids mentioning gender equality issues when it comes to French women. However, in several tweets and speeches (see, for instance, [Twitter](#), 20/04/2022), Le Pen claimed to be a "free woman", as she owes nothing to anyone, "neither to political parties, nor to bankers, or big companies" ([Twitter](#), 05/04/2022). Both Meloni and Le Pen could be identified as conservative feminists ([Schreiber](#) 2018): they consider themselves to be representatives of and advocates of women's interests. Nevertheless, their representation of 'feminism' is perceived through the prism of conservative values, such as pro-life attitudes and the type of 'femininity' that conforms to traditional "social and cultural norms of womanhood" (Schreiber 2018, p.69). In the case of Le Pen, however, this conservative feminism is even more salient when promoting femonationalist values.

2.2. What women want for "brown women"? Saving "brown women from brown men" and femonationalism

The maternal and compassionate features of *strongwomen* in Meloni and Le Pen are powerfully combined with assertiveness and toughness in their behaviour towards non-white and non-Christian women. Clearly, the figure of *strongwomen* becomes here tainted with nativist hues. The populist radical right, indeed, has been successful in depicting Islam as a menace to the West and its allegedly incompatible ideology with the European "way of life" (Kallis 2018). Islam has

therefore been portrayed as invasive, “barbaric, repressive, misogynistic [...] hostile to the West, and terroristic” (Kallis 2018, p.84). Especially after the 2015 and 2016 terror attacks in France, numerous French coastal towns banned the use of the burkini, a Muslim women’s covering swimsuit, which is a measure supported by Le Pen (Kallis 2018, p.89). The Lega, in Italy, proposed a similar bill that did not go through parliamentary approval (Kallis 2018), and FdI followed suit in regional and local arenas. According to such femonationalist thinking, Islam does not respect women’s rights, and therefore, “our” women need protection (Kováts 2018; Dietze & Roth 2020; Havertz 2021; Walia 2021). On the contrary, Muslim (immigrant) women are portrayed as “oppressed Orientalist objects” (Farris 2012, p.184). Interestingly, Akkerman (2015) observes that “debates about immigration and integration therefore increasingly focus on the family and the role and status of women. Gender issues accordingly have appeared on the anti-immigration agendas of populist radical-right parties” (2015, p.40). Using feminist ideals for anti-immigrant and anti-Islam campaigns uncovers the performative contradictions of populist radical right parties’ discourses (Farris 2012).

The former Front National was among the pioneers in shaping anti-Muslim discourses in Europe (see for instance Dézé 2012; Wieworka 2013), and in the early 2000s manifestos, it was already possible to find the word ‘Islamism’ which has later been adopted by Le Pen as well (FN manifesto 2002 & 2007). The now RN, continuing Jean-Marie Le Pen’s legacy, defines ‘Islamism’ as a “totalitarian ideology that infiltrates everywhere and has to be fought” ([Twitter](#), 16/03/2022).

The question of Islam is where Le Pen is more vocal than Meloni, and where the nativist populist radical right ideology emerges the most (see Mudde 2019). During the presidential campaign, Le Pen uses words such as “eradicate”, “being at war”, and “fight” against Islam (see for instance,). This war against ‘Islamism’ is strictly linked to the loss of nativist values,

“With Islamism, our most essential values are swept away: secularism, diversity, equality between men and women, freedom of expression, freedom to believe or not to believe, freedom to teach or to inform...” ([Twitter](#), 05/02/2022)

Particularly, the stance concerning “equality between men and women” is interesting for Le Pen since, as previously discussed, in her manifesto there is no mention of gender equality policies. However, Le Pen often mentions equality and women’s rights to contrast Islam and Muslim culture, while being especially vocal against the hijab. As Akkerman (2015) clarifies, the liberal definition of gender equality understands religious freedom as paramount in terms of equality, freedom, and neutrality of the State. Furthermore, according to the liberal principle of choice, women should be free from coercion by family members and religious authorities, in the private sphere – at the same time, the State should not interfere (Akkerman 2015). This liberal definition

of gender equality lay bare the contradictions inherent to the liberal state call for the infringement of women's right of choice, in the name of their protection from being submitted to religious choices.

Le Pen's femonationalism is particularly evident when arguing that 'Islamism' forces women to wear the veil – describing hijabi-women as being left on the side, isolated, and judged ([Twitter](#), 29/06/2022) Furthermore, Le Pen also defines the burkini – the Muslim swimsuit – as a costume of 'Islamist' propaganda, which she proposed to forbid as well as the veil ([Twitter](#), 06/06/2022). Le Pen also believes that Islamism is the abandonment of French national principles; and that menaces women's rights ([Twitter](#), 29/06/2022). However, Le Pen does not forget to implement a humane attitude even in the harsh campaign against Islam. Le Pen, in fact, argued that secularism in France implies freedom of cult, which allows Muslim people to practice their faith – a discourse that slightly mitigates the anti-Muslim stances, and that instead wants to show a distinction between faith (Islam) and ideology (Islamism) ([Twitter](#), 16/03/2022).

Meloni is instead less vocal on the issue of allegedly and strategically protecting non-White women. Among the rare mentions of this issue, we found femonationalist tones in Meloni's tweets in support of Iranian women following the Iranian women's revolt in September 2022:

"Iranian women today are in revolt, challenging the fundamentalist regimes by cutting off their veils and cutting their hair in the square and, in turn, risking [to be arrested] and death. I am close to them for the courage they show, fighting head-on against Islamist obscurantism." (Twitter, 21/09/2022)

Meloni takes her pledge to support Iranian women on the global stage as well as in the Italian milieu. This becomes clear in the following Tweet, where Meloni assertively denounces violence against *all* women, and adds praise to Muslim women who are fighting against violence, which Meloni implicitly intends as the violence perpetrated by Muslim men

"Let us tear down the shameful wall of silence surrounding violence against women, disguised as respect for other cultures and other religions. We owe it to the courageous Muslim women who are fighting in Italy and around the world to defend their freedom and independence." (Twitter, 21/09/2022)

Conclusion

Despite women being still a long way from having their gender equality recognised, and despite being underrepresented in top-level political roles, populist radical right parties seem to present an exception to this trend. Meloni in Italy and Le Pen in France are leading two major populist radical right parties, respectively FdI and RN, that put themselves up for elections in 2022, garnering outstanding electoral results. Le Pen came close to winning the Presidential post, with the largest ever electoral support won. Meloni, instead, won the elections, thus becoming Italy's first female Prime Minister. While there is a growing strand of literature focusing on Meloni, given her clout in politics currently, the literature is still missing a comprehensive and comparative analysis of the French and Italian cases of female leadership of the populist radical right.

Driven by the research question over how Meloni and Le Pen construct the multifaceted concept of gender in the period shortly before and after the elections they contested, this paper breaks new ground in the theoretical framing of female leadership in the populist radical right, which is not a rare occurrence, considering also Alice Weidel's leadership of the AfD in Germany, and the increasing success of women in politics.

Despite the promising premises constituted by Meloni's and Le Pen's outstanding electoral gains, although gender equality and a maternal and compassionate attitude take up the centre-stage in Meloni's and Le Pen's discourses, the typical populist radical right's tougher stance on gender issues does not disappear from Meloni and Le Pen. This conservative harshness on gender topics is patent in the hostility against the LGBTQ+ community and abortion, as well as in the obstinate prescriptive maternity and prescriptive heterosexual family. These findings emerge from our qualitative discourse analysis of party manifestos and social media (Twitter and TikTok) posts published in the timeframe including the three months before and after the 2022 elections.

Drawing from Ben Ghiat's (2020) and Osuna Oliva's (2021) ground-breaking theorisation of *strongmen* as tough, impulsive, charismatic leaders identified in the likes of Mussolini and Trump, we theorised the concept of *strongwomen*, who are as tough and charismatic in their style, ideology, and policy preferences as their male counterparts. From our analysis, we derived empirical findings that led to our novel theoretical contribution: the introduction of the concept of *strongwomen*, which is a revised transposition of the more acknowledged and theorised notion of *strongmen*. What makes *strongwomen* stand out from *strongmen* is their addition of feminine traits, such as compassion and maternal attitudes, to their assertiveness and toughness, characteristic of *strongmen*.

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