# Representations of immigration on Facebook: A lexicographic analysis of the communication of Italian populist and non-populist leaders (2019-2021)

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## Abstract

This study proposes a psycho-social reading of immigration communication on Facebook by five Italian political leaders during the Conte II government (5 September 2019 to 13 February 2021). The research is inserted into the theoretical framework of social representations that presuppose the complexity and tendentiousness of language by actively participating in constructing reality. We analyzed the discursive construction of the migration phenomenon in the posts published by two leaders of the right and center-right populist parties (Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini, respectively), the leader of the populist catch-all party 5-Star Movement (Luigi Di Maio) and two left-wing non-populist leaders (Nicola Zingaretti and Laura Boldrini), to ensure comprehensive coverage of the different political ideologies in the Italian context. From the entire corpus of posts published by the five leaders under examination during the analyzed period, only the posts concerning immigration were selected, for a total of 1171 posts. Of these, 311 were published by Giorgia Meloni, 760 by Matteo Salvini, 45 by Luigi Di Maio, 30 by Laura Boldrini, and 25 by Nicola Zingaretti. We noticed essential differences in communication regarding the migration phenomenon, with the two right and center-right-wing populist leaders (Meloni and Salvini) more likely to publish posts about immigration and promoting a negative representation of the migration phenomenon, in contrast to Di Maio and especially the two left-wing non-populist leaders Boldrini and Zingaretti.

**Keywords**: social representations, [im]migration, populisms, mainstream left-wing party, leaders and social media, textual analysis

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## Introduction

The immigration question has a centrality both in politics and in social sciences. In Italian politics, this centrality is because Italy has been one of the countries most affected by migratory flows in late years (de Rosa et al., 2021). In the social sciences, there has been much attention to studying the link between this question and populist culture. In recent decades, scientific literature has shown how populism, especially right-wing populism, feeds on a conflictual relationship with migrants: the "Others" par excellence (Mannarini, Veltri, Salvatore, 2019), "the bad guys", opposite to the "good people". This type of relationship is particularly salient in mass media communication (Mazzara et al., 2021) and primarily in social media. Among these, Facebook uses a form of communication that reflects the peculiarities of populism, so much so that it speaks of a sort of "elective affinity"; between this social network and populism (Gerbaudo, 2018). This affinity is mainly based on the Manichean and strongly polarized and conflictual vision of the reality typical of populism (Hawks and Uzunoğlu, 2019; Mazzoleni &amp; Bracelet, 2018; Wirth et al., 2016) and a strongly simplified and emotional language (Mazzoleni, 2014; Blassnig, Ernst, Engesser and Esser, 2020).

These characteristics are shared with the communicative style of Facebook, and as we will show with our study, they appear particularly active in the representations of migrants in Italy.

In the literature, the strong link between populism and immigration has led to neglecting the analysis of the role played by mainstream parties, particularly those of the center-left. Thus, there is no established tradition of studies on how center-left culture represents this world. With rare exceptions (for example, de Rosa et al., 2020; Repetto, 2021), there remains a gap that our research aims to help fill by using a comparative look between the representations built via Facebook by populist leaders with different ideological-cultural orientations and non-populist leaders of the center-left.

Our work is theoretically framed in the tradition of social representations that presupposes the non-neutrality of the language used instrumentally to construct a vision of reality that is functional to the interests of the source. This objective is achieved by a partisan use of specific linguistic markers that direct the reader's attention in one direction rather than another. Thus, for example, Sensales and colleagues (2021) highlighted a difference in the frequency of use of the terms "migrants" and "immigrants" by two Italian populist leaders. Salvini, a center-right populist leader of the League, uses the word "immigrants" more often, which in Italian is a past participle and connotes a passive and invasive phenomenon. Di Maio, leader of the 5 Stars Movement, a transversal populist force more oriented to the center-left, on the other hand, refers more often to the "migrants." This present participle indicates a more active role of refugees and does not imply a negative connotation. These two terms alone are enough for the two leaders to outline two different and opposite representations of the "Othering", full of meaning and functional to their ideological point of view.

Other previous studies have explored the Facebook communication of these two Italian populist leaders. Di Cicco and Sensales (2019) dealt with the analysis of Salvini and Di Maio's posts in the period between 2014 and 2018, analyzing both the entire Facebook communication produced by the two

leaders and a subset of posts solely related to the [im]migration topic. The results showed that posts related to the latter category earned more likes, comments, and shares than combined posts.

In addition, the same research looked more specifically at immigration communication on Facebook by the two populist leaders. In particular, following the comparison of some lexicographic features of Salvini and Di Maio's posts, greater salience of negativity and emotionality was highlighted by the leader of the Italian League, who more frequently refers to sadness, anger, and anxiety in his posts. Once again, this demonstrates Salvini's ability to tune in with his electorate, positioning himself as "an 'entrepreneur of fear' capable of activating an 'emotional regime' based on anger" (Sensales, 2005/2019).

A previous analysis of the social pages of the same two leaders in the period between 2013 (the year the Pentastral leader opened his official page on the social network) and the last day of campaigning in 2018 has shown that the audience of the leader of the League is much larger than that of the 5 Stars leader, who still manages to be competitive with his opponent in terms of an average number of likes and shares of posts, even though the posts published by Salvini generate a more significant number of comments, probably due to their higher degree of divisiveness (Di Cicco, 2018).

In the same study, Di Cicco (2018) found differences in the communication between the two leaders at the level of certain aspects of language, such as the different personal deixis. In particular, Di Maio favors the use of the first person plural, showing that he wants to lead a leadership oriented in a collective sense and proposing self-celebratory rhetoric of his party, with posts bearing statements such as "we are here. on the issues we are there", "we are the future of the country" or "we must change this country." On the other hand, Salvini uses the first person singular more frequently, thus presenting himself as a more decisive and more authoritarian leader, posting phrases such as "I am ready. #Italiansfirst" or "I won't give up for the sake of our children," "I say: stop illegal immigrants." This is confirmed by a further analysis of the Facebook posts of the two populist leaders Di Maio and Salvini always in the period between 2014 and 2018 (Sensales, Di Cicco, Baldner, 2021), highlighting, for Salvini, the preference for the first singular pronominal and possessive inflections (I, me, my), while in Di Maio there is a centrality of the first plural pronominal forms.

Sensales and colleagues (2021) also show that the characteristic words of Salvinian communication reveal the link with a "sovereign, securitarian exclusionary right-wing ideology" (Ibidem), in which the "otherness" to be fought are immigrants; on the other hand, the representations of populism induced by Di Maio show a strong ingroup/outgroup differentiation, promoted by the use of the pronominal forms we-our / they-their-them. In this dynamic, while the "we" is referred to Di Maio's party but also in part to "Italy" and the "Italians," the "them" refers to the political opponents of the PD, as well as to Europe and the banks.

These examples highlight how the different use of pronominal markers can activate a syntonic communication of the two leaders about the diverse needs of their electorate, promoting, on the one hand, a more conservative form of populism focused more on leadership development and, on the other hand, a progressive populism aimed at achieving more active participation by citizens (Salgado & Stavrakakis, 2019).

Starting from these studies, we intend to expand the lexicographic analysis of the posts published on Facebook by prominent Italian political leaders, to also study the discursive construction of the migration phenomenon by the non-populist, left-wing leaders Laura Boldrini (member of PD, Democratic Party) and Nicola Zingaretti (secretary of PD) and the right-wing populist leader Giorgia Meloni (secretary of FDI, Brothers of Italy). Thus, their posts were analyzed with those of Matteo Salvini (secretary of League) and Luigi Di Maio (secretary of m5s, Five Stars Movement).

## Aims

The general objective of this exploratory study is a linguistic analysis of communication on the issue of immigration by five different Italian political leaders (populists and non-populists). The purpose is to highlight the differences in the social representations of migrants promoted by the five politicians.

Specifically, we analyzed the Facebook posts published by two leaders of the right and center-right populist parties (Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini, respectively), the leader of the 5-Star Movement (Luigi Di Maio), a populist catch-all party, and two center-left-wing non-populist leaders (Nicola Zingaretti and Laura Boldrini) during Giuseppe Conte's center-left cabinet (from 5 September 2019 to 13 February 2021). The five politicians were selected to ensure comprehensive coverage of the different political ideologies that actively clash in the Italian context (populist right, transversal populism, and moderate left) on the issue of immigration.

The following are specific hypotheses (Hp) and objectives (O) based on what is illustrated in the introduction section:

Hp1) we predict a higher frequency of posts by Salvini because he is by far one of the most active political leaders on Facebook;

Hp2) we hypothesize that Salvini and Meloni produce more posts about immigration than the other leaders because the issue of immigration is a workhorse of the political communication of the right and center-right;

Hp3) we assume that the two center-left leaders favor a more varied and complex communication due to a lesser familiarity with Facebook, which leads them to use a more conversational and argumentative tone, not in line with the style requested by Facebook;

Hp4) we presume that the right-wing leader Salvini uses the first person singular more frequently in order to promote a more conservative leadership oriented to autoritharism; on the other hand, we expect that Luigi Di Maio favors the use of the first person plural, promoting a leadership oriented in a collective sense aimed at achieving more active participation by citizens;

Hp5) we expect to find a different identity construction of immigration promoted by politicians of the other parties analyzed. Notably, we hypothesize a more significant presence of references to feelings such as anger, contempt, and fear in the posts published by Salvini and Meloni; in contrast, we hypothesize a lesser focus on the issue of immigration by the other three leaders, particularly Zingaretti and Boldrini;

Hp6) we suppose to find more references to security policies in the two right and center-right leaders and humanitarian policies in the other three leaders, particularly in the two center-left leaders;

O1) we then aim to explore the possible different labels relating to the migration phenomenon to verify the potential coherence of the results of previous research. These researches have shown how the right-populist uses tags, such as the past participle "immigrants," which describes the migratory phenomenon as invasive and dangerous. In contrast, the 5-star populism uses the present participle "migrants," considered "politically correct" (see Sensales, Di Cicco, Baldner, 2021). In our case, we expect to find these differences with similar labels between Di Maio and the two non-populist leaders.

## Methodology

### Material under analysis

Data was gathered and extracted through the Miralytics platform[1] (https://www.miralytics.social/) using an automatic exploration based on keywords considered relevant to the theme of immigration.

Such words are, specifically: "-migr-", "stranger-" "refugee-", "clandestin-", "asylum seekers-", "NGO", "Sea-Watch-", "Aquarius-", "Diciotti-", "Gregoretti-", "landing-" "barge", "shipwreck-", "gommon-" "expulsion-", "invasion-", "Africa-", "scafist-", "Lifeline", "Carola", "Rackete", "Silvia Romano", "Lampedusa", "Riace-", "Lucano-", "somal-", "marocc-", "tunis-", "niger-", "sene-", "algeri-" "campo/i rom-", "nomad-", "ius soli-", "islam-", "racism-" "asylum seeker(s)", "Alan Kurdi", "Salvamento Marittimo", "Open Arms", "#openports", "#closeports", "hospitality", "security decree", "borders".

This allowed us to select 1171 posts related to immigration only, for a total of 41471 words ("tokens"). The frequency distribution is reported in Table 1, which also contains data

**Tab. 1.** Frequency distributions for the number of immigration-related posts made on the Facebook pages of the five political leaders under study, the number of words, the average of words per posts, the different words contained in those posts, and detected lexical density.

| Facebook Page | N. Posts | Corpus size (Tokens) | N. Words per Post (Mean) | Distinct words (Types) | Lexical density (Types/Tokens) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Giorgiamelonipaginaufficiale (giorgiameloniofficialpage) | 311 | 13089 | 42,09 | 3347 | 25.6 |
| LauraBoldrini | 30 | 1254 | 41,8 | 798 | 63.6 |
| LuigiDiMaio | 45 | 5185 | 115,22 | 1654 | 31.9 |
| Nicolazingaretti | 25 | 1459 | 58,36 | 842 | 57.7 |
| Salviniofficial | 760 | 20484 | 26,95 | 4210 | 20.6 |
| Total | 1171 | 41471 | | | |

on the number of words published per page. The column of distinct words ("types") shows the number of words present in the posts, but "merging" the terms used several times (so, for example, if the word "NGO" appears 10 times, in the count of distinct words it will be considered as published only once). Finally, lexical density refers to the ratio of distinct words over the total words. This table provides an idea of the complexity and articulation of the language of each of the five leaders analyzed.

### Operational Path

On the extracted posts, we conducted a lemmatization of the terms to group the inflected words into a single type, thus avoiding excessive dispersion of frequencies. For example, we have grouped "threats," "threatening," and "threatened" in the canonical form "threat."

The lemmatization of the vocabulary resulted in 6046 words out of the original 41471.

### Data Processing and Textual Statistics

In analyzing textual data, a lexicometric approach, which originated in French-speaking countries and was firmly rooted in continental Europe (Lébart & Salem, 1994), was privileged. This approach is mainly based on comparing lexical profiles and, therefore, on the distribution of word frequencies.

Specifically, for the realization of this study, the statistical elaborations of the textual data were conducted through the procedures of SPAD-T, a software designed by Lébart and Salem in 1988. This tool is based on the analysis of graphic forms, i.e., it is able to recognize each word of a text as an element whose characteristic feature is the visual appearance; this means that, for example, words with the same meaning but written differently are not recognized as identical.

Thus, SPAD-T is able to provide a paradigmatic representation of the word corpus extracted by the software. Specifically, this is made possible by the Mots procedure, which provided the general vocabulary of the five politicians under consideration in this case. It is, therefore, a "vertical" type of analysis in which the representation of the text is made without taking into account the development of the discourse but only by extracting the words and reconstructing the statistics related to them, highlighting the most frequent ones, but also those belonging to certain morphological groups. With this procedure, the frequencies of each of the vocabulary headwords of all five leaders were obtained, both in alphabetical order and rank order (from the most frequent to the least frequent words).

Secondly, the software allows the extraction of information related to that part of the language that is particularly significant. This phase is beneficial to extract the so-called peculiar language, i.e., that 12-15% of the vocabulary is generally considered more relevant to carry out the textual analysis (Bolasco, 2005). The lexical analysis allows the identification of some language constants in terms of the percentage incidence of some word classes, thus allowing the title of the so-called basic vocabulary (Ibid.). In this research, SPAD-T's VOSPEC procedure allowed the identification of lexical cores typical of the different social

pages of politicians. This step, relying on the chi-square logic, allows the identification of typical associations of different groups because such "typicality" occurs when the lexical item appears with an intra-group frequency significantly different from the global one (PROB. < .05). In this case, the significance of the differences is assessed through the ratio between the frequency of the lexical item in the reference group and the frequency that this item would have according to the hypothesis of random distribution in the various groups. The procedure makes it possible to develop tables in which both the frequency of the word in the group and the frequency of the expression in the entire corpus of data analyzed are presented, as well as the significance level of this difference. Using this procedure, the specific vocabulary of each leader was obtained. The tables report the frequencies of posts and characteristic words for each of the five leaders. Specifically, five tables were created (one for each leader), in which each row corresponds to a term used in the posts and whose columns report the internal frequency of use (i.e., how many times that word is used in the communication of the leader under examination) and the global frequency (i.e., the number of times that word is present in the entire population of posts analyzed).

Finally, the examples of phrases that were statistically most representative of the communication of each politician and their followers were used. These examples are provided directly from the VOSPEC stage.
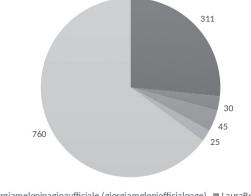
Starting from here, word clouds were created to be compared using only the frequencies of the words characteristic of the different lexical cores (i.e., statistically significant with probability < .05), thus omitting all other information provided by the output and avoiding making the reading of the results difficult.

## Results And Comments

### Analysis of the frequencies of posts with reference to immigration

In presenting these results, the data in Table 1 were used. Figure 1 shows how Matteo Salvini publishes the majority of posts related to the topic of migrants. Specifically, 65% of the

**Fig. 1.** Frequency distribution of immigration-related posts published on the Facebook pages of the five leaders surveyed



giorgiamelonipaginaufficiale (giorgiameloniofficialpage) ■ LauraBoldrini
■ LuigiDiMaio     ■ nicolazingaretti
■ salviniofficial

posts examined were collected on Matteo Salvini's Facebook page, Giorgia Meloni published 26%, and the remaining 9% by the other three leaders (Luigi Di Maio = 4%, Laura Boldrini = 3%, and Nicola Zingaretti = 2%).

Their results confirm that Hp1(Salvini is the Italian political leader who posts the most on Facebook) and Hp2 (Salvini and Meloni produce more posts about immigration than the other leaders).

*Lexical density analysis*

The number of words contained in these posts was also analyzed. Figure 2 shows these results, highlighting how the two right and center-right-wing populist leaders, Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini, devote more words to the topic. In fact, on the page of the League leader, 49% of the total words are posted, while that of Giorgia Meloni contains 32%. Luigi Di Maio's page includes 12% of actual words, while the remaining 7% is distributed among Laura Boldrini's (4%) and Nicola Zingaretti's (3%) pages. The number of words per post was also analyzed (Fig.3) to provide an idea of the average length of each post, regardless of the number of posts published. This made it possible to highlight how Di Maio published the longest posts, followed (in order) by Zingaretti, Boldrini, Meloni, and Salvini, whose average number of words per post is 26.95 compared to Di Maio's 115.22.

The most interesting data is provided by the distribution of the frequencies of distinct words and the analysis of the lexical density of the posts published by the five political leaders.

Specifically, Figure 4 reports the number of distinct words in relation to the posts of the five different leaders, while Figure 4 reports lexical density data.

About the last graph (Figure 5), it should be noted that non-populist center-leftist leaders Laura Boldrini and Nicola Zingaretti report the highest level of lexical density, highlighting a more complex articulation of language than the other three leaders, thus confirming Hp3 (the two center-left leaders favor a more varied and complex communication using a more argumentative tone).

**Fig. 2**. Frequency distribution of words contained in immigration-related posts on the Facebook pages of the five leaders surveyed
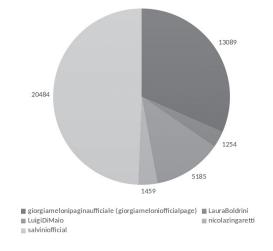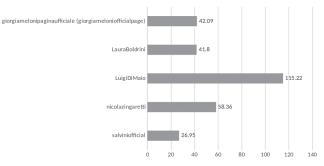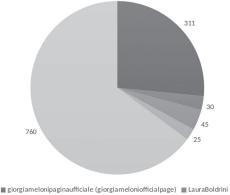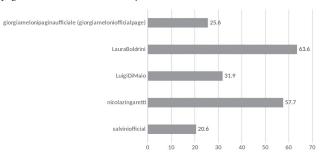
**Fig. 3**. Average N. Words per post

**Fig. 4**. Frequency distribution of the distinct words contained in the immigration-related posts published on the Facebook pages of the five leaders examined

**Fig. 5**. Lexical density of the immigration-related posts published on the pages of the leaders under study

*Analysis of the vocabulary of five leaders*

A lexicographic textual analysis was conducted through the SPAD-T software.

First, the Mots procedure provided the general vocabulary of the five politicians under consideration. Table 2 reports the 30 most frequent vocabulary words in the migration-related posts published overall by the two right and center-right-wing populist leaders Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini, the cross-party populist Luigi Di Maio, and the two non-populist leaders Laura Boldrini and Nicola Zingaretti.

The Mots results highlight the self-referentiality of the communication of the leaders under consideration: the three most frequent words are "Italy," "government," and "Italians," where the first and third terms refer to the superordinate ingroup to which all five leaders belong, and the second one can be traced to the ingroup dimension for Di Maio, Boldrini,

**Tab. 2**. Frequencies of the 30 most used words in immigration-related posts published on the Facebook pages of Giorgia Meloni, Matteo Salvini, Luigi Di Maio, Laura Boldrini and Nicola Zingaretti

| Italian Words | English translation | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Italia | Italy | 541 | 1,30 % |
| Governo | Government | 535 | 1,28 % |
| Italiani | Italians | 335 | 0,80 % |
| Clandestini | Illegal immigrants | 247 | 0,59 % |
| Sbarchi | Landings | 227 | 0,54 % |
| Immigrati | Immigrants | 223 | 0,53 % |
| Immigrazione | Immigration | 178 | 0,42 % |
| Lega | League | 176 | 0,42 % |
| Porti | Ports | 166 | 0,40 % |
| Pd | Pd | 165 | 0,40 % |
| Europa | Europe | 146 | 0,35 % |
| Sicurezza | Security | 136 | 0,32 % |
| Sinistra | Left | 135 | 0,32 % |
| Paese | Country | 124 | 0,30 % |
| Confini | Borders | 115 | 0,28 % |
| Stato | State | 104 | 025 % |
| Lampedusa | Lampedusa | 99 | 0,24 % |
| Noi | We | 94 | 0,23 % |
| Nostra | Our | 91 | 0,22 % |
| Aperti | Open | 89 | 0,21 % |
| Casa | Home | 79 | 0,19 % |
| Salvini | Salvini | 79 | 0,19 % |
| Ong | Ngo | 75 | 0,18 % |
| Fermare | To stop | 72 | 0,17 % |
| Libia | Libya | 66 | 0,16 % |
| Clandestina | Clandestine | 65 | 0,16 % |
| Parlamento | Parliament | 61 | 0,15 % |
| Solidarietà | Solidarity | 61 | 0,15 % |
| Profughi | Refugess | 59 | 0,14 % |
| Migranti | Migrants | 54 | 0,13 % |

and Zingaretti and the outgroup dimension for Meloni and Salvini. The ingroup dimension is also recalled by the terms "we" and "our." Then, among the most frequent words, references to the outgroup appear: "illegal immigrants," "landings," "immigrants," and "immigration," all terms attributable to the narrative style characteristic of exclusionary populism and the rhetoric of the right and center-right parties. In the last places, however, we find words that refer to inclusive dynamics ("solidarity," "refugees," and "migrants").

Finally, we highlight the presence of the words "league" and "pd" (the only two political parties whose names appear in the first 30 more frequent words) and "salvini," leader in anti-immigration communication.

### Analysis of Specific Vocabulary for each leader

Vospec procedure made it possible to identify lexical cores typical of each leader examined.

To facilitate the results reading, in this section, word clouds (created with WordArt software) are reported, showing the 30 most frequent typical words in posts, divided according to the politician's page from which they were extracted. With these words, we have built the typical word clouds of each leader. The word clouds are comparable and constructed using only the lexical items frequency of the different lexical nuclei (i.e., words with PROB. < 0.50). The word size within these clouds

reflects their different frequency, in absolute terms, within the reference group.
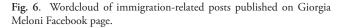
**Fig. 6**. Wordcloud of immigration-related posts published on Giorgia Meloni Facebook page.



**Fig. 7**. Wordcloud of immigration-related posts published on Matteo Salvini Facebook page.

**Fig. 8**. Wordcloud of immigration-related posts published on Luigi Di Maio Facebook page.



**Fig. 9**. Wordcloud of immigration-related posts published on Laura Boldrini Facebook page.



**Fig. 10**. Wordcloud of immigration-related posts published on Nicola Zingaretti Facebook page.



Comparing Figures 7 and 8, it is possible to see how Di Maio favors the use of the first person plural, as opposed to Salvini, who more frequently uses the first person singular. Indeed, in figure 8, it should be noted how the words "our", "we must", "we can, "we are", "we", "we are (doing)" and "our country" are the most used by the Five Stars leader; on the other hand, in figure 6 we cannot see this kind of words related to Salvini's Facebook posts, containing the words "I" and "my country instead". This confirms Hp4 (Salvini adopts a language orientated to achieve an authoritarian leadership, while Di Maio favors the use of a more inclusive language).

Vospec procedure also highlights significant differences in the words used by the five leaders in their posts. In the word cloud related to Salvini's posts, we can see words like "clandestines", "invasion", "illegal immigrants", and "delinquents", all terms that promote a negative portrayal of immigration and activate feelings of anger and fear about the migrants' actions on Italian territory (*"dozens and dozens of illegal immigrants land undisturbed on the island, unchecked. the invasion continues...."*

[2]). Similarly, words like "to defend", "naval block", "illegality", "scandalous" and "illegal immigrants" appear in Meloni's posts word cloud (*"a government that not only allows anyone to enter italy illegally, but also fails to deal with illegal immigrants."*[3]). The two right and center-right-wing political leaders most frequently report references to sadness, anger, and anxiety in their posts, demonstrating their willingness to activate fear and resentment.

On the other hand, in the specific vocabulary of Nicola Zingaretti, expressions referring to feelings of intolerance or anger toward migrants are absent, replaced by terms of denunciation against injustices affecting asylum seekers ("hate", "racism", "victims", "violence"; *"after years of wars, innocent victims, refugees, violence Syria does not deserve another armed conflict"*[4]). In Boldrini's specific vocabulary, there are no messages inciting the repatriation of asylum seekers or the closure of Italian ports, but words such as "to save" appear in posts expressing humanity toward illegal immigrants. Moreover, terms like "right", "humanitarian" and "humanity" appear in Boldrini's specific vocabulary, which once again highlights a discursive construction of the migration phenomenon centered on feelings of solidarity and brotherhood towards them, totally absent in the posts of right and center-right-wing leaders (*"it is important to remember today, #june20, #worldrefugeeday, that we must protect and safeguard refugees together with the #eu. #withrefugees"*[5]). As for Di Maio's specific vocabulary analysis, no terms that can be traced back to activating hatred against migrants appear, despite the populist leader promoting a migrant repatriation policy (*"faster repatriations, including by ship and not only by plane."*[6]). These results confirm Hp5 (the five leaders under analysis promote different representations of immigration, with Salvini and Meloni inciting hatred and anger and Boldrini and Zingaretti promoting a more inclusive policy).

The results also reveal references to different migration policies by the leaders under review. The two center-leftist leaders use terms such as "right," "life," "humanitarian," and "humanity," which highlight a discursive construction of the migration phenomenon centered on feelings of solidarity and brotherhood toward them (*"thousands of migrants in bosnia abandoned in the woods and under the snow. together with many parliamentarians, MEPs, and institutional figures I signed an appeal"*[7]). There is also no evidence of words referring to feelings of impatience or anger towards migrants. The latter are instead found in the posts of the two right and center-right.-wing leaders (*"friends, alone I don't count for anything, but together we can save our country from the devastating invasion project that excites the left and fattens the soros-funded NGOs: an uncontrolled and unregulated immigration that humiliates Italians in need..."*[8]), who moreover advocate the urgency of adopting immediate policies of repression (*"defend the borders, protect the Italians: flash mob of fratelli d'italia in catania"*[9]).

As for Di Maio, the word "repatriations" turns out to be statistically significant, thus characterizing Di Maio's linguistic choices. In most posts, the leader of the Five Stars speaks of the migration situation as a problem whose only solution lies in refusing to accept asylum seekers (*"in the meantime, thanks to the work of Minister Lamorgese, from August 10 the repatriations of Tunisians who have landed in Italy will resume"*[10]. However, unlike the characteristic narrative of right and

center-right-wing populist leaders, Di Maio does not make particular accusations toward migrants but emphasizes their disadvantaged socioeconomic condition (*"migratory flows of desperate people who have no choice, and which Italy cannot manage"* [11]). Thus, Di Maio seems to take a position against the arrival of asylum seekers in Italy. Still, at the same time, he seems to distance himself from the accusatory and impatient attitude typical of Salvini and Meloni's narrative style. On the other hand, as already pointed out by Cedroni (2014), one of the main characteristics of populist rhetoric is launching deliberately ambiguous and contradictory messages to gather support from different targets.

These results confirm Hp6 (there are more references to security policies in the two right and center-right leaders and humanitarian policies in the other three leaders, particularly in the two center-left leaders).

The results also show a tendency of leaders to use different labels in relation to the migration phenomenonon. Di Maio (Fig. 8) refers more often to the word "migrants". At the same time, Salvini uses the term "immigrants" more often (Fig. 7), as shown in the previous study by Sensales, Di Cicco, and Baldner (2021). Salvini also frequently uses the term "clandestines", denouncing the irregular situation of refugees on Italian soil. However, this research also shows Meloni's tendency to refer more often to "immigrants" (Fig. 6) and the preference of the two center-left leaders to use terms such as "migrants", "refugees" and "men" (Fig. 9 and 10), showing a more sympathetic attitude towards asylum seekers. These results fulfill O1 of our research concerning exploring the different labels used by the five leaders under examination.

## Conclusions

The study made it possible to compare the differences in the discursive construction of the migration phenomenon by Italian political leaders belonging to different political alignments (populist right, transversal populism, and moderate left). We were thus able to highlight two opposing ways of constructing the representations of the migratory phenomenon: that of the populist right of the angry-disparaging exclusionary type and that humanitarian inclusive of the center-left, while the transversal populism is placed in an intermediated position with exclusionary rhetoric without emotional tones.

Through the analysis of the five leaders' communication via Facebook, we have shown how specific linguistic markers are instrumentally used for different ideological needs. In this way, one of the main assumptions of the theory of social representations is confirmed. Indeed, by contesting the transparency of language, it affirms its opacity at the service of different ideological cultures.

Overall, our results confirm the hypotheses and satisfy the proposed objectives. They also contribute to bridging the knowledge gap related to the scarce literature on social media communication centered on immigration by center-left non-populist leaders. Finally, they show the strong interrelation between social media communication and populism. The number of posts produced by three populist leaders (particularly Salvini and Meloni) is far greater

The results revealed notable differences in communication regarding the migration phenomenon, with Salvini and Meloni more likely to use arguments geared toward activating a situation of emergency and feelings of anger and intolerance in their followers, and with Boldrini and Zingaretti more often using inclusive and denunciatory terms toward the unfavorable conditions in which they pour migrants. Di Maio's tendency to disparage the acceptance of migrants on Italian soil then emerged, but without pouring out angry words towards them, confirming himself as the leader of a party of transversal populism, capable of capturing the most heterogeneous protest instances while gaining support on both the left and the right.

The lexical analysis then showed how populist leaders (especially right and center-right-wing leaders) publish posts that repeat the same words more often than Boldrini and Zingaretti. In this way, it is confirmed what is supported by the literature on the extremely simplified style typical of populist communication via social media. On the contrary, non-populist leaders have greater lexical variety and density. From this, we can deduce that the expressive spectrum of a political leader is much broader, more complex, and articulated the less populist his rhetoric is.

## Notes

[1] Miralytics is a Facebook-based sentiment analysis software that extracts, stores and processes textual data published by the main Italian politicians on their official pages.

[2] Italian version (I.V.): "decine e decine di clandestini sbarcano indisturbati sull'isola, senza controlli. l'invasione continua...."

3   I.V.: "un governo che, non solo permette a chiunque di entrare illegalmente in italia, ma non riesce nemmeno a gestire gli immigrati clandestini"

4   I.V.: "dopo anni di guerre, di vittime innocenti, di profughi, di violenze la siria non merita un altro conflitto armato"

5   I.V.: "è importante ricordare oggi, #20giugno, #giornatamondialedelrifugiato, che dobbiamo proteggere e tutelare i rifugiati insieme all'#eu. #conirifugiati""

6   I.V: "rimpatri più veloci, anche via nave e non solo in aereo"

7   I.V.: "migliaia di migranti in bosnia abbandonati tra i boschi e sotto la neve. insieme a tanti parlamentari, eurodeputati ed esponenti istituzionali ho firmato un appello"

8   I.V.: "amici, da solo non conto nulla, ma insieme possiamo salvare il nostro paese dal devastante progetto di invasione che eccita la sinistra e ingrassa le ong finanziate da soros: un'immigrazione incontrollata e senza regole che umilia gli italiani in difficoltà…", e ancora "continua l'emergenza a lampedusa, nel vergognoso silenzio del #governoclandestino. fai girare"

9   I.V.: "difendere i confini, proteggere gli italiani: flash mob di fratelli d'italia a catania"

10   I.V.: "intanto grazie al lavoro della ministra lamorgese, dal 10 agosto riprenderanno i rimpatri dei tunisini che sono sbarcati in italia"

11   I.V.: : "flussi migratori di disperati che non hanno scelta, e che l›italia non può gestire"

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