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Minister Salvini's political strategy during  
the Diciotti case: the role of social media in  
shaping electoral support

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## Introduction

The political landscape in Italy has radically changed during the last six years. National elections held in 2013 were won by the centre-left coalition with almost 30% of the votes, followed by the centre-right coalition with 29%, and by the Five Star Movement with 26% of the votes. Five years and three governments later, elections held in March 2018 had a dramatically different outcome. Given that there was no actual coalition on the left nor on the right side of the political spectrum, individual parties were not able to reach the formal majority required by the electoral law to form a government. The Five Star Movement got 33% of the votes, followed by the Democratic Party (19%), the League (18%), and Forza Italia (14%). Some scholars believe that three elements in this outcome prove the existence of the start of a third phase in the post-war Italian political system (Busilacchi 2019). The first one is the replacement of bipolar, left-right competition by an imperfect tripolar system. The second is the emergence of a new framework of political competition with new emerging cleavages, one of them being the opposition between parties belonging to the main European political tradition and anti-system parties. Finally, it has been argued that a transformation is underway in the democratic system itself. While the latter was previously based on political stability and regular alternation, it is possible that the 2018 Italian election was the advent of a new phase characterised by instability.

The array of issues that Italian governments have to face is vast, but one issue has always been a particularly sensitive and conflicting area of intervention: migration. The refugee crisis, started in 2013, put Italy in a critical position, with more than 170,000 migrants arriving in the EU through the Central Mediterranean Route in 2014 alone (Frontex 2015). The migrant crisis has generated “widespread public panic in Italian society, the origins of which are rooted in the pre-existing problems of a country wracked by economic recession and the structural legitimisation crisis of its political system” (Gattinara 2017, p. 327).

Many West European countries have seen the establishment of right-wing populist parties in their political system. Their opposition to immigration and multicultural society is the key to their electoral success (Mudde 2013), and Italian parties were no exception. In fact, it could be argued that the League led by Matteo Salvini was the true winner of the 2018 national election. While in 2013, still under the name of Northern League and in coalition with Silvio Berlusconi’s party, it was only able to get 4% of the votes nationwide, the last election saw the party’s popularity skyrocketing. The League got almost 18 percent of the votes, and it is now part of the government along with the Five

Star Movement. Its leader, Matteo Salvini, is currently holding the position of Minister of the Interior, which is of crucial importance for security and immigration issues.

In such a fragmented political scene, communication via social media has proven to be increasingly important in order to understand how and why parties and leaders gain people's approval. The study of political communication was first approached by American scholars during the Fifties. Between 1965 and 1990, however, a growing number of studies on this subject were conducted also in Europe. This led to the development of an autonomous European research field with the adoption of a holistic perspective which analysed not only the electoral behaviour of an individual, but the entire communicative process. Moreover, the analysis of the interaction between the media and the public was performed thanks to hybrid and comparative studies that detached themselves from a focus on single countries. Politics and communication, two apparently separated worlds, have evolved to the point of becoming a new entity, that is political communication. The interdisciplinary nature of the subject and its complexity make finding a proper definition very difficult. In the words of Gianpietro Mazzoleni (2012), political communication can be defined as the exchange and the discussion of contents which have a public and political interest, and which are produced by the political system, by the media, and by the citizens-electors.

In the current Italian political arena, communication is becoming more and more relevant in order to shape public opinion and attract new portions of society into the electorate. "New media"<sup>1</sup>, including social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, have changed the way political communication is produced. They have also provided politicians with new instruments which can be used in order to spread the ideas that constitute the foundations of their political agendas. An interest in how current Italian leaders' political communication via social media is able to reflect the country's social tension is what lies behind this dissertation. Ever since the government led by the M5S and the League took office, social networks have been heavily used as tools by the parties' leaders in order to clarify their decisions and justify their political moves. In particular, the League's secretary and current Minister of the Interior, Matteo Salvini, is known for his daily use of social media and his eagerness to appear as a politician who is close to its electorate.

During the summer of 2018, newspapers and news agencies from all around the world covered a sequence of events tied to the behaviour of Minister Salvini following the arrival of the Italian coastal guard ship Diciotti in the Sicilian harbour of Catania after rescuing almost 200 people at sea.

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<sup>1</sup> *New media* include mass communication media which have developed following the birth of computers.

The first chapter will define a theoretical framework which will help in defining the key concepts used in the rest of this dissertation. In order to understand the implications of the Diciotti case, it will be useful to differentiate between the concepts of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants, as well as to define the concept of populism. In addition to this, an analysis of three theories which are peculiar to the Diciotti case will be conducted. The second chapter will offer a brief account of the history of the League since its foundation at the end of the Eighties, when it was still a small regional party with a strong independentist agenda. The third chapter will outline an overview of the Diciotti case to have a clear understanding of the facts. Finally, the fourth chapter will examine Salvini's use of social media by carrying out a discourse analysis of his Facebook posts and tweets, focusing on the Diciotti case and its aftermath.

# Chapter I: Theoretical Framework

## 1. Concept Specification

The concepts of immigrant and populism are open to numerous interpretations. Since “to define is first of all to assign limits, to delimit” (Sartori 2004, p. 786), this section will be dedicated to concept specification. First of all, it is necessary to provide a precise definition of immigrant. Moreover, a clear definition of a populist party is needed to better understand the nature of the League under Matteo Salvini’s lead.

### 1.1 Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Migrants

Three specific definitions are needed in order to fully grasp the implications of the refugee crisis and how it was framed by Italian populist parties such as the League. The term “immigrant” was, in fact, often misused as to include refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants.

The 1951 Refugee Convention is a legal document which protects refugees under international law. According to the Convention, a refugee is “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (UNHCR, p. 3) <sup>2</sup>.

Asylum seekers, on the other hand, are people who move across borders in search for protection, but who may not fulfil the criteria to be considered refugees laid down by the 1951 Convention. The UNESCO defines an asylum seeker as “someone who has applied for protection as a refugee and is awaiting the determination of his or her status. Asylum seekers can become refugees if the local immigration or refugee authority deems them as fitting the international definition of refugee” <sup>3</sup>.

Finally, the term “migrant” has formally been defined by Pizarro (2002, p. 12) as including three broad categories of people:

“(a) Persons who are outside the territory of the State of which they are nationals or citizens, are not subject to its legal protection and are in the territory of another State;

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<sup>2</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (1951) *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees* [Online] Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10>

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), *Glossary of migration Related Terms* [Online] Available at: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/international-migration/glossary/asylum-seeker/>

- (b) Persons who do not enjoy the general legal recognition of rights which is inherent in the granting by the host State of the status of refugee, naturalized person or of similar status;
- (c) Persons who do not enjoy either general legal protection of their fundamental rights by virtue of diplomatic agreements, visas or other agreements”.

For this paper, the term *immigrant* is used as a general and neutral concept covering refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants coming from North African countries and the Middle East during the years characterised by a massive influx of people in European countries.

## 1.2 Defining Populism

The concept of populism is often regarded as difficult to define because of the role played by individual countries’ historical and social contexts (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). A minimal definition of populism, which includes only the necessary and sufficient conditions, states that

[...] Populism is understood as a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people. In the populist democracy, nothing is more important than the “general will” of the people, not even human rights or constitutional guarantees. (Mudde 2007, p. 23).

Populism stands in contrast with pluralism and elitism. Populists are, in fact, “skeptical of the key features and institutional structures that are intrinsic to pluralism, that is, compromise, mediating institutional bodies, and procedures that ensure, most notably, minority rights” (Akkerman *et al.* 2014, p. 1327). In addition to this, elitism is also regarded as contrasting sharply with populism, since it ultimately states that the society or system should be led by an elite. However, elitism shares a key feature with populism: the Manichean division of society into two groups: the people and the elite (*ibid.*, p. 1328).

Elements of this “thin ideology” can be found in Matteo Salvini’s right-wing League, which make it a *de facto* populist party. For instance, the party has displayed a continuous pattern of explicit delegitimisation of the political establishment ever since its foundation as a strictly regional force in the late Eighties. Mainstream parties and European institutions are framed as an adversary and

separate “caste” against a virtuous people (Ivaldi *et al.* 2017). The core traits of populist ideology in the League can be summarised as follows (*ibid.*, p. 360):

<b>Political elite as a “caste”</b>	<i>La Casta</i>
Nativism <sup>4</sup>	Nativist
People	Italians / Immigrants, Christians / Muslims
Elite	Politicians
Economic interests	Social Market
Euroscepticism	Hard
People	Exploited and ignored
Elite	Banks, markets, corporations, financial institutions, the European Central Bank
<b>Primary antagonistic relationship</b>	From spatial (North / South) to cultural
<b>Idea of political representation</b>	Referendum

A precise definition of immigrant, along with a clear understanding of the main features of a populist party will be useful in the analysis of our case study. Before that, however, some theoretical implications are needed.

## 2. Theories

This part is dedicated to three theories which are particularly relevant to the study of our case. The following sections will focus on the self-categorisation theory, the framing theory, and the mediatisation of politics theory. The League has displayed in numerous circumstances attitudes and policies which relate to all three theories, which is the reason why I decided to examine them more closely.

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<sup>4</sup> According to Mudde, nativism is defined as “the ideology that a state should comprise “natives” and that “nonnatives” are to be treated with hostility” (2007, 138).

## 2.1 Self-Categorisation Theory

The self-categorisation theory describes the circumstances under which a person will perceive a collection of people as a group, as well as the consequences of perceiving people in group terms. It is a development and a specification of a broader analysis of intergroup relations and social conflict known as social identity theory. Its basic assumption is that individuals tend to identify with groups. The concept of social identity is thus defined as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel 1974, p. 69). This theory assumes that individuals strive to improve their self-image through social and personal identities. Moreover, it predicts certain intergroup behaviours on the basis of perceived group status differences. Tajfel also argues that humans use social categorisation to categorise people based on shared characteristics (race, age, gender, religion), which in turn creates In-Groups and Out-Groups.

The theory was later revisited by Turner in 1985 and took the name of self-categorisation theory. The focus was directed at the general issue of the individual-group relationship, and the theory distanced itself from the social identity theory which, on the other hand, sought to explain intergroup discrimination in terms of the need for positive distinctiveness (Turner and Oakes 1986). The self-categorisation theory explains group phenomena “in terms of the structure and functioning of the social self-concept (the system of cognitive representations of self, based upon comparisons with other people and relevant to social interaction)” (*ibid.*, p. 241). Therefore, the main concern is the way in which identification shifts from being personal to collective. For this to happen, an important role is ascribed to “prototypical group members”, who are able to influence members in order to ultimately achieve stronger group conformity (McGarty *et al.* 1992).

An insecure sense of self-identity can lead people to identify with nationalistic sentiments and attitudes. Taking into consideration an ethnic and cultural conceptualisation of nationalism which “largely follows from a ‘primordial’ belief regarding the nature of the nation – the belief that nations have existed since the dawn of human history” (Dunn 2015, p. 369), as well as the idea that right-wing parties are “markedly more intolerant and punitive toward outgroups than other party families” (Dunn and Singh 2011, p. 317), a first hypothesis can be outlined with regards to Salvini’s League.

**H1:** The League uses a nationalistic dialectic which appeals to citizens who strongly identify with the Italian nation and have greater trust in the government.

## 2.2 Framing Theory

The framing theory is based on a set of concepts and perspectives on how individuals, groups, and societies organise and perceive reality. It is useful in our analysis since it provides the framework to better understand the actual processes where contextual effects explain why people are more accepting of debates about certain issues in their society.

The concept of frame was first employed in sociology by Erving Goffman in order to explain how events are understood and organised not only in people's minds, but also in society as a whole. In his work, he assumes that "definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principles of organisation which govern events [...] and our subjective involvement in them; frame is the word I use to refer to such of these basic elements" (Goffman 1974, p. 10). Frames are thus perceived to be simple cognitive structures which facilitate perception as well as representation of reality. According to Tversky and Kahneman (1981, p. 453), who applied the concept to the realm of behavioural economics, a decision frame is "the decision maker's conception of the acts, outcomes, and contingencies associated with a particular choice".

When referring specifically to politics, the theory of framing highlights how political representatives offer interpretative models that provide meaning and help individuals in making sense of their surroundings. Different political actors will strategically select and emphasise different elements pertaining to a certain issue in their agendas. Taken from this perspective, frames can also be understood as "discursive structures which allow the receiver of a message to simplify its meaning and to choose certain components for interpretation" (Kuzio 2015, p. 38). Different political actors could provide their own interpretation of an issue by framing it in a way which mirrors their agenda. For instance, immigration could be treated in securitarian terms, that is as an international threat or a tangible problem for domestic security. On the other hand, the same issue could be framed by left-wing parties in terms of humanitarian values such as solidarity, cooperation, and respect for others (Urso 2018).

According to Zincone (2006, p. 351), five possible attitudes towards immigrants can be identified in Italian politics.

- *Solidarist*, which aims to give immigrants access to the country and rights.

- *Multiculturalist*, which favours the conservation of immigrants' language and religious customs which do not conflict too strongly with the law and does not discourage the formation of tools of socialisation and community communication.
- *Functionalist*, which aims to make entry and residence permits for immigrants depend on the economic, financial, and demographic needs of the host country.
- *Identitarian*, which fears that the presence of immigrants will alter the national culture and may consequently pursue a strategy of limiting and screening immigration flow and citizenship.
- *Repressive/legalitarian*, which aims at preventing clandestine entry and illegal residence, and above all aims to suppress crime and terrorism by immigrants.

The politicisation of immigration in Italy has been gaining salience since the mid-Nineties, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when the number of immigrants reaching Southern Europe increased and the Italian demographic composition quickly began to change. Immigration has since then increasingly taken centre-stage in the political landscape. Part of this has led to a rise in far-right, anti-immigration parties such as the League. Existing evidence suggests that the presence of immigrants generates an advantage for parties with anti-immigration or nationalist platforms, and that specific immigration policies adopted by League mayors in Italian municipalities discourage immigrants from moving there altogether (Bracco *et al.* 2018).

Drawing a comprehensive image of the framing theory and its implications both in sociology and in political science leads to the second hypothesis which will be discussed in this paper.

**H2:** The League's identitarian and repressive framing of immigration issues in Italy resonates deeply with the electorate, which relates to it and thus increases its support towards the party's leader.

### **2.3 The Mediatisation of Politics Theory**

Communication strategies undoubtedly have a pivotal role in today's political parties' programmes. The mediatisation process has been underway ever since the birth of modern mass media, when communication systems were based off of a limited number of press and electronic channels. This phenomenon is common to the political systems of all democratic countries, and it has developed at different speeds in each of them. However, concerns have grown with regards to the role that media have now taken. In fact, a democratic system which is driven by the media is thought to cause the decline of the model of political organisation born with the liberal state, since no constitution foresees that media could be held accountable for their actions (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). Absence of accountability can imply serious risks for democracy. Moreover, recently developed forms of media can facilitate the spread of populist attitudes and opinions.

The mediatisation of politics theory assumes that the interaction and the communication between the political system, the media system and the citizens happen in a mediatised space and is largely dependent on the media. The space created by the media thus adds itself to the public space created by the interaction between the three aforementioned actors. The media are channels which catalyse the exchange between the public system and the citizens, and they influence their behaviours as well as the nature of their relationships.

The process of mediatisation has produced a series of consequences. The introduction of television into the political sphere has imposed strategies and logics different from those of traditional politics. Political competition is no longer focused on party systems' efficiency, but on the capacity of spreading messages to an ever-larger public via media control. Showbiz-like strategies oblige political subjects to create performances and exploit visibility.

The mediatisation of politics has also caused a weakening of the bond between parties and the electorate. Functions which had always been exercised by political parties, such as the ones tied to simplification and aggregation of political proposals, are now fading out because of an ongoing process of societal change. Since ideologies do not play a relevant role anymore, parties no longer represent the main political and cultural mediation channel. Political leaders and subjects now have as their main goal that of conquering electors' trust and revive their interest about precise issues. Media play a key role in this dynamic, given that they are channels which spread information. Therefore, media have a relevant role when it comes to agenda setting. In fact, it is believed that the perceived relevance of certain issues is a direct consequence of the relevance expressed by mass

media. Ultimately, individuals tend to include or exclude from their thought processes what media include or exclude in their narrative. Agenda setting is completed by agenda building, a process in which media determine the selection of topics that the political process has to consider.

Since outlining a normative definition of the mediatisation of politics is problematic, it could be said that this process occurs “when mass media constitute the most important channels for information exchange and communication between people and political actors” (Strömbäck 2008, p. 231). Mediatisation thus has to deal with the centrality of mass media, as well as with the process that modifies the way in which the political system, the media, and the citizens communicate.

A third hypothesis can be outlined after this discussion:

**H3:** The way in which Minister of the Interior Salvini used social media platforms during the Diciotti case is a fitting example of how the mediatisation of politics is taking place in current Italian politics.

Once the hypotheses have been stated, a brief account of the history of the - formerly Northern - League is needed in order to understand its different stances on immigration throughout the years.

## Chapter II: Historical Background

### 1. From Bossi's Northern League to Salvini's "National" League

The League (or the Northern League) is a political party that was founded by northern-regionalist politician Umberto Bossi in 1989 as a federation of several regional parties of Northern Italy, and by 2008 it had become the oldest party group in the Italian Parliament. Its support base is rooted in regions of Northern Italy, particularly in Lombardia and Veneto. Since 1994, the Northern League took part, allied with centre-right parties, in coalition governments led by Silvio Berlusconi. As part of this, it obtained several national ministries. Moreover, it gained the governorship of some of the wealthiest regions in Northern Italy. The political platform and agenda of the League in its early years comprised of political and fiscal federalism and regional autonomy, going as far as to ask for a modification of the Italian Constitution in order to obtain the secession of a part of Northern Italy or "Padania" from Italy.

The distinctive trait of the League under the leadership of Umberto Bossi was its ideology, which was defined as "regionalist populist" (McDonnell 2006). It was a populist ideology, not explicitly right-wing in nature, in that it advocated a territorial cause, stood to defend and promote what it saw as "its" regions, consistently presented them as ontologically different and distinctive from the rest of the country and argued that the centralization of political authority and economic resources had damaged northern regional interests and identity (Albertazzi *et al.*, 2018). The League's initial mission was to lead a movement of northern secession from the Italian state in order to establish a new "Federal Republic of Padania" (D'Alimonte 2019). In fact, in the first years after its foundation, the Northern League was very successful in forcing two issues to the top of the national political agenda: what would be known as the "northern question", that is the growing economic and social gap between a wealthy North and a much less developed South of Italy; and the rapidly growing sense of discontent, and even hostility, towards the political elites and institutions. This points to the other key feature of the party: its populist nature. This was especially evident in the early years, when the League's rhetoric heavily denounced the central government and what it deemed as the "corrupt elites". In fact, the Northern League justified its juxtaposition of northern Italians with "Roma ladrona" (Rome the thief) by positing the former as a homogenous, hard-working community of people attached to their distinctive traditions, and the latter as the place where the political and cultural elites running the country (to the benefit of the South) could be found.

After a stable alliance between the League and Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia was formed in 2000, there was a slight shift in the party rhetoric. From 2001 to 2006, the two political forces governed Italy in conjunction. Bossi's Northern League replaced its original secessionist purpose with a federal one. Notwithstanding this, it did not abandon its regional roots, nor the pledge to lead its home area out of the Italian republic.

Salvini's election as party secretary in 2013 constituted a real turning point in the League's ideology and rhetoric. Nowadays, the League remains populist, but it is no longer a regionalist party. The new leader's aim was to transform the formerly Northern League into a national party which could be compared to Marine Le Pen's National Front in France. The party's transformation can thus be read as the natural result of a process of renovation, both in generational and ideological terms. The willingness of turning a small regionalist party into a national political force was clear soon after Salvini took the party's helm. The leader's statements both on social networks and at party rallies immediately showed that he was adamant that the League had a broader electoral support, coming also from regions which had previously been downplayed and blatantly insulted. A few days after his election, Matteo Salvini apologised for the insults he had directed at people in the south of Italy throughout his political career and claimed to have become persuaded that, either Italy saved itself as a nation, or else all of its regions, without exception, would face ruin (Il Sole 24 Ore 2014). Therefore, the League currently led by Salvini can be considered a national right-wing party whose goals and enemies are evidently changed from those in place when the party was first founded by Umberto Bossi. Its strong regionalist drive has been replaced by a more general patriotic sentiment, with Italy replacing Padania. The Roman political elite and southerners, which were considered the party's uttermost enemies, have been replaced by the European elites and by immigrants. In addition to this, the rightist component in the League's ideology has become more radical.

Since the new millennium, the Northern League abandoned the distinctly "pro-North" focus and reoriented its political message towards issues of immigration and crime, which constitute the only issues from the original League's programme that have proven to be still relevant in the party's new framework. Using populist rhetoric, the party has associated immigration with rising criminality, drugs, unemployment, and excessive public spending. The focus of its ideology shifted from a regionalist to a nationalist one by claiming that Italy should be united against a totalitarian European Union, which came to be portrayed as the real *locus* of power. The calling for regional autonomy and reforms in Northern Italy, which had been at the core of the Northern League's ideology under the leadership of Umberto Bossi and Roberto Maroni, was dropped altogether in order to favour a focus

on the national dimension. This process culminated just before the 2018 national election with Matteo Salvini's decision to altogether drop the term "North" from the electoral symbol of the party. This allowed him to strengthen the personalisation process by adding his name on the party logo as its candidate for the premiership (i.e. "Lega Salvini Premier"). In addition to this, the main 2018 electoral slogan, inspired by Donald Trump's presidential campaign, was "Italians First", in stark contrast with "North First", which had been the main slogan during Maroni's leadership.

Therefore, since the election of Salvini as the new party leader, the League appears to have developed a "Janus-faced character" (Albertazzi *et al.* 2018, p. 650). It maintains its traditional structure as a party rooted in the North, however this is now mirrored by a much lighter organization, which fields candidates across Italy, including the South. Here, a weaker territorial presence has so far been offset by heavy reliance on the leader's ability to communicate, including via social media, with a view that his popularity would deliver some degree of electoral success. These two souls of the party are linked by the figure of Salvini himself, who uses personalisation to widen the party's geographical spectrum and to define the identity of a new, national League.

However, there is an uncertainty regarding how regional or national the party is. The decision to drop the adjective "Northern" from the electoral symbol was unofficial and undiscussed, since the term still remains in the League's official statute. The move was made by Salvini himself through his own social media accounts, therefore bypassing entirely both national and regional party mechanisms. After the party had run the 2018 general election under the name "League", it participated in regional elections with two distinct names depending on the region's collocation. The party ran as "Northern League" in northern regions, whereas ballots only included the term "League" in the South of Italy. This lingering ambiguity will need to be addressed by the party, but until now it has not proven detrimental to Matteo Salvini. On the contrary, it could have proven to be strategically useful in increasing its electoral base in different Italian regions.

Another development brought about by Salvini concerns the party's communicative strategy, which now relies to a great extent on the possibility of permanent campaigning provided by social media. The support of those who follow the Minister of the Interior on social media (3.6 million people on Facebook and 1 million people on Twitter as of June 2019) helps him shape national debates on issues concerning identity and security.

The radical change from the Bossi and Maroni era to Salvini's era has gone through different phases heavily influenced by the new leader's use of social media. At first, the European Union was the

League's prime target. A study of Salvini's Facebook posts over the span of three years, from 2014 to 2017, shows that the focus of his posts has increasingly shifted, intertwining the issues of immigration, security, and terrorism, which are now considered among the most salient issues that Italy has to face. Moreover, ever since he was elected as party leader, he dropped the focus on Northern values, needs, and interests to favour a broader nativist strategy (Albertazzi *et al.* 2018).

The League has been part of the Italian government since June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018, and Matteo Salvini's top priority as Minister of the Interior and Vice President of the Council of Ministers has been that of framing the issue of immigration in different ways to widen its support base and to support a nativist perspective. In order to see how the leader is achieving his goal, we have to narrow our research field down and pinpoint a case study.

## Chapter III: An Overview of the Diciotti case

The Diciotti case can be analysed from different perspectives. In the following two sections, the case study will be examined both from a legal perspective and from a journalistic one. The first section will cover the events from August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2018 until August 26<sup>th</sup>, 2018. The second part will focus on the aftermath of the Diciotti case, as well as on the consequences that it had on the Italian government and on minister Salvini.

### 1.1 The ten days of the Diciotti

On August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2018, a boat coming from Libya and carrying people of various nationalities (prevalently from Eritrea and Somalia) was signalled from authorities as being in extreme difficulty and in desperate need for rescue. During the following two days, authorities from Italy and from Malta started a controversy as for who was responsible for rescuing the aforementioned immigrants. Although Italy knew about the boat, authorities believed that it was Malta's duty to intervene, since the boat itself was in Malta's SAR zone (Search and Rescue). Malta, however, has never signed some of the international conventions signed by Italy in 2004, such as the SAR and SOLAS conventions<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, it often does not intervene when there are boats with persons in distress at sea in its SAR area. In the early morning of August 16<sup>th</sup>, a concrete threat for the immigrants' lives - the boat had begun to take water in - led the Italian Coast Guard to intervene in international waters and to later transfer the 190 immigrants rescued on the Diciotti ship, which belongs to the Italian military and which went near Lampedusa (Sicily). Among the rescued people, there were ten women and 37 minors. Thirteen people were immediately brought to the island of Lampedusa for risks related to their health.

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<sup>5</sup> The SAR Convention was adopted at a Conference in Hamburg in 1979. It was aimed at developing an international SAR plan, so that, no matter where an accident occurred, the rescue of persons in distress at sea would be coordinated by a SAR organisation. The International Maritime Organisation thus divided the world's oceans into 13 search and rescue areas. The SAR convention was amended in 1998 and in 2004. Additional information about the Convention can be found here:

<http://www.imo.org/en/OurWork/Safety/RadioCommunicationsAndSearchAndRescue/SearchAndRescue/Pages/SARCConvention.aspx>.

The International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) was adopted in its first version in 1914, in response to the Titanic disaster, the second in 1929, the third in 1948, and the fourth in 1960. It is generally regarded as the most important of all international treaties concerning the safety of merchant ships. Additional information about the Convention can be found here: [http://www.imo.org/en/about/conventions/listofconventions/pages/international-convention-for-the-safety-of-life-at-sea-\(solas\),-1974.aspx](http://www.imo.org/en/about/conventions/listofconventions/pages/international-convention-for-the-safety-of-life-at-sea-(solas),-1974.aspx)

After three days spent in the waters around the island of Lampedusa, the Diciotti ship was finally let into the Catania harbour on August 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018. This delay was caused by the fact that Italian and Maltese authorities were still debating about the country who was responsible for the indication of the *PoS* (Place of Safety). Italy wanted the ship to go into Malta's territorial waters, but the latter did not authorise the docking of the ship, also because the Diciotti technically constitutes Italian soil, since it is an Italian ship. Once the persons in distress have been rescued, international law requires that they are brought to safety as fast as possible. The rescue is considered concluded only when the persons have reached a place of safety. In Catania, however, Diciotti captain Massimo Kothmeir received the order not to let the migrants disembark. The order came straight from the Italian government. The Ministry of the Interior, in fact, refused to release the *PoS*, and therefore the authorisation for the disembarkation, until a deal with other major European countries relating to who should accept a share of the immigrants would be concluded. Rome insisted Malta should take in the group because the boat first passed through the country's search-and-rescue area, but Valletta refused, claiming that people on board wanted to reach Italy.

Living conditions on the military ship, however, were unbearable given the fact that the Diciotti itself had not originally been built in order to accommodate such a high number of people. On August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 27 unaccompanied minors were permitted to land. The Minister of the Interior authorised the disembarkation after an inspection of the ship led by Luigi Patronaggio, the prosecutor of the city of Agrigento. Patronaggio stated that, while politics had the right to take decisions, those could not clash with the national constitution and with international norms. These circumstances led the public prosecutor's office to open a formal investigation for kidnapping against unknown subjects. During this early phase of the investigations, there were not yet allegations against specific members of the government. The minors on board of the Diciotti - 25 boys and two girls, mainly from Eritrea, the youngest being 14 years old - were in very poor health. They were all suffering from malnutrition, and some were not even able to walk properly because of previously untreated injuries. In addition to this, all minors were exhausted by the journey not only from a physical point of view, but from a psychological one. Giovanna Di Benedetto, a spokesperson for Save The Children, reported that they had all spent a long time in Libya, where they had suffered abuse for up to three years prior to their departure.

On the next day, a delegation of the Council of the National Guarantor for Detainees and Persons deprived of Personal Liberty composed by Daniela De Robert, Fabrizio Leonardi, and Elena Adamoli, visited the ship to have a clear understanding of the situation, eight days after the initial

rescue at sea. After talking with both the immigrants and the crew, the delegation recognised that the vast majority of the people on board were of a nationality which would have guaranteed them automatic international protection in almost every European country (Camilli 2018).

The table below lists the country of origin of the 150 migrants on board of the Diciotti on August 23<sup>rd</sup>.

Eritrea	130
Comoro Islands	10
Bangladesh	6
Syria	2
Egypt	1
Somalia	1

After visiting the Diciotti, the delegation filed reports which were sent to the Public Prosecutor Offices (*procura*) of the cities of Catania and Agrigento.<sup>6</sup> Both reports underlined how critical the situation had become with regards to the respect of the fundamental rights of the people involved. Should those rights not be guaranteed, Italy could potentially face legal punishment before international courts. The delegation highlighted three aspects which needed specific attention.

The first aspect was the *de facto* deprivation of the individual liberty of the immigrants, who had been rescued on August 16<sup>th</sup> by an Italian ship which was not given the authorisation from the Italian government to dock in an Italian harbour. When the authorisation had finally come, they were still not permitted to land, having to wait for another five full days. According to the delegation, this sequence of events triggered a legitimacy issue, with a possible violation of Article 13 of the Constitution of the Italian Republic at the national level, and of Article 5 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) at the European level. These measures state that “personal liberty shall be inviolable”<sup>7</sup> and that “everyone has the right to liberty and security of person”<sup>8</sup>. Despite the lack of a

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<sup>6</sup> Garante Nazionale dei Diritti delle Persone Detenute o Private della Libertà Personale, *Informativa per la Procura della Repubblica presso il Tribunale di Catania*.

<http://www.garantenazionaleprivatiliberta.it/gnpl/resources/cms/documents/0c8171dea61ebaf14e7e8a0dd6bc7498.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Art. 13.1,2 Constitution of the Italian Republic: “Personal liberty shall be inviolable. No one may be detained, inspected, or searched nor otherwise subjected to any restriction of personal liberty except by reasoned order of the Judiciary and only in such cases and in such manner as provided by the law. [...]”

<sup>8</sup> Art. 5.1 ECHR: “Everyone has the right to liberty and security of person. No one shall be deprived of his liberty save in the following cases and in accordance with a procedure prescribed by law: (a) the lawful detention of a person after conviction by a competent court; [...] (e) the lawful detention of persons for the prevention of the spreading of infectious diseases, of persons of unsound mind, alcoholics or drug addicts or vagrants; (f) the lawful arrest or detention of a person to prevent his effecting an unauthorised entry into the country or of a person against whom action is being taken with a view to deportation or extradition.”

formal act to limit their personal liberty coming from the Italian judiciary, as well as the absence of technical issues which could halt the disembarkation, people on board were not given the permission to land.

The second aspect focused on the material and physical condition of the spaces in the Diciotti ship designated as the immigrants' living areas. Those were considered "absolutely not suitable" to live in for a long period of time. People on board did not have access to indoor areas, and thus had no choice but to live and eat on the ship's deck. Some blankets and pieces of cardboard were used both as beds and as dining tables. Moreover, there were only two working bathrooms - with no sinks and draining directly into the sea - on the ship, which were clearly insufficient for the necessities of 150 people. The only source of running water to be used for hygiene was a tube on the ship's deck, which was also used in order to wash clothes. During the time spent on board of the Diciotti ship, the immigrants only had one possibility to wash themselves in the open air and with cold water. All this led the delegation to believe that, although Captain Kothmeir was trying his best to guarantee the safety of the passengers, the overall context could be regarded as a violation of Art. 3 of the ECHR, which constitutes a *jus cogens* norm of international law that binds all states and from which no derogation is permitted in any case.<sup>9</sup>

The third and final aspect considered in the reports were the immigrants' health conditions. The journey had made them incredibly weak, making it necessary for them to take daily nutritional supplements in addition to a diet aimed at providing all the nutrients they had lacked for months. Moreover, according to a medical report issued some days prior, there were 69 cases of presumed scabies and 5 cases of advanced scabies on board. The aforementioned sanitary conditions of the Diciotti ship, along with the fact that garments could not be regularly washed and that passengers were only given an antihistamine, could only worsen the overall health conditions of the immigrants.

The Italian deputy prime minister threatened to suspend his country's financial contribution to the European Union if Brussels did not intervene and redistribute the 150 people onboard the coastguard ship Diciotti. A Facebook post written by Matteo Salvini on August 23<sup>rd</sup> reads:

*"Do you remember the 450 immigrants landed in Pozzallo in July? The European Union had promised to take care of them, and what now? Germany accepted to take 50 immigrants: it took zero. Portugal accepted to take 50 immigrants: it took zero. Spain did the same, along with Ireland. Malta said it would have accepted 50*

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<sup>9</sup> Art. 3 ECHR - Prohibition of Torture: "No one shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment".

*immigrants: it took zero. Why should we trust anyone this time? Before asking about the disembarkment of the Diciotti ship, the European Union should give us some explanations. I will not give up”<sup>10</sup>.*

Luigi Di Maio, Italian Minister of Labour and Social Policies of the Five Star Movement (M5S), which governs in coalition with the League, said that if the EU did not act immediately, the movement would not stand beside the decision to give 20 billion Euros each year to the European bloc <sup>11</sup>. The European Commission said threats were unhelpful and called on all countries to find a solution to help the people onboard. All immigrants were finally able to step foot on the Catania harbour at midnight on August 26<sup>th</sup>, ten days after having been rescued by the Italian Diciotti ship.

## **1.2 The Aftermath of the Diciotti case**

In the days following the immigrants’ landing into the Sicilian harbour of Catania, investigations continued in order to understand whether or not Minister Matteo Salvini was personally responsible for what had happened on the Diciotti ship.

As previously mentioned, after visiting the Diciotti on August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2018, Luigi Patronaggio, prosecutor of the city of Agrigento, had started investigations against unknown persons for kidnapping. Salvini, following the news that an investigation was potentially underway, said in a video on Facebook Live: “I heard that the prosecutor’s office in Agrigento has opened an investigation. I also heard that the suspects are ‘unknown’ at the moment. But I am not unknown. My name is Matteo Salvini, and I am the Minister of the Interior. Come on, put me on trial, I am here”. Just days after the end of the Diciotti case, on August 31<sup>st</sup>, Patronaggio sent an envelope containing the formalisation of accusations against Minister Salvini and his chief of cabinet, Matteo Piantadosi, to the office of the prosecutor in Palermo, Francesco Lo Voi. In this file, five violations were imputed to the Minister of the Interior. The first one was kidnapping, a violation of article 605 of the Italian penal code, since there had been no reason to keep the immigrants on the Diciotti ship for such a long time. The second one, kidnapping for coercion purposes, a violation of art. 289 of the Italian penal code, was ascribed to Minister Salvini since he had used the Diciotti case to blackmail the European Union in order to obtain a more favourable deal regarding the redistribution of immigrants. The

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<sup>10</sup> The original post can be found at this page:

[https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/posts/10156010175648155?\\_tn=-R](https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/posts/10156010175648155?_tn=-R).

<sup>11</sup> La Repubblica, YouTube (2018) *Diciotti, Di Maio: “Governo compatto, avanti con linea dura contro l’UE*. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GWSfNRYV11M> [Accessed on June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019]

detaining of distressed persons on the ship was also considered an illegal arrest, a violation of art. 606. In addition to this, an abuse of power (art. 323) was contested to Salvini, since he violated numerous norms of European and international law. Finally, given the fact that the Minister had not indicated a place of safety to the Italian Coastal Guard, the omission of administrative acts (art. 328) was also contested (Palazzolo 2018a). Lo Voi had fifteen days to analyse the accusations and eventually change them, before formally sending the case to the three judges who constitute the Tribunal of Ministers in Palermo.

After a formal beginning of the proceedings against Salvini had been communicated by a letter written by Lo Voi in early September, accusations were reduced to kidnapping, aggravated by the weak health conditions of the majority of the people on board of the Diciotti, as well as by the fact that there were many unaccompanied minors. The three judges of the Tribunal of Ministers in Palermo, chaired by judge Fabio Pilato, established that the issue did not belong to their area of competence. The reason behind this was that the Minister's order to hold the Diciotti in harbour, without letting the immigrants on land, came when the ship was already in a territory under the competence of Catania's prosecutor's office (Palazzolo 2018b). Therefore, after having conducted some hearings in Palermo with the Coastal Guard and functionaries of the Ministry of the Interior, the Tribunal of Ministers decided to send the dossier to Catania.

On November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018, the general prosecutor of the city of Catania, Carmelo Zuccaro, had asked for the archiving of the proceedings against minister Matteo Salvini. According to Zuccaro, Salvini's decision to not let the immigrants land was justified by a political choice, which could not be disputed by the penal judge for the separation of powers, aiming at asking the European Union for a redistribution of the immigrants following a case in which it would have been Malta's duty to accept them. Since the European Commission was supposed to hold a meeting on August 24<sup>th</sup>, the general prosecutor wrote, Salvini's decision was coherent. A formal request of archiving was therefore sent to Catania's Tribunal of the Ministers, along with the acts related to the formal penal proceeding which had previously arrived from Palermo (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2018).

However, Zuccaro's requests were not accepted by Catania's Tribunal of the Ministers. According to the latter, minister Salvini had acted with a precise will to deprive people of their liberty. This could be deduced not only by direct declarations made by Salvini in the days during and following the Diciotti case, but also by statements made by the highest Ministry of the Interior's administrative offices. On December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018, the Tribunal decided that Matteo Salvini could be

charged with kidnapping for abusing his powers in his capacity as Minister of the Interior, for depriving persons of their liberty, in violation of international conventions on sea rescue and the current Italian regulations after he prevented immigrants from disembarking the Diciotti ship in August<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, the contested crime was aggravated by the power detained by Matteo Salvini in the capacity of a public official who had abused his powers, thereby damaging distressed persons and even unaccompanied minors. According to the judges in Catania, the Minister of the Interior had arbitrarily decided for the forceful permanence of the immigrants on board, depriving them of their personal liberty without a judge's authorisation, and beyond the permitted time. The document was deposited on January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2019. Two days later, it was thus made official that the Tribunal of the Ministers of Catania had asked for the authorisation to proceed against Matteo Salvini for kidnapping.

The authorisation to proceed asked by the Tribunal of the Ministers was necessary, since Matteo Salvini is a minister of the Italian Republic. Despite the position held by a minister - or by the President of the Council of Ministers - in any government, ordinary legal proceedings can be put in place against them when needed. However, before the proceedings start, as established by Art. 96 of the Constitution of the Italian Republic, the Senate of the Republic or the Chamber of Deputies have to provide an authorisation to proceed with investigations<sup>13</sup>. In case of approval, the first-degree judgement would then be under the responsibility of the ordinary tribunal of the Court of Appeal district's administrative centre. In fact, after initial inquiries, the Tribunal of the Ministers would not be competent for the case anymore (Barone 2019). On the other hand, senators could deny, by absolute majority, the authorisation to proceed in case they believed that minister Salvini had acted in the way he did during the Diciotti case in order to defend a constitutionally relevant interest of the state. What this basically meant was that the Senators had to establish whether or not the Minister of the Interior had acted to protect a public interest during the Diciotti case, and then vote accordingly. In this scenario, the Five Star Movement's support towards Salvini would be crucial, since it detained the majority of the Senators.

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<sup>12</sup> Procura Distrettuale della Repubblica di Catania, *Domanda di Autorizzazione a Procedere in Giudizio ai Sensi dell'Articolo 96 della Costituzione nei confronti del Senatore Matteo Salvini nella sua qualità di Ministro dell'interno pro tempore*. The full document, available in Italian, can be accessed online at this page:

<http://www.giurisprudenzapenale.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Salvini-Diciotti-Doc.IV-bis.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Constitution of the Italian Republic, Art. 96: "The President of the Council of Ministers and the Ministers, even if they resign from office, are subject to normal justice for crimes committed in the exercise of their duties, provided authorisation is given by the Senate of the Republic or the Chamber of Deputies, in accordance with the norms established by Constitutional Law."

In the table below, you can see the composition of the Italian Senate’s parliamentary groups in the current legislature. <sup>14</sup>

Forza Italia - Berlusconi Presidente	61
Fratelli d’Italia	18
Lega - Salvini Premier - Partito Sardo d’Azione	58
MoVimento 5 Stelle	107
Partito Democratico	52
Per le Autonomie (SVP-PATT, UV)	8
Misto	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>318</b>

What was actually at stake in this phase of the legal proceedings was the relationship between different state powers. The judiciary was here claiming that even the executive could not be considered to be *legibus solutus*, i.e. above the law, and had to respect boundaries established by the rule of law (Camilli 2019). On January 24<sup>th</sup>, when the news about the authorisation to proceed came out, the Minister of the Interior and Vice President of the Council of Ministers wrote in a Tweet:

*“I risk between three and fifteen years in jail because I stopped illegal immigrants from coming into the country. I am speechless. Am I afraid? Not at all. I will continue working to defend my country’s borders and the security of the Italian people”.*<sup>15</sup>

The vote regarding the authorisation to proceed against Matteo Salvini took place on March 20<sup>th</sup>. An overwhelming majority of the Senators (237) voted in opposition to the decision of the Tribunal of the Ministers, thereby denying the authorisation to continue investigations regarding the Minister’s conduct during the ten days leading to the disembarkation of immigrants from the Diciotti ship. According to the Italian higher chamber, minister Salvini had operated with Italy’s best interest in mind, according to the guidelines established by the government for matters concerning the issue of immigration. Sixty-one senators voted in favour of the authorisation, and no senator abstained. Some days before the vote in the Senate, the same Tribunal of the Ministers which had asked for the authorisation to proceed against Salvini deposited a request to archive alleged criminal offences against

<sup>14</sup> The Senate has 315 elected members, and an additional number of appointed life senators and *ex officio* life senators. Data is retrieved from the Senate of the Republic: <http://www.senato.it/leg/18/BGT/Schede/Gruppi/Grp.html>

<sup>15</sup> The original tweet can be found at this link: <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1088408491973373957>

Giuseppe Conte (President of the Council of Ministers), Luigi Di Maio (Vice-President and Minister of Labour and Social Policies), and Danilo Toninelli (Minister of Infrastructure and Transport) for crimes committed during the Diciotti case. The three members of government had previously sent an official act to the tribunal in which they stated that the decision to halt the Diciotti ship in the harbour of Catania had been taken by the government as a collegial body, and not exclusively by the Minister of the Interior (Albanese 2019).

The aforementioned decision made by the Tribunal of the Ministers of Catania was *de facto* the last step in the judiciary aftermath of the Diciotti case. Since it could not be overturned, along with the decision made by the Italian Senate, judicial proceedings were stopped and charges against minister Salvini and other members of government were dropped.

Now that a comprehensive overview of the Diciotti case has been outlined, we are going to analyse the importance of Matteo Salvini's social media strategy during the whole case, from the moment the immigrants were saved until the vote in the Senate.

## Chapter IV: How Salvini's social media shaped the Diciotti Case

The - still formally Northern - League's message, mainly focused on opposing economic elites and appealing to "the people" identified on ethnic bases has led some scholars to believe that it constitutes "an almost ideal-type incarnation of populism" (Tarchi 2015, p. 243). This chapter will aim at understanding how Matteo Salvini used a precise populist rhetoric on his social media accounts during the Diciotti case, and how it successfully resonated within his electorate.

### 1. Methodology

The Diciotti Case was taken as a case study since it offers a fitting example of the "implications of the link of populist phenomena with the communication eco-systems" (Mazzoleni & Bracciale 2018, p. 3). The case study approached in this paper concerns the handling by the Minister of Interior Matteo Salvini of an episode revolving around the issue of immigration. This episode demonstrated how the League used the issue of immigration to provide a distorted image of immigrants and refugees in order to increase its electoral following.

In social and life science, the question about how to define the expression *case study* has always been relevant. A working definition that could be used in this context is the one proposed by Gerring. Taking into consideration the two variables of space and time, he defined a case study as "the intensive study of a single case where the purpose of that study is - at least in part - to shed light on a larger class of cases (a population)" (Gerring 2007, p. 20). In a similar manner, a case study can be defined as an "intensive study about a person, a group of people or a unit, which is aimed to generalize over several units" (Gustafsson 2017, p. 2). A case study can be conducted "in order to generalise key themes and results that help predict future trends, illuminate previously hidden issues that can be applied to practice, and/or provide a means for understanding an important research problem with greater clarity" (Wellner, Pierce-Friedman 2019, p. 103).

The analysis of the Diciotti case proposed here is focused on the impact that the case itself had on Italian politics, and in particular on Salvini's League. However, given the advances in digital technologies which have taken place over the last decade, an analysis of the case conducted without taking into consideration social media would have been incomplete. In fact, technological developments have "made available to political actors an unprecedented abundance of communication tools: new platforms, new outlets, social media with potentially huge publics"

(Mazzoleni & Bracciale 2018, p. 3). Messages spread on social media, especially on Facebook and Twitter, have increasingly become part of Italian politics, with elements of populist ideology found not only in accounts of right-wing politicians, but also on those of politicians typically associated with anything but a populist rhetoric, such as Matteo Renzi. The three elements used to measure the degree of populist communicative strategy were: (1) Appeal to ‘the people’; (2) Attacking the élite, and (3) Ostracising the others (*ibid.*, p. 4). In this context, which confirms the existence of a form of “endemic populism” (*ibid.*, p. 7) among all Italian leaders, albeit with different degrees, the way in which a problem is framed becomes crucial. A working definition of the term “frame” set out by Snow and Benford describes it as “an interpretive schema that simplifies and condenses the ‘world out there’ by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions” (1988, p. 37). Collecting and analysing data about the leaders’ social media accounts can help in defining the frame provided by each politician to their electoral base to strengthen their programmes. Given the increasing use of social media as a political tool, and considering growing support towards populist parties in Italy, from the Five Star Movement to Salvini’s League, the Diciotti case is a fitting example to understand the impact of messages spread via social media platforms.

I have chosen to analyse all Facebook posts and Tweets on Matteo Salvini’s official accounts containing the word “Diciotti” from August 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018 (the day the Diciotti ship first docked in Catania’s harbour) up until March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019 (the day the Italian Senate rejected the authorisation to proceed with judicial proceedings against minister Salvini for kidnapping)<sup>16</sup>. While looking for a way to organise the data, I decided to consider the most popular posts and tweets from every month written by Matteo Salvini, thus narrowing my analysis down to six Facebook posts and seven tweets<sup>17</sup>. I also tried to find a criterion that could put the two social networks on the same level, thus trying to avoid subjective indicators such as the comments’ content. For Facebook, I took into consideration the total number of reactions to a certain post, as well as the number of shares. Likewise, I analysed the number of retweets and likes for Twitter.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Given Salvini’s role as Minister of the Interior in the Diciotti case, I chose not to analyse the League’s official profiles. Matteo Salvini’s Official Facebook Page: @salviniofficial; Twitter profile: @matteosalvinimi.

<sup>17</sup> While the months taken into analysis are eight, Matteo Salvini did not write a Facebook post about the Diciotti case during the months of November and December, and he did not write a tweet containing the word “Diciotti” in December.

<sup>18</sup> Full data about the Facebook posts and tweets taken into consideration is available in Appendix A and B at the end of the dissertation.

In order to comprehend the political discourse and strategy behind Salvini's handling of the Diciotti case on his social media account, it will be useful to individually analyse each Facebook post and each tweet. By doing so, it will be easier not only to understand how he relied on the support of his followers during the Diciotti case, but also to see how his actions reflect a change in the League's goals and attitudes. We have already seen that the policies of secessionism and separatism championed by Umberto Bossi in the Nineties were substituted by a nationalistic and nativist attitude. Matteo Salvini has thus kept the - formerly Northern - League anti-systemic style, but he shifted the focus to "issues that are perceived as problems throughout Italy, such as the participation in the Euro and mass immigration" (Brunazzo & Gilbert 2017, p. 631).

The most recurrent themes of right-wing populist parties are nationalistic in nature. The anti-immigrationist discourse of Salvini's League is aimed at profiting from the perceived dangers of immigration, leading some scholars to believe that the party has successfully established itself in the Italian political arena as a "political entrepreneur of xenophobia" (Avanza 2010). The political discourse analysis conducted in the following section will thus not analyse Matteo Salvini's rhetoric as "simply an example discourse type, without explicit reference to political content or political context" (Wilson 2008, p. 398). On the contrary, it will try to grasp exactly how this rhetoric proved successful in the contemporary Italian political context, and what were the elements behind it.

Let us now begin our study of Matteo Salvini's communicative strategy as Italian Minister of the Interior during the Diciotti case. For every Facebook post and every tweet analysed, we will try to understand if and to what extent a right-wing populist rhetoric is found. We will try to identify populist elements according to the initial hypotheses stated in Chapter I. Therefore, three elements will be closely examined, the first of them being the presence of a national ideology. The second element will deal with the framing of the issue of immigration. Finally, we will look at the degree to which social media have become a key part in Italian contemporary political discourse.

## 2. Analysing Salvini's Social Media during the Diciotti case

While taking into consideration Matteo Salvini's official social media accounts, two main aspects have to be recognised. First of all, there is a striking difference between the social engagement originated by Facebook posts and the one originated by tweets. In fact, the Minister's official Facebook page has more than 3.6 million likes, whereas his Twitter profile counts approximately 1.1 million followers<sup>19</sup>. Secondly, our analysis must account for the different phases in the unfolding of the Diciotti case. For instance, social media engagement will naturally be higher in the months of August and September, when the critical phase of the Diciotti case was taking place. Total interactions in August (determined by the sum of all reactions and shares for Facebook, and by the sum of all retweets and likes for Twitter) amounted to almost 1.5 million for Facebook posts, while they amounted to 68 thousand on Twitter<sup>20</sup>.

Once these two premises have been made, our analysis can start. For consistency with regards to Chapter II, we will analyse Salvini's most popular social media content including the word "Diciotti" in chronological order. Therefore, we will start with the actual case involving the Diciotti ship, and we will later turn at the aftermath of the case involving judicial proceedings.

### 2.1 August, September, and October 2018: how the Diciotti case was initially portrayed

The post considered for the month of August 2018 was the most successful post with regards to the analysis of Facebook. It obtained 270 thousand total interactions, with 206 thousand reactions and 64 thousand shares. The post, written on August 25<sup>th</sup>, reads:

*"After much struggle, many insults, lies, threats, and investigations, there finally is a solution for the Diciotti ship"*<sup>21</sup>

Below this sentence, there was a link to a 50-minute livestream of a political rally held by Salvini hours before the immigrants were finally let on the Catania's harbour. The livestream begins with people cheering for the League's leader. The first sentences said by minister Salvini were:

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<sup>19</sup> As of June, 2019.

<sup>20</sup> The exact figures for August 2018 are: 1.427.700 total Facebook interactions, and 67.979 total Twitter interactions.

<sup>21</sup> Links for all Facebook posts and Tweets analysed in this chapter are available in Appendix C. They are all written in Italian.

“Those who want to stop us will have a hard time doing that. Ten minutes ago, I have been told that I am under investigation for kidnapping. I think it will be difficult to stop us, because they can put me under investigation, they can even arrest me, but they cannot stop the desire for change of 60 million Italians. They can investigate whoever they want, they can come pick me up. I am ready”.

This post can be taken as a quintessential representation of Matteo Salvini’s political strategy when dealing with issues pertaining to immigration. First of all, we find the nativist attitude, with the Minister of the Interior claiming that 60 million Italians cannot be stopped, even if the judiciary decided to put him on trial. Secondly, the case of the Diciotti ship here seems not to be that relevant. The real issue appears to be the fact that Salvini was insulted and threatened for how he decided to deal with the case. Therefore, the framing of the case here does not involve the issue itself, but the consequences that it had on minister Salvini. It appears that only the word “struggle” has directly to do with the Diciotti case, while all others express something that the Minister has had to personally endure while working for the country. Finally, there is an attack to the elite both in the Facebook post and in the livestream, with Matteo Salvini claiming that “lies” have been said and that the judiciary, which is here perceived as the enemy, could not do anything to stop his policies, even if it decided to put him on trial and arrest him.

The tweet analysed for this month was written on August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2018, the day Luigi Patronaggio stated, after inspecting the ship, that there could be elements for an investigation against Salvini. The tweet, which was retweeted almost 3 thousand times and liked 14.113 times, reads:

*“It seems that for the Diciotti ship, now in Catania, the prosecutor’s office is putting ‘unknown people’ under investigation for ‘illicit detention’ and kidnapping. There is no unknown, PUT ME UNDER INVESTIGATION! It’s me who does not want other UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS to step foot in Italy. If they arrest me, will you come visit me, my Friends? 😊”*

In this tweet, two elements of populist ideology can clearly be found. First, we have a direct appeal to “the people”, since Matteo Salvini often addresses his followers as “Friends”, thereby establishing a direct relationship with them which is free from any constraint given by newspapers or any other mediated form of communication. The second populist element is a direct attack to the elite, which is here embodied by the prosecutor’s office.

Once the most critical phases of the Diciotti case had passed, overall interactions with content directly regarding the case started to decrease, although maintaining noteworthy figures. Total interactions for the most popular Facebook post in the following month, written on September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2018 amounted to almost 130 thousand <sup>22</sup>. It was also written in the same exact way on Twitter, and it is that month's most popular tweet, with approximately two thousand retweets and seven thousand likes <sup>23</sup>. The post reads:

*“More than 50 among the immigrants of the Diciotti were so ‘in need’ of protection, boards and lodging, that they decided to walk away and disappear. But didn’t I kidnap them? This is another confirmation of the fact that not all who arrive in Italy are ‘small skeletons who escape war and hunger’. I will work even more to change laws which are wrong and to stop the arrivals”.*

In this post, two dimension of populist political discourse can be found. The most relevant one is the ostracisation of others. In fact, what minister Salvini is openly stating here is that he does not believe that all immigrants who arrive in Italy by sea are escaping war and famine in their home states. This opinion is backed, according to Salvini, by the fact that more than 50 people among those saved by the Diciotti ship escaped, thus refusing the protection the Italian state was willing to provide for them. In addition to this, Salvini decided to use a metaphor which has later been used by other League politicians, ‘small skeletons who escape war and hunger’, instead of using a more neutral term. Patterns of metaphors are a well-established instrument used by politicians of right-wing parties across Europe in order “to heighten the perception of danger about immigration and to influence public discourse and legislation” (Padovani 2018, p. 3555). The message that Matteo Salvini wanted to spread with this post/tweet deeply resonates with the latter statement. Thanks to his presence on social media, he is able to influence the opinion of those who follow him, and he wants to make sure that people get the message that what is happening in Italy is wrong, and that he will do the best he can to change the lie of land.

The last social media posts considered for the first part of this analysis were written in October 2018, and they are longer and more complex in nature. Let us begin by the Facebook post with the overall higher interactions for the month. It was written by Matteo Salvini on October 12<sup>th</sup> and it totaled 22.675 interactions <sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Reactions: 101.071. Shares: 27.917

<sup>23</sup> Retweets: 1.915. Likes: 7.043.

<sup>24</sup> Reactions: 17958. Shares: 4717.

The post reads:

“ The Baobab Experience activists (those who hosted the ‘escaped’ ones that disembarked from the Diciotti) did not say anything, possibly because they were too busy expressing solidarity to the mayor of Riace or criticizing the #SalviniDecree: yet, the night between October 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>, something very serious happened in the camp they manage near the Tiburtina station. A 38-year-old woman from Slovakia has filed charges for rape against an undocumented 20-year-old Tunisian man, claiming that he also hit her and took her hostage. The undocumented immigrant ended up in jail, has already been released and is prohibited from living in Rome. I feel DISGUST towards rapists: exemplary punishment is needed for them and, if necessary, chemical castration. For some professional antiracists - and for the silence of left-wing feminists - on the other hand, I feel pity.”

The post then contains a link to an article reporting about the episode <sup>25</sup>. This Facebook post, for what concerns the Diciotti case, is somehow linked to the one we have previously analysed. In fact, it brings back into the picture the immigrants who have escaped the government’s arrival policies, claiming that activists from an association in Rome called Baobab Experience deliberately chose not to talk about what had happened <sup>26</sup>. Elements of populist ideology can be found in this post, even if the part concerning the Diciotti case is really small. If we take into consideration the whole post, an ostracisation of the others is taking place by using a narrative which portrays immigrants as dangerous, and Baobab Experience volunteers as people who ‘did not say anything’ about what happened in the camp. Moreover, Salvini is here once again appealing to his supporters by stating that he is in favour of chemical castration for rapists, a proposal which has proven to be particularly popular among the right-wing electorate.

Turning to Twitter, the tweet with the most interactions (3.585 in total) during the same month was written on October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018 <sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Canepa, E. (2018) Stuprata nel centro migranti: tunisino in stato di fermo. *Il Giornale* [Online] October 12. Available at: <http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/cronache/stupro-nel-centro-migranti-baobab-roma-1587501.html>

<sup>26</sup> More info about Baobab Experience can be found on its official website: <https://baobabexperience.org/about-us/>

<sup>27</sup> Retweets: 668. Likes: 2.917.

The tweet reads:

*“Unbelievable, the #Diciotti investigation against me continues: I would be a kidnapper (I am risking 15 years in jail) for having stopped at sea a ship full of immigrants. Now the investigation, which started in Agrigento, will go from Palermo to Catania... End this now and let me work!”*

The tweet also contains a visual, an instrument widely used by the League in previous instances, such as during the campaign leading up to the #StopInvasione march in Milan in October 2014 (Padovani 2018). This tweet is an attack to the elite, specifically to the judicial system that has chosen to put the Minister under investigation. Salvini criticises the judiciary because the investigation is moving from one city to another, without explaining the reason why this happened <sup>28</sup>. He is stressing the fact that he could potentially end up in jail for fifteen years. Finally, he asks the judiciary to end the investigation now in order to let him work.

Elements of populist ideology can thus be found in every post and tweet by minister Salvini during the first part of the Diciotti case. Let us now turn to the second part, which is going to focus on the judicial consequences of the episode.

## **2.2 Salvini’s handling of the Diciotti case on social media until March 2019**

The only data left for the year 2018 is the one about a tweet written on November 1<sup>st</sup>. In fact, there are no Facebook posts or other tweets containing the word “Diciotti” written during the last two months of the year. The tweet obtained 2.927 total interactions, and it reads:

*“The prosecutor’s office of Catania has asked for the ARCHIVING for the (absurd) episode which saw me under investigation for having stopped the #Diciotti ship. So, I am not a kidnapper, so much for the a-social centers and left-wing owls, they will be so disheartened... 😞*

*Full steam ahead! 🚢🚢🚢”* <sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See Chapter III, paragraph 1.2 above, “The Aftermath of the Diciotti case”.

<sup>29</sup> This tweet was written using some expressions difficult to translate into English. The word “owl” is sometimes used in colloquial Italian to denote people who bring misfortune. “Disheartened” is here used to translate the word *abbacchiatissimi*, a familiar term which translates as “exhausted, depressed, discouraged”.

Matteo Salvini is here referring to the request of archival of proceedings against him submitted by Carmelo Zuccaro. The populist element is here, once again, the attack against the elite, which is portrayed as an ensemble of people from community centers and left-wing parties who only want to see him fail. He reassures his followers and appeals to them by stating that he will work at full speed. It has to be noted here that proceedings against Salvini were not actually dropped after Zuccaro's request. In fact, as we know, the Tribunal of the Ministers rejected his request and asked the Senate for the authorisation to proceed. This leads us to 2019, when the final stages of the Diciotti case took place.

The Facebook post and tweet containing the word "Diciotti" with the most interactions for the month of January 2019 were written on the same day, January 24<sup>th</sup>. On that day, the Tribunal of the Ministers formally asked the Senate of the Republic for a vote on the authorisation to proceed against the Minister of the Interior. The tweet is basically a shorter version of the Facebook post. For this reason, I will translate them in sequence below. The Facebook post obtained a total of 77.946 interactions, while the tweet got 7.626<sup>30</sup>. The Facebook post reads:

*"They can even give me a life sentence!*

*P.s. Thanks to the people of #SalviniDontGiveUp who are filling up Twitter, [I can't believe] how many of you is there???"*

The post contains the link to an article about the authorisation to proceed against Salvini<sup>31</sup>. The populist element is the appeal to the people, whom Salvini is praising for their never-ending support even during the most difficult times. The tweet, on the other hand, reads:

*"THANK YOU to those who are manifesting their support by tweeting #SalviniDontGiveUp, we are a beautiful Community! Yes, I declare myself guilty of having defended the borders and the Country. And I do not give up!  
#Diciotti"*

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<sup>30</sup> Facebook reactions: 72.729. Facebook shares: 5.215. Retweets on Twitter: 1.800. Likes on Twitter: 5.826.

<sup>31</sup> IL MATTINO (2018) *Diciotti, il tribunale dei ministri di Catania vuole procedere contro Salvini: "Rischio da 3 a 15 anni, ma non ho paura"* [Online]. Available at [https://www.ilmattino.it/primopiano/politica/diciotti\\_salvini\\_indagato\\_rischio\\_da\\_3\\_15\\_anni\\_ma\\_non\\_ho\\_paura-4253043.html](https://www.ilmattino.it/primopiano/politica/diciotti_salvini_indagato_rischio_da_3_15_anni_ma_non_ho_paura-4253043.html) [Accessed on June 9th, 2019]

The tweet also contains the visual of the Italian flag with the hashtag #SalviniDontGiveUp written on it. Below, we can read in capital letters: “*Diciotti, they want to put him on trial for defending the homeland and the borders!*”. In this tweet, we can find both an appeal to Salvini’s followers and a strong nativist attitude, highlighted by the use of the Italian flag and of the term “homeland”. Instead of attacking the judiciary for advancing a formal authorisation to proceed against him or using a xenophobic attitude to blame immigrants for what could potentially happen to him, Matteo Salvini decided to present himself as a patriot willing to go to jail for defending his country. He underlined the cohesion of his supporters by calling them a Community, and he used a visual in order to get the message across in the fastest and most vivid way possible.

Let us now turn to February 2019. The Facebook post with the most social interactions (66.089) was written on February 21<sup>st</sup> <sup>32</sup>. It reads:

*“Will you let me answer with a big laugh? All born on January 1<sup>st</sup>, all disappeared, and now they want a compensation...  
ENOUGH with making fun of the Italians! The party is over, and boats will not arrive anymore: at best, we will send them a Bacio Perugina! 🍫”* <sup>33</sup>

The post contains a link to an article by a Sardinian newspaper <sup>34</sup>. When the news came out that 41 people on the Diciotti ship wanted a monetary compensation for the privation of personal liberty they had endured, Salvini replied with this post. The Minister here uses a populist rhetoric in that he, once again, appeals to the Italian people, not only to his supporters. He then proceeds by using the expression “the party is over”, a typical expression used by the League to indicate that immigrants will not be able to come to Italy and do as they please anymore.

The most popular tweet of February 2019 expresses similar concepts. Written on February 21<sup>st</sup>, with 4.375 total interactions <sup>35</sup>, it translates as:

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<sup>32</sup> Facebook reactions: 59.196. Facebook shares: 6892.

<sup>33</sup> The Bacio Perugina is a typical Italian candy. Its name translates as “Perugina Kiss”, which is why it is used in this context.

<sup>34</sup> UNIONE SARDA (2019) *Caso Diciotti: 41 immigrati chiedono i danni a Salvini* [Online] Available at: <https://www.unionesarda.it/articolo/news/italia/2019/02/21/caso-diciotti-41-immigrati-chiedono-i-danni-a-salvini-137-838667.html> [Accessed on June 9th, 2019]

<sup>35</sup> Retweets: 726. Likes: 3.649.

*“The lawyers of the Diciotti immigrants ask for money, they ask me for ‘compensatory damages’ for their beneficiaries... 😂*

*That’s enough, Italians are not stupid. The party is over!”*

Once again, we can see an appeal to the people and, to a certain extent, an attack towards the elite, embodied here by the lawyers of the immigrants involved in the Diciotti case. Moreover, the nativist approach is expressed by referring to “the Italians” in contrast with the immigrants. The whole situation is considered almost a joke, and this is manifested through the general language used by the League’s leader in these social media posts. He even openly states that the lawyers’ requests make him laugh, while additionally making jokes and using laughing *emojis*.

The last month taken into consideration in this analysis is March 2019. There is only one Facebook post and three tweets containing the word “Diciotti” for this month. Nevertheless, we are going to examine them. The Facebook post with the most interactions (42.326 in total)<sup>36</sup> was written on March 6<sup>th</sup>. It reads:

*“He is credible. Others attack him on a wrong level: regarding the Diciotti case, people see the results, and for the European Union, which has repeatedly attacked us [the Italians], the case is closed. Salvini has acted in the name of a superior national interest, everyone has understood that.’*

*Thanks to Antonello Venditti for his intellectual honesty and the clarity of his opinion!  
P.s. Happy birthday with a view to his birthday, mine is the day after his, we are both Pisces 😊”*

The post continues with a link to an interview to Antonello Venditti, a famous Italian singer and songwriter<sup>37</sup>. There is here no explicit evidence of a populist rhetoric. Matteo Salvini chose, in the days preceding the Senate’s vote on the authorization to proceed against him, to share the opinion of an Italian celebrity who stands on his side.

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<sup>36</sup> Facebook reactions: 38.794. Facebook shares: 3.531.

<sup>37</sup> SKY TG24 (2019) *Venditti: “Caso Diciotti? Salvini has acted in the interest of the nation”* [Online] Available at: <https://tg24.sky.it/intrattenimento/2019/03/06/antonello-venditti-matteo-salvini.html> [Accessed on June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019]

Let us now turn to Twitter. The tweet below was written on March 20<sup>th</sup>, and it got a total of 2.919 interactions<sup>38</sup>.

*“I would have never thought that I would have to intervene for an accusation of KIDNAPPING, but I am willing to do it since I have been working for months for the Italians’ interests. 🇮🇹 #Diciotti”*

This tweet, on the other hand, shows a populist rhetoric via an appeal to the Italian people and, once again, a nativist attitude. Minister Salvini is here showing how he is going to defend himself in front of the Italian Senate before the vote - which eventually saved him from further investigations. He is portraying himself as a defender of the country who gladly works in order to guarantee Italy’s best interest. The whole picture is completed by the use of the Italian flag.

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<sup>38</sup> Retweets: 425. Likes: 2.494.

## Conclusion

Political communication is deeply connected to the media of its time. As new information technologies and media enter the picture and gain appeal in certain groups within a society, political communication evolves to accommodate the people's needs and the requests in new ways. The development of social networks and social media has made communication clearer, more immediate, and quicker than ever. Although major changes in the communication sphere had already happened in recent history, it may be argued that none of these was able to change the way politics is made and thought out as the advent of social media. In fact, social networks such as Facebook and Twitter provide a perfect platform for framing issues in a certain way and spreading them to one's followers in order to convey a precise message.

In Italy's fragmented contemporary political arena, the use of social media is considered a key element in order to influence the electorate. The process of mediatisation of politics underway at the moment is making communication between politicians and supporters more unmediated. Electoral slogans are now announced via brief messages written directly by the parties' leaders, without recurring to journalistic interview nor official press statements. Social media also constitute an arena for discussion, even though the risk of creating "echo-chambers" is high, with Internet users sometimes claiming to believe more to people belonging to their same social group than to official news outlets (Di Fonzo 2011).

This thesis has analysed how social media was used by a single party leader, the League's Matteo Salvini, in his ministerial function during a specific case regarding immigration. By taking into consideration all Facebook posts and tweets containing a certain word, it is clear that the populist narrative is still a landmark of the League. However, it is interesting to note how the rhetoric used by the minister Salvini is not exclusively aggressive towards the elites or minorities. In fact, an element which often gets the attention of those who read his messages is how informal these are. This is noticeable not only because of the language used by Salvini, which is always straightforward and easily understandable, but also by the fact that he seems eager to establish a connection with his supporters. The electorate ultimately appears to like his attitude, given the support Salvini and his party receive both on social media and in Italian electoral ballots.

The Diciotti case can be taken as a fitting example in order to prove how the Northern League has changed, and why it cannot be defined as a regionalist party anymore. Nowadays, Matteo Salvini aims at portraying himself as a leading figure for all Italian regions, not only for northern ones. In May 2019, the League got 34.33% of the votes nationwide in European elections, compared with 6% in the 2014 one. Moreover, the party was chosen by approximately 22% of the population in southern Italy<sup>39</sup>. This proves that, under Matteo Salvini's leadership, the League has successfully undergone a process of innovation and re-branding which has successfully substituted the image of a small secessionist party with that of a national right-wing one.

The way the Diciotti case was dealt with also underlines how problematic Salvini's attitude on social media can be. Elements of classical populist rhetoric can be found in almost every post and tweet written by him. He often appeals to his followers for support, he attacks groups perceived to be the enemy, and he ostracizes others. His posts and tweets contain attack towards the elite, which is often identified with other politicians, the European Union, the Italian judiciary, and people helping immigrants in Italy. Moreover, he often depicts immigrants as dangerous people who are not actually escaping from war or famine in their home countries, going sometimes as far as to mock them by making jokes and asking his followers for support.

While this study had as its object the analysis of the political strategy on social media of a Minister during a single case, more research on the matter could be conducted. For instance, keeping the focus on a national level, it would be interesting to see how other parties have reacted on the same episode. On the other hand, it would also be useful to understand the attitude of one party towards similar cases. By shifting the focus on a European level, it would also be interesting to see how populist right-wing parties across Europe deal with issues similar to the Diciotti case on social media.

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<sup>39</sup> ELIGENDO (2019) *Europee, Regionali e Comunali del 26 maggio 2019* [Online]. Available at: <https://elezioni.interno.gov.it/europee/scrutini/20190526/scrutiniEI> [Accessed on June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019]

## Appendix A

Data on all Matteo Salvini's Facebook posts containing the word "Diciotti" (August 2018 - March 2019)

### AUGUST 2018

<b>POST DATE</b>	<b>REACTIONS</b>	<b>SHARES</b>	<b>TOTAL INTERACTIONS</b>
<b>21.08</b>	26.948	3.333	30.281
<b>22.08</b>	98.075	11.835	109.910
<b>22.08</b>	49.532	5.927	55.459
<b>23.08</b>	104.515	31.018	135.533
<b>24.08</b>	158.459	46.919	205.378
<b>24.08</b>	34.182	2.509	36.691
<b>25.08</b>	77.112	6.252	83.364
<b>25.08</b>	187.054	32.449	219.503
<b>25.08</b>	53.810	18.850	72.660
<b>25.08</b>	206.005	64.251	270.256
<b>27.08</b>	27.534	9.585	37.119
<b>30.08</b>	49.855	6.164	56.019
<b>30.08</b>	34.766	5.847	40.613
<b>31.08</b>	65.218	9.696	74.914
<b>TOTAL</b>	1.173.065	254.635	1.427.700

## SEPTEMBER 2018

POST DATE	REACTIONS	SHARES	TOTAL INTERACTIONS
05.09	101.071	27.917	128.988
06.09	20.459	1.894	22.353
07.09	43.112	26.918	70.030
09.09	14.955	5.954	20.909
10.09	30.663	5.245	35.908
12.09	21.137	1.815	22.952
15.09	30.866	4.336	35.202
23.09	29.577	4.033	33.610
<b>TOTAL</b>	291.840	78.112	369.952

## OCTOBER 2018

POST DATE	REACTIONS	SHARES	TOTAL INTERACTIONS
12.10	17.958	4.717	22.675
<b>TOTAL</b>	17.958	4.717	22.675

## JANUARY 2019

POST DATE	REACTIONS	SHARES	TOTAL INTERACTIONS
09.01	14.642	3.772	18.414
24.01	72.731	5.215	77.946
29.01	36.096	3.199	39.295
31.01	49.030	4.307	53.337
<b>TOTAL</b>	172.499	16.493	188.992

## FEBRUARY 2019

POST DATE	REACTIONS	SHARES	TOTAL INTERACTIONS
01.02	23.094	3.531	26.625
03.02	14.618	1.536	16.154
04.02	27.681	1.768	29.449
18.02	34.016	2.696	36.712
21.02	59.197	6.892	66.089
22.02	41.756	11.901	53.657
22.02	7.993	601	8.594
<b>TOTAL</b>	208.355	28.925	237.280

## MARCH 2019

POST DATE	REACTIONS	SHARES	TOTAL INTERACTIONS
6.03	38.795	3.531	42.326
<b>TOTAL</b>	38.795	3.531	42.326

**TOTAL FACEBOOK POSTS: 35**

**TOTAL INTERACTIONS (REACTIONS + SHARES): 2.288.925**

## Appendix B

Data on all Matteo Salvini's Tweets containing the word "Diciotti" (August 2018 - March 2019)

### AUGUST 2018

TWEET DATE	RETWEETS	LIKES	TOTAL INTERACTIONS
20.08	327	1.743	2.070
22.08	2.944	14.112	17.056
23.08	465	1.998	2.463
23.08	935	4.022	4.957
23.08	1.689	5.805	7.494
24.08	2.544	8.450	10.994
24.08	621	3.301	3.922
25.08	2.161	8.023	10.184
25.08	828	3.647	4.475
27.08	992	3.372	4.364
<b>TOTAL</b>	13.506	54.473	67.979

### SEPTEMBER 2018

TWEET DATE	RETWEETS	LIKES	TOTAL INTERACTIONS
05.09	1.915	7.043	8.958
07.09	804	2.459	3.263
09.09	1.592	4.082	5.674
11.09	274	1.428	1.702
12.09	275	1.642	1.917
23.09	228	1.213	1.441
<b>TOTAL</b>	5.088	17.867	22.955

## OCTOBER 2018

TWEET DATE	RETWEETS	LIKES	TOTAL INTERACTIONS
18.10	668	2.917	3.585
20.10	642	2.499	3.141
<b>TOTAL</b>	1310	5.416	6.726

## NOVEMBER 2018

TWEET DATE	RETWEETS	LIKES	TOTAL INTERACTIONS
01.11	492	2.435	2.927
<b>TOTAL</b>	492	2.435	2.927

## JANUARY 2019

TWEET DATE	RETWEETS	LIKES	TOTAL INTERACTIONS
09.01	1.213	5.023	6.236
10.01	128	655	783
24.01	682	2.968	3.650
24.01	915	4.649	5.564
24.01	446	2.278	2.724
24.01	595	2.335	2.930
24.01	505	2.468	2.973
24.01	1.800	5.826	7.626
26.01	267	1.686	1.953
28.01	184	939	1.123
<b>TOTAL</b>	6.735	28.827	35.562

## FEBRUARY 2019

TWEET DATE	RETWEETS	LIKES	TOTAL INTERACTIONS
01.02	615	3.177	3.792
03.02	544	2.818	3.362
04.02	96	754	850
04.02	178	1.018	1.196
04.02	109	875	984
04.02	124	954	1.078
08.02	116	875	991
17.02	420	2.178	2.598
17.02	68	618	686
20.02	78	619	697
20.02	53	427	480
22.02	144	961	1.105
22.02	726	3.649	4.375
25.02	68	624	692
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>3339</b>	<b>19.547</b>	<b>22.886</b>

## MARCH 2019

TWEET DATE	RETWEETS	LIKES	TOTAL INTERACTIONS
20.03	425	2.494	2.919
20.03	94	893	987
20.03	99	870	969
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>618</b>	<b>4.257</b>	<b>4.875</b>

**TOTAL TWEETS: 46**

**TOTAL INTERACTIONS (RETWEETS + LIKES): 163.910**

## Appendix C

Links to every Facebook post and tweet analysed in this dissertation.

### Facebook posts

August 25<sup>th</sup>, 2018: <https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/videos/289290658531578/>

September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2018:

<https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/photos/a.10151670912208155/10156041916048155/?type=3&theater>

October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2018: <https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/posts/10156126954348155>

January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019: [https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/posts/10156362772673155?\\_\\_tn\\_\\_=-R](https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/posts/10156362772673155?__tn__=-R)

February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2019: <https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/posts/mi-permettete-di-rispondere-con-una-grassa-risatattutti-nati-il-primo-gennaio-tut/10156427781653155/>

March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019: [https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/posts/10156456258248155?\\_\\_tn\\_\\_=-R](https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/posts/10156456258248155?__tn__=-R)

### Tweets

August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2018: <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1032355777380605952>

September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2018: <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1037414480769150977>

October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018: <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1052922918504673280>

November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018: <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1057944627507007488>

January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019: <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1088427456913203200>

February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2019: <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1099043249220665345>

March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019: <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1108309245827649537>

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## Riassunto dell'elaborato

### La strategia politica del Ministro Salvini nel caso Diciotti: il ruolo dei *social media* e la loro influenza sull'elettorato

Negli ultimi anni, la scena politica italiana ha subito dei cambiamenti drastici. Le elezioni politiche del 2013 avevano visto la vittoria della coalizione di centro-sinistra con circa il 30% dei voti, seguita dal centro-destra e dal Movimento 5 Stelle. Le elezioni del 2018 hanno ribaltato questo risultato, portando alla formazione di un governo tra il M5S e la Lega. Tale situazione rispecchia ciò che è successo in altri paesi europei, dove i partiti populistici hanno ottenuto un successo elettorale sempre maggiore.

In un panorama politico sempre più frammentato, la comunicazione ha assunto un ruolo fondamentale nella percezione dei problemi più rilevanti e nella definizione del rapporto tra politici ed elettori. L'avvento dei cosiddetti *new media* ha infatti determinato un nuovo modo di fare politica. I *social media*, in particolare Facebook e Twitter, si sono rivelati strumenti preziosi nelle mani delle figure di spicco di ogni parte politica. La rapidità e la semplicità dei *social network* hanno infatti generato un rapporto sempre più diretto tra personaggio pubblico e *followers*, questi ultimi sempre più attratti da una politica priva dell'intermediazione di interviste giornalistiche e conferenze stampa ufficiali.

Il senatore Matteo Salvini, attuale Vicepresidente del Consiglio dei Ministri e Ministro dell'Interno, nonché segretario della Lega Nord, è uno degli esponenti politici più attivi sui *social network*. La sua pagina Facebook conta più di 3,5 milioni "Mi piace", mentre il suo profilo Twitter è seguito da più di un milione di persone<sup>40</sup>. Salvini usa i suoi account per interagire con l'elettorato e comunicare aggiornamenti sulla sua attività governativa. Allo stesso tempo, però, vi trovano posto anche contenuti più informali, come scene di vita quotidiana e commenti a casi di cronaca.

Tra le notizie che hanno maggiormente catturato l'attenzione in Italia durante la scorsa estate, vi è il caso legato alla nave della Guardia costiera italiana Diciotti. La vicenda, avvenuta a fine agosto 2018 e protrattasi fino a marzo 2019, ha avuto come tema centrale la gestione dei flussi migratori nel Mar Mediterraneo. Dal 2013 l'Italia ha dovuto affrontare una crisi migratoria senza precedenti, che

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<sup>40</sup> Dati aggiornati al 10 Giugno 2019. Facebook: 3.658.350 "Mi piace". Twitter: 1.100.000 followers.

ha visto l'arrivo di più di 170.000 migranti nel solo 2014. Vista l'importanza assunta dalla comunicazione politica, e visto il ruolo del ministro Matteo Salvini, questo mio elaborato analizza i suoi messaggi relativi al caso Diciotti condivisi su Facebook e Twitter. Prima di illustrare i risultati, è necessario approfondire tre aspetti. Il primo, più teorico, riguarda i tre parametri usati per determinare la presenza di una retorica populista sui *social media*. Il secondo aspetto, più storico, concerne la storia della Lega Nord e come essa sia cambiata sotto la guida di Matteo Salvini. Il terzo aspetto, infine, ha a che vedere con la ricostruzione del caso Diciotti e delle vicende giudiziarie che ne sono scaturite.

I *social media* sono uno strumento usato da tutti i partiti politici per conquistare l'interesse dell'elettorato e per provocare una reazione su temi ben precisi. Vi sono, tuttavia, tre elementi particolarmente utili nell'analisi di contenuti condivisi da esponenti del populismo di destra come Matteo Salvini.

Il primo elemento, basato sulla teoria della categorizzazione del sé, è la creazione di un senso di identità nazionale attraverso una retorica che porta l'individuo ad identificarsi con un'entità collettiva. Negli ultimi anni, la Lega si è orientata verso una narrativa prettamente nativista, incentrata sull'ambito semantico della coesione nazionale e del sentimento patriottico.

Il secondo elemento, derivato dalla teoria del *frame* sviluppatasi a partire dagli anni Settanta con Goffman, riguarda il modo in cui vengono costruiti ed interpretati degli avvenimenti. I *frame* assumono infatti una duplice funzione: da un lato offrono un modello che aiuta le persone nell'interpretazione del mondo circostante, dall'altro semplificano, a livello linguistico, il contenuto di alcuni avvenimenti o messaggi.

Infine, il terzo elemento ha a che vedere con la mediatizzazione della politica, un processo che porta i *mass media* ad essere gli strumenti più importanti per lo scambio di informazioni e per la comunicazione tra elettorato e attori politici.

Una volta esaminato il quadro teorico all'interno del quale si inserisce l'analisi dei *social media* del Ministro dell'Interno durante il caso Diciotti, è opportuno ricordare brevemente la storia e i recenti cambiamenti della Lega Nord.

Fondata nel 1989 dal senatore Umberto Bossi con l'intento di unire i vari movimenti politici secessionisti presenti nell'Italia settentrionale, la Lega Nord ha inizialmente utilizzato una retorica populista di stampo prettamente regionalista. Inizialmente il partito ha portato avanti un progetto autonomista, difendendo e promuovendo le proprie regioni di origine e arrivando a chiedere una

modifica della Costituzione per garantire l'indipendenza di una parte del nord Italia, la Padania, da denominarsi "Repubblica Federale della Padania". Le tematiche più rilevanti per la Lega Nord erano due. La prima, la cosiddetta questione settentrionale, faceva riferimento al divario economico tra regioni del Nord e regioni del Sud, che venivano considerate una sorta di zavorra per il Nord, ritenuto dal partito di Bossi la locomotiva economica italiana. La seconda tematica riguardava la nascita di un senso di malcontento e di ostilità verso le istituzioni centrali e verso l'*élite* politica. La differenza tra il Nord e il Sud del paese era considerata non solo dal punto di vista economico, ma anche da quello politico. Infatti, le regioni del Nord venivano presentate come delle comunità legate alle proprie tradizioni e con un sistema produttivo efficace, mentre il resto dell'Italia era percepito dalla Lega Nord come un serbatoio di voti clientelari a favore dei partiti tradizionali.

Lo stampo regionalista della Lega Nord virò verso il federalismo tra il 2000 e il 2006, periodo in cui il partito arrivò a occupare posizioni di rilievo nel governo presieduto da Silvio Berlusconi in seguito alle elezioni del 2001. Nonostante il cambiamento rispetto alle proprie origini regionaliste, la Lega Nord non abbandonò il suo bacino elettorale di riferimento, né l'intenzione di costituire uno stato indipendente.

La vera svolta arrivò nel 2013, con l'elezione di Matteo Salvini a segretario della Lega Nord. Il nuovo leader ha da subito manifestato la volontà di rinnovare il partito, sia da un punto di vista ideologico, sia da un punto di vista politico. Le dichiarazioni di Salvini durante i comizi e sui *social media* hanno espresso un messaggio diverso da quello esclusivamente regionalista, portando la Lega Nord all'adozione di un linguaggio e di un atteggiamento più favorevole nei confronti di quelle parti dell'Italia che erano state considerate alla stregua di parassiti sotto la guida dei precedenti segretari. Difatti, Salvini ha affermato che, di fronte a una situazione economica estremamente difficile, l'Italia poteva salvarsi solo come una nazione unita, senza alcuna differenziazione tra Nord e Sud. Di conseguenza il principale bersaglio della divisiva retorica leghista si è spostato dal Meridione al fenomeno dell'immigrazione e all'attività delle istituzioni europee.

L'immigrazione è stata presentata come un fenomeno in continua ascesa e i conseguenti costi dell'accoglienza come un ulteriore onere a carico delle casse dello Stato. Inoltre, l'immigrazione è stata arbitrariamente collegata a una crescita della criminalità nel nostro paese. Il fulcro dell'ideologia populista della Lega Nord è quindi passato dal regionalismo al nazionalismo, individuando nell'Unione Europea, ed in particolare nelle misure di austerità imposte a paesi in difficoltà economica, il vero nemico da affrontare, anche in relazione alle politiche legate alla gestione dei flussi migratori verso l'Europa.

Lo studio del caso Diciotti può considerarsi emblematico dell'atteggiamento della Lega di Matteo Salvini riguardo all'immigrazione.

La vicenda ebbe inizio il 14 agosto 2018, giorno in cui venne rilevata la presenza di un'imbarcazione proveniente dalla Libia bisognosa di soccorso immediato. Nei due giorni successivi, le autorità italiane dichiararono che le operazioni di primo soccorso spettavano a Malta. Quest'ultima, data la mancata firma della Convenzione SAR sul soccorso in mare e della Convenzione SOLAS sulla salvaguardia della vita umana in mare, non intervenne.

Il 16 agosto, a causa dell'immediato pericolo di vita per le persone a bordo, la nave Diciotti della guardia costiera italiana soccorse i 190 migranti. Tredici persone vennero subito trasferite a Lampedusa per ragioni sanitarie, mentre le altre vennero trasportate a Catania, dove la Diciotti attraccò il 20 agosto, dopo tre giorni di trattative tra Italia e Malta per la definizione di un porto sicuro. Una volta a Catania, il capitano Kothmeir chiese di far scendere i migranti, ma il Ministero dell'Interno gli ordinò di non calare la passerella, adducendo come motivazione la mancata collaborazione di Malta e la necessità di trovare un accordo con l'Unione Europea riguardante la redistribuzione dei migranti nei vari paesi. La procura di Agrigento aprì subito un fascicolo sulla vicenda, iscrivendo poi Matteo Salvini nel registro degli indagati. Le condizioni a bordo della Diciotti divennero presto insostenibili, date le precarie condizioni fisiche e psicologiche dei passeggeri e la mancanza di adeguate strutture per ospitarne un numero così elevato. Lo sbarco dei migranti venne autorizzato solo a mezzanotte del 26 agosto.

Essendo il reato contestato a Matteo Salvini ministeriale, ovvero compiuto nello svolgimento delle funzioni di ministro, il fascicolo aperto da Agrigento venne trasmesso al tribunale dei ministri di Palermo. La procura di Agrigento aveva contestato a Matteo Salvini e al suo capo di gabinetto del Viminale, Matteo Piantodosi, cinque reati: sequestro di persona, sequestro di persona a scopo di coazione, arresto illegale, abuso d'ufficio e omissione d'atti d'ufficio. A metà ottobre 2018 i giudici di Palermo, dopo aver esaminato gli atti e modificato i reati contestati, mantenendo solo il sequestro di persona aggravato, trasferirono il fascicolo nelle mani del tribunale dei ministri di Catania per ragioni di competenza territoriale. A fine ottobre, il procuratore di Catania Zuccaro chiese l'archiviazione del procedimento contro il ministro Salvini, sostenendo che il suo operato fosse giustificato dalla scelta politica di voler trovare un accordo con l'Unione Europea. Il tribunale dei ministri respinse questa proposta e, il 24 gennaio 2019, chiese ufficialmente al Senato della Repubblica l'autorizzazione a procedere nei confronti del Ministro dell'Interno in base a quanto

stabilito dall'Art. 96 della Costituzione. Il 20 marzo 2019, il Senato negò l'autorizzazione a procedere, ritenendo che il Ministro dell'Interno avesse agito in difesa dell'interesse nazionale.

Ora, avendo ripercorso i punti salienti della vicenda, è possibile analizzare i contenuti condivisi dal ministro Salvini sui *social media* dall'inizio alla conclusione del caso Diciotti.

Nella mia ricerca ho preso in considerazione tutti i post su Facebook e i tweet scritti dal Ministro nell'arco temporale tra il 15 agosto 2018 e il 31 marzo 2019 e contenenti la parola "Diciotti". Sono risultati 35 post e 46 tweet. Dopo aver registrato la risposta degli utenti per ogni contenuto, ho selezionato per ogni mese il post e il tweet con il maggiore numero di interazioni, calcolato sommando il numero di "mi piace" a quello delle "condivisioni" per Facebook e dei "retweet" per Twitter. Il campo è stato così ristretto, arrivando a un totale di sei post e sette tweet.

I contenuti *social* scritti da Salvini presentano molte delle classiche caratteristiche della retorica populista. Le più rilevanti sono tre.

La prima consiste nell'appellarsi ai propri *follower*, sia invitandoli ad assumere determinati comportamenti sul caso Diciotti, sia ringraziandoli per la continua fiducia riposta nell'operato del Ministro dell'Interno.

La seconda caratteristica concerne l'ostilità verso un'*élite*, che nel caso Diciotti prende a tratti le sembianze della magistratura italiana, le cui indagini vengono considerate come un intralcio al lavoro ministeriale. Le *élite* prendono anche le sembianze dell'Unione Europea, dipinta da Salvini come un'istituzione che ha a più riprese tradito l'Italia con le sue politiche migratorie.

La terza caratteristica, infine, riguarda l'ostracizzare alcuni gruppi della società, deformandone l'immagine e dunque la percezione nell'opinione pubblica. I messaggi di Salvini dipingono spesso gli immigrati come un gruppo di persone che "prende in giro gli italiani", e che non è realmente in fuga da persecuzioni e guerre nei propri paesi di origine.

Un'altra peculiarità della dialettica *social* ha a che vedere con l'uso di un linguaggio diretto e comprensibile, volto a raffigurare il Ministro come un lavoratore al costante servizio del proprio paese e dei propri elettori. In quasi tutti i post e i tweet si può rintracciare un riferimento all'Italia o alla difesa del territorio nazionale, ritenuta da Salvini il compito più importante da realizzare, anche davanti al rischio di conseguenze sul piano giudiziario.

L'uso dei *social media* da parte del Ministro dell'Interno è dunque in linea con le principali caratteristiche dei partiti populistici. I messaggi di Salvini esprimono la volontà di proporsi come un leader della nazione intera, non più legato solamente alle regioni del nord Italia. L'analisi del caso Diciotti ha evidenziato l'atteggiamento tuttora ostile della Lega nei confronti degli immigrati, ed il ricorso a un linguaggio aggressivo nei confronti di alcune istituzioni. Allo stesso tempo, però, colpisce il grado di informalità del linguaggio tra politico e *followers*, volta a instaurare un rapporto diretto, lontano da quello istituito dagli altri partiti.

Questa analisi, incentrata sul ministro Salvini e sul partito da lui guidato, potrebbe essere ripetuta per altri partiti politici - populistici e non - durante il caso Diciotti, o per capire quale sia l'atteggiamento di ogni partito di fronte a fenomeni aventi a che fare con l'immigrazione. La ricerca nell'ambito della comunicazione *social* è in costante evoluzione, e continuerà ad esserlo a causa delle rapide trasformazioni in atto nel mondo dei *social media*.