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Course of Integration of Europe

The Post-Euroscepticism Shift: Analysing How The Italian And French Populist Radical Right Parties Are Implementing Euroalternativism

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Abstract

Traditionally, populist far-right parties are Eurosceptic. Nonetheless, populist radical right (PRR) parties are no longer publicly pushing exit sentiment, but they are gaining ever more traction, shifting their political programmes from leaving the EU to reforming the EU, paving the way for an Alter-EU. During the last European Parliament elections, these parties gained votes increasingly. From fringe voices, they ultimately emerged among the most prominent political actors in the European landscape. I will investigate this post-Eurosceptic development, considering the PRR parties' historical development. Additionally, I will explore their communication evolution through the lenses of Wodak's (2017) Discourse Historical Approach and Laclau's Empty Signifiers. I will furthermore analyse the political engagement of the French and Italian PRR, throughout the last three EP legislative mandates (2014-19, 2019-24 and the ongoing one), tracing their political developments in three key areas: migration, climate change, and defence. Finally, the dissertation showcases that a mainstreaming of the Populist Radical Right is taking place within EU politics and aims at reforming it into the "EUrope of Nations" rather than a supranational community. On the one hand, PRR seek to enforce the intergovernmental asset to secure a larger discretion at the national level. On the other hand, PRR parties extended their nationalism over the EU borders, securitising them through a European civilisational discourse.

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Introduction

Only about a decade ago, *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brothers of Italy), *Lega* (the League) and *Rassemblement National* (National Rally) firmly campaigned for national exits from the Eurozone and the EU, respectively, *Italexit* and *Frexit* (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024b; Lega, 2014; France 24, 2014). Today, these stances have largely disappeared. Instead, they question the EU from within, unwilling to leave it, especially after becoming the most-voted parties in their countries. Therefore, they now question the EU institutions from within, supporting a different vision of the European Union, a Union of Nations.

They envision a conservative, xenophobic intergovernmental version of the EU, appealing to a community of sovereign states, “strong nations” or “fatherlands”, that rejects the “centralised” design of European supranationalism. Giorgia Meloni sought to become one of the supporters of Ursula Von Der Leyen’s election, adopting a more collaborative tone and communication strategy.

This shift has also been perceived by their electorates. An ECFR study shows that only 15 per cent of Brothers of Italy supporters believe Giorgia Meloni wants Italy to quit the EU (Leonard and Krastev, 2024). Likewise, Marine Le Pen abandoned calls for French withdrawal from the Union and the euro, claiming that France can improve citizens’ lives *without quitting Europe or the euro* (Reuters, 2017). Both parties thus illustrate what Lorimer (2024) describes as the “mainstreaming” of the radical right, whereby movements once stigmatised as anti-system actors now play a central role in European politics.

This raises the central research question of this dissertation: *How are the Italian and French Populist Radical Right Parties implementing an Euroalternative shift?*

This question matters for two reasons. First, the mainstreaming of RN and FdI profoundly shapes the dynamics of the European Union. Their political weight influences coalition-building in the European Parliament and affects EU policymaking on salient sectors as migration, climate, and defence. Second, their evolution challenges existing theories of Euroscepticism, which often present the PRR as irredeemably hostile to the European project. By exploring their reorientation from “exit” to “reform,” this dissertation contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between radical right populism and European integration.

To address the research question, the dissertation draws on a twofold source base. Primary materials include party manifestos, electoral platforms, and EP proposals, which reveal the official positions of RN and FdI. Secondary materials encompass policy briefs, think tank analyses, academic research,

press interviews, parliamentary voting records, and speeches by party leaders. This combination enables a comprehensive assessment of both discourse and practice.

Methodologically, the dissertation applies Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) and Laclau's concept of empty signifiers. This framework allows for the analysis of how PRR parties construct meaning, frame Europe as an object of contestation, and adapt their discourse to shifting political contexts.

The dissertation is structured as follows. Chapter I provides an overview of the origins of the two PRR parties: Brothers of Italy and National Rally. Chapter II reviews the literature on Euroscepticism and Euroalternativism, highlighting the transition beyond the Hard/Soft dichotomy and identifying the research gap. Chapter III outlines the theoretical framework and explains the choice of RN and FdI as case studies. Chapter VI details the methodology, justifying the use of DHA and critical discourse analysis. The empirical analysis is divided into three chapters: Chapter V examines the migration agenda; Chapter VI investigates the environmental agenda; and Chapter VII delves into the defence agenda. Each explores both rhetoric and institutional practice across the last three European Parliament mandates (2014–2019, 2019–2024, and 2024–present). Finally, the Conclusion synthesises the findings, reflects on the implications, and suggests directions for further research.

In short, this dissertation seeks to demonstrate that RN and FdI no longer fit the traditional model of Hard Euroscepticism. Instead, they increasingly adopt Euroalternativist strategies, presenting themselves as actors capable of reforming Europe from within. By analysing their discourse and institutional practices, this study contributes to the wider debate on the evolving role of the populist radical right in the European Union.

I. Literature review

Now, the dissertation will provide an overview of the existing literature on the evolution of Euroscepticism and Euroalternativism. This literature review will have a specific focus on the unfolding relationship between the European Union and Populist Radical Right parties (PRR), precisely the French *Rassemblement National* (RN) and the Italian *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI). This chapter presents two main purposes. Firstly, it aims to track what is currently known about Euroalternativism. Secondly, it highlights the mapping of conceptual, ideological, and strategic shifts that PRR parties have implemented in adopting a Euroalternative stance, namely, seeking to reform the EU from within rather than oppose it outright. To do so, this literature review identifies and critically engages with

four key debates: (1) the move beyond the traditional Hard/Soft Euroscepticism dichotomy; (2) the reframing of populist identity politics from national to European narratives; (3) the paradoxical alignment of nationalist parties with the defence of a “European civilisation”; and (4) whether this transformation is driven by strategic calculation or ideological evolution. Ultimately, the chapter identifies a research gap that this dissertation aims to address, specifically in how the discursive and programmatic aspects of Euroalternativism are translated into institutional practices.

The study of Euroscepticism has been comprehensively examined and has become a mature field within Political Science. Euroscepticism coexists with the very establishment of the EU community project (Usherwood and Startin, 2012). Ever since then, scholars mapped its contours ranging from its origins, its mainstreaming translated into every specific-national context, and considering its implications for the European integration process (De Vries, 2018; Boomgaarden et al., 2011; FitzGibbon, Leruth and Startin, 2016; Brack and Startin, 2015; Hooghe and Marks, 2007; Taggart and Aleks Szczerbiak, 2002; Taggart, 1998). A groundwork frame was laid by Taggart and Szczerbiak (2002) with their seminal dichotomy of 'Hard' and 'Soft' Euroscepticism. Hence, a *distinguo* between movements condemning an incompatibility between the EU and a country's membership (Hard Euroscepticism), calling their nation to leave the EU, and movements accepting the EU membership per se, but criticising specific policy areas or specific EU integration steps (Soft Euroscepticism).

At the level of political affiliation, while Soft Euroscepticism is represented by a wider range of the political spectrum, Populist Radical Right (PRR) parties have historically been the paradigmatic supporters of Hard Euroscepticism. Their foremost ideological beliefs, including nativism, nationalism, and hostility to supranational authority, positioned the EU as a significant threat to national sovereignty and cultural identity (McMahon, 2021). This stance was not merely rhetorical but formed the bedrock of their political agendas. A clear example is shown by Jean-Marie Le Pen's *Front National* (National Front - FN), which once lobbied for France's exit from the EU. His daughter, the current head of FN, Marine Le Pen, also advocated for the return of the Franc as the national currency, defining the EU as a prison on her 2014 platform (France 24, 2014; Caro, 2019). Moreover, after the Brexit campaign's success, she called for delivering an equivalent referendum in every EU Member state (Gotev, 2016). Similarly, upon its founding in 2012, Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy (FdI) was explicitly a "euro-critical movement, opposed to this Europe that crucifies us" (Russo, 2013), emerging from a political tradition deeply hostile to the European project.

However, the contemporary consensus in the literature is that a significant strategic recalibration has occurred (Flood 2009: 914; FitzGibbon & Guerra 2019: 3). The chaotic and economically damaging aftermath of Brexit served as a critical "watershed moment" (McMahon, 2021). Five years later,

Marine Le Pen rebranded *Rassemblement National* (RN) and formally abandoned the Eurosceptic platform. Now, RN stands for a “European Alliance of Nations” as “France does not require the EU in its present form” (Hegde, 2023), underlining a clear move towards a redesign of the EU from the inside. Likewise, Italy’s *Fratelli d’Italia* (FdI), rooted in a formerly Europhobic tradition of *Movimento Sociale Italiano/Alleanza Nazionale* (MSI/AN), has manifested a less hostile stance towards EU institutions (Hegde, 2023), insisting that FdI does not have an anti-European view. Instead, she seeks recognition and legitimacy among EU member states and aims “to reform the European Union from within” (Hegde, 2023). This transition from unequivocal opposition to an internal transformation strategy has been referred to as “Euro-alternative” (McMahon, 2021). PRR parties no longer intend to dismantle the EU, but rather to control and reshape it into their own intergovernmental, conservative, and nativist vision of a “Europe of fatherlands” (McMahon, 2021; Guerra and FitzGibbon, 2019). This agenda shift has corresponded with, and may have carried out, their growing electoral success and mainstreaming in national and European politics (Statista Research Department, 2025; Lorimer, 2024). PRR parties have become increasingly engaged in European politics, but this growing involvement remains understudied in academic literature.

Conceptualising the Shift: Beyond the classic theories of Euroscepticism

Although the occurrence of the shift is widely acknowledged and agreed, academic debate focused on more in-depth typologies and the heterogenous breadth in PRR positions, including in their framing of sovereignty and other distinct ‘aspects’ of European integration (Vasilopoulou 2018a: 2, 2018b; Borriello and Brack 2019: 834; Taggart and Szczerbiak 2018; Pirro 2017: 406 & 416; Cincu 2017: 30–36; Lees 2018: 305; Ivaldi 2018). Four key debates can be identified.

Beyond the Hard/Soft Binary

Although it is a cardinal concept, many scholars today believe that the classic Hard/Soft Euroscepticism model is inadequate to convey the complexity of the PRR's current position. The literature has successfully moved beyond this binary, developing a richer vocabulary to describe the new party positions. Scholars have proposed more nuanced typologies, focusing on distinct ‘aspects’ of European integration that parties contest (Vasilopoulou, 2018) or identifying new overarching stances such as “Euro-alternativism” (McMahon, 2021). This allows for a more precise analysis of

party manifestos and leader discourse, recognising that a party can be simultaneously pro-membership and fundamentally opposed to the EU's current legal and political structure. McMahon (2021) describes parties that renounced their stances about leaving the EU and instead entered EU politics electorally as Euro-alternatives. Alt-European policy programs include a conservative, xenophobic intergovernmental project of a European 'community of sovereign states', 'strong nations', or 'fatherlands' that despise the 'centralised' vision embodied by the United States of Europe idea (McMahon, 2021; AfD, 2013). In other words, the direction of this shift is for PRR parties to reshape the EU project rather than leave it (Caro, 2019; Guerra and FitzGibbon, 2019).

Re-framing 'Us vs. Them' from the National to the European Civilisation

Another central element of populist culture is the mass psychology inherent in mass identity-building (Laclau, 2005). The binomial identity-alterity represents a core element of populist political framing, embodied in their so-called “identity politics” (Wodak, 2015). Wodak (2017), by employing the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), analysed the PRR parties' linguistic phenomena, discursive strategies and argumentation schemes (nomination/predication strategies, recurring *topoi*), examining how radical right populist parties instrumentalise the 'politics of fear' through communication strategies and argumentation, ending up in reshaping the political landscape. According to her, these splits between “us” and “them”, “good” and “evil”, “corrupted élite” and “people subjected” fuelled the PRR rhetoric during electoral campaigns, mobilising increasing support. It has also been carried out through exclusionary policies, stirring up fear of cultural identity loss by normalising dividing stances as racism, antisemitism, and islamophobia. Hence, Wodak (2015) addresses the PRR parties' transition from fringe voices to successfully persuasive political actors in their communication strategy, which is widely designed around fears and scapegoats. However, although Wodak's study examines PRR parties in Europe and beyond, she delves into each national context separately, providing a more detailed analysis of PRR parties. Furthermore, given the increased presence and consequent engagement of those parties within the EU, an analysis beyond the national level is essential. Indeed, advocating for major protection of national borders is controversial when framed in a context where national politics must share or cede parts of sovereignty to supranational politics.

From Nationalism to European civilisation

Cerrone (2022) analysed how European Populist Radical Right attempts to harmonise their national stances with their alleged commitment towards and within the EU through the “European civilisation”

oratory. First, Cerrone (2022) overcomes the essentialist postulation on the “clash of civilisations” (Evans and Huntington, 1997). Academic debate has come to view civilisation more as supranational “imagined communities” and pluralist intersubjective realities built on the interactions of political actors, such as citizens and elites (Brubaker, 2017; Hale and Laruelle, 2021). Given this academic premise, Cerrone (2022) opted to investigate how actors interpret and employ the term “civilisation,” especially in their discourse. The “civilisationism” idea is a recurring concept within far-right discourse that holds and frames its boundaries, identifies a scapegoat and makes it a monolithic enemy (Cesari, Ivo Bosilkov and Piacentini, 2019). Hence, far-right discourse advocates for the European civilisation by subtly demonising and marginalising what is considered as *alter* from the European folklore (Brubaker, 2017; Cesari, Ivo Bosilkov and Piacentini, 2019; Duina and Carson, 2019). This rhetorical scheme has been frequently employed by the far-right over other historical periods, such as fascism and post-war fascism (Mammone 2015), and relies on a common Christian legacy, secularism, and liberalism (Brubaker 2017; Zúquete 2018). Hence, paradoxically, the current Euro-alternative far-right turned out advocating for the safeguarding of European liberal values, while employing illiberal propaganda and implementing illiberal policies (Cerrone,2022). For instance, at the 2019 World Congress of Families, Giorgia Meloni advocated for “a Europe that defends its civilisation against those who want to erase its identity” (Meloni, 2025). However, while Cerrone (2022) provides a good account of how PRR parties justified their participation in the EU, there is a shortage of investigation on how the appeal to safeguard “European Civilisation” translates into concrete votes, amendments, and policies.

Driver of the Shift: Pragmatic Strategy or Ideological Evolution?

Another central debate revolves around the actual motivation for this political recalibration. It is highly contentious whether it is a cynical attempt to seize power or a genuine ideological change. On the one hand, supporters of ideological explanations argue that Eurosceptic ideology is fed by nationalist culture (Gómez-Reino, 2018). However, Cerrone (2022) and the emergence of Euro alternatives have shown that EU integration and nationalist culture can coexist oddly in political parties. On the other hand, De Vries and Edwards (2009) and Vasilopoulou (2023) adopt a strategic perspective, arguing that far-right parties shape their stance on the EU based on electoral incentives. Opposing the EU would make them stand out as defenders of national interests, separating them from the mainstream (De Vries, 2018; Almeida, 2010; De Vries and Edwards, 2009). Moreover, Euroscepticism, depicted as a ‘touchstone of dissent’ (Taggart, 1998), was a limit to the far right’s advancement both in domestic and European political institutions (Lorimer, 2024). Indeed, Ivaldi

(2018) suggests, through an analysis of Euroscepticism within French politics, that the RN's Euroscepticism effectively addressed and delivered people's grievances during times of crisis. Although RN's Euroscepticism hindered its access to power and governmental accountability (Ivaldi, 2018), its marginalisation within the government coalition-building benefited it, given that the nature of dissent serves as a touchstone (Taggart, 1998). While some argue that Eurosceptic positions might erode PRR parties' accountability, hindering their access to power served as a "glass ceiling" (Taggart, 1998; Ivaldi, 2018). They gained ever more votes among European Member States over the years and especially during the last elections (Inocencio, 2024). Also, Lorimer (2024) demonstrates that PRR parties' views and framing of EU integration succeeded in seducing public opinion. She underpins that these political forces have become increasingly mainstream. Hence, they profess anti-establishment propaganda while in some cases they become the actual establishment (Lorimer, 2024). Conversely, Vasilopoulou (2023) acknowledges ideology but emphasises that far-right parties engage in a balancing act between ideological commitments, electoral competition, and strategic interests, adopting different degrees of Euroscepticism based on context. Similarly, De Vries and Edwards (2009) highlight that the ideological and strategic perspectives might be antithetical, but also complementary, as both can be empirically tested and validated. However, by emphasising strategic calculation, the literature may overlook the ideological effort required to defend the change to a party's core voters, who were previously fed a diet of vehement EU opposition.

The Research Gap: From Platform to Practice

Although Euroalternativism is a relatively recent phenomenon that remains understudied by academics, a field of literature has begun to outline it. The key debates have illuminated some conceptual, strategic, and discursive dimensions of this new stance. However, a clear gap emerges at the intersection of these debates. While we have a detailed understanding of the Euro-alternative platform, there is a scarcity of research on its practical application. The literature has analysed the new manifestos, the strategic calculations, and the civilizational rhetoric. Still, it has not yet systematically examined how parties like RN and FdI are attempting to implement this vision now that many PRR parties are in power or attract large shares of votes and are prominent actors within the EU's institutional framework. Therefore, this dissertation will address this gap by drawing the analysis from the platform to practice. The following chapter will deepen the analysis by exploring the theoretical framework's underpinnings and the methodology backing this research.

II. Theoretical Framework

As discussed in the preceding chapter, the definition of Euroalternativism adopted in this dissertation is the one provided by McMahon (2021), according to which “*Alt-Europe is a conservative, xenophobic intergovernmental vision of a European ‘community of sovereign states’, ‘strong nations’ or ‘fatherlands’, that abhors the ‘centralised’ United States of Europe*”. While McMahon links this narrative to Judeo-Christian civilisational identity, this study does not adopt the Judeo element, as PRR parties simultaneously exhibit both antisemitic and pro-Zionist positions (Chrisafis, 2023; Fanpage, 2024). Instead, the focus is on the Christian civilisational discourse identified by Cerrone (2022), which emphasises cultural Christianity as a dividing line between “us” and “them.”

Previously, Eurosceptic parties portrayed the “EUropeans” as a threat, drawing a boundary line between their national stances and the EU (Vasilopoulou, 2023). Now, the separating line is being rhetorically drawn between “the Europeans” and “the non-Europeans.” Among Southern European PRR parties, this also means an intention to mark a division between “Christians” and “the non-Christians”. In this context, the label “Christians” refers to cultural rather than liturgical Christianity. This distinction implies that the defence of Christians is articulated as the defence of a broader societal structure encompassing values, behavioural norms, and historical legacies rooted in a specific civilizational identity. Accordingly, the PRR leaders analysed in this study do not merely express personal religious convictions but actively perform and instrumentalise Christian values as a foundational element of their political agendas. These values are presented as the moral and cultural backbone of their policymaking, thereby legitimising their broader ideological project. Within this framework, the primary out-group of the narrative of the EU Euroalternative parties will be identified and examined. Non-Christians are represented by Muslims, who are recurrently portrayed as a civilizational threat (Froio, 2018). In practice, it’s common that PRR leaders stress that they are good Christians and highlight the importance of Christian values within their agenda-setting (Froio, 2018; Giuffrida, 2023). While religion has a great appeal among Italian voters, also due to the rooted presence and historical influence of the Catholic Church, France is a secular country, proud of its *laïcité* (Green, 2017). Despite this, religion remains a recurring theme in RN’s political communication, seeking to gain traction among the most conservative (Green, 2017). This dichotomic vision of society is also described by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), who state that populism frames society into two homogeneous and antagonistic sides, namely, the “pure people” who are unfairly subjected to the “corrupted élite”.

A key distinction between Euroscepticism and Euroalternativism is the shift from rejection to redefinition. Eurosceptic parties traditionally depicted “Europe” itself as a threat. Today, Euroalternativist parties portray “the EU” as the problem while re-signifying “Europe” as an entity to be preserved in an intergovernmental form. In other words, they changed their political strategy, and a clear example is illustrated by the 2019 EP elections, where Marine Le Pen campaigned “*Pour une Europe des nations et des peuples*” (A Europe of Nations and People) (Rassemblement National, 2019), stressing her intergovernmental vision. In this sense, it appears that they aim to transform the EU and reshape it in accordance with an intergovernmental structure and the values outlined at the beginning of this chapter. To achieve this, they progressively adjusted their strategy, softening their communication and attracting an ever-growing number of voters at both the national and European levels, thereby increasing their engagement within EU institutions. Hence, they are not just nationalist anti-Europeans anymore (Guerra and FitzGibbon, 2019) but rather point to adapting Europe to nationalisms. To explain their strategy, I will draw upon Laclau's (2005) “empty signifiers”. An empty signifier refers to a term that becomes detached from fixed meaning and instead operates as a symbolic vessel capable of uniting diverse political demands. By unifying heterogeneous demands under a common banner, PRR parties managed to appeal to a larger share of voters, and that enabled them to stop being fringe voices. In the case of Euroalternativism, both Meloni and Le Pen have strategically reframed “Europe” not as an object of outright rejection, as in traditional Hard Euroscepticism, but as a contested signifier open to redefinition. By tempering their hard antagonism towards the EU as an institution, they inevitably gained more access to it. Terms such as “Europe of nations,” “real Europe,” or “Europe of peoples” serve as empty signifiers, allowing these leaders to construct broad populist coalitions across disparate constituencies. By invoking “Europe” in ways that can simultaneously signify national sovereignty, civilizational identity, social protection, and economic autonomy, they articulate chains of equivalence that bind together varied grievances such as economic insecurity and cultural anxiety. This adaptability of populism is also recognised by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), who refer to populist ideology as “thin-centred”, meaning that it is a highly malleable concept due to populism’s vagueness. In *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (2007), Mudde argues that vagueness is not a weakness but a deliberate strategy that enables PRR parties to appeal to diverse and sometimes contradictory constituencies. By avoiding detailed policy commitments and instead relying on symbolic language centred around nativism, authoritarianism, and populism, these parties can maximise their reach while preserving internal cohesion. Both leaders invoke broad slogans such as “Europe of nations” or “sovereignty” without specifying concrete institutional reforms, allowing them to unify disparate grievances under a common populist banner. This ambiguity serves multiple functions: it prevents alienation of more moderate or pragmatic voters,

sustains the populist dichotomy of ‘the people’ versus ‘the elite’, and provides tactical flexibility in both domestic and European arenas. Mudde’s thesis thus helps to illuminate how Euroalternativism, far from representing a dilution of radical right agendas, constitutes a recalibrated populist strategy rooted in deliberate ideological ambiguity.

Scope and Case Selection

However, while Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) focus on populism’s polarising strategy, Laclau (2005) emphasises its emancipatory function in challenging the traditional status quo. Moreover, whereas Laclau (2005) analyses both left- and right-wing parties in his study of populism, this research concentrates exclusively on French and Italian far-right parties. Since the purpose of this study is to investigate Euroalternativism, that is, how Eurosceptic parties have turned into insiders actively engaging in European politics, the far right provides a particularly relevant focus. In recent years, right parties and populist radical right parties (PRR) have secured an increasing share of seats in the European Parliament (European Parliament, 2024). Moreover, besides left-wing parties with Eurosceptic stances that exist, they remain fringe voices (Wagner, 2021), resulting in less relevance for this analysis. Additionally, they are less dominant within the Assembly and are less characterised by Eurosceptic populist anti-establishment stances (Aleks Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2024).

For this reason, I narrowed the scope to *Fratelli d’Italia* and *Rassemblement National*, the principal far-right parties in Italy and France, two key EU member states. In this sense, these parties can play a pivotal role in reshaping the European Community from within through a Euroalternativist agenda grounded in nationalism and traditionalism.

This reflects an unprecedented shift in the composition of the European Parliament. An institution founded on liberal-democratic principles now hosts a significant presence of radical right parties, which, having once been openly Eurosceptic, have gained growing support since the 2014 elections (European Parliament, 2024).

Their alleged “more authentic Europe” is far from the actual European community project, embodied in the “ever closer Union” recalled by the Treaty of Rome (1957), enshrined in the preamble of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), or in the renowned Mario Draghi’s metaphor calling Europe a marriage without divorce, after the euro financial crisis. So, PRR parties are slowly taking over this supranational project, reforming the EU institutional framework and enforcing nations’ discretionary power, namely, intergovernmentalism.

Methodology

This section outlines the research design and analytical tools used to examine the Euroalternativist strategies of RN and FdI. The analysis focuses on three policy areas - migration, environment, and defence - across three European Parliament (EP) mandates (2014–2019, 2019–2024, and 2024–present).

RQ: How are the Italian and French Populist Radical Right Parties implementing an Euroalternative shift?

To answer this, the dissertation combines qualitative discourse analysis with contextual institutional research, allowing both rhetorical and behavioural dimensions to be examined in parallel.

DHA enables the identification of nomination and predication strategies (how actors are named and characterised), argumentation schemes (the justifications used), and perspectivisation (positioning within a discourse). These categories enable the tracing of how PRR parties construct antagonisms and legitimise their Euroalternativist proposals. In parallel, Laclau's (2005) concept of empty signifiers is employed to explain the flexibility and broad appeal of terms such as "sovereignty," "Europe of nations," or "real Europe." This dual framework allows the analysis to capture both micro-level linguistic practices and macro-level ideological constructions.

Moreover, the analysis covers the three most recent European Parliament (EP) elections (2014, 2019, 2024). The year 2014 serves as a critical starting point. It marked the first European Parliament elections following the peak of the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis, during which Eurosceptic sentiment was high. The outbreak of the migration crisis in the subsequent year further fuelled PRR narratives. Crucially, 2014 was also when the first signs of the Euroalternative shift began to appear, such as the Lega Nord's manifesto, "Another Europe is possible." Two years later, the Brexit referendum took place in 2016. While several national withdrawal campaigns gained momentum in the UK's immediate aftermath, EUxit movements soon shifted their strategy, opting instead to become a game-changer by gaining influence within the European Parliament (McMahon, 2021). This decade, encompassing three European Parliament elections (2014, 2019, 2024), provides a sufficient timeframe to trace the evolution and institutionalisation of the Euroalternative strategy from a peripheral protest to a central political project. Furthermore, the research will be drawn from gathering data and evidence from two-fold source-based: primary and secondary materials. The former covered party manifestos for the 2014, 2019, and 2024 EP elections and PRR political proposals. The latter includes academic literature, think tank reports, press interviews and the release of the PRR leader, leaders' tweets, and policy briefs on legislation, which contextualise and interpret

PRR activity. Texts were selected based on their relevance to EU politics and to the three chosen policy sectors. The manifestos were published on the parties' websites, except for the RN, which I had to gather through press releases. For parliamentary practice, voting records and legislative proposals were gathered directly from the European Parliament database. Leader speeches were selected if delivered in EP plenary sessions or in campaign contexts directly addressing EU policy. As a native speaker of Italian and fluent in French, I do not require external translation. Besides the language, I chose to investigate and compare FdI and RN also because they present important analogies, as they were traditionally Eurosceptic parties that now have a huge traction among the voters of the two founding countries of the EU and with a larger population, meaning that they weigh more than other Member States during the decision-making process. Given the importance of France and Italy in the European political landscape, investigating Euroalternativism in *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI) and *Rassemblement National* (RN) is crucial. Additionally, founded only in 2012, FdI has rapidly become Italy's leading party and now heads the most right-wing government in the country since the end of World War II. However, although Brothers of Italy and National Rally are well-suited for comparison, since FdI did not reach the electoral benchmark in the 2014 European elections, my research will also collate FdI with League and RN, along with *Reconquête!*, as the comparison might yield insights into the outperformance of FdI and RN.

Relevance and Implications

As Italy is also the third-largest economy in the Union and a G7 country, its political trajectory has direct and indirect influence across Europe. FdI's support, for instance, was instrumental in shaping the coalition dynamics underpinning the second von der Leyen Commission and has played a role in European Parliament negotiations on rearmament and sovereignty-sensitive agendas, often aligning with leaders such as Viktor Orbán or the Polish far right.

Meanwhile, RN continues to gain momentum in France, another EU cornerstone, making it essential to understand how both parties strategically reframe the EU from within. Their shared promotion of Euroalternativism, underpinned by nationalist and traditionalist values, raises questions not only about the future of European integration (Lorimer, 2024) but also about democratic backsliding, gender equality, and the normative foundations of the EU. Although their leadership by two women might suggest political progress, both Giorgia Meloni and Marine Le Pen advance agendas that challenge fundamental rights, including reproductive freedoms, and reassert hierarchical, traditionalist notions of society. In this context, examining how these actors construct and advance

Euroalternativism is key to understanding the ongoing redefinition of Europe's political centre and the potential implications.

The dissertation will provide an empirical analysis of PRR FdI's and RN's transition into Euroalternativism through the previously outlined lenses of the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) (Wodak, 2017) and Laclau's (2005) notion of empty signifiers. I opted to divide the section thematically into three paragraphs that correspond to the three main challenges facing the EU: migration, defence, and climate change. Starting from 2014, the inflow of refugees coming from the Middle East and Syria crossing the Mediterranean Sea rocketed up, and the EU faced a refugee crisis that revealed the already contentious European approach to migration and asylum from third countries (Talani, 2020). In 2019, Ursula von der Leyen's opening Statement highlighted that a healthy planet was the EU's "most pressing challenge" and the "greatest responsibility of our time" (von der Leyen, 2019). In contrast, in her opening speech delivered after the 2024 elections, she shifted her attention from the green agenda as she inaugurated the discourse regarding the Europeans' struggles to defend democracy and Freedom. In this context, von der Leyen referred straightaway to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, expressing her willingness to reform the European approach to defence industry and strategy by creating a single market for defence, and bolstering military synergy

To better deliver the evolution of the PRR parties' strategy, the analysis will span the last three EP elections (2014, 2019, and 2024), covering also the ensuing parliamentary term.

By examining the last three European Parliament elections (2014, 2019, and 2024), several developments are worth noting. Voter engagement has risen markedly alongside a shift in Europe's political landscape. The European average turnout increased from approximately 42.61% in 2014, when it was at its lowest, to over 50% in 2019, marking the first such rise since 1979. In 2024, participation further increased, reaching 50.74% (European Parliament, 2024b).

In parallel, support for radical right and Eurosceptic parties has expanded significantly: collectively, these forces captured roughly a quarter of the European vote in 2024 (Cas Mudde, 2024), building on strong performances in the previous two contests. While the anticipated "surge" of the far right in 2024 was less dramatic than some expected (Van Rij and Benton, 2024), the long-term trend shows a steady increase in support for anti-establishment and Eurosceptic parties across Europe (Van Rij and Benton, 2024). This pan-European trend has been especially pronounced in France and Italy. On the one hand, in France, Marine Le Pen's far-right National Rally (formerly Front National) obtained about a quarter of the vote in both 2014 and 2019 (Willsher, 2014) and surged to over 30% in the 2024 European elections (European Parliament, 2024a). Moreover, in 2021, another French

Eurosceptic far-right party emerged, *Éric Zemmour's Reconquête!* ("Reconquest!"). It entered the fray in 2024, securing around 5% of the French vote and gaining representation in the European Parliament (European Parliament, 2024a). On the other hand, in Italy, Matteo Salvini's nationalist Lega Nord climbed from roughly 6% of the vote in 2014 to a staggering 34% in 2019, transforming into the country's largest party in that European election, before falling back to about 8% in 2024 as support shifted to Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia), which won approximately 28% of the Italian vote (Preve, 2024).

Overall, these developments underscore how the agendas long championed by such Euroalternativist parties have resonated with large segments of Italian and French voters. As a result, their ideas have begun to influence EU policy debates on migration, climate, and security (Van Rij and Benton, 2024), and even leaders in mainstream parties have echoed aspects of nationalist rhetoric (Van Rij and Benton, 2024). In turn, this growing Euroalternativism represents a fundamental challenge to the EU's integrative project (Lorimer, 2024; Vasilopoulou, 2023), as evidenced by far-right leaders casting their victories as a "massive rejection" of the European Union in favour of a return to sovereign nationhood (Willsher, 2014). It is also the purpose of this dissertation to explore how this change in voters' preferences and EP assembly composition might affect and influence the design of the EU project. Such a context frames the subsequent empirical analysis, which will explore how issues of migration, the environment, and defence have been leveraged by these movements to attract voter support and what this means for the future of the European community.

Overview of the Historical Evolution of Previously Radically Eurosceptic Parties

Before delving into the Euroalternative behaviour that the PRR parties are implementing, this analysis will provide a historical overview of the parties by tracing their origins, which highlights their Eurosceptic legacy. Although this research examines four parties (Brothers of Italy, National Rally, The League and Reconquest!), as explained in the methodology chapter, the historical digression will only cover the excursus of Brothers of Italy and National Rally. This selection is motivated by the similar development and the political relevance of these two parties. As a matter of fact, both have post-fascist and Eurosceptic roots. Furthermore, from being fringe voices, they are now the first-voted parties in their countries, even in the EP elections (European Parliament, 2024a), achieving a political weight able to influence the EU decision-making and agenda-setting. The League has a hard Eurosceptic past, as well, but it still condemns the EU authority, whereas Meloni tries to deal with it.

Additionally, it performed poorly in the last EP elections (European Parliament, 2024a). Ultimately, Reconquest! is left out in this chapter because it is a newly born party, as it was founded just in 2021. The first party examined will be Brothers of Italy, due to a chronological criterion.

1. Overview on Fratelli d'Italia (FdI): the Former Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) and Alleanza Nazionale (AN)

In the aftermath of the Second World War, former members of the armed forces and supporters of the deposed totalitarian Fascist dictatorship regrouped in December 1946 to establish the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI), Italian Social Movement (Tarchi, 2024). Tens of thousands of fascist servicemen, *gli irriducibili* (the indomitable), who ended up on the defeated side of the Italian civil war, were given a new political reference on December 26, 1946, with the birth of the MSI. The new party dominated the Italian far-right landscape for almost fifty years.

Starting in the 1960s, the MSI attempted to emphasise its affiliations to the right. In 1971, it changed its symbol and was renamed “*Movimento Sociale Italiano-Destra Nazionale*” (MSI-DN), Italian Social Movement-National Right, to include remaining members of the last monarchist party. Although its militants managed to win seats in every Parliamentary and local council elections, and gradually moderated its overt references to fascism, that is, however, still employed within their meetings and congress’s rhetoric (Tarchi, 2024), it didn’t manage to break out of its marginalisation in the Italian political landscape.

Ideologically, the MSI conceived Europe as a “Third Force” that should have been stand-alone from the polarised Soviet and American spheres of influence (Parlato, 2006), marking a specific otherness that echoes Cerrone’s (2022) European civilisation discourse illustrated in the chapters above. However, this vision of Europe as a Third Pole waned shortly afterwards as the far-right sought its political legitimisation within the Italian political system, availing an anti-communism strategy (Sorgonà, 2022). From 1969 to 1987, Giorgio Almirante's secretariat enacted a militant renewal, radicalising the anti-communism trait. Moreover, he opened up to Europe, as in one of his most famous speeches delivered in 1988, he underlined that “*the right wing is either Europe, or it is nothing. And I'll tell you something else: Europe will either go right, or it won't work at all.*” (Fratelli d'Italia, 2019). In other words, Almirante delivered a clear political message that not only right-wing forces should not be an outsider within the European context, but he also means that Europe should comply with the conservative vision of a more decentralised (intergovernmental) European Union, in

line with what later Marine Le Pen envisages as a “European Alliance of Free Nations” (Le Pen, 2021; Basso, 2022a). Nevertheless, he failed to overcome MSI’s isolation, yielding an electoral support base of approximately 5–6%, except in the case of 8.7% in 1972 (Biblioteca della Camera dei Deputati, n.d.). Hence, MSI remained left out of the mainstream government coalition – the *arco costituzionale* (constitutional arc) - thanks to Italy’s anti-fascist constitution and consensus (Vassallo and Vignati, 2024). As a result of this ban on governmental access, the MSI encountered some controversies from within, which happened to trigger divisions among the more radical members. Nevertheless, none of the organisations that tried to oppose the MSI's decades-long control of its typical "hunting ground" were ever able to establish a strong presence in the region or win over a sizable portion of the electorate, leading most of them to resort to violent means of protest or to develop *coup d'état* initiatives. Some of these minor movements participated in what is referred to as the "strategy of tension" between terrorist attacks and cooperation with "deviant" elements of the state security apparatus throughout the 1970s, which are known as the "years of lead".

By the 1980s, Western Europe had witnessed the emergence of a "post-industrial far right" - new radical right parties free of blatant fascist nostalgia. Internal conflicts at MSI in Italy foretold change. Gianfranco Fini led a more moderate section that aimed to rebrand the MSI as a conservative right-wing party, losing its extreme image (Parlato, 2017). This vision was actualised in the early 1990s, when Italy's corruption scandals (*Tangentopoli*) turned over the party structure. The fall of the ruling Christian Democratic and Socialist parties removed the foreclosure of MSI on national power, as the neo-fascists could claim "*mani pulite*" (clean hands) amid the establishment's corruption (Chiarini, 2023). Seizing this opportunity, Fini presided over the Fiuggi Congress in January 1995, during which the MSI was formally dissolved and reformed as *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN) (Tarchi, 1997; Tarchi, 2024).

Furthermore, AN ended the far right's exile from power by joining Silvio Berlusconi's centre-right coalition and entering government in 1994 and again in the 2000s. Hardliners like Alessandra Mussolini resigned in protest of Fini's moderation, which included symbolic actions (such as denouncing fascism as "absolute evil" on a 2003 visit to Israel's Yad Vashem), policy changes, attempts of approaching the European liberal-conservative circles by lauding other European leaders such as Nicolas Sarkozy and David Cameron, and even teasing the idea of granting voting rights to immigrants (Vassallo and Vignati, 2024). By the 2000s, AN turned into a more traditional national-conservative party while carrying the historical baggage of the MSI.

As Tarchi (2024) acknowledges, FdI directly descends from MSI/AN. When some former AN members led by Giorgia Meloni broke away from Berlusconi's People of Freedom (PdL) in December 2012, aiming to "refund the Italian right" on fresh grounds, FdI was founded. Hence, former AN youth wing head Meloni and her co-founders Ignazio La Russa, an MSI/AN veteran, and Guido Crosetto, a conservative outside the MSI tradition, sought to reclaim the "national conservative" territory that AN had previously held. They re-adopted the MSI's symbolic heritage

By reintroducing the tricolour flame emblem (the MSI's logo), hosting its 2014 party conference in Fiuggi, the site of AN's establishment (Tarchi, 2024). This continuity has been introduced on an ideological level, as well. Indeed, FdI echoed national-conservative ideas long championed by ex-AN cadres, such as strengthening the executive, calling for nationalism (Meloni, 2022). However, a gap can be noted in the stance towards the EU. Indeed, on the one hand, the MSI behaved ambivalently. As Lorimer (2024) observes, MSI/AN tried to use "Europe" as an ideological resource to gain political legitimisation, defining Europe as a culturally distinct civilisation with a clear nativist footprint, while opposing key EU integration steps (Sorgonà, 2022). On the other hand, FdI inherited this supranational integration scepticism and boosted it towards *Italexit* (Meloni, 2013).

2. From Jean-Marie Le Pen's Front National (FN) to Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National (RN)

Rassemblement National's origins are dated later than Brothers of Italy, but they share the same record of a radical right party with ultra-nationalist, post-fascist roots evolving from pariah status toward the political mainstream (Henley, 2025; Vassallo and Vignati, 2024). As Pirro (2014) observes, initially, the MSI, with the Poujadism, represented a model of inspiration for FN.

In 1972, the former Poujadist MP Jean Marie Le Pen co-founded with Roger Holeindre, Jacques Bompard, François Brigneau, and Pierre Durand the *Front National pour l'unité française* (National Front for French Unity). FN supporters ranged from Catholic fundamentalists to admirers of Philippe Pétain, the leader of France's collaborationist wartime regime, and from royalists to former colonialists. The FN was the first ultranationalist party to emancipate itself—at least at the level of programme—from the nostalgic, fascist legacy of the traditional far right. Jean-Marie Le Pen, a former member of Pierre Poujade's populist, anti-tax movement (*Union de défense des commerçants et artisans*, UDCA), was selected as leader over other co-founders—including Vichy collaborators and neo-fascists of various stripes—due to image considerations.

The end of the "*les trente glorieuses*" economic boom (1945-1975), rapid expansion of immigration from France's former colonies, and the decline of the coal and steel industries drew many working-class, sometimes former left-wing, to the *Front National*. Its early members comprised former hardliners of the *Algérie française*, Vichy supporters, and neo-fascists. From the beginning, Le Pen's FN preached a furious blend of nativism and nationalism, warning of threats to the French nation from immigration, communism, and European integration.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, in the late 1970s, FN reinvigorated its political strategy and gained support by securitising immigration, thereby seizing a tactic previously employed by the Communist Party (PCF) (Pirro, 2014). Indeed, given the period of severe social and economic crisis, the PCF, which was facing a loss of support, decided to take a xenophobic posture in defence of the French working class. Indeed, during the 1978 legislative elections, FN, by highlighting the 'dangers of immigration', imposed its new rhetorical stance. Based on its famous slogan, "*1 million unemployed means 1 million too many immigrants! France and the French first!*", immigration was framed as an "*extremely serious problem in view of our economic and social situation*" (Mestre, 2012; Valérie Igounet, 2015).

By the 1980s, the party was winning 10% or more in parliamentary and European elections, increasing to 15% in the 1995 presidential election. Between the 1980s and 1990s, the party's substantial growth in support is thought to be triggered by its combination of nationalist and traditional values, "law and order", and anti-immigrant agenda that gained traction with voters. FN's nativism and nationalism made it an early Eurosceptic party. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the FN persistently opposed any integration progress toward what the Treaty of Rome states as an "*ever closer union*." For instance, J.M. Le Pen strongly opposed the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, asserting that it would end French monetary and border sovereignty (Le Pen, 1992). Moreover, J. M. Le Pen addressed the EP by defining it as "*useless*" and complained that the EU was "*nothing but a windmill*" (Cabanas and Cabanas, 2025). In 2005, the FN joined the battle against the proposed EU Constitution, partnering (from the right) with a segment of the left in a victorious populist-nationalist "No" during the referendum campaign (Le Pen, 2005; Startin, 2008).

Finally, although FN secured some seats in both the National and the European Assembly, the mainstream parties always implemented a bulwark, known as the *cordon sanitaire*, impeding FN from gaining governmental access, since the 1990s, similarly to the case of MSI before Berlusconi's government. This halt also brought FN to a decline in its voter base, while in 2011, when Marine Le Pen became the new party's leader, the decreasing support trend got increasingly inverted (Pirro, 2014). Furthermore, with Marine Le Pen's secretary, FN enhanced its Euroscepticism. As a matter

of fact, by the 2010s, the FN explicitly supported France's exit from the EU or at least from the Eurozone (Henley, 2017; Reuters Staff, 2017a).

1. Results and Analysis: Migration Agenda

When the 2014 EP elections occurred, a European migration crisis was taking place. France and especially Italy experienced a period of political turmoil that benefited anti-system parties (Donà, 2022). For decades, European societies largely accommodated a relatively stable flow of economic migrants in search of employment and improved living conditions (Goldmeier, 2025; Talani, 2020). The outbreak of the Syrian civil war, combined with ongoing instability in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan, has led to a sharp rise in refugee arrivals across Europe. In 2015, according to Clayton and Holland (2015), 1,000,573 people reached Europe via the Balkan routes (FRONTEX, 2017) and across the Mediterranean Sea, landing especially in Italy and Greece. The European crisis of migration has been overall framed as “biblical” (Fox News, 2015) “, existential” (Shinkman, 2015), and completely “political” (Frelick, 2016) by media channels. From a political perspective, we observe a securitisation of the topic, particularly among the Populist Radical Right (Almustafa, 2021). Indeed, this sudden inflow, largely driven by the war in Syria and instability in the Middle East and North Africa, placed unprecedented pressure on the EU's Common European Asylum System, exposing the weaknesses of instruments such as the Dublin Regulation and the uneven distribution of responsibility among member states (Guild et al., 2015; Talani, 2020; Emmanouilidis et al., 2016). The crisis became a turning point in European electoral dynamics. In Italy, Salvini's *Lega* and later Meloni's *Fratelli d'Italia* mobilised voters by portraying migration as both a security threat and a symptom of Brussels' failure to protect national interests (Albertazzi, Giovannini and Seddone, 201; Avesani, 2025). In France, *Rassemblement National* consolidated its support by linking immigration to social and cultural decline, a strategy that resonated particularly strongly in the European Parliament elections of 2014 and 2019 (Ivaldi, 2018; Vasilopoulou, 2023).

Nomination/Predication Strategies

The aftermath of the Eurozone Sovereign Debt Crisis (2010–2015) unsettled European citizens. The concerns about socio-economic precarious conditions unleashed mistrust towards the EU and favoured a populist anti-migration narrative, which made the sudden influx of migrants the source of problems. Indeed, by analysing Lega's 2014 EP electoral campaign, it appears that they repeatedly call for a “*Europa dei Popoli e delle Nazioni*” (Europe of People and Nations), stressing their political

will to implement an enforced intergovernmental asset by ensuring national law's superiority over the European one (Lega, 2014). Regarding the migration agenda, they first addressed the arrival of migration as a security problem and financial burden that occurs and is endured due to the EU's negligence (Lega, 214). Besides blaming it on the EU, the League party proposes to get rid of "the EU's interference", allowing member states full discretion in ruling their own national borders, so that they can better manage the issue. Also, Marine Le Pen, RN's leader, notably delivered a securitised narrative of migrants by labelling incoming non-Europeans "*clandestins*" and part of "*mass immigration*", pointedly avoiding terms like "refugees" to strip legitimacy from asylum seekers (Momtaz, 2019). Furthermore, during her political campaign, she condemned "the Europe of Brussels" and advocated for protectionism, border control, and withdrawal from the euro (Mestre, 2012), as did the Northern League (NL) party. Another analogy is represented by the political enemy/scapegoat they target, which embodies the Islamophobic Euroalternative civilisational rhetoric, as previously explained in the theoretical framework chapter. Indeed, the anti-migration political communication and policies mostly refer to incoming Islamic people. Furthermore, the jihadist terrorist attacks hitting European capitals, which peaked between 2015 and 2017 (Council of the European Union, 2022), have been easily and successfully instrumentalised to make this populist racist narrative take root. In other words, the PRR leaders examined in this study built on people's fears through a populist marketing strategy of 'nation-first' rhetoric (Cerrone, 2022). A clear example is shown by Marine Le Pen, threatening about a Great Replacement, invoking an Islamised France, warning of "*minarets dotting the countryside where church steeples once stood*" (Ganley, 2022). During the 2014-2019 Parliamentary term, it is evident that the PRR's overall political stance remained more Eurosceptic. Indeed, they campaigned against the common currency and further countered the EU integration while condemning it. In fact, both the then Northern League and the National Front rejected proposals to toughen and expand EU border management (European Parliament, 2016). They also objected to the reform of the Dublin system on mandatory intra-EU solidarity (Wikström, 2017) as they campaigned against redistribution-based designs during the Dublin IV recast and related CEAS files (2016–2018). Finally, they even organised cross-party events, such as the international meeting organised by the Northern League in January 2016, which gathered delegates from the Europe of Nations and Freedom group (ENF), including those from the National Front. On the same occasion, Marine Le Pen expressed her political will to establish a closer cooperation with the NL in order to address issues, particularly immigration, on a supranational level (Ivaldi, Lanzone and Sozzi, 2016).

Brothers of Italy (FdI) and *Reconquête!* emerged later in the EU political landscape, respectively, in 2019 and 2024. The first one ran the 2014 EP elections without reaching the *quorum*, while the latter

participated just last year. Nevertheless, their nomination/predication strategies present quite analogies to the ones described above of NL and FN.

Giorgia Meloni, FdI founder and leader, stands out for her radical anti-migration stances carried out in an Islamophobic register, as well. She employs a fatalist discourse of invasion, albeit with a distinctly military vocabulary. For instance, she referred to the largely overcrowded inflatable boats that hardly reach the Italian shores as a “naval invasion” (Balmer, 2022). Additionally, FdI framed the refugee crisis within a victimhood narrative, where Italy was portrayed as being “overrun” or “abandoned” by the EU, which, according to them, was even facilitating the “invasion” (Fratelli d'Italia - Alleanza Nazionale, 2014; Balmer, 2022). In the 2014 EP electoral campaign, FdI was markedly hard Eurosceptic, calling for an agreed dissolution of the Eurozone (Fratelli d'Italia - Alleanza Nazionale, 2014). Indeed, Giorgia Meloni repeatedly agreed with Le Pen’s opposition towards the euro (Meloni, 2014; Pagella Politica, 2023) and the following year, she tweeted “*To the EU Commission that says that membership of the euro is irrevocable, I say: nothing is irrevocable in democracy. Especially slavery*” (Meloni, 2025b). Regarding immigration, one of her most popular slogans is “*Aiutiamoli a casa loro*” (Let’s help them, but in their home countries), envisioning the only solution as sending migrants back or preventing them from reaching Italy. In this regard, in 2018, she requested a naval blockade off Libya (Fratelli d'Italia, 2018). This was not only an impractical request, typical of the populist vagueness (Laclau, 2005), since it is an extremely delicate operation on a diplomatic level, but also violates human rights (Liboreiro, 2023).

Éric Zemmour, who founded *Reconquête!* in 2021, further developed the “grand remplacement” (great replacement) conspiracy theory, enhancing it more than Marine Le Pen and making it a pillar of his 2022 presidential campaign (Trippenbach, 2021). Indeed, he pointed out that Muslim immigrants are supplanting native Europeans, depicting immigration as an orchestrated “*invasion*” that will “*erase*” Christian European civilisation (Ganley, 2022) and declaring that the French “*cannot tolerate two civilisations on French soil*” (Trippenbach, 2021). During the French Presidential elections, he did not advocate for Frexit, unlike Le Pen. However, he pushed for a re-nationalisation of migration policies, declaring that he would have sought renegotiation of the Schengen Agreement and even the withdrawal from the European Convention on Human Rights (Zemmour, 2022). In line with the populist rhetoric and Laclau’s (2005) empty signifiers idea, he criticised the EU with quite vague argumentations, describing it as an institution “*directed by an abstract élite*”, tearing up “*its own roots and erasing its own history*” (Basso, 2022). Hence, he also advocated for a “*Europe of Nations*”, namely, fighting “*the élite*” from within and turning it into a more intergovernmental body where nationalisms gain more discretion.

Furthermore, another feature that changed in the PRR context at the European level during the subsequent legislative mandates (2019-2024), besides their scaling up in vote shares and the increased number of parties, is a softened Hard Eurosceptic rhetoric. In the FdI 2019 EP political manifesto, the Euro-exit is no longer contemplated; however, the programme's pillar focuses on an anti-European re-nationalisation aimed at "defending Italian identity" (Fratelli d'Italia, 2019). Moreover, for the first time, FdI gained EU access with a 6.44% vote share (European Parliament, 2019).

However, a bigger rebranding operation has been implemented by the *Lega Nord* (Northern League) that turned into "League", marking a shift from a regional party to one with national and nationalist scope. However, the League's transformation implied an enlargement of the targeted voters while maintaining a similar communication strategy. What is more, in the 2019 EP elections, the League, a nationalist anti-European party, ended up being the most-voted party in Italy with 34.26% (European Parliament, 2019).

Marine Le Pen's party changed its name from *Front National* (National Front) to *Rassemblement National* (National Rally) and rebranded its European political strategy, as well. Indeed, it turned its narrative (Momtaz, 2019), quitting its former calls for Frexit and Eurozone-exits, but behaved as an EU-benevolent, alleging that "*Il faut sauver l'Europe de l'UE qui la détruit!*" (Europe must be saved by the EU as it is destroying it!) (Le Pen, 2019). To achieve this, RN proposes returning to "Une Europe de Nations" (a European Alliance of Nations), thereby establishing an intergovernmental system that would transfer decision-making power from Brussels. In practical terms, the National Rally proposed scrapping the European Commission, dismantling the Common Agricultural Policy, and establishing tough new criteria for the remaining competencies of the EU. In other words, paradoxically, to save Europe, according to RN, the only way is to take it over and dismantle it.

To sum up, migration remains one of the PRR parties' propaganda pillars, framed as a security issue that menaces an "ethnic replacement" (Kaval, 2023), especially when it regards people coming from Africa and the Middle East professing Islam. Indeed, a controversial double-standard approach towards migration needs to be pointed out. When the Russian invasion of Ukraine broke out, Ukrainians fleeing the conflict were suddenly granted an automatic one-year residency permit (Balmer, 2022), whereas Meloni has made the naval blockade in the Mediterranean one of her main crusades. Furthermore, in the light of DHA analysis (Wodak, 2017), labels do matter, and a duplicity is detectable in the incoming designation that confirms the role of cultural Christianity in PRR. Indeed, according to both Meloni and Le Pen, Ukrainians are "real refugees" to be helped, while Africans are "illegal migrants" to be expelled (Balmer, 2022; Eir Nolsøe and Abboud, 2022). Another aspect worth mentioning is the progressive stretching of the binomial identity-alterity, which in this

case is embodied by the distinction nationals-migrants, where the former cluster is being extended from regional (Northern Italy with Northern League), to national (French/Italian), to continental (European).

During the 2024 EP elections, further developments in the positions of PRR parties emerged, with some parties radicalising, while others de-radicalised their stances, ultimately attracting more voters (Leonard and Krastev, 2024). On the one hand, FdI, from being a post-fascist Eurosceptic fringe voice, became the most-voted party in Italy. In 2014, it did not reach the *quorum*, and in 2024, it got almost 30% of the vote share (European Parliament, 2024a). Also, RN peaked in the vote shares (31.37%). On the other hand, the League party, which shrank its appeal among public opinion, radicalised its Eurosceptic trait. It framed the EU as the enemy, employing as its motto “*Più Italia, Meno Europa*” (More Italy, Less Europe), underscoring a manifestly inverse and incompatible relationship between the two sides (Lega per Salvini Premier, 2024). Conversely, in RN and FdI, the political messages are delivered more subtly. On the one hand, since Giorgia Meloni has become the head of the Italian government, she has been seeking to ease tensions with the EU by appearing open to collaboration. Additionally, according to Fasola and Lucarelli (2024), she utilised migration as a lever in her relationship-building strategy with the EU Commission. However, even if she seems “Europeanised”, she aimed at shaping European migration policies in line with a PRR design. She also endorsed the 2023 EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), which sought to lower the incoming “irregular migrants”. Meanwhile, in November 2023, the Italian Albanian MoU created two enclaves in Albanian soil (Gjadër and Shengjin) as migratory hubs (“*modello Albania*”), without shifting jurisdictional responsibility to Tirana (Varvelli and Ziccardi, 2025).

The success of PRR parties that softened their Eurosceptic political communication strategy might be linked to a shift in people’s perceptions of major political issues and the EU’s performance. Besides the delusional Brexit’s aftermath (McMahon, 2021), Leonard and Krastev (2024) reported that the “EU success narrative” is deeply rooted in European public opinion. Indeed, in 2024, ECFR polled several EU Member States, including France and Italy. The results showcased a general positive sentiment towards the EU’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, support for Ukraine, and the European Green Deal. Therefore, this might also explain some PRR ambiguity in conveying more moderate stances while maintaining their former line politically.

After delving into the coral topic of PRR political communication and agenda, this study will explore the PRR approach towards the Environmental crisis.

2. Environmental Agenda

The dissertation will now provide an analysis of the PRR approach in relation to the EU's green agenda. It will delve into both the PRR communication strategy and political action, examining whether there are any inconsistencies or shifts, and exploring the eventual implications within EU politics.

Extreme weather events are not a recent challenge. As the European Environment Agency (2025) reports, since the 1980s, about 85,000–145,000 fatalities across Europe have occurred, generating about €500 billion in economic losses. However, the EU started to draw attention to it and take significant action in 2019. Indeed, given the environmental and economic impact of climate change, the green transition became a priority of von der Leyen's first Presidency (von der Leyen, 2019) that launched ambitious initiatives such as the Green Deal and the related “Fit for 55” measures (European Commission, 2023).

On the other hand, PRR proposals and programmes do not focus on climate change and environmental policies (Wakim, 2024). Historically, far-right parties have often been outright climate change deniers or sceptics, and, in fact, PRR leaders have often leveraged people’s grievances by antagonising the national government or EU institutions (Jacques Delors Institute - Energy Centre, 2024). As repeatedly recalled throughout this research, populist rhetoric polarises the elite, which in this case is represented by the EU, against the people, and seeks to exploit this polarisation to support its policy claims. Besides the anti-elitist feature, another aspect that stands out in the PRR’s communication strategy is its anti-pluralism, which downplays peculiarities. They opt for simple and general messages to convey (slogans), as Laclau’s (2005) concept of empty signifiers explains. Indeed, complex climate policies, which involve technical targets, are distilled into emotive slogans. Phrases like “*repeal the Green Deal*” (*Reconquête!*, 2024), “*stop the eco-madness*” (Lega per Salvini Premier, 2024) or “*no euro-green tax*” serve as rallying cries. They do not specify detailed plans but symbolise a general resistance (Laclau, 2005). The Jacques Delors Institute - Energy Centre (2024) study underlined that “the radical right weaves opposition towards the European Green Deal into their nationalist, anti-immigration, and identity narratives,” emphasising alleged unfair burdens on ordinary Europeans. In other words, PRR rhetoric portrays the EU green policies as detrimental, alleging that they would lead to European de-industrialisation, undermining national energy and agricultural production (*Reconquête!*, 2024).

By combining climate scepticism with xenophobic or anti-elite content, PRR discourse fuels identity anxieties. For instance, Italian and Polish PRR leaders sometimes invoke Europe’s “Judeo-Christian

civilisation” or warn of demographic decline to justify an anti-climate stance (McMahon, 2022; Froio, 2018; Cerrone, 2022). These rhetorical strategies, moral polarisation, populist *ethno-theses* and conspiratorial messaging serve to simplify the debate and stigmatise opponents as enemies of the people (McMahon, 2022; Wodak, 2015; Vasilopoulou, 2018).

The RN translated environmentalism into its identitarian ideology and borders’ dogma, resulting in the concept of “localism” (Guillou, 2023; Maisonneuve, 2022). Hence, instead of denying climate change tout court, RN updated its environmental stance, and Le Pen, from a green scepticism that wants to scrap the EU “punitive ecology”, called for a purely national “sovereignty plan” and tried to reawaken the rural-urban divide fuelling farmers’ rage (Guillou, 2023).

Until the months leading up to her election, Giorgia Meloni made green-sceptic claims, as well, calling the European Green Deal ‘climate fundamentalism’ (Il Fatto Quotidiano, 2022). She has been hostile to European energy and climate policy, backing up large domestic agriculture, microelectronics, and automobile industries. For instance, following the flash floods in northern Italy in 2021, she accused climate policies of impeding the installation of critical infrastructure to safeguard populations (Jacques Delors Institute - Energy Centre, 2024). Whereas, with the blistering hot summer of 2022 in Italy, which is one of the European countries most vulnerable to climate change, she has tried to recast ecology as a "right-wing issue" (Buzogány and Mohamad-Klotzbach, 2022).

From a practical point of view, observers have pointed out that PRR within the EU institutions has a detrimental influence on greenhouse gas emission reductions and energy and climate policy ambitions (Lockwood and Lockwood, 2022; Stella Schaller and Alexander Carius, 2019; Jahn, 2021; Ćetković and Hagemann, 2020). In France, the RN and Reconquête! intended to withdraw important Green Deal policies. For example, Marine Le Pen's 2024 platform promises to scrap carbon taxes on gasoline, dismantle the EU's windfall tax on energy corporations, and empower member states to disregard EU climate sanctions, while Eric Zemmour went further, aiming at “*abroger l’intégralité des textes du Pacte vert*” (repealing the whole Green Deal) (Olivier, 2024; Wakim, 2024).

In 2019, when the League was the largest Italian party in the European Parliament (European Parliament, 2019), it set the stage for strong opposition to environmental policies (Voce and Clarke, 2022). For instance, Italy’s League and Hungary’s Fidesz (and sometimes PiS) withdrew to form a new far-right grouping, where climate sceptics are dominant (Matteo Salvini, 2019).

PRR’s increasing traction with voters influenced the political balance among Parliamentarians, causing some mainstream actors to radicalise their agenda (Jacques Delors Institute - Energy Centre, 2024). For instance, the European People's Party (EPP) advocated for a moratorium on green policies

in September 2022 to prevent industries from incurring additional costs (EPP Group, 2022). Another clear example of general disengagement from environmental crisis management is shown by the Nature Restoration Law, a pillar of the European Green Deal. During the months leading up to the vote, EPP Party leader Manfred Weber spearheaded a campaign alleging that the proposal would damage farmers' livelihoods, jeopardising European food security and the economy by stripping away their land. EPP, joined by the conservative and radical right, ECR, and ID, managed to significantly diminish the proposal, which was eventually passed through Parliament with a small majority (Wax and Guillot, 2023; Niranjana, 2023). After a month of parliamentary delays, President Macron postponed some fuel price rises in the spring of 2024, insisting on a "pause" in the implementation of EU environmental laws. Ursula von der Leyen replied by promising to engage with member states before raising targets and informing the press she would not impose extra obligations in the short term (Keraron and Goulard, 2024; Gavin, 2024), showing a clear shift in her priorities from her first presidency.

Indeed, ongoing geopolitical developments that pose a security threat to European countries have driven EU institutions to focus more on defence reforms.

3. Defence Agenda

This chapter examines how the Italian and French populist radical right (PRR) have approached EU defence cooperation across the last three European legislative terms (2014–2019, 2019–2024, and the current one). It will compare the stances and their eventual evolution of Rassemblement National (RN), *Reconquête!*, Fratelli d'Italia (FdI), and Lega on NATO, EU defence integration, and the development of strategic autonomy through the DHA lens (Wodak, 2017) and Laclau's (2005) concept of empty signifiers.

Discursive Strategies through DHA and Empty Signifier Lenses

Wodak's (2017) DHA lens reveals how PRR defence narratives are constructed through general concepts, in other words, empty signifiers. Specifically, the term "sovereignty" is often invoked, as it has both a nationalist allure and a broader, malleable meaning that different audiences can support without needing a precise definition (Laclau 2005). Indeed, a vague vocabulary is easier to agree with, and it can fit with heterogeneous voter groups. In matters of defence, both the French and Italian PRR parties champion "sovereignty" but with distinct nuances. In France, RN draws on a Gaullist tradition of strategic autonomy. Le Pen, in her 2017 and 2022 campaigns, proposed France's withdrawal from NATO's integrated military command, insisting French forces should not fall under

automatic US-led structures (France 24, 2022). She has also called for reassessing sanctions on Russia and for eventual rapprochement with Moscow, portraying Russia as a civilisational partner for a multipolar Europe (Chrisafis, 2022).

Similarly, in Italy, the League (2014) stated that security and defence cannot be a European competence. Conversely, similarly to the green agenda, Giorgia Meloni's position has shifted since she assumed the leadership of the Italian government (Il Post, 2022). Before then, as Le Pen, she routinely criticised the United States' and the European Union's foreign policy decisions, while confessing her admiration towards Putin (Il Post, 2022). Now, she constantly seeks Trump's agreement (Fantappiè, Goretti and Simonelli, 2025), and in her book, entitled "*La versione di Giorgia*" (Giorgia's version), she stated that she "*obviously stands for a European defence body*", while her defence minister, Guido Crosetto, called a European army a "*stupidity*" (Canepa, 2023). This rejection of further integration is exemplified by another cornerstone of PRR rhetoric: the Europe of Nations. It is still an ambiguous yet evocative signifier, as well, signalling a positive attachment to *Europe* while rejecting the *European Union*'s federal trajectory. In line with this intergovernmental vision, Italian and French PRRs ground one of their core principles: national sovereignty must remain paramount in defence (Tidey, 2024).

Similarly, all four parties consistently opposed initiatives such as the European Defence Fund (EDF) and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), arguing they threaten national control of military industries and command structures. This idea echoes the PRR vision of a *Europe à la carte* (Vasilopoulou, 2011), where Member States collaborate on specific domains without ceding shares of sovereignty.

The Last Three Legislatures' Trajectory

Over the last three EP legislatures, from 2014 to the present day, there has been an evolution from open Euroscepticism to a more cautious approach. Following the Russian invasion of Crimea, the RN (then FN) and League took strong sovereigntist positions, opposing the EU sanctions against Russia and rejecting measures towards "strategic autonomy" within the EU (BBC, 2015).

By 2019, both RN and FdI had recast themselves as Euro-reformists rather than openly Europhobic (Momtaz, 2019). Le Pen downplayed rumours of NATO exit following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, promising to respect Article 5 while denouncing US domination (Chrisafis, 2022). Meloni remade the FdI as a pro-NATO and pro-Ukraine party, which was critical to her acceptance as Prime Minister of Italy (Tocci, 2023). *Reconquête!*, however, adopted more radical strategies, which gave Le Pen a more moderate image (Ivaldi, 2022; Ivaldi, 2023).

ReArm Europe: Intergovernmental Inertia

In the current legislature, major security challenges occur inside and close to the European continent. The ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and the Gaza Strip, the US disengagement, have inevitably questioned the extant EU defence system. Some scholars hold that this could be a momentum for EU integration, as it would have concerned the defence sector, one of the most delicate and jealously protected sectors by member states (Grevi, 2025). Given the withdrawal of US protection and to prevent and prepare in case the Russian invasion might go beyond Ukrainian borders (Popescu, 2025; Guilbert, 2025; Dickinson, 2025), the current von der Leyen Commission designed the “ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030”, valued at around €800 billion, aimed at bolstering EU defence capabilities (Clapp et al., 2025). However, as it happened with the cutback of the Green Deal goals, the “ReArm Europe” plan might represent another case of nationalist Intergovernmental reorientation in EU politics. Indeed, it has been presented and could have been a step forward in further supranationalisation, as envisioned in the EU project. Instead, it relies on intergovernmental relationships among Member States, unveiling a European defence sector still fragmented by national interests (ISPI, 2025; Wolff, Steinbach and Zettelmeyer, 2025). The funds and military resource management clearly show this. In fact, defence spending is channelled through national budgets, and loans (via the SAFE instrument) are voluntary. Member states are responsible for allocation and procurement (European Commission, 2023b).

The reaction of Italian and French PRR parties is heterogeneous. Although the plan grants countries considerable discretion, Le Pen declared, “*arrogating powers to herself that are not hers,*” appealing to the Nation’s sovereignty (Deconinck, 2025) as an untouchable right (an empty signifier). Whereas Meloni appears to have abandoned the strong, open opposition and is now playing a collaborative role, swinging between Brussels and Washington (Varvelli, 2025). In this sense, Meloni acts as a Euroalternative by promoting reforms that do not actually change by fostering European integration, but through the conservation of national(ist) interests.

Conclusion

This dissertation aims to investigate how far-right populist parties in France and Italy are adapting their approach towards EU institutions. Hence, from their sceptical anti-establishment approach to an

increasing involvement in the EU politics. I attempted to answer my research question: *how are the Italian and French Populist Radical Right Parties implementing an Euroalternative shift?*

To study this switch, I first delved into FdI and RN origins. Then, I drew up the academic literature, exploring the key debates in Chapter II. After setting the theoretical framework in Chapter III, where I adopted McMahon's (2021) definition of Euroalternativism and incorporated Cerrone's (2022) European Christian-civilizational discourse into my analysis. I also applied a discourse-historical approach (DHA) and critical discourse analysis to the PRR parties' manifestos, speeches, parliamentary proposals, and related PRR materials concerning three key policy areas: migration, climate change and defence. Additionally, the research material was dated from 2014 to the present to study the last three EP mandates.

By analysing both PRR rhetoric and political activity, I found out that while they abandoned the hardline of their "exit" agenda in their public discourse, they stress the EU's need for fundamental reform. Hence, according to their communicative strategy, the EU, which was once an unacceptable enemy, became an acceptable institution if it is reformed in accordance with their European-nationalist vision.

For example, no party currently advocates for a Frexit or Italexit; instead, they discuss "repatriating powers" from Brussels or increasing the influence of national parliaments. This is consistent with the concept of Euroalternativism, a pro-systemic yet critical position towards the EU (Taylor, 2018). Another key finding is that FdI seems to be the party that changed the most in its public attitude, and this shift might be strictly correlated with its rise to government. From being anti-establishment with a neo-fascist legacy, it now seeks to be ever closer to the European Commission President or maybe it made the European Presidency closer to its agenda.

Moreover, this study provides insights into contemporary PRR discourse and its role in EU politics. It demonstrated that mainstreaming of the radical right involves not only organisational inclusion but also a moderation of rhetoric, and that the radical right entails both organisational inclusion and rhetorical rebranding. Another key finding concerns the positive correlation between the vote shares Italian and French PRR gained and the reorientation towards increasingly conservative positions of mainstream centre-right parliamentary groups, such as the EPP. This insight adds nuance to the literature on Euroscepticism (cf. Vasilopoulou 2011) by highlighting a shift towards "systemic opposition. Moreover, RN and FdI are the most voted parties in two of the most populous Member States. In other words, they both are very influential in two pivotal EU countries. Hence, scholars must study them.

Nevertheless, a limitation of this study is its limited scope, which covers only the PRR parties of two countries. Future research shall then widen the scope of the analysis, perhaps by including a longer timeframe that also considers the Euro financial crisis. Additionally, other PRR parties can be considered and compared through a cross-national analysis, such as the German one, as *Alternative für Deutschland* is gaining increasing traction among voters. Germany, along with France, represents the axis of the EU, and AfD has a female leadership, as well. Furthermore, the study of PRR discourse may encompass other policy domains and investigate whether Euroalternativism is applicable across sectors or if exceptions emerge.

In conclusion, this paper identifies a significant shift in PRR parties' European policy: a switch from harsh Euroscepticism to Euroalternativism. By discussing this transition, it lays the groundwork for future comparative research into the implications and stability of this trend.

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