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Abstract

The 'Refugee crisis' has been accompanied by a radical shift of public attitudes toward NGOs operating in the southern Mediterranean, whose image has quickly turned from 'saviors of the sea' to 'sea taxis' by practices of re-contextualization of migration discourses. Less attention has been directed towards the ways such criminalization of solidarity affected migrant representation and identities in turn, especially on social media. This study aims to cast a new light on the discursive practices of criminalizing NGOs and their role in shaping the dichotomy 'Us vs Them'. The case study focuses on Twitter as a privileged arena, where different categories of users are involved in the criminalization of NGOs, fostering the normalization of anti-immigration rhetoric, thus creating room for populist and sovereigntist ideologies. Based on a corpus composed of more than 800.000 tweets posted between 2017 and 2020, this study adopts a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods including corpus linguistics and discursive strategies. Findings show that the NGO criminalization is part of the broader process of normalization of anti-immigration rhetoric, legitimizing restrictive migration policies, fostering the building of a sovereigntist political identity and neglecting immigrants' and refugees' own identities and rights. Specifically, results highlight a new articulation of the Us vs Them dichotomy where 'Us' is represented by the in-group, a new 'Them' is represented by the NGO and 'Those' is represented by migrants. The research output as a whole seems to consolidate a present and future trajectory regarding the political discourse on migration that is based on a progressive redefinition of the attributes of illegality/crime that shifts from migrants to rescuers.

Key words: NGOs criminalization; sovereigntism; exclusionary discourse; de-humanization; anti-immigration rhetoric; refugees identity

1. Introduction

In the last decade, forms of exclusionary discourse appear to have been gradually shifting targets, topics and intentions. Moving from a stereotypical consolidated construction of the 'Other' as a problem or threat (Baker et al., 2008; Viola & Musolff, 2019; Wodak, 2001), we are interested in analyzing how hostile narratives have ended up aggressively targeting humanitarian

organizations and precisely the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in Mediterranean sea, increasingly the subject of mistrust, stigmatization and, criminalisation through various discursive strategies. In doing so, the chapter also analyzes the impact of the criminalization of NGOs on the discursive construction of 'Us' and 'Them' deepening some possible shifts in the Italian public debate on Twitter.

In recent decades, scholars have reported a restriction of NGOs' operational space, due to the growing pressure from political, institutional, and economic actors, aimed at limiting their capacity to take action and providing humanitarian assistance in different geopolitical contexts (van der Borgh & Terwindt, 2012). This tendency was further strengthened by the so-called 'refugee crisis' and the adoption of increasingly restrictive approaches towards migrants and asylum-seekers by the European Union and member states, which resulted in the adoption of criminal measures against those who help them (Carrera et al., 2018; della Porta & Steinhilper, 2021; Reggiardo, 2019).

With this backdrop, between 2017 and 2020 Italian governments progressively restricted the operational space of NGOs in the south Mediterranean to reduce the number of arrivals (Carrera & Cortinovis, 2019; Sigona, 2018). This strategy reached its climax with the 'closure of ports' in the summer of 2018 and the two 'Security Decrees' aimed at limiting the possibility of immigrants to be recognized as refugees, and making it more difficult for NGO ships to rescue people at sea.

The occurrence of such a progressive change in political practices of border control and migration handling is often connected with a change in tones and register of public discourse modifying the journalistic and the political representations of the NGOs' public image. However, the criminalization of NGOs appears to be functional also in maintaining full control over images and stories of immigrants, providing an opportunity to better understand discursive shifts on migrant identity and on the fundamental elements of populism rearticulating the relation between 'Us', 'Them' and the 'dangerous others' (Mudde 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Indeed, the anti-NGO discourse appears to be a key issue for understanding the development of sovereigntist ideology (Basile & Mazzoleni, 2020), identifying new actors as threats against national sovereignty, as well as a direct expression of the transnational elites who challenge and fight against the will of common people. These changes were made possible by several events that triggered a moral mobilization of public opinion allowing a 'rational' legitimization of restrictive policies (see e.g., Krzyżanowski, 2020; Triandafyllidou, 2018; Wodak, 2015; 2017).

This process has been noticed in legacy media (Moore et al., 2018; Cusumano & Bell, 2021), digital media (Berti, 2021; Gualda & Rebollo, 2016) and political communication (Cervi et al., 2020; Terlizzi, 2021), showing that the Anti-NGOs discourse can be fully understood only by considering the inherently hybrid character of the current media system (Chadwick, 2013).

As mentioned, the study places itself within the debate on the European refugee crisis, which has heavily affected Italy as one of the main countries of arrival for immigrants from Northern Africa. The rise of landings and rescue operations in the southern Mediterranean nurtured a wave of anti-immigrant claims, considered a driving factor that explains the increase in votes for Italian right-wing populist parties in the 2018 national election (Combei & Giannetti, 2020). These events contributed to shifting the representations of the humanitarian crisis into a political emergency (Castelli Gattinara, 2017),

amplified by right-wing campaigns against EU institutions and aimed at bolstering polarization, radicalization and politicization (Krzyżanowski et al., 2018; van der Brug et al., 2015).

Thus, this research is aimed at analyzing actors, languages and discursive strategies that characterize/shape the criminalization process within the Italian anti-NGO public debate on Twitter between 2017 and 2020. Twitter is held as a privileged arena in the hybrid media ecosystem due to its ability to fuel public debate and influence news coverage and media and political agendas (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015). The research adopts a mixed methods approach in order to analyse the criminalization at quantitative and qualitative level. Specifically, we identify: i) which actors are mainly involved in the criminalization debate of the anti-NGO debate; ii) which lexicon has been used and how it has changed through years; iii) which discursive strategies have been reproduced and how they shifted the discourse while modifying the discursive construction of immigration-related identities. Results show that the NGOs criminalization not only allows to deepen important areas of discourse studies such as discrimination, politics and populism, but it contributes to identify a discursive shift in public discourses about immigration (Krzyżanowski, 2020): the case study highlights new articulation between the *in-group* represented by 'Us' and two different *out-groups* namely 'Them' represented by the NGO and 'Those' represented by migrants.

2. Background

2.1 Topics in Critical Discourse Studies and the Communicative Dynamic of Social Media

Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) embrace both quantitative and qualitative approaches to deconstruct underlying meanings and ideologies from different cultural content such as written, visual and audiovisual artifacts. CDS has been historically interested in studying media and politics in order to reveal how discourses are used to attain and maintain power, as well as sustain existing social relations (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; van Dijk, 1987; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Specifically, CDS is focused on analyzing texts produced by powerful elites and institutions, such as journalistic and political speeches (Bouvier & Machin, 2018; KhosraviNik & Unger, 2015). During the last decade, the main topics of analysis, such as identity, racial discrimination, nationalism, reproduction of ideology and persuasion, have found new momentum in investigating social media as interactive, multimodal and circularly-networked spaces (KhosraviNik, 2020). Indeed, such popular topics in the field are not only still relevant within the communicative dynamic of social media, but also they reveal a mix of powerful-institutional and ordinary-individual texts re-configuring the relation between discourse and power, posing new challenges to theories in CDS (KhosraviNik & Unger, 2015).

For several years, the field has been carefully garrisoning the debate on immigration in Europe and the related process of normalizing the 'politics of fear' (Wodak, 2015), also highlighting the strength and diffusion of a highly politicized and mediatized hegemonic discourse on these topics (Krzyżanowski et al., 2018; van der Brug et al., 2015). The power of such an ideologization has allowed anti-immigration rhetoric to spread from radical right-wing groups to

become a common ground in the European political debate (Krzyzanowski et al., 2018). Finally, in the last years, CDS discussed the rise of uncivil society, in particular on the web, and in its 'borderline discourse' that «progressively 'normalized' the anti-pluralist views across many European public spheres on a par with nativist, xeno-ethnic and exclusionary views now widely propagated by RWPPs in Europe and beyond» (Krzyzanowski & Ledin, 2017, 1). Such a borderline discourse has moved from marginal online spaces, embraced by mainstream media and politicians, thus resulting in forms of pre-legitimization or open legitimization of anti-immigration rhetoric (Krzyzanowski et al., 2021; Krzyzanowski & Ledin, 2017; Wodak, 2021).

2.2 The Discursive Construction of the Otherness and Immigrant Identities

Research in CDS has provided substantial evidence that immigration discourses share universal features concerning the discursive construction of identities. It has been noticed how migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers tend to be merged into one larger category of 'Others' (see e.g., Baker et al., 2008; Wodak, 2001) reported widely by the media by means of reproducing the 'fear of the stranger' (Viola & Musolff, 2019; Wodak, 2019;). These findings are consistent with research on the representation of refugees and migrants in the Italian scenario. Since the 1990s, the Italian media coverage of migration has been characterized by an inherently negative representation of the phenomena, overwhelmed by crime news, alleged invasions and security issues, often resulting in media hypes (Cerase & Santoro, 2018; Vasterman, 2005) and moral panic (Binotto et al., 2016; Maneri, 2015; Combei & Giannetti, 2020) fueled by a media system converted into a 'fear machine' (Dal Lago, 2012). Specifically, many studies focused on the relevance of the 'emergency frame' and the 'securitization frame' (Buzan et al., 1998) with similar topics and accents in both UK and Italian press (Taylor, 2014).

More generally, analyzing the discursive construction of national/cultural identity informs about the way some people can feel threatened by 'aggressive' Others that are 'willing' or 'plotting' to take control over their home, way of life and very existence (Viola & Musolff, 2019, 3). These discursive constructions foster nationalistic discourses, foster re/nationalizing tendencies to strengthen and emphasize the differences between ingroup ('us', 'European citizens') and outgroup ('non-European others' rather than 'illegal', 'undocumented' or 'irregular' migrants (Viola & Musolff, 2019; Wodak, 2019). A vast and heterogeneous literature provides a number of useful interpretations of the 'us vs. them' and its articulation as two highly polarized groups present in the anti-immigration discourse. For the purpose of this paper, we mention the idea of a nation (state) as a container (Charteris-Black, 2006) delimited by borders to separate inside (in-group) from outside (out-group). That concept entails an action that may refer to inviting, letting, allowing, or bringing immigrants into the 'container' country rather than sending them home, round them up, let them out as well a limit, target, and control immigration even talking of importing - exporting as to compare people to commodities. Indeed, the movement of de-humanized subjects from outside that fill/enter the inside is often described by metaphors such as *tide*, *flood* or *wave* (El Refaie, 2001; Hart, 2010). Making such a construction of the immigrant as an alien and/or enemy implies their dehumanization and degradation to a 'thing' (De Genova, 2002;

KhosraviNik 2010). As recently stated by Romano and Porto (2021), these aspects represent a complex ‘FORCE-DYNAMICS schema’ that explains «how and why refugees have been forced to leave their country, how and where they are traveling to, which obstacles they are overcoming and also why European countries perceive them as a threat, thus trying to stop them» (Romano & Porto, 2021, 4).

In terms of Critical Discourse Studies, van Leeuwen (2008) identifies *passivation* and *impersonalization* as important linguistic tools to represent migrants. The former is a linguistic process enacted using grammatical roles and transitivity structures (e.g. passive clauses), aimed at presenting someone as subjected or benefitting from an activity addressed to them rather than the active part of it. *Impersonalization* consists in representing certain actors by using abstract nouns referring to particular qualities being assigned to them as a collective entity (van Leeuwen, 2008). Finally, dehumanization of migrants acts via the degrading use of organism, object, natural catastrophe/war, and animal metaphors (Santa Ana, 1999, 2002; Musolff, 2015) such as ‘masses of waters’ and bio-and socio-‘parasites’.

While there is a wide literature on ‘us vs. them’ as two polarized groups, our contribution intends to highlight how the NGOs criminalization process re-articulated the dichotomy that characterizes the anti-immigration discourse. Assuming both national and immigrant identities are discursively constructed, NGOs criminalization provides an opportunity to investigate new developments about collective identities. In other words, our hypothesis highlighted by the case study concerns a new triangulation between three distinct actors: i) ‘Us’: that is the in-group represented by the ‘people’, marked by populist and sovereignist positions; ii) a new ‘Them’ represented by the NGO; iii) ‘Those’ represented by migrants.

2.3 The Criminalization of NGOs Within the Italian Socio-Political Context: a Brief State of Art

Recently, relations between governments and NGOs have become more tense in Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and EU countries such as Poland, Hungary and Romania. In 2012 and then in 2015, the Russian Duma, the lower house of the Federal Assembly of Russia, passed a law on treason restricting civil liberties and targeting international NGOs by comparing them to ‘foreign agents’ (Pitts & Ovsuannikova, 2015). In Hungary, the right-wing populist majority approved the ‘Soros package’, a set of laws regulating immigration, asylum and border control that imposed relevant restrictions to NGO activities, including criminal liability for ‘facilitating illegal immigration’ (Reggiardo, 2019), and for protesting anti-immigration policies (Carrera et al., 2018; della Porta, 2018). Such restrictions also affected other states who are subjected to the arrival of migrants and refugees (Reggiardo, 2019), often implemented alongside concern and hostility by public opinion (Dempster & Hargrave, 2017).

In the Italian context since 2017 there has been an escalation of policies promoted by different governments aimed at restricting and criminalizing NGO boats operating in the Mediterranean. For matters of space we briefly mention some policies and events while we will refer to other aspects of the socio-political context in Paragraph 4.3. A first measure concerns the launching of a

‘Code of Conduct’ for NGOs wanted by the center-left government in 2017 by then Interior Minister Marco Minniti consisting in a list of rules to be complied with to continue search and rescue activities at sea. Alongside the code, we mention a fact-finding investigation opened in 2017 by Catania Prosecutor Carmelo Zuccaro on the origin of funding for NGO activities at sea and the viral video posted on Facebook by a young Italian blogger that was supposed to prove that NGOs go to rescue shipwrecked people near the Libyan coast and bring them to Italy.

During 2018, with the populist government ‘Conte I’¹ comes the inauguration of the era of #portichiusi rhetoric (closing ports) and security decrees sought by the Vice Prime Minister Matteo Salvini by which the entry and landing of humanitarian ships in Italian waters is explicitly criminalized. During the year, several events should be mentioned, such as the one from the Italian Coast Guard ship ‘Diciotti’ that was stranded in the port of Catania for more than 5 days without the Italian government granting disembarkation. In 2019, with the ‘Conte II’ government² and the change of interior minister (Salvini to Lamorgese), a series of administrative detentions of humanitarian ships were confirmed. Due to the pandemic crisis, in April 2020 the ‘Conte II’ government closed ports to prevent the arrivals of migrants, while refugees and asylum-seekers already in the country were largely excluded from health protection (Carlotti, 2020). Italy and other governments tried to instrumentalize the crisis to impose ever more authoritarian practices as an ongoing suspension of humanitarian activities.

Several studies in the last few years, focused on different aspects of NGOs criminalization³. Among these studies there is agreement that during 2016 the attention posed by the media to the NGOs operating in the Mediterranean Sea is characterized by the epic tale of the courage of rescuers engaged in saving lives, presented as ‘angels of the sea’ (Barretta et al., 2017). At the beginning of 2017 it registered a communicative turn expressed by a sentiment of growing hostility and denunciation toward NGOs. For the first time, especially within the Italian context, they were suspected of colluding with human traffickers on the migration routes between Libya and Italy, which ended up cracking the semantics of pietistic/paternalistic humanitarian relief and reinforcing the securitarian-style frame (Musrò & Parmiggiani, 2022). As a result of media and political attention to the events, suspicion toward NGOs is shared and legitimized by comments from various actors in public and media debate such as anchors, pundits, experts, politicians, and journalists. In other words, as stated by different authors, NGOs have quickly been turned from ‘angels of the sea’ into ‘taxis of the sea’, ‘slave ships’, ‘accomplices of ethnic substitution’ and even ‘allies of COVID-19’ (Colombo, 2018; Giacomelli et al., 2020; Musrò & Parmiggiani, 2018; 2022).

Although the literature on the topic has grown in recent years, less attention has been paid to the discursive construction of the criminalization of NGOs and how the latter has affected the ‘Us vs Them’ dichotomy.

3. Methodology

This research is grounded in a multidisciplinary approach, in order to integrate quantitative social media metrics, Corpus Linguistics tools, and argumentation and legitimation strategies derived from CDS. The joint use of these techniques aims to extract and synthesize relevant information from large amounts of data, as to grant a consistent, robust and well-granted link between theoretical premises and empirical evidence.

We choose Twitter as one of the most researched platforms to investigate the interplay between politicians, journalist and the public and also its consequences on public opinion (Hermida, 2010), ability to affect both the electoral process and news coverage of politics (Davis et al., 2016; Conway-Sylva et al., 2017) and use as a resource to access real-time information about political events (Chacon, et al., 2017; Elmer, 2013; Gainous & Wagner, 2014).

Data collection was performed by *Mozdeh*, a text mining software built for scraping textual data from Twitter archives⁴ (Thellwall, 2018). The main corpus is composed by more than 800,000 Tweets and it has been extracted by using a list of keywords⁵ selected after an exploratory analysis of the corpus: *ong*, *smugglers*, *sea taxi*, *taxi for migrants*, *slavers ships*, *#ong*, *#soros*, *#smugglers*, *#seataxi*, *#antiong*, *#stopong*, *#noOng*. We choose this list of words because it highlights the NGO criminalization allowing us to identify which categories of users were more active, which language and discursive strategies were reproduced. The period selected by the case study focused between Jan 1st, 2017 to Dec 31st, 2020 when the main measures against NGOs were adopted in the Italian context and when the media attention on the so-called refugee crisis has reached its peak (Associazione carta di Roma, 2017; 2018; 2019; 2020).

The combination of different techniques and approaches is aimed at achieving a comprehensive understanding of the criminalizing discourse against NGOs at different levels. In particular, Twitter metrics have been used to identify and address the most prominent actors in discourse building considering mentions and retweets. Corpus linguistics has been deployed to investigate the linguistic surface of discourse and its changes over time considering the 1000 most frequent words for each year and analyzing inflected forms of nouns and verbs. Finally, we focused on the main discursive strategies (re)produced in the criminalization of NGOs reporting the main discursive shifts occurred through the years considered introducing a brief sociopolitical context. Specifically, within the different CDA approaches, we follow the 'Discourse-Historical Approach' (DHA) for which the argumentation analysis is a constitutive element of a discourse (Reisigl, 2017). Starting from the outputs derived by Twitter metrics, we focused on a small corpus of data within Tweets that received the highest number of Retweets considering political actors and other users' categories. We analyzed this sub-corpus, representing a small percentage of the main database considering the discursive strategies of (de)legitimation (van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999) composed of four major categories.

1. *Authorization*: legitimation by reference to the authority of tradition, custom, law, and/or persons in whom institutional authority of some kind is vested.

2. *Moral evaluation*: legitimation by reference to value systems often using adjectives without further justification.
3. *Rationalization*: legitimation by reference to the goals and uses of institutionalized social action and the knowledge that society has constructed to endow them with cognitive validity. There are two main types of rationality: the *instrumental rationality* and the *theoretical rationality*.
4. *Mythopoesis*: legitimation achieved through narratives and the telling of stories.

We also referred to the *topoi* scheme (Table 1) presented by Wodak and Meyer (2001) and used in many studies (see e.g., Hart, 2010; Wodak, 2015). *Topoi* refer to rhetorical schemes employed by tellers to persuade their audience of the validity of their opinions, and they offer an opportunity for a systematic in-depth analysis of the strategies to ensure the transition from argument to conclusion (Wodak, 2015).

<i>Usefulness, advantage</i>	<i>Finances</i>
<i>Uselessness, disadvantage</i>	<i>Contagion</i>
<i>Definition, name-interpretation</i>	<i>Numbers</i>
<i>Danger and threats</i>	<i>Law and right</i>
<i>Humanitarianism</i>	<i>History</i>
<i>Justice</i>	<i>Culture</i>
<i>Responsibility</i>	<i>Abuse</i>
<i>Burdening</i>	<i>Privilege</i>
<i>Crime</i>	<i>Displacement</i>
<i>Urgency</i>	<i>Disease</i>

Table 1. List of recurring *topoi* (Wodak & Meyer, 2001)

Such a qualitative analysis can help deconstruct underlying meanings, explain the relationship between discourse, power and ideology and unveil the way power distribution issues result into different conceptions of otherness (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2001).

4. Findings

In this section we present the main results of the study. In Section 4.1 we introduce the quantitative Twitter metrics concerning the most mentioned accounts, the metrics for political actors and political orientation and the most 10 retweeted politicians. In Section 4.2 we provide snapshots of lexicon and register changes considering the 1000 most frequent words/lemma for each year. Finally, in Section 4.3 we present the discursive strategies of NGOs criminalization highlighting the discursive shifts occurred over the years considered.

4.1 Twitter Metrics

This section analyzes some Twitter metrics as effective means to address the role of particular actors and measure their ability to engage the public within the anti-NGOs debate on Twitter.

According to the purposes of the analysis, we considered: 1) *primary metrics*, directly borrowed from specific affordances, which facilitate

communication on the platform such as retweets and mentions, and 2) *secondary metrics* indirectly built from users' data, such as the number of tweets on that topic or from a combination of retweets and number of tweets (Díaz-Faes et al., 2019). The four particular metrics being used in this papers are: 1) the number of mentions received by the different actors, taken as an indicator of their *impact*, intended as tendency to be called upon within a particular conversation (Bracciale & Martella, 2016; Keller et al. 2020); 2) the number of tweets published by the different actors, understood as an indicator of *activity* with respect to the topic considered, namely productivity, aimed at achieving a central position in the information flow (Bracciale & Martella, 2016; Diaz-Faes et al., 2019; Enli & Simonsen 2018) as well as an element of comparison of the relative salience of the topic for the different actors (Di Grazia et al. 2013; Hawtorne et al., 2013; McGregor et al., 2017); 3) the number of retweets, as an indicator of the *engagement capacity* of a given actor and as an ability to affect the debate (Cha et al., 2010; Boyd et al. 2010, Bode and Dalrymple, 2016, Didegah et al., 2018; Muñoz et al. 2022) and 4) the RTT ratio (number of retweets/tweets) that can provide a more precise estimate of *influence*, understood as the ability of a certain actor to directly spread a particular message and create engagement (Bastos et al. 2013; Boyd et al. 2010; Fernquist et al., 2018; Muñoz et al. 2022; Starbird & Palen 2012).

4.1.1. Most mentioned accounts by categories

The analysis moves from the 570 most mentioned Twitter accounts to identification of the most relevant actors actually involved in the production of discourse, regardless their role and alleged visibility or influence, considering mentions as an overall indicator of impact. We manually code each account into those categories of users we created. Table 2 shows that the most mentioned category is 'Common users', which includes people who don't have public roles nor are affiliated with media, political parties, NGOs, institutions or the Catholic Church. This category weighs 38.3%, and it is followed by 'Journalist / media', weighing 24.7%. 'Politicians' and political figures are 16.4%, and NGOs and their representatives are 11.4%. The remaining categories ('Public figures', 'Institutions', 'Stakeholders' and 'Catholic Church') comprehensively weight for 9.1%.

<i>Most mentioned accounts</i>		
	N	%
<i>Common users</i>	184	38.3
<i>Journalism / media</i>	119	24.7
<i>Politicians</i>	79	16.4
<i>NGOs</i>	55	11.4
<i>Public figures</i>	17	3.5
<i>Institutions</i>	15	3.1
<i>Stakeholders</i>	9	1.9
<i>Catholic Church</i>	3	0.6
<i>Delated / unavailable account</i>	41	-
<i>Suspended</i>	48	-
Total	570	100

Table 2. 570 most mentioned accounts by categories

The category of ‘Politicians’ is hegemonized by radical right-wing politicians and parties with strong anti-immigration positions. As introduced above, Table 3 considers the number of tweets, assumed as an indicator of activity/productivity, measuring the effort of a particular actor to have a say on a particular topic. Retweets are considered as an indicator of someone’s engagement ability to influence debate, while RTT ratio is assumed as an indicator to provide a normalized estimate of influence.

Aggregating the ‘Politicians’ category to their political orientation (Table 3) shows the ability of the sovereigntist/right-wing field to rule the debate having 55.2% of total mentions, 60.9% of tweets and even 75.4% of retweets. Humanitarian/left-wing politicians have lower mentions and tweets (respectively 40% and 38,5%) while retweets plummet to 23,5%. The strong tendency towards polarization of the debate emerges very clearly from the data. Rather than an assumption, the divide between sovereigntists and humanitarians appears as a matter of fact, ascertained for each of the 570 accounts considered: it is no coincidence that 95.2% of the political actors side with or against NGOs and only 4.8% play on ambiguity (calculated ambivalence) or do not express any opinion on the topic.

	Mention		Tweet		Retweet	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<i>Sovereigntist / right-wing</i>	22673	55.2	2167	60.9	340405	75.4
<i>Humanitarian / left-wing</i>	16429	40	1373	38.5	106018	23.5
<i>Calculated ambivalence</i>	329	0.8	22	0.6	4980	1.1
<i>Not detectable</i>	1656	4	-	-	-	-
Total	41087	100%	3562	100%	451403	100

Table 3. Metrics for Politicians category divided per political orientation

The data presented in Table 2 and 3 highlight a key point: among the 570 most mentioned accounts, there is not a single account that expresses the direct voice of immigrants and refugees, confirming them as speechless and voiceless subjects of discourse.

Table 4 explores more in detail the ‘Politicians’ category. In the first 10 most retweeted politicians we found 6 Sovereigntist / right-wing actors and 4 Humanitarian / left-wing. Matteo Salvini (see Section 4.3.2 for the political context), secretary of the *League* and Minister of the Interior from June 2018 to September 2019, is by far the most mentioned and retweeted account. The highest number of tweets on this issue proves his personal commitment to the anti-NGO rhetoric, while the high RTT ratio proves his ability to reach larger audiences. Salvini played a prominent role in the construction of the discourse on NGOs and its transformation into a major issue in the political debate, both in heritage and social media (Berti, 2021; Combei & Giannetti, 2020; Cusumano & Villa, 2021). After Salvini, Giorgia Meloni, leader of the right-wing party *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brother of Italy), strategically exploited NGO issues to define and assert sovereigntist politics.

The data in Table 4 also show that Left-wing leaders and parties embracing pro-NGO advocacy are weaker than right-wing ones, both in terms of volume and of ability to reach audiences. Matteo Orfini, exponent of *Partito*

Democratico (Democratic Party) is third by number of retweets, being only 9.3% of those received by Salvini.

Account	Political orientation	Retweet	Mention	Tweet	RTT
@matteosalvinimi	Sovereigntist / right-wing	179690	1639	334	537.99
@GiorgiaMeloni	Sovereigntist / right-wing	64708	274	127	509.51
@orfini	Humanitarian / left-wing	16733	473	76	220.17
@capezzone	Sovereigntist / right-wing	15836	1018	81	195.51
@nfratoianni	Humanitarian / left-wing	14866	205	159	93.5
@sardonesilvia	Sovereigntist / right-wing	12347	361	93	132.76
@DaniloToninelli	Sovereigntist / right-wing	12045	3369	16	752.81
@LauraBoldrini	Humanitarian / left-wing	9796	1120	26	376.77
@epalazzotto	Humanitarian / left-wing	8249	833	112	73.65
@fratelliditalia	Sovereigntist / right-wing	5590	1467	123	45.45

Table 4. Most 10 retweeted politicians

4.2 Lexical Analysis

Word frequency analysis (excluding NGO form itself) highlights valuable data, providing snapshots of lexicon and registers changes over the years (Baker, 2018; Griebel & Vollmann, 2019). The analysis has taken into account the 1000 most frequent words - excluding mentions and hashtags - for each of the considered years. The words were manually lemmatised to grasp the inflected forms of nouns and verbs, indicated by the symbol [*], whose frequencies are the cumulative frequencies of the original forms. Percentages are calculated on the sum of frequencies for the twenty most frequent forms.

4.2.1. 2017: the Judicial Construction of the NGOs Case

Looking at the 20 most frequent forms for each year it is clear that in 2017 (Table 5), the most frequent forms to represent people being rescued by NGOs are the generic *immigrat** (17.97%), and the connotative form *clandestin** (2.45%). The forms *nav** (12.32%) *mar** (4.99%), *Libia* (3.64%) are neutral and have instead a referential function, aimed at anchoring the discourse to the specific context of sea rescue in the Southern Mediterranean. In addition to this, the criminalisation of NGOs becomes evident from the relative frequencies of words such as *scafist** (5.01%) or *traffificant** (3.43%), which have an explicitly negative connotation and associate NGOs sea rescue with human trafficking or complicity with traffickers, who *portar** (2.43%) immigrants / illegals themselves to Italy. There are also a number of references to *Italia* (Italy) as well as to *Italian** (Italian*) and *nostr** (2.88%) emphasizing the ingroup membership. A fifth focus is represented by references to judicial and political measures taken to regulate or stop NGOs, as reflected in the forms *Codice* (of Conduct, 4.51%), *Govern** (4.32%), *Zuccaro* (the public prosecutor

leading the judiciary investigation, 3.39%), *Politic** (e.g., policy, politician, politics, 2.73%). The references to people rescued by NGOs and to their *vit** (3.15%), being typically embedded into humanitarian discourse have a little weight in the list. The interpretation of forms such as the pronoun *loro* (3.94%) appears more problematic since it is used both in reference to NGOs and immigrants/refugees, as well as the word *contro* (4.55%) which is used with different connotations in order to express conflict.

Rank	Word / lemma (Ita)	Word / lemma (Eng)	N	%
1	migrant*	Immigrant	26244	17.97%
2	nav*	Ships	17999	12.32%
3	Italia	Italy	8299	5.68%
4	scafist*	Smugglers / traffickers	7315	5.01%
5	mare	Sea	7292	4.99%
6	italian*	Italian*	6818	4.67%
7	contro	against	6648	4.55%
8	codice	Code (of conduct)	6587	4.51%
9	govern*	Government*	6313	4.32%
10	volere*	(to) want*	5929	4.06%
11	loro	Them	5759	3.94%
12	salvare*	(to) save*	5726	3.92%
13	Libia	Lybia	5313	3.64%
14	trafficienti	Traffickers / smugglers	5007	3.43%
15	Zuccaro	Zuccaro	4959	3.39%
16	vit*	Life / lives	4595	3.15%
17	nostr*	Our*	4214	2.88%
18	politic*	Politic* (e.g., politics, politician, policies)	3983	2.73%
19	clandestin*	Illegal*	3585	2.45%
20	portare*	(to) bring (in), (to) carry	3497	2.39%
Total			146082	100.00%

Table 5. Lemmatized forms 2017: top 20

4.2.2. 2018: the Rise of Matteo Salvini and the ‘Closed Ports’ Campaign

After the 2018 election and with the new right-wing/populist government, the criminalization of NGOs sharply changes the protagonists of the debate. It is to be noticed a relevant decrease in the lemma *migrant** (10.33%) and a light increase in *clandestin** (2.83%). However, the most relevant change concerns two aspects, both connected to the change of Italian government as a consequence of Italian Parliamentary elections held on 4th March 2018. The new populist majority, formed by the *5 Star Movement*⁶ and *Lega* immediately attempted to politically exploit the NGO controversy. The Ministry of the Interior, Matteo Salvini has taken a public stand against NGOs on countless public occasions: as a consequence, on the one hand the single reference to *Salvini* reaches 6.38% of the most frequent words and on the other hand, the reference to *Italia* and *Italian** respectively skyrocketed to 8.01% and 7.03%, plus a 3.25% for *nostr**, used both as a possessive adjective and pronoun to refer to *our country / our borders*.

Along with apparently neutral words such *nav** (14.51%), *mar** (6.42%) another significant change concerns the lemma *port** (5.37%) that enters in the list marking a shift of attention to the moment of boat landings on Italian

shores. However, *port** it is strongly linked to the *#closeports* communication campaign (see Section 4.3.2) showing how the discourse relating to Italian ports and their closure underlined by the verb *chiudere** in its different declinations (2.83%) involves a growth of attention to ‘us’. In addition to the figure of Salvini, the political dimension is represented by the word *government* (3.75%) which slightly decreases compared to the previous year. Empathy toward migrants is expressed through references to *person** (3.98%) *the uman** (3.63%) nature of people in distress and *mort** (3.11%) show an overall dramatization and a quantitative increase in references to humanitarian discourse.

Rank	Word / lemma (Ita)	Word / lemma (Eng)	N	%
1	nav*	ship*	39871	14.51%
2	migrant*	immigrant*	28379	10.3%
3	Italia*	Italy	22006	8.01%
4	italian*	Italian	19324	7.03%
5	Mare	sea	17645	6.42%
6	Salvini	Salvini	17535	6.38%
7	Porti	Port*	14767	5.37%
8	person*	persons, people	10930	3.98%
9	governo	Government*	10313	3.75%
10	uman*	Human*	9972	3.63%
11	contro	against	9646	3.51%
12	nostr*	Our, ours	8933	3.25%
13	libic*	Lybian	8846	3.22%
14	nessun*	nobody*	8592	3.13%
15	vit*	Life, lives	8553	3.11%
16	mort*	Deaths	8524	3.10%
17	clandestin*	Illegal*	7789	2.83%
18	chiudere*	(to) close	7773	2.83%
19	volere*	(to) want	7734	2.81%
20	fare*	(to) do	7719	2.81%
Total			274851	100.00%

Table 6. Lemmatized forms 2018: top 20

4.2.3. 2019: the Seawatch Incident and the (Further) Polarisation of Anti-NGOs Discourse

Generally, 2019 is characterized by a growth of 2018 trends. However, the anti-NGO debate is strongly characterized by the centrality of the affair concerning the German NGO Sea Watch 3: within the list of the 20 most frequent words, we found again *nav** (10.84%), and *migrant** (9.29%) and of course *port** (6.47%) that leads immediately to Salvini’s ‘porti chiusi’ campaign. Italia is again at the 3rd place with a small decrease (6.96%) Salvini rises to the 4th position (6.78%) with respect to 2018, and *Italian** (6.61%) slips to the 5th place while *nostr** remains at 3.07%, very similar to the previous year.

Rank	Word / lemma (Ita)	Word / lemma (Eng)	N	%
1	nav*	ship*	60095	10.84%
2	migrant*	immigrant*	51483	9.29%
3	Italia	Italy	38561	6.96%
4	Salvini	Salvini	37588	6.78%
5	italian*	italian*	36631	6.61%

6	port*	port*	34990	6.31%
7	mare	Sea	33786	6.09%
8	loro	them	26875	4.85%
9	person*	persons / people	25530	4.61%
10	govern*	government	23141	4.17%
11	clandestin*	illegal*	19349	3.49%
12	contro	against	18776	3.39%
13	sbarc*	landing*, desembarkment*	18648	3.36%
14	politic*	politic* (e.g. politics, politician, policies)	17219	3.11%
15	nostr*	Our, Ours	17002	3.07%
16	sbarcare*	(to) land / disembark	16670	3.01%
17	volere*	(to) want	16538	2.98%
18	altr*	other*	16373	2.95%
19	europ*	Europ* (Europe, European, Europeans)	15306	2.76%
20	vit*	Life, lives	15077	2.72%
Total			554345	100.00%

Table 7. Lemmatized forms 2019: top 20

It is to be noticed how the pronoun *loro* (them) enters the first time the list at the 8th place (4.85%) as well as *altr** at the 17th place (2.95%). These two forms highlight how discourse has rapidly turned into a somewhat ‘us versus them’ perspective where ‘them’ are alternatively identified in immigrants and NGOs volunteers and operators such as Carola Rackete, the captain of Sea Watch. As said, these references go together as they are embodied into the sovereignist discourse against NGO and Salvini that still represents the single political figure most cited. In addition, forms such as *clandestin** (3.49%), *sbarc** (3.36%) and the verb *sbarcare** in its different declensions (3.01%), are often related to the Sea Watch incident and in particular to the 17 days of wrangling between Captain Rackete and the Italian minister Salvini who tried to prevent the disembarkation of 40 people rescued by the NGO boat. The whole affair is no doubt the most relevant event involving NGOs occurred in 2019. As for the humanitarian side of discourse, forms such as *person** (4.61%), *uman** (2.76%) and *vit** (2.65%) have become the only references in the most cited words. Once again the word *contr** is found in the ranks, as to confirm the inherent conflict in the discourse on NGOs rescue activities.

4.2.4. 2020: the loss of interest for NGOs debate

In September 2019, with the fall of the populist government formed by M5S and Lega, replaced by a coalition government consisting of M5S and three left-wing parties, the political climate and consequently the debate on NGOs witnessed a marked change. The anti-NGO debate decreases in terms of the number of tweets produced. It is to be noticed an important decrease in the lemma *migrant** dropping from 9.29% in 2019 to 7% in 2020, being partially replaced by the derogatory form *clandestin**, which has become increasingly frequent over the years increasing from 3.49% of 2019 to 6.46% of 2020. Once again, terms referred to in-group have still a relevant weight, with small differences with 2019: *Italia* is at 7.71%, *italian** is 6.96% and possessive pronoun / adjective *nostr** is 3.53%. Concerning the political dimension after

two years, *Salvini's* ability to monopolize and personalize NGO debate is quite reduced: he halves the previous year's percentages and drops to 3.54%, while *govern** increases substantially its presence from 4.17% to 5.97%.

Rank	Word / lemma (Ita)	Word / lemma (Eng)	N	%
1	nav*	ship*	18773	10.30%
2	Italia*	Italy	14057	7.71%
3	migrant*	immigrant*	12761	7.00%
4	italian*	italian*	12681	6.96%
5	clandestin*	Illegal*	11774	6.46%
6	govern*	government	10891	5.97%
7	tutt*	all / everyone	10339	5.67%
8	loro	them	9977	5.47%
9	mare*	sea	9675	5.31%
10	port*	port*	9537	5.23%
11	dovere*	(to) have to	7857	4.31%
12	Salvini	Salvini	7018	3.85%
13	person*	person*	6445	3.54%
14	nostr*	our, ours	6434	3.53%
15	sbarc*	Landing*, Desembarkment*	6305	3.46%
16	sbarcare*	(to) land, (to) desembark	6228	3.42%
17	arrivare*	(to) arrive	5935	3.26%
18	paes*	Country	5734	3.15%
19	volere*	(to) want	4951	2.72%
20	contro	against	4924	2.70%
Total			182296	100.00%

Table 8. Lemmatized forms 2019: top 20

Along with apparently 'neutral' references to *nav** (10.30%), *migrant** (6.96%), *sea* (5.31%) and *port** (5.23%) there appear two verbs who relate to will *volere** (4.31%) and duty *dovere**. In addition, the centrality of arrivals and landings seems to be strengthened compared to the previous year as shown by *sbarc** (3.46%), and verbs such as *sbarcare** (3.42%) and *arrivare** (3.26%). However, reference to humanitarian frame discourse appear to be lessened, as the only form in the list is *person**, which drops to 4.61% to 3.54%.

From data obtained by the frequencies of the words most used in the anti-NGO debate, we can introduce some discursive aspects that will be explored in the following paragraphs. Firstly, from 2017 to 2020, lexicon analysis shows a shift in the leading figures in the anti-NGO debate which is focused on a conflict between three main actors, two of which are opposed to each other. Each category is constructed by specific lexical features.

- (1) The *outgroup* is labeled by main terms *migrant** (migrants) and *clandestin** (illegal immigrants). The first term almost neutral *per sé*, decrease from 17.97% of 2017 to 7.00% in 2020, while the latter, bearing a strong negative connotation shows a significant increase rising from 2.45 of 2017 to 2.83% in 2018 then to 3.49% in 2019 and even to 6.46% in 2020. Although Italian media have accepted and normalized such a derogatory use of the term (Maneri, 2015), and, despite some journalists avoid using it,

the label *clandestin** remains a powerful key to approach public debate on immigration (Binotto et al., 2016).

- (2) An opposite trend is recorded for the *ingroup* identified within the lexicon through main terms *italian** and *Italia* which increased and stabilized their presence in the debate during the years. Cumulate frequencies of these two terms raise from 10.35% in 2017 to 14.67% of 2020, not to mention the possessive pronoun / adjective *nostr**, passing from 2.88% in 2017 to 3.53% in 2020.
- (3) Similarly, there is a substantial increase in the overall references to (NGO) ships, which increasingly become the target of criminalization that progressively shifts the criminalization from migrants and refugees to NGO leaders and volunteers. Although the lists above do not display this particular data, in 2018 and 2019 the debate was characterized by frequent name-calling of boats (Sea Watch, Aquarius, Mediterranean) and volunteers especially in relation to captain Carola Rackete affair.

In parallel, references to the political dimension become increasingly central from 2018 onwards. Although they are mainly personified by the figure of Salvini as the single most-cited political figure, political references strengthen the politicization of migration (Hutter & Kriesi, 2021; Krzyzanowski et al., 2018; Van der Brug et al., 2015) and particularly the anti-NGO debate (Cerase & Lucchesi, 2022).

Finally, verbal forms used to express empathy towards immigrants have a fluctuating trend, especially between 2018 and 2019. On the one hand, humanitarian relief beneficiary subordination is objectivized as they are not recognized as persons but as inert objects of discursive and political practices by mean of verbs such as *portare*, *sbarcare*, *chiudere*; on the other hand, an alternative discourse looms, based on empathy which, by recognizing the suffering of others as *uman** and *person**, opposes (or attempts to oppose) this depersonalization, in a direct appeal to the empathy and sensitivity of the interlocutors. Above all, there is a constant and clear reminder of the inherently conflictual nature of discourse, expressed by the recurrence of the adverb *contro*, which always recurs in the list of the most quoted words for four years in a row.

In light of these changes, we propose a new formulation of the ‘Us vs Them’ dichotomy: while ‘Us’ remains represented by the ingroup, ‘Them’ progressively shifts from migrants to NGOs and their supporters introducing the category of ‘Those’. The latter are called into question just as the subject of such a dispute, where ‘Us’ neglect the right of ‘Those’ to have their own identity.

4.3 The discursive strategies of NGO criminalization

Cornering the discourse strategies, we selected a list of Tweets that received more retweets per year considered by the case study. As mentioned, retweets show the user’s ability to influence debate and reproduce a particular discourse. On Tweets selected we scrutinize discursive strategies implied to legitimize NGO criminalization between 2017 and 2020. In particular, alongside legitimization strategies and topoi, the investigation is focused on the construction and rearticulation of ‘Us’, ‘Them’ and ‘These’. For each year considered we briefly introduce the broader sociopolitical and historical Italian

context which discursive practices are embedded in and related to (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009).

The results show a discourse shift in the ‘criminality frame’ in the migration representation (Binotto, et al., 2016; Combei & Giannetti, 2020; Dal Lago, 2012): criminal allegations go from migrants to rescuers and even to those who express solidarity with NGOs. While boats and crew members are increasingly identified and subjected to attacks, migrants and refugees are discursively constructed as non-persons, devoid of any identity, who are gradually voiceless and passively subjected to discursive practices produced by ‘Us’, taking on the role of ‘Those’.

4.3.1. 2017: Showing Evidence of NGOs’ Guilt

In 2017 Italy was guided by the ‘Gentiloni government’ in office from 12 December 2016 to 1 June 2018. The government was led by the center-left Democratic Party (PD) with New Centre-Right (NCD) and the Centrists for Europe (CpE) as junior partners. Concerning migration politics, in July 2017 the Minister of the Interior Marco Minniti, promoted the so-called ‘Minniti Code of conduct’ for NGOs which imposed several limitations on NGOs operating in rescuing asylum seekers in the Mediterranean (Cusumano, 2017; Cusumano & Gombeer, 2020). The code forbade NGO to entering Libyan territorial waters and it also made it mandatory to them not to turn off transponders and to avoid telephonic communication or light signals that would facilitate the boarding and departure of migrants. Among other things, the code made it mandatory to allow on board judicial police officers so they can proceed with their investigations on human trafficking. Some NGOs such as Médecins Sans Frontières refused to sign the code of conduct. Moreover, 2017 coincided with the beginning of the election campaign for the 2018 national election that was largely conducted on a rising wave of anti-immigrant sentiments which has been considered a driving factor behind the vote for populist parties. Specifically, during the year, *Five Star Movement* (FSM) contributed to introducing different discursive strategies that initially shaped the anti-NGO debate.

However, as shown in the Table 5, in the 2017 sub-corpus there is not significant evidence about the name of NGOs boats. Rather, the criminalization is bolstered by associating NGOs with *smugglers*, *traffickers* and *taxis* as acts of nominalization (Wodak, 2001) to legitimize a denial of the humanitarian operations of NGOs. More precisely, a strategy frequently used by politicians in 2017 consisted in attempting to show evidence of an alleged collusion of NGOs and traffickers. Tweets⁷ by Luigi Di Maio and Danilo Toninelli (M5S) and Daniela Santanché (*Fratelli d'Italia*⁸) (Figure 1) represent linguistic tools aiming at constructing a self-evident truth, even when misconducts were not proven.

Today all newspapers say: a pact between NGO and smugglers. All the truth in this video.



The #Frontex dossier proves that we were right. Investigating possible dishonest NGOs means defending honest ones. Now #apologizetous!



The complicity between human traffickers and Ngo is clear. Now it turns out price list: 800 euros for a boat full of migrants #wakeuptaly



Figure 1. Tweet from politicians in 2017

The effectiveness of such argumentations bases its strength on ‘evidence’ showing ‘actual facts’ through the ‘topos of reality’ (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001) which, starting from a central argument (the investigations will certify collusion between NGOs and smugglers) implies only one possible conclusion (the need to stop their activities). This involves a form of rational legitimation (van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999) exploiting a tautology: if there are any clues about collusion between NGOs and traffickers, these will undoubtedly be true. This strategy is able to confirm the existing suspicions and draw the future topic’s trajectories, acting as discursive pre-legitimation (Krzyanowski, 2019) also promoting a causal pattern enabling a change in the language commonly used to refer to ‘Us’ and ‘Them’. This transition is evident in the following tweet by

a popular ‘common user’ named ‘Il Sofista’ (The Sophist) known for its right-wing and sovereigntist positions:

Removed NGOs from Libyan coast, migrants do not sail. They were the smugglers.

They pay with reparations to Italy and jail time



Figure 2. Tweet from ‘common user’ ‘Il Sofista’ in 2017

The traditional ‘Them’ referring to migrants is assigned to NGOs by linking them with smugglers: (*‘They were the smugglers’*). This new and unprecedented ‘Them’ represents an actor who threatens the in-group by challenging borders and political sovereignty, thus needing a punishment through payment of compensation to ‘Us’ (Italy) or imprisonment (*‘They should refund Italy and go to jail’*). In such a discursive shift, migrants become that further dehumanized ‘Those’ who are voiceless and passively subjected to a dispute between ‘Us’ and ‘Them’.

At the same time, some of the most retweeted posts in 2017 share provocative language and emotional tone of denunciation, scandal and moral condemnation with the explicit purpose of persuading the audience about the suspicious activities of the NGOs. The psychiatrist and television figure Alessandro Meluzzi stated (Figure 3):

NGOs (are) financed by Soros and co. are the paramilitary tool of a tragic invasion of Italy! They need to be stopped. Stop blackmailing!

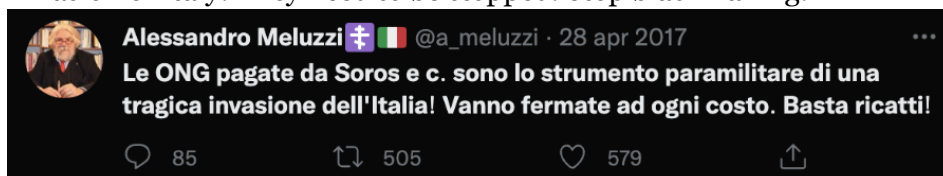


Figure 3. Tweet from Alessandro Meluzzi in 2017

Meluzzi uses simple nominalization strategies to legitimize NGO criminalization through rationalization. First of all, NGOs are labeled as ‘*financed by Soros*’. As noted by Wodak (2019), the Hungarian-American philanthropist George Soros is part of selected specific scapegoats and has been demonised by traditional antisemitic conspiracy stereotypes perpetuated by right-wings politicians. In this case, Soros plays the role of an instigator of an operation aimed at destabilizing Italy through NGOs that are a ‘*paramilitary tool*’ aimed at the utility of a specific practice namely a ‘*tragic invasion*’ intentionally provokes. The latter represents a common and long-lasting metaphor in the Italian political debate about immigration (Castelli & Gattinara, 2017; Colombo, 2013; Triandafyllidou, 1999) which depersonalizes migrants as a dangerous mass of people: the invasion metaphor frames migrants as a ‘dangerous other’, evoking both ‘topos of numbers’ and ‘topos of

threat' thus emphasizing negative perceptions of immigration and migrants themselves.

In 2017, the criminalization process was at its early step, to be further developed and contextualized to pave the way for an emerging sovereigntist discourse.

4.3.2. 2018: the Closing of Ports and Take back Control over National Sovereignty

After the 2018 national election, the 'Conte I government' was formed in June by a coalition between the M5S and Lega and it was commonly regarded as the 'first fully populist government within the Eurozone' (Combei & Giannetti, 2020, p. 232). It was referred to as the 'government of change' which applied strong exclusionary migration politics. Undoubtedly, the League secretary Matteo Salvini as Vice Prime Minister played a central role with the 'Security decrees' which progressively prohibited the NGOs from accessing Italian ports using them to showcase his hardline anti-immigration stance (Geddes & Petracchin, 2020).

Until 2013 *Lega Nord* was defined as a regionalist populist party advocating autonomy for northern Italian regions. When Salvini became the leader in 2013, the *League* has undergone a process of ideological transformation turning it into a national party that has combined Euroscepticism and anti-immigration position, representing an archetypal radical right party that put nativism and authoritarianism at the center of its discourse (Albertazzi, et al., 2018; Cusumano & Gombeer 2020). Consequently, during the 2018 Salvini become the main protagonist in criminalizing discourse against NGOs.

As shown in Section 4.1 and 4.2, Salvini colonized political debate with his campaign to close Italian ports and ongoing blockades of NGO boats being denied to land. As confirmed by other studies, the leader of *The League* showed his capacity to dominate public discourse, reaching the highest newsworthiness peaks of the entire year (Berti, 2021) and taking advantage of the wide coverage in heritage media (Associazione Carta di Roma, 2018). The follow tweet (Figure 4), represents the most prominent argument for 2018 claiming the closure of Italian ports through his viral hashtag *#closingports* (Evolvi, 2019; Dennison & Geddes, 2022).



Figure 4. Tweet from Matteo Salvini in 2018

Together with the nativist slogan perpetuated during the election campaign ‘Italians first’ (Albertazzi & Zulianello, 2021), ‘#closing ports’ represents a way to regain control over national sovereignty as a core theme of Italian right-wing sovereigntist discourse. The tweet is composed of a picture, where a medium close-up of Salvini figure appears in a black background, crossed arms, fixed and serious look at the camera. Salvini represents himself as an authoritarian and savior leader who provides security through restrictive *law-and-order* policies (Wodak, 2015).

As shown in Section 4.2, lemmas port* (*hurbour*) and nav* (*boat**) play a central role in 2018 in terms of frequency, showing significant changes in debate, which appear to be increasingly less generalized and more specific, through the direct mentioning of NGO boats (Figure 5: ‘*The boat Open Arms*’, ‘*The boat ‘Sea Watch3*’), thus introducing a serialization of news on humanitarian rescue (Associazione Carta di Roma, 2018).

Also today the SEA WATCH 3, a German ONG ship flying the Dutch flag, is off Libyan water, waiting to load on board yet another cargo of migrants to be taken to Italy. Italy has stopped to bow its head and obey, enough is enough. #closingports



Open Arms ship, Spanish ONG and flag, has picked up 200 migrants and now asks for an Italian port, after Malta, which landed a woman and a child rightly, denied it. Italian ports are CLOSED! For human traffickers and those who help them, the fun is over.



Figure 5. Tweets from Matteo Salvini in 2018

If refugees and asylum seekers are left in the background (the tweets do not show any images of migrant people), in both tweets, Salvini uses traditional discursive constructions to objectify them: *'waiting to load on board yet another cargo of migrants to be taken to Italy'* and *'has picked up 200 migrants'* are linguistic forms aimed to compare migrants and refugees with goods/items (De Genova, 2002; KhosraviNik, 2010).

Besides these features, Salvini (along with other politicians) frequently mentions other states to assign a transnational responsibility and shift legal duties of rescue outside Italian borders. From a discursive point of view, this meets the 'topos of responsibility' (Wodak & Meyer, 2001), mentioning other countries (Figure 5: *German ONG, Dutch flag, Libyan coast*) that should act to find effective solutions to solve the 'problem' of landings. Claims for closing ports and blocking NGO activities represent an act of re-territorializing State power and a way to confirm the centrality of 'Us': the tweet *'[...] Italy has stopped to bow its head and obey, enough is enough'* intends to restore the authority into the place and national community by which politics stems its legitimacy (Basile & Mazzoleni, 2018; Wodak, 2015). In other words, Salvini's argumentation aims to break with the past and with the alleged favorable condition for NGOs and proclaim a new phase, where they are going to lose undue benefits. Such an argument closely recalls the narrative of 'taking back control' that became the slogan of the far right during the pro-Brexit campaign (Bevelander & Wodak 2019). Finally, the 'closing ports' discourse is legitimized by a strategy called instrumental rationalization (van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999), affirming the usefulness of closing ports and blocking the NGO boats on the ground of expected or presumed benefits: once ports are closed, boats departures will end, and smugglers will give up. In other words, as stated by Wodak referring to 'Walls and fences', also 'closing ports' have become for Italy 'the symbols for responsible governance and Government' (Wodak, 2017, 46) where migrants' exclusion is justified by the high moral ground that national States stand for (Vollmer, 2016). Consequently, the ways Salvini and the government established the blunt illegality of NGO activities also unveiled their

alleged NGO criminal intentions, which became an essential part of populist rhetoric and sovereigntist discourse and a means to be acknowledged by public opinion. However, the legitimization of this argumentation has been possible by taking advantage of the discursive construction shared during 2017 and based on the alleged collusion between NGOs and traffickers.

4.3.3. 2019: the Sea Watch3 Incident and personal criminalization of Carola Rackete

In 2019, the two 'Security Decrees' proposed by Salvini introduced further restrictions on the activities of NGOs while his popularity reached a peak in the polls (Dennison & Geddes, 2021). During the summer Salvini issued an administrative decree that banned NGOs boat Sea-Watch 3 from entering Italian water, centralizing the political debate on immigration on this incident. Indeed, the Sea-Watch case was emblematic of the ways in which immigration in Italy has been politicised (Geddes & Petracchin 2020). Within this context the criminalizing discourse was mainly focused on the Sea Watch captain Carola Rackete. She was accused of having rammed and attempted to sink an Italian 'Guardia di Finanza' patrol boat that was trying to prevent NGO ship Sea Watch3 from docking. Also in this case, the objectification of migrants is based on the denial of humanitarian intents, as tweets from right-wing politicians were focused on the 'criminal act' performed by Rackete through legitimization strategies to recall the impersonal authority of the law (van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999) and to expose NGOs' illegality.

#IDoNotStandForCarola. It is not about supporting Salvini or the government, but it is about being mocked by turning in heroine the Captain who deliberately violated the law



Last Night a CRIMINAL behavior of the captain of the pirate boat which has attempted to flatten/squash against the pier of Lampedusa port a Guarda di Finanza patrol boat, with the crew on board putting at risk the police officers lives. CRIMINALS

#SeaWatch3



Figure 6. Elio Lannutti and Matteo Salvini tweets in 2018

‘Captain deliberately infringed law’, ‘criminal behavior’, ‘pirate boat’ and ‘criminals’ are simple yet direct argumentative forms, focusing on the non-compliance of the law, backgrounding Rackete’s humanitarian intentions. Moreover, the hashtag #IDoNotStandForCarola, as well as blame and derogatory insults (e.g. *smelly, disgusting, dirty bitch, Nazi*), shows the tendency to personalize NGO criminalization: utterances progressively lose their impersonal, generalized nature, and they start to target ships and crew members by calling their names. The Sea Watch case highlights the way criminality is shifted from migrants to NGOs and crew members while enduring attention on ports as a political theater to enact the spectacle of border control practices (De Genova, 2016) and expose NGOs’ alleged criminal intentions.

As shown in Table 7, in 2019 there was an increase in the frequency of words related to politics and government, mainly involving populist and right-wing politicians. Indeed, the Sea Watch case represented a further step in the politicization of migration (Hutter & Kriesi, 2021; Krzyżanowski et al., 2018): not by chance, Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini targeted left-wing politicians from Democratic Party who visited the Sea Watch roadsteads, waiting to dock in Lampedusa port.

With their complicity, the #SeaWatch nearly killed finance officers and put immigrants’ lives at risk: if they have dignity, the parliamentarians on the

ship should resign. You cannot spit in the face of the Italian people with a salary paid by Italians!



More work? Less taxes? More investment? No, for Democratic Party parliamentarians, the priority is to go to Lampedusa to cheer on a foreign NGO mocking our country, violating our laws and our borders. This is the anti-Italian left.



Figure 7. Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini tweets in 2019

Firstly, in Meloni's tweet the Sea Watch is attacked because it 'almost killed' policemen and also it 'put migrants' lives at risk'. We see here a denial of the humanitarian intentions of NGOs constructed on a paradoxical discourse overturning for which the opposition to the NGOs means a true interest in migrant lives. However, in both tweets the main focus is on attacking the political opponents, highlighting how an NGO dispute serves as a level to develop the competition between parties (Hutter & Kriesi, 2021). In this scenario, politicization moves the attention from a discriminatory rhetoric

against migrants to the field of political conflict acting as a process of normalization of anti-immigration discourse. Conflating allegations against the Sea Watch operation and blaming left-wing representatives, Meloni and Salvini manage to create and connect two enemies: while Sea Watch is accused of violating Italian laws and borders, opposition leftist MPs might be described as ‘*anti-Italian left*’ that ‘*must step down*’, thus identifying left-wing politicians as an emanation of NGOs, and, in turn, of European political and economic elites, being by definition anti-Italian and against ‘people’.

4.3.4. 2020: NGOs and Migration Issues during the Pandemic

As mentioned in Section 2, due to the pandemic crisis, in April 2020 the ‘Conte II’ government closed ports to prevent the arrivals of migrants, imposing an ongoing suspension of humanitarian activities. The stiffening of such control practices is a part of a continuum of border externalization and migration criminalization, embedding nationalistic rhetoric to legitimize restrictive measures (Triandafyllidou, 2020; Wodak, 2021). Precisely, in 2020 we noted a re-contextualization of traditional discursive strategies enacted in the first year of pandemics. Tweets in Figure 8, from sovereigntist actors Giorgia Meloni and Francesca Totolo (a collaborator of the nationalist media outlet ‘Il Primato Nazionale’) focus the attention on the contraposition between immigrants’ and Italians’ situation during the emergency.

400 #migrants landed in Italy in a few days and 145 #AlanKurdi migrants who will land after the quarantine (after @Paola de micheli's request) who will be welcomed by taxpayers' money. For Italians there is no money, for immigrants they can always be found.



While we keep Italians segregated at home, the #AlanKurdi ship, of the German NGO SeaEye, continues to demand to land immigrants in Italy from countries with no control. The measure of our patience is FULL



Figure 8. Francesca Totolo and Giorgia Meloni tweet in 2020

The argument relied upon a language of division organized along the traditional dichotomy 'Us vs. Them' which, in times of pandemic, is built on the alleged imbalance between the 'us disadvantaged' and 'Them favoured'. In other words, the dichotomy is *not* presented through the well-known positive-self presentation *vs.* negative-other presentation (Hart, 2010; Reisgl & Wodak, 2001) but calls for a status of inequality that the two groups are facing during the pandemic crisis. While Italians are 'taxpayers' but mostly victimized '*For Italians there is no money*' or '*we keep Italians segregated*', migrants, instead, are '*welcomed*' and for them money '*can always be found*'. Indeed, the discourse is based on the 'topos of displacement' (Hart, 2013) in which immigrants and asylum seekers are predicated as having privileged access not only to socio-economic resources ahead of the in-group but in terms of freedom. This topos may be related to the 'topos of justice' (Wodak, 2001) and can be expressed as follows: 'if a situation leads to certain individuals being privileged over other individuals, action should be taken to redress this imbalance' (Hart, 2013, 200). When contextualized into the pandemic, the 'topos of displacement' causes stronger outrage maximizing the presumed inequality intended to characterize society according to a 'struggle-frame' (Albertazzi et al., 2021). The representation of 'Them' does not come through obvious and explicit negative

linguistic formulas, but through the description of a situation in their favor that necessarily refers back to other actors.

However, in Meloni's Tweet, there is a subtextual reference to the relations between migration and the danger of the virus: the Alan Kurdi boat is accused of '*continuing to demand to land immigrants in Italy from countries with no control*' evoking the 'topos of emergency/danger'. However, this connection is more assumed rather than explicitly manifested as a political communication strategy. As seen in Section 4.2, in our corpus we didn't find contents that directly connect migrants to outbreak spreading (Sontag, 1991). The absence of systematic reproduction of de-humanizing metaphors confirms that pandemics seem to have not furthered the radicalization against immigrants (Genova & Lello, 2021), which seems to have 'frozen' (Binotto, et al., 2016). However, the 'topos of displacement' shows an argumentation based on defending the in-group and claiming their victimhood in respect to how migrants are treated in relation to limitations caused by the pandemic.

5. Conclusions

This paper has highlighted the process of criminalization of NGOs within the Italian context analyzing its impact on the discursive construction of 'Us' and 'Them' going through some possible discursive shifts (Krzyżanowski, 2018) in public discourses about immigration. Findings show that the NGO criminalization is part of the broader process of normalization of anti-immigration rhetoric (Krzyżanowski, 2020), legitimizing restrictive migration policies, fostering the building of a sovereigntist political identity and neglecting immigrants' and refugees' own identities and rights. Furthermore, results brought innovative elements in the media representation of migration in Italy and for migrants' identities, contributing to the body of literature examining the processes of normalization of anti-immigration discourse by right wing populist parties.

Firstly, criminality allegations are shifted from immigrants to NGO volunteers who are represented as 'new criminal actors', which partially replaced immigrants as criminals and undeserving refugees. This allowed turning people's gaze away from migrants and causes of migration processes avoiding giving space and visibility to faces and stories of migrants reinforcing the dehumanization of refugees and asylum seekers. Secondly, the criminalization of solidarity allows identifying NGOs as a rhetorical target for the nationalist-populist discourse legitimizing a discourse on national sovereignty and border control. These outputs are obtained by the articulation of different techniques allowing exploring underlying dimensions in an empirically accurate way anchoring the analysis to the power relations at the discursive level. Indeed, the analysis of Twitter metrics made it possible to verify the strong involvement of politicians from *Five Star Movement* in 2017 and *Lega* and *Fratelli d'Italia* from 2018 to 2020. Their leaders, Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni, insisted into NGO debate, till to gain a hegemonic role as primary definers of such an issue (Combei & Giannetti, 2020; Dal Lago, 2012). Data from the lexical analysis made it possible to provide a solid anchorage of a general interpretative hypothesis, which was subsequently verified and deepened through the analysis of discursive strategies. Indeed, lexical analyses have highlighted the progressive discursive shift that has occurred over the

years. The data show a strong tendency to politicize and polarize the discourse on rescues, being accompanied by an equally strong contrast between 'Us' (Italians) and 'Them' (NGOs) while 'Those' (immigrants and refugees) emerge as a third, problematic and passive subject of discourse. As for other populist discourses, the contrast between two different subjects clearly emerges: 'Us' which stand for in-group as now opposed to (a new) 'Them' (NGOs) who threaten in-group community by challenging national laws, borders and political sovereignty. Finally, 'Those' as non-persons devoid of any identity, voiceless and passively subjected to discursive practices of both 'Us' and 'Them'. The latter are devoid of their own voice and agency and accompanied by a growing tendency to designate them as 'illegal' (clandestine). In Van Leeuwen's discursive terms, immigrants are represented through *passivation* and *impersonalization* being declined as to shift the political axis from migrants to the NGOs that rescue them.

More generally, the discursive construction of NGOs as criminals has hybridised widely known discursive strategies on immigration discourse. Indeed, NGOs - along with migrants, Muslims, European institutions, elites and traditional media - are increasingly addressed as a new enemy of the people (Wodak, 2015), facilitating the legitimization of anti-immigration discourse and, therefore, extremist positions (Mazzoleni & Ivaldi, 2020; Krzyżanowski et al., 2018).

Progressively, the anti-NGO discourse focused on ports and borders as the ultimate barrier against external forces such as globalization, supranational institutions, multiculturalism and migratory processes. As a common enemy coming from 'outside', NGOs personify the loss of sovereignty by the nation state and its native population, thus reinforcing internal cohesion (Casaglia & Coletti, 2012). Specifically, the relevance of national identity that unveils inherent nativism underlying sovereigntist conceptions of people, being represented as a specific entity, irreducible to others and clearly circumscribed by national borders, constantly threatened or besieged by external people and ideas questioning its own homogeneity (Mudde, 2007). In this process, the discursive construction of criminalisation by sovereigntist actors has introduced a shift in considering NGOs as merely political and conflictual actors, denying the primarily humanitarian, apolitical, non-governmental and transnational intent of NGOs (Reggiardo, 2019). *Lega* and *Fratelli d'Italia* members have therefore constructed and sedimented ideological narratives and imaginaries that have consolidated their hegemony in the public discourse on immigration, creating an imbalance between forms of power that has penalised, weakened and subordinated NGOs to the power of political action (Krzyżanowski et al., 2018).

Although images have not been specifically analysed so far, the evident regularity in the visual representations accompanying sovereigntist and humanitarian discourses only emphasise the antagonistic character of the discourse and the de-humanisation of the people subjected to rescue operations. In this sense, the novel exclusionary discourse against NGOs implements itself as a *dispositive*; a complex set of linguistic, visual paralinguistic (e.g., photojournalism) and behavioural practices, non-linguistic performed practices (doing things, voting, border patrolling) and their materializations (checkpoints, fences, walls, decrees) (Jäger & Mayer, 2014). As seen in the chapter, this tendency towards the criminalisation of NGOs is certainly fostered by the progressive serialisation of individual episodes,

controversies, and predictable chains of reactions, turned into a palatable trans-media format, which can be spent on newspapers, TV news, political talk shows, blogs and, of course, social media platforms, especially Twitter, giving rise to phenomena analytically not too far from moral panic (Armillei, 2017; Cohen 1972; Critcher, 2008; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Krzyżanowski, 2020).

Notes

1. Composed by the anti-establishment *Five Stars Movement* and the radical right party *Lega*. It has been in office since from June 2018 to September 2019 and it is remembered for the strict exclusionary migration policies led by *Lega* leader Matteo Salvini
2. Composed by *Five Stars Movement*, the *Democratic Party* and other small center-left parties. It has been in office from September 2019 to February 2021.
3. For a comprehensive reconstruction of the policies and events surrounding the criminalization of NGOs look at Musarò and Parmiggiani (2022) and the reports of 'Associazione Carta di Roma' (2017; 2018; 2019; 2020).
4. This study benefits from an update that allows academic researchers using the 'Twitter API for Academic Research' by accessing the entire historical Twitter archive.
5. We used Italian keywords and we provided the translation of them from Italian to English.
6. The 5 Star Movement, born in 2009, has been one of the most electorally successful European populist parties since 2013. Originally displaying a clear anti-establishment identity, in economic terms it presents left-of-centre positions inconsistently mixed with more conservative proposals. On the issues of citizenship and immigration, it has an elusive positioning, mixing national securitisation and international humanitarianism (Mosca & Tronconi, 2019).
7. Tweets text has been translated by authors from Italian to English.
8. *Fratelli d'Italia* is a (far) right-wing party actually leader in the 2022 'Meloni government'.

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