

How and why do female far-right leaders instrumentalize women's rights to frame immigration as a threat to women? A comparative analysis of France and Italy

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UNIVERSITY OF CATANIA
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
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**How and why do female far-right leaders instrumentalize
women's rights to frame immigration as a threat to women?
A comparative analysis of France and Italy"**

MASTER'S DEGREE THESIS

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1. Introduction

1.1 Development research question:

As the far right continues to gain ground in Europe, we are seeing an increased presence of women within these parties (Léonard, 2022, p. 2). A distinctive feature of this rise of the far-right is their invocation of gender equality in their xenophobic rhetoric. (Farris, 2017, p.10) These far-right parties, despite their reputation for misogyny, are now attracting a new female electorate, that explicitly identifies as far-right and conservative (Léonard, 2022, p.2) (Della Sudda, 2022, p.106). Mayer explains that the ‘radical right gender gap’: that is, the gender disparity in support for far-right parties, is narrowing in Europe (Stricot,2023). This trend was confirmed in the 2022 presidential elections in France, where women were just as likely as men to vote for ‘radical right-wing populist parties’ (Stricot, 2023) (Durovic & al., 2023, pp. 463–468). The emergence of strong female politicians accompanies this feminisation of the far-right electorate.

“I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother, I am a Christian,” declared Giorgia Meloni in 2019, embodying, on the one hand, the female face of the far right and, on the other, since 2022, the presidency of the Council of Ministers.

Meloni is not the only female figure on the far right; others include Riikka Purra, Finland’s Deputy Prime Minister, Marine Le Pen in France, and Alice Weidel, leader of the far-right party ‘Alternative für Deutschland’ in Germany. (Bauvois & al., 2025) These women do not merely fulfil a symbolic role but adopt a feminist stance for conservative and xenophobic ends.

How do some far-right women use feminist rhetoric for conservative and xenophobic ends? Several researchers have examined this phenomenon.

In 2022, Magali Della Sudda was already referring to the ‘new right-wing women’, highlighting the emergence of far-right feminist movements which she describes as ‘feminists hostile to feminists’ (Della Sudda, 2022, p. 280). According to her, these groups “interpret sexual violence through the lens of race rather than gender” and are directly opposed to immigration (Della Sudda, 2022, p.280). A case in point is the Collectif Némésis, which aims to “denounce the dangerous impact of mass immigration on Western women so that this issue becomes a matter of public debate” (Collectif Némésis, 2025).

This new form of female nationalist activism uses feminist language to reject certain social groups: employing a progressive discourse to legitimize a conservative and xenophobic ideology (Léonard, p.2, 2022). For the far right, the struggle is no longer one for gender equality but is distorted to legitimize an anti-migrant and Islamophobic agenda, viewing migration as the cause of insecurity and sexual violence to which women fall victim. (Deroeux, 2022) The central aim of these movements is to ‘defend “the white European woman” from the nation’s public enemy number one, “the immigrant rapist”’ (Vierendeel, 2023).

This trend to exploit feminism to justify racist and anti-immigration policies corresponds to the concept of ‘femonationalism’ developed by Farris. (Farris, 2017, p.22) She explains that in recent years, far-right parties and groups have invoked gender equality to serve a xenophobic and racist agenda. These groups advocate anti-Islam agendas “in the name of women’s rights”, perceiving Muslim men as a threat to Western European societies. (Farris, 2017, p. 1) The phenomenon of ‘femonationalism’ is a common feature shared by the various far-right movements in Europe.

Building on this literature, this dissertation conducts a comparative analysis of France and Italy, examining how Marine Le Pen and Giorgia Meloni instrumentalize the rhetoric of “protecting women” to construct immigration as the primary threat to women and to gender equality. This dissertation will seek to answer the following question:

“ How and why do female far-right leaders instrumentalize women’s rights to frame immigration as a threat to women? A comparative analysis of France and Italy”

1.2 Justification Research question :

This question is relevant for several reasons. Firstly, it is a contemporary phenomenon that primarily affects Western Europe. The researcher Farris, who theorized the concept of femonationalism, focuses on three European countries: France, the Netherlands and Italy. (Farris, 2017, p. 1-3) Furthermore, the recent conceptualization of femonationalism demonstrates its relevance today as a response to the rise of extremism. This analysis also helps us to understand the shift in the image of far-right parties, from a hard-line, aggressive image to a softer one, through phenomena such as gender softening.

The question posed will help us understand how feminism, traditionally associated with progress, can become a conservative idea when it is used by the far right. The struggle is not gender equality anymore but European women against non-European males. The use of

feminist discourse by far-right groups is becoming a new axis of political polarization, ‘us’ versus ‘them’. The ‘us’ encompassing white Europeans versus ‘them’, men and more specifically Muslim men. (Vierendeel, 2023)

1.3 Methodology :

This paper employs a qualitative research design. The aim is to focus on the historical context and the dynamic processes involved in order to provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Parotte, 2022, p. 77). The qualitative approach helps to shed light on ‘hidden’, underlying mechanisms; it enables us to understand how and why a phenomenon exists. Qualitative content analysis focuses on interpreting nuances and metaphors, something that quantitative analysis cannot do (Attina, 2025, p. 52). According to Attina, this study employs a longitudinal research design. This approach provides an analysis of the long-term dynamics and historical context (Attinà, 2025, p. 42).

This thesis employs an abductive approach. This approach is a process of knowledge construction that combines the principles of induction and deduction. (Parotte, 2022, p.63) Both approaches will be used. With the application of several theoretical frameworks, the deductive approach will be applied. That is ‘the researcher starts from a theoretical framework and then empirically tests their hypotheses’. (Parotte, 2022, p.66). This paper employs theoretical frameworks because it ‘enables us to make sense of our data, to take a step back and to offer a specific analysis of it’ (Parotte, 2022, p.63) However, when I analyze and collect primary data, I follow an inductive approach, defined as ‘a methodological process consisting of moving from the particular to the general, where observation precedes theorization’ according to Van Campenhoudt & al. (Van Campenhoudt & al., 2007, p. 380).

To answer the question by mobilizing qualitative methods, the data are collected using a literature review. The part is structured into several sections. This paper forms part of a comprehensive approach, which seeks to understand social phenomena. This approach is based on a diverse body of data. This paper research is based on a corpus including primary and secondary sources. As primary source, I will analyze publicly available data accessible online, such as social media, online media and YouTube channels. The aim is to compare data from different sources on the same topic in order to gain an overview of the various approaches. As secondary sources, the paper mobilized several kinds of literature. Firstly, the scientific literature enables researchers to ‘report on research that has already been carried out on the subject’ and to situate the case study within the existing literature (Parotte, 2022, p.90). It also

provides a framework for analyzing the data collected (Parotte, 2022, p.90). This paper employs several theoretical frameworks: main political concept as far-right, nationalism and feminism but also more specific on the topic as femonationalism and homonationalism help to provide a framework for analyzing the data and answering the question. Next, grey literature is consulted. This permits contextualization of the subject “as it is largely comprised of outputs from official institutions” (legal documents, archives, reports) (Parotte, 2022, p.91). It will be analyzed through discourse analysis or official statements by leaders. Finally, it is noteworthy that literature is not limited to academic or dry texts. For example, party manifestos or also the social media accounts of far-right parties, groups or personalities, the statements they make, and the leaflets they distribute can provide us with important insights into women’s positions, their roles and the far right’s use of feminism.

1.3.1 Paper’s outline:

This paper engages feminists and political theories and applies them to case studies of female far-right leaders. To address the research question posed, this thesis will be divided into chapters. The first chapter outlines the theoretical and conceptual frameworks. It discusses several concepts such as feminism, far-right, homonationalism, femonationalism and female nationalism that are necessary to understand the scope of the subject and the research question.

Lately, in Europe we note an increased visibility of women in far-right parties, as leaders but also as activist. This trend appears like a paradox since feminism is traditionally associated with progress and left-wing in opposition to conservatism and right-wing. According to Della Sudda, recently a new form of feminism has emerged. These new right-wing feminists view sexual violence through the lens of race rather than gender. (Della Sudda, 2022, p.280) For women in these parties, the struggle is no longer about gender equality but about legitimizing an anti-migration and Islamophobic purposes, that sees migration as cause of insecurity and sexual violence against women. To explore the role of women in these parties and to understand this phenomenon, the second chapter examines the paradox of women in far-right and the new far-right feminism.

Next, a comparative analysis of France and Italy will be presented. A comparative analysis presents advantages because it enables us to overcome the limitations of isolated case studies by controlling for variables through the selection of cases (Lijphart, 1971). Attinà adds that this analysis “explains political outcomes” by involving “the systematic comparison of political phenomena - such as institutions, public policies, or political behaviour - across different

political systems or across different periods and contexts within the same system. It aims to identify similarities and differences across cases in order to understand why certain outcomes occur in all cases or only in some of them”(Attinà, p.54, 2025). Although the two countries share similarities, their political contexts and social environments are different, a comparative analysis will reveal how French and Italian history and context influence the use of femonationalism today. It is interesting to see how this mechanism is constructed in both countries on different grounds. In this chapter, the following variables are examined in both countries: the global national context, the actors both non-human and human within the female leaders and the activists.

Finally, the last chapter will address the research question by examining the far-right toolbox mobilized by Meloni and Le Pen in the femonationalist approach. Two tools will be examined: the narrative tool and the political and institutional one. First, the narrative tool, which plays a central role in the spread of far-right ideology and in femonationalist discourse. It enables political figures to redefine the terms of the debate and frame the subject within their parties’ political agenda. Indeed, according to Della Sudda, this new form of nationalist feminism uses feminist language to exclude certain social groups and legitimize conservative and xenophobic ideas (Della Sudda, 2022, p.280) (Léonard, 2022, p.2). A new polarization axis is created, they use an “in the name of women’s right” rhetoric to construct their reality : women need to be protected from insecurity and there is a certain population defined as a threat. This idea created an opposition between European women and the “others” who are Muslim men (Farris, 2021, p.1). A wide variety of supports are used for discourse, including official speeches, party manifestos, social media posts... In this way, the narrative tool is a major axis to answer the question. The discourse analysis will be divided into two parts: one focusing on the form of the speeches delivered by Giorgia Meloni and Marine Le Pen, including an analysis of their social media activity, and a second focusing on the content of their speeches. The first part of the analysis which focuses on form, relies on primary sources, while the second part consists of a review of the literature mostly based on several studies conducted by Debras, Otto Vitali, Colella, and Lasio & al. Second, the political and institutional tool, this section demonstrates how femonationalist discourse are translated in practice. On the one hand, the analysis will be based on Farris who asserts that integration policies are the primary institutional manifestation of femonationalism. And on the other hand, it will develop how this tool is mobilized by Giorgia Meloni and Marine Le Pen, using grey and scientific literature.

1.3.2 Cases selection:

The case study for this paper, France and Italy were chosen for several reasons. First, Farris used France and Italy to demonstrate her theory of femonationalism. There is a wealth of literature on femonationalism in these countries, making them a relevant case study, but also the main literature on female far-right politicians are about Le Pen and Meloni. They are two keys figures in European Union politics. They share the same political affiliation and rhetorical approach but sometimes hold divergent political and ideological views (Amante & al., 2024). Both countries are from the same region of the world, they are member state of the European Union. That also means that France and Italy share some fundamental values and structural elements. Furthermore, this thesis is being written in Italy by a French-speaking student. This proximity to the cases creates a sense of connection and a deep concern for the issues.

This is certainly not an exhaustive list. However, the phenomenon is significant and wide-ranging and a comprehensive analysis would require resources which go beyond the scope of this dissertation. It is therefore acknowledged that certain relevant dimensions of the topic will fall outside the scope of the study. For reasons of feasibility and analytical clarity, the research focuses on a defined case study on Giorgia Meloni and in Italy and Marine Le Pen in France. The temporal scope is restricted to the period beginning in 2015. This year was marked by an important migration crisis in European Union and marks a turning point in which immigration became a major political and social issue across the continent, shaping political landscape in the European Member states, and “humanitarian framings of “innocent victims” were progressively replaced by hostility” (Lasio & al., 2026, p. 2). The available scholarly literature similarly concentrates on developments after 2015, reinforcing the relevance of this temporal focus. France and Italy are examined in particular because, as Farris notes, these national contexts were among the first in Europe to witness a “convergence between nationalist right-wing actors, feminist groups, and anti-Islam femocrats” (Farris, 2017, p. 31).

2. Theoretical and conceptual frameworks :

2.1 Definition of feminism

‘No country in the world has managed to achieve full legal equality for women and girls’, stated UN Women on March 8 2026. (UN women, 2026)

Whether in Europe or elsewhere in the public or private sphere, on March 8 or throughout the year, “women’s rights are being challenged, relativised and attacked. The gains we have made are being undermined” (Bergé, 2026).

Over time, the concept of feminism has been repeatedly redefined (Forestier & al., 2025, p.3) Feminism is a global history and a global phenomenon that reflects the realities of women across very different cultural and political contexts’(Forester & al., 2025, p.3). Although feminism claims to be universal, there are differences between the definitions given to it by its various figures. It’s not only theoretical but also negotiated in real-world under challenging conditions, it is contested every day.

To understand the scope of feminism, this section provides historical perspectives followed by definition to show how past struggles and ideas are still relevant today and to avoid struggle over definitions, several definitions of the topic will be exposed according to several actors (Gilbert, 2012, p.39).

2.1.1 Historical point:

The oldest records of the struggle for women’s rights date back to the ancient world. “For most of recorded history, only isolated voices spoke against the inferior status of women” (Brunell, 2026). From the 3rd century to the 15th century, in Europe, several women challenged their status and resisted their circumstances but their actions were limited. Italian and French women played a central role during this period. In the 15th century, Christine de Pizan criticised clerics writing against women and called for female education, while the Venetian writer Cereta published letters addressing women’s complaints, including denial of education and marital oppression (Brunell, 2026). This “debate about women” emerged in France before spreading across Europe (Dufournand, 2023, p.1).

It was only with the Enlightenment that women turned their demands into a coherent movement. They demanded that the legal principles concerning liberty, equality and natural rights should be applicable to both men and women. However, philosophers largely ignored these demands.

Rousseau, for example, described women “as silly and frivolous creatures, born to be subordinate to men”. In addition, the famous Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789, did not cover the legal status of women. The term ‘equality’ was not interpreted as gender equality, but rather as equality within social class and caste. (Brunell, 2026) (Declaration of the rights of man and of the citizen, 1789) In response, Olympe de Gouges published the Declaration of the Rights of Women and the Female Citizen claiming that women should be not only man’s equal but his partner. Mary Wollstonecraft wrote that ‘women are as naturally rational as men [...]. If they are silly, it is only because society trains them to be irrelevant’. (Brunell, 2026)

The term “feminism” itself appeared in the 19th century as a neologism with negative connotations, originally used in medical terminology to describe a lack of virility in men (Fraisie, 2026). Although several European constitutions were established during this century, women remained excluded from public life in legal texts (Fraisie, 2026). Even at the end of the century, women in France were still forced to cover their heads in public (Brunell, 2026).

The late 19th and early 20th centuries marked the first wave of feminism and the suffrage movement. Feminists focused mainly on political and legal equality, including women’s suffrage, property rights, education and financial independence. The first women’s rights convention took place in 1848, during the “Springtime of Nations” in Europe. However, the movement was largely led by educated upper-class white women and had little connection with ordinary or non-white women (Brunell, 2026). The first wave ended progressively as women obtained the right to vote: Finland granted suffrage in 1906, France in 1944, Italy in 1945 and Greece in 1952 (Daley, 2024).

The so-called ‘second wave’ of feminism took root in the 1960s and 1970s, with women fighting for socio-political rights such as equal pay, equal opportunities, legal equality and child support for working women. Feminist organisations campaigned for reforms concerning abortion, maternity leave, day care and violence against women (Brunell, 2026). Women’s studies departments were created and new professional opportunities became accessible. Yet this movement also mainly reflected the concerns of educated white women. “Many black women had difficulty seeing white women as their feminist sisters [...] white women were as much the oppressor as white men”. (Brunell, 2026). Western feminists often believed they had progressed further and attempted to “save” women in less developed countries without fully understanding local political and social realities (Chua, 2018).

The third wave marks a break with the earlier waves: feminists reclaim, rebuild a new framework, and redefine ideas about womanhood, gender, and sexuality, amongst other things. This new wave brings a fresh approach and is far more inclusive of women and girls of colour than before. We no longer speak of ‘equality of the sexes’ but of ‘gender equality’. The rise of the internet has democratised feminist content and allowed it to reach a wider audience. (Brunell, 2026) At the same time, political regional divisions and populism within Europe affected feminist progress differently across member states “European countries are neither so unified nor homogeneous”, women had different conditions, different rights and different definition across member states. (Delphy, 1996, p.148-151).

The latest wave, which began in the 2010s is characterised by the growing importance of online activism. Social media has enabled the mobilisation of wider audiences, particularly through movements such as #MeToo, which raised awareness about gender-based violence on a global scale. Although the “wave” model remains influential, it is widely criticised for being too Western-centred. Nevertheless, these developments highlight both the evolution of feminism and the difficulty of defining a single feminist movement, since feminism takes different meanings depending on social, cultural and political contexts. (Peroni, p.1-2, 2020)

2.1.2 Feminism’s Definition:

Definition is a central issue for feminism in general, but also for this paper. As Delphy puts it regarding the future of feminism within the European Union: “ The unification of Europe is, to my mind, less a problem than the unification of feminists on a clear definition of what a feminist approach is” (Delphy, 1996).

In order to highlight the differences in meaning behind a single idea (feminism), I will explore how its definition and concept vary depending on the context and the individuals who use it by examining four different perspectives (public opinion one, expert, political oriented left-right wing).

A first, more general approach to feminism can be illustrated through the definition proposed by the United Nations, which closely reflects common public understanding. According to the UN, “feminism is the belief that everyone, regardless of gender, should enjoy equal rights and opportunities.” (UN, 2026). This definition presents feminism in a broad and accessible way,

emphasizing equality as a universal principle rather than a politically or ideologically charged concept.

Christine Bard is a French historian specialized in women's history and feminism, who offers an expert perspective on the subject. According to her, feminism is ‘a neologism used to describe advocates of gender equality and to mock their attempt to “deny” the natural difference between the sexes’ (Bard, 2019, p.9). The primary aim of feminism is therefore to achieve gender equality whilst ensuring greater autonomy and freedom for women. (Bard, 2019, p.9).

On a political plan, actors positioned on the right of the political spectrum do not offer a clear definition of what feminism is, yet they still take up the subject, claiming to defend women and be ‘pro-women’ (which is telling in itself). The Italian association ‘Pro Vita e Famiglia’ is clearly positioned on the right and, while never claiming to be feminist, asserts that it seeks to protect and support women through family-centred policies. The group advocates a maternalist vision: it values women first and foremost in their role as mothers, opposes abortion and rejects gender equality policies. In their view, modern feminism does not represent Italian women and threatens the traditional family (Pro-vita & famiglia, 2026). Feminism, as understood by the Italian right, focuses on protecting Italian women and their traditions from perceived external threats, rather than on the deconstruction of patriarchy.

In France, Groupe Nemesis is ideologically close to the ‘Pro Vita e Famiglia’ movement. Unlike the Italian group, the French group clearly claims to be feminist. However, it claims not to feel represented by ‘traditional’ feminist movements. The group's vision of feminism focuses on defending Western women against a perceived sense of insecurity attributed to immigration. The movement also aims to promote European civilisation and traditional family values (groupe némésis, 2026).

I have noticed that left-wing movements, for their part, advocate a more explicit feminist approach. The broad-based movements ‘Nous Toutes’ in France and ‘Non Una Di Meno’ in Italy offer a definition of the concept and attach a very different meaning to it compared to right-wing groups.

The “Nous toutes” collective states that “feminism is about putting an end to sexist and sexual violence and achieving genuine gender equality”. They emphasise gender equality and all forms of violence. (#nous toutes, 2026) Meanwhile, for the Italian group ‘non una di meno’,

“feminism is a struggle against all forms of oppression linked to gender, capitalism, racism and social norms”. (Non una di meno, 2026)

These developments help us to understand that feminist struggles have taken many different forms and that there is a diversity of feminisms, each influenced by their specific spatial and temporal contexts and their political stance.

2.2 Far-right & Nationalism's definition:

Far right :

It can be tricky to label a movement, a person or a discourse as far-right. On the one hand, political criteria vary and evolve, and never amount to an indisputable, binary conclusion. On the other hand, the quick changes within the far-right allow it to bypass analysis (Debras & al., 2024, p. 1). But let's try to clarify what is described as the far right in this paper.

In political science, when we speak of the far right, we are referring to a 'set of discourses, figures, movements or parties' built around an ideological framework combining inegalitarianism, nationalism and securitarianism; some authors also include a rejection of institutions. (Debras & al., 2024, p. 1) (Jamin, 2025)

Inegalitarianism

According to the ideology of inegalitarianism, individuals are by nature unequal. It claims that there are different 'races' which determine an individual's identity, with some races being superior and others inferior. For the far right, 'this natural rule' (or natural inequality) must also apply to the political and social order. There is therefore no question of regulating inequalities through public policy. (Debras & al., 2024, p.1).

We can take this a step further and talk about cultural inegalitarianism. Taguieff explains that there is a rupture in representations and that the far right is shifting from biological inequality to cultural absolutism. The idea behind cultural absolutism is that individuals are locked into a culture, much like a race that cannot be changed. (Taguieff, 1988, p.184-185)

The far right uses cultural absolutism to justify the belief that certain cultural groups cannot mix. The idea is that one group has such a strong cultural identity that it cannot integrate into another cultural group.

For example, in France, a member of the far-right collective Némésis stated: “I’m going to say this simply, politely and without hate, but I’m going to say it because that’s what everyone is thinking tonight as they watch the Eid footage: there are far too many Muslims in France” (AA, 2025). This statement illustrates how such groups deploy cultural inegalitarianism, ticking the first box of the definition by portraying Muslims as a cultural bloc that cannot be integrated.

Nationalism

From the perspective of the far right, nationalism is conceived as protective. It is understood as a way of safeguarding the nation against both internal and external threats. An internal enemy may be defined as an individual or movement that promotes ‘new forms of communal life’ which are perceived as threatening the survival of the ethnic group. For many political actors, the internal threat is the left. The external enemy is diversity and multiculturalism, which are seen as likely to undermine national identity. (Jamin, 2025)

Nationalism is a component of the far right, but it is also a concept in its own right. I will explore this further, as it is relevant to this paper and forms part of the concept of femonationalism.

Nationalism, as a concept in its own right, can be defined as ‘a political movement based on a community’s realisation that it constitutes a nation by virtue of the ethnic, social and cultural ties that bind its members, and which asserts the right to form an autonomous nation’ (CNRTL, 2012). This doctrine is characterised by an emphasis on the traditional values of a nation regarded as superior to others. Nationalism may employ xenophobia or racism to assert its superiority over other nations. (Della Sudda, 2022, p. 21–22).

The nation is conceived as homogeneous and pure, forming the ‘us’, the ‘nationals’, to be distinguished from the ‘them’, the ‘foreigners’.

The nation must also be sovereign and independent, so that supranational entities, institutions, treaties and international agreements are criticised or rejected. (Debras & al., 2024, p.2).

Security focused:

This third characteristic stems from nationalism.

The far right portrays immigration as an internal and external threat to the nation. It links immigration to insecurity and describes non-nationals as criminals and as people who exploit the benefits of the national system.

In line with this way of thinking, the nation must be protected. Far-right policies therefore propose security, control and coercive measures, such as strengthening the army and the police, and the strict enforcement of sentences... (Debras & al., 2024, p. 2)

Providing a single definition of the far-right can be reductive. Indeed, it is not always necessary for all four criteria to be met; sometimes, two criteria are sufficient to classify a subject or movement as far-right.

Pereira introduces the concept of the 'ultra-right', distinguishing it from the 'far right'. Indeed, the term 'far right' is used to 'refer to those political parties that take part in elections in representative democracies whilst supporting xenophobic policies', whereas 'ultra-right' refers to 'violent small groups of the neo-Nazi variety' (Pereira, 2025, p.2).

It should be noted, however, that according to Farris, femonationalism is not populism. Firstly, because femonationalism does not pit the people against the elites. Farris's theory is not limited to right-wing populist parties but also involves liberal feminists, institutions, unelected actors and 'centrist' governments. It is a widespread phenomenon. It would be reductive to limit it to populism. Furthermore, populism presents itself as a contestation of the established order, as a revolutionary movement, whereas, on the contrary, femonationalism reinforces strict migration policies, legitimises certain security measures and may support state logic. The concept is more a tool of the system than an anti-system movement. (Farris, 2017, pp. 4–11).

Farris therefore uses the term 'right-wing nationalism' to describe the policies of far-right parties (Farris, 2017, p.37).

2.3 Farris's approach: femonationalism and its critics

“Those who choose to live in Italy must respect Italian norms” ; “Islam is incompatible with European values, cultures”

Giorgia Meloni, Prime Minister of Italy (Giuffrida A., 2024) (The federal, 2023).

“I think we are dealing with very sick women [full- veiled Muslim women] and I do not think we have to be determined according to their pathology.”

Élizabeth Badinter, a left-wing French feminist philosopher (Farris, 2017, p.1)

In February 2025, Alestra, a gender studies researcher and political journalist, explained that feminism is 'the struggle for the emancipation of all women'. She also drew a parallel between feminism and its appropriation by the far right, stating that contrary to this definition, the far right calls for greater control and surveillance of women, arguing that harassment stems from immigration. (France Inter, 2025)

To describe the convergence observed between feminism, far-right parties, and EU politics, Farris introduced the term 'femonationalism' (Möser, 2022, p. 1544). This concept is based on the notion of 'homonationalism', which was first introduced by Puar in her book “Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times” (Möser, 2022, p. 1544). (Della Sudda, 2022, p. 13). Jasbir Puar proposes the term 'homonationalism' to describe the alignment of certain LGBTQI+ organisations with nationalist positions, making their struggle a marker of civilisation (Puar, 2007, pp. 1–5). Some authors criticise Farris, saying that 'the term was a success partly because it profited from Puar's discussion' (Moser, 2022, p. 1544). If homonationalism refers to a politics of cultural superiority through tolerance towards homosexuals, then femonationalism appears to do the same for women's issues.

In her book “In the name of women's rights : the rise of femonationalism”, the term is built by Farris as a shortened form of "feminist and femocratic nationalism". “Femonationalism refers both to the exploitation of feminist themes by nationalists and neoliberals in anti-Islam (but also

anti-immigration) campaigns and to the participation of certain feminists and femocrats in the stigmatization of Muslim men under the banner of gender equality”. (Farris, 2017, p. 4)

“Femonationalism thus describes, on the one hand, the attempts of western European right-wing parties and neoliberals to advance xenophobic and racist politics through the touting of gender equality while, on the other hand, it captures the involvement of various well-known and quite visible feminists and femocrats in the current framing of Islam as quintessentially misogynistic religion and culture”. (Farris, 2017, p.2)

Femonationalism is a rhetorical tool used to justify anti-immigration political agendas by presenting a cultural gap that portrays the west as progressive in contrast to the “backward other”. Unlike intersectional feminism, which includes race, class and anti-colonial struggles, femonationalism separates native women (seen as free and emancipated) from non-western women (seen as passive victims of an oppressive culture) (Bauvois & al., 2025). Even if this work focuses on female leaders, femonationalism is not only used by women. For example, in France, Éric Zemmour also uses the defense of women to justify anti-Islam statements (Diaz, 2021). This mechanism also extends to campaigns such as #MeTooEurope, which are sometimes misused by femonationalist actors to specifically target Muslim men, while ignoring violence that exists within Western societies themselves (Truong, 2022)

Farris’s approach is rooted in a “neo-Marxist and economist background” (Moser, 2022, p.1545). This means that she prioritises the economy and deducts all other social relations from it. Noting a “surprising intersection among nationalists, feminists, and neoliberals”, she put forward an analysis and a framework that considers the political economy behind this intersection (Möser, 2022, p.1545).

Farris’s position has been strongly criticized by other scholars, who argue that she overlooks the colonial dimension, which leads to an artificial opposition between feminism and anti-colonialism. These critics emphasize a complex nexus between sexual politics and coloniality. Colonialism profoundly shaped patriarchal systems and gender relations in the societies it dominated. According to Rivera Cusicanqui, colonial patriarchy has reinforced gender inequalities. Some pre-colonial societies did not operate under patriarchal systems and were instead characterized by greater diversity and more fluid gender and sexual practices. Moreover, “some colonized men have profited from the colonizers’ sexism to improve their political power over women”(Moser, 2022, p.1556). Anti-colonial feminist scholars argue that “the bourgeois heterosexual family is itself a colonial and modernist product,” criticizing the

assumption that heterosexuality is the natural norm for migrants or colonized populations, and that anything deviating from it constitutes a threat to Western values. (Moser, 2022, p.1558)

Despite their limited commitment to developing concrete gender equality policies, and their masculinist political style, these parties increasingly promote anti-Islam agendas. From Marine Le Pen to Giorgia Meloni, some scholars argue that this “feminist” turn serves a strategic purpose. They suggest that the emphasis on gender equality within nationalist agendas helps modernize their image and increase the number of female voters. (Farris, 2017, p.12)

The preceding observations on feminism provide grounds for a critique of Farris. Indeed, she presents feminism as a homogeneous concept that has only recently split into factions. It is obvious that this does not reflect feminism’s actual diversity and complexity, both historically and in the present day (Moser, 2022, p.1545). According to Moser, femonationalism is a more appropriate analytical tool for the phenomena analysed in this paper.

Let us refer back to this quote: “I think we are dealing with very sick women [i.e., fully veiled Muslim women] and I do not think we have to be defined by their pathology. (Élizabeth Badinter)”.

This quote, taken from French politics, can be analysed using the framework of femonationalist analysis. Indeed, Badinter draws a connection between Islam, the veil and the subjugation of women, which illustrates Farris’s arguments. Badinter suggests that Islam is a religion that harms women by making them ‘sick’, thus promoting the idea that it must be restricted in order to protect women. Farris’s approach allows us to examine the migration policies pursued by the far right from a feminist perspective, which is perfectly aligned with the research objective.

2.4 Female nationalism

‘This concept associates the female political subject with the nationalist political project, promoting a community based on national belonging’ where sexual and national identities are often perceived as innate and mutually dependent. (Della Sudda, 2022, p.14)(Thomson, 2020, p.6)

Female nationalism refers to the ways in which women are mobilised, represented or involved in nationalist projects, as the biological and cultural bearers of the nation, and as territorial and physical symbols of national identity(Yuval-Davis, 1997) (McClintock, 1995). Enloe adds that

women are also political actors actively participating in the construction or defence of the nation (Enloe, 1989). The social, reproductive and symbolic positions of women are mobilised for the construction, reproduction or defence of the nation. (Della Sudda, 2022, p.14).

Women are central to this theory, they constitute the national project in five key ways:

- as biological reproducers of the collective
- as reproducers of national boundaries through sexual and marital restrictions
- as active transmitters of national culture
- as symbolic signifiers of national difference
- as active participants in national struggles. (Thomson, 2020, p.4)

Women guarantee the “national purity” to the next generation. Yuval-Davis explains that “women often serve as biological and cultural reproducers of the nation” (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p.2). This importance is often reflected in the symbolic use of feminine figures to represent the nation, such as Marianne in France or the concept of the “Motherland” (where the female body becomes a symbolic territory to be protected and controlled) (McClintock, 1995, p.359).

A contemporary illustration of this maternal imagery can be seen in Giorgia Meloni’s self-presentation as demonstrated by her statement ‘Sono una madre’ which aligns maternal roles with the defence of national and family values (Thomson, 2020, p.4).

One central issue to note is that women are not only instrumentalised by nationalist movements. Many actively and voluntarily participate in nationalist projects. According to Enloe, women joining the nationalist project are driven by a desire to secure a political role or to advocate for traditional values (Enloe, 1989, p.44). In some cases, this agency extends to taking part in national violence or supporting conservative ideas that ‘mother’ the men who maintain the nation. (Thomson, 2020, p.5)

Della Sudda states that women in contemporary nationalist movements combine family values, defence of the nation and maternal roles (Della Sudda, 2022, p. 14). Moreover, this phenomenon exposes a significant contradiction: while gender equality is often advocated to justify the exclusion of migrants and “others”, it is often rejected when it comes to challenging the internal patriarchal structure or established family values (Thomson, 2020, p.8)

3. **Paradox of women in the far-right**

The far right in Europe today is characterised by a remarkable transformation: “It’s growing, it’s vocal and it’s female” (Bale & al., 2025)

Women are no longer just voters in contemporary politics, they are leaders, strategists, activists and public figures too. However, a strange paradox has been revealed: traditional gender roles and conservative family values are being promoted by some of the most powerful female leaders today. At first view, these policies seem to contradict the values of equality and progress defended by feminism. This raises a fundamental question: why do women support political agendas that seem to work against their own interests? (Bule & al., 2025)

Female leaders of far-right parties, such as Meloni, represent this contradiction particularly clearly. These parties have long been described as aggressively masculine, anti-feminist, and broadly anti-progressive, which makes the presence of women in their highest ranks appear almost self-contradictory. Female leaders play essential roles: they soften the public image of their parties, broaden their electoral appeal, and embody narratives of authenticity, protection, and moral renewal. Their political identities are built on paradoxes, but also on coherent ideological commitments (nationalism, cultural conservatism, maternalism) that help explain why they defend certain policies rather than others. (Indelicato & al., 2024, p.8)

This section examines four key dimensions of this phenomenon. First, it explores the strategic importance of women for far-right parties, showing how female figures help broaden electoral appeal, soften public images, and legitimize ideological positions that might otherwise appear exclusionary or aggressively masculine. Second, it investigates why women (leaders & supporters) choose far-right parties, focusing on the motivations, beliefs, and identity concerns that lead them to embrace agendas often perceived as contrary to women’s interests. Third, it analyses the paradoxical nature of these new far-right female figures, who simultaneously embody empowerment and defend traditional gender norms. Finally, it considers how these women rise to power, identifying the political, social, and cultural conditions that enable their ascent and explain their growing influence within movements historically dominated by men.

3.1 Why female leaders for far-right? What role do women play in far-right parties?

In studies of far-right political parties, women have traditionally been assumed to stand outside these movements or to be manipulated by them. Yet this idea no longer reflects reality: an increasing number of women now play active roles as activists, representatives, and even party presidents. Far-right parties need women, not necessarily to advance gender equality, but because women function as valuable tools of political marketing.

3.1.1 Demonization:

Several authors argue that female activists and leaders serve a very specific purpose within these parties. (Bale & al., 2025) By associating women with ideas such as gender equality or women's rights, far-right parties use them to "de-demonize" their image through what Bolmgren calls controlled femininity. (Bolmgren, 2024, p. 82) The moderate appearance, smiles, and empathy projected by far-right female figures help make these parties more acceptable to the electorate. Since, as I will develop later, women are often perceived as "moral anchors of society", their endorsement of the far-right signals that it cannot be so terrible or so dangerous (Debras, 2023, p. 2; Bale & al., 2025).

Marine Le Pen is a perfect illustration. The party as we know it today is the result of her long-term efforts to reshape both her own image and that of the Rassemblement National. She played a central role in the party's "de-demonization." Controlled femininity thus becomes a strategic decision aimed at distancing the party from its radicalism or its militant past (Bolmgren, 2024, p. 82).

This dedemonization strategy plays a crucial role for far-right parties. Women soften and modernize the party's public image without altering its nationalist and exclusionary foundations (Aoun, 2025, p. 2). To reach out to female audiences, parties "deploy women leaders to widen their appeal". (Aoun, 2025, p.2) Indeed, women can be "powerful amplifiers of the far-right rhetoric and can be seen as part of a larger attempt by far-right movements to rebrand themselves as modern versions of patriotic, Identitarian rebellion that have little in common with traditional neo-Nazi movements" (Ebner & al., 2019, p.34)

Moreover, these women construct narratives that resonate with "diverse voter bases" (Aoun, 2025, p. 2). Their leadership "serves as a bridge" between ideological contradictions, appealing to both traditionalist and moderate voters while subtly reinforcing anti-feminist and patriarchal

narratives (Aoun, 2025, p. 2). For example, Giorgia Meloni, positioning herself as both a mother and a nationalist leader, embraces a traditionalist platform that opposes abortion and champions conservative family policies, yet continues to command considerable female support. (bale & al., 2025) Giorgia Meloni is seeking a balance between retaining and reassuring her conservative voters and winning over newcomers. For example, following her election in 2022, she adopted ‘masculine generic terms to refer to herself [as il presidente del Consiglio] and began wearing men’s-style suits (Cavazza & al., 2023, p.24) (Vaccarone, 2022).

Marine Le Pen again exemplifies this dynamic: by presenting herself as a modern, emancipated woman while maintaining a nationalist ideology, she has succeeded in reducing the electoral gender gap (Dietz, 2023, p. 148). Mayer further explains that the radical-right gender gap is the difference between men’s and women’s support for far-right parties. (Mayer, 2023, p. 463–484) As the table states, this trend was confirmed during the 2022 French presidential election.

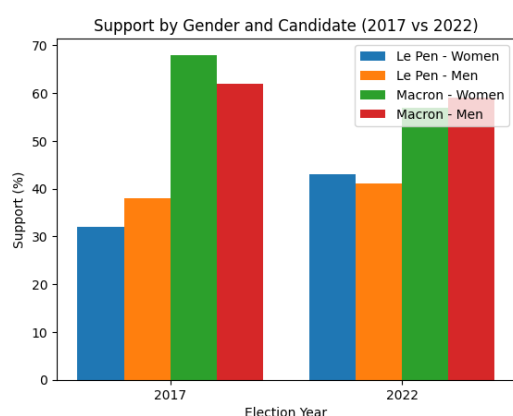


Figure 1: Doridot & al, « second tour : profil des abstentionnistes et sociologie des électorats », *Ipsos bva*, 2022

A German study (*gruppenförmige Menschenfeindlichkeit*) also reveals that the gender gap is far smaller than expected: when measuring racism, sexism, and antisemitism, women respondents showed more racist inclinations than men over a long observation period (Stricot, 2023). Women are therefore just as likely as men to vote for radical-right parties (Dietz, 2020, p. 148). According to Dorit Geva, a professor of politics and gender studies at the University of Vienna, female leaders are “essential” to far-right parties and have helped attract female votes by promoting “the idea that being far-right had become avant-garde, that it was cool” (Van Ossel, 2025)

Let’s be critical: according to some authors, Italy does not follow the same trend regarding the gender gap. They advocate a different approach. Cavazza & al. argue that in Italy the gender

gap disappeared in the 2006 general election, “as a result of the radical reduction of the relative disadvantage between men and women in terms of occupational status and education”. (Cavazza & al., p.23, 2023) scholars explain that the 2022 general election could have revealed a new gender gap with a female candidate from the right. However, the data show that “Meloni’s gender did not trigger a resurgence of the gender gap, as women were no more likely than men to vote for her party than for the other parties.” (Cavazza & al., 2023, p.24) (Angelucci, 2022). The data used by Cavazza & al. show that support for Fratelli d’Italia is similar, with around 15% of voters having voted for Meloni, regardless of whether they were men or women. (Cavazza & al., 2023, p. 21-23) The Italian Centre for Electoral Studies has produced this graph and claims that the data indicates that Meloni received as many votes from men as from women (Angelucci, 2022).

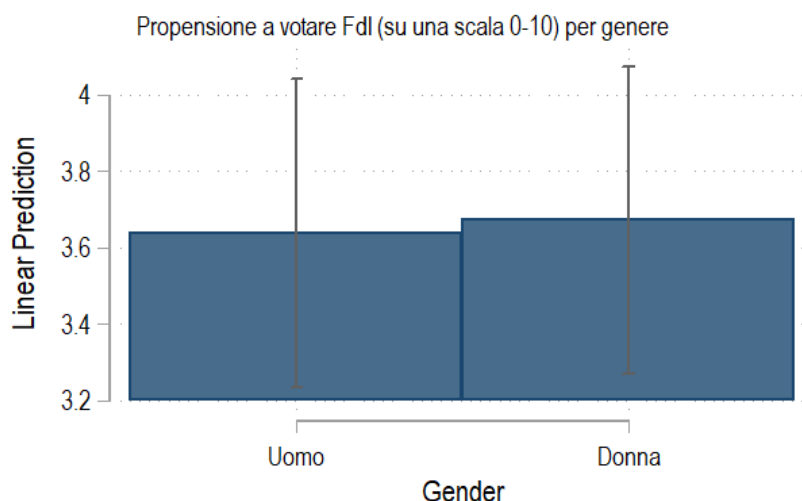


Figure 2 : Angelucci, “l’identikit degli elettori italiani 2022: I principali partiti a confronto”, *Centro Italiano Studi Elettorali*, 2022

3.1.2 Gender softening effect:

Some scholars argue that the increasing presence of women in far-right movements serves as a subtle strategy to criticize Islam and immigration by using women as rhetorical tools. This phenomenon is observed through “gender softening effect”, which means that : “women appear less threatening and more trustworthy than their male counterparts, allowing them to reposition radical ideas within a more acceptable frame” (Spierings & Zaslove, 2015) (Ben-shitrit & al., 2022, p.86-88). By placing women at the forefront, far-right parties can soften their public image while maintaining the same ideological positions. “Meloni is an effective messenger of far-right policies in part because, as a woman, carries more weight than a male politician’s” (Marton, p.44, 2025)

This strategic use of women also sets the stage for femonationalism, in which female activists mobilize feminist arguments and claim to defend women’s right in order to target immigrants. (Farris, 2017, p.4) In this context, women become politically useful because their presence allows far-right parties to promote xenophobic ideas under the excuse of protecting women, creating the idea of a progressive stance.(Farris, 2017,p.6) Following the same line of thinking about protecting women, 'native' men can continue to be seen as the natural protectors of native women, since migrant men are portrayed as the only perpetrators of gender-based and domestic violence.(Colella, 2021, p. 278-280)

However, issues related to women and family are not central to far-right political agendas. The word “women” appeared only twice in Marine Le Pen’s 2022 presidential program. Le Pen’s positions on women’s rights are quite contradictory, but based on her statements, it is quite clear that she reduces women to the role of mothers (Farris, p. 54, 2017). In the age of social media, political communication also takes place online. For example, tweets, posted by Le Pen during the 2022 presidential campaign, about women represent 0%, whereas those referring to “French/France” account for 10%. (Vitez, 2022, p. 232)

Similarly, a lexical analysis of Giorgia Meloni’s 2022 electoral program shows that the word “*donne*” appears only four times, and mostly in relation to natality and security, measures linked to gender equality are almost absent.(Griffini & al.,2023) In the same way, in 2023 Fratelli d’Italia had the lowest percentage of women in the parliament and Meloni’s government had “the lowest percentage of women in the last decade”(Cavazza & al., 2023, p.20). Indeed, the government currently only has six women who hold less powerful portfolios than men.

3.1.3 Mother of the nation:

Marine Le Pen and Giorgia Meloni have adopted the role of “mother of the nation.” This positioning enables them to project an image of hegemonic masculinity while avoiding appearing either too aggressive or insufficiently “feminine” to their electorate (Indelicato & al., 2024, pp. 8–9). Once they embrace this maternal role, they gain greater legitimacy in defending the traditional family as the core of national unity. In this framing, Meloni presents herself not only as an Italian woman but also as a mother concerned with the future of the nation in the same way she is concerned with the future of her own family (Indelicato & al., 2024, p. 9). When she responds to a case of femicide, she reminds people that she is a mother, “I am a mother, and to me, something like that is unthinkable.” (Drittoroverscio, 2021).

The far right promotes hegemonic femininity, treating white women as more important than women of colour. These parties thus promote a traditional, white, heterosexual family model and seek to regulate women’s bodies to ensure sufficiently high birth rates to sustain a capitalist economic system but also to guarantee the transmission of civilization in response to the so-called “great replacement” theory (Alestra, 2025). The great replacement theory can be defined as a “mainstream conspiracy among the far-right in the West which sees migration as organized by large concentrations of multinational corporations for the purpose of replacing Western whites with non-white population from the Global South”(Vohra, 2023). From this perspective, the parties’ concerns regarding the falling birth rate among Western European women (and Western European women exclusively) are purely linked to the continuity of the nation/ethnic group. (Farris, 2017, p.97) The mother is seen as the depositary of the nation's reproduction, both biologically and culturally: she is the one who will inculcate Western values. (Van Ossel, 2025) Within the framework of the “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory, migrant women, especially Muslim migrant women, are portrayed as actively complicit in the supposed takeover of Europe (Indelicato & al., 2024, p. 13). For example, Italy has implemented several measures to increase the birth rate among ‘native’ women, notably through the ‘Fondo Nuovi Nati’ plan, which offered benefits to Italian mothers. immigrant parents who did not hold Italian nationality, however, were not eligible for the same support. (Farris, 2017, pp. 96–97)

Like Meloni, Marine Le Pen supports a policy that encourages ‘French’ women to have more than two children. When she uses the term ‘French’, she is referring to white, Christian women

and not to women from migrant backgrounds who may hold French nationality (Le Pen, p. 11, 2012).

Marine Le Pen has stated: “The choice is between immigration and a higher birth rate; I am very clear that I choose the birth rate, the continuity of the nation, and the transmission of our civilization through our family model” (Bolmgren, 2024, p. 16). This discourse is echoed in campaigns such as that of the youth organization of Alternative for Germany (AfD), which declared: “I am not a feminist because a housewife is a profession” (Dietze, 2020, p. 148).

Rather than advocating liberation from the constraints of family structures, the far right presents a return to the nuclear family (defined as a household consisting of two adult parents, traditionally one male and one female, and their biological children) as revolutionary, framing it as an alternative form of modernity (Dietze, 2020, p. 149) (Green & al., 2024). Indelicato and Lopes argue that far-right female leaders claim gender equality as mark of Western civilisation and promote traditional gender roles as desirable. This narrative is constructed in opposition to LGBTQIA+ rights, particularly same-sex marriage and child adoption which are framed as direct threats to the nation (Indelicato & al., 2024, p.12).

Similarly to what was observed in the case of FdI, nationalism has an ethno-cultural connotation in the case of the RN and becomes entangled with the idea of the family. The nation is seen as an extension of the family (Griffini 2019, p.149).

3.1.4 National identity as political marketing :

Marine Le Pen, Giorgia Meloni, and Alice Weidel in Germany share several characteristics: they are blonde, they are women, they project an image of strength, and they lead far-right political parties (Debras, 2025, p. 1). Recently, Jordan Bardella, president of the French far-right party Rassemblement National, made his relationship public with a young woman who is also blonde, and even more paradoxical she is a 22 year old princess and fashion and luxury student descendant of the royal family of “Bourbon of the Two Sicilies” (Chemin & al., 2026). This example reflects the way the far right constructs and promotes a particular representation of femininity. In addition, when the media focuses on his private life and his sweet, blonde girlfriend, “glamorizing the likely far-right presidential candidate”, people momentarily forget that he is a far-right leader, allowing the party to shift attention away and advance unpopular measures.(Chemin & al., 2026) (Blast, 2026)

It also illustrates how *gender softening* works: in 2024, French media and magazines noted the hair colour of Le Pen as “in the collective imagination, blonde hair has an angelic side which comes out, softer and approachable. It makes you think of a princess, not someone evil!” (Perrier, 2024).

Around 90% of female leaders in far-right politics are blonde, and many are not naturally so. The aesthetic is intentional: they are expected to embody an ideal. Far-right women’s activism promotes a model of womanhood associated with the supposed “purity” of the nation: white, blonde, and presented as untainted by mixing. This imagery supports the idea of “traditional femininity,” in which the white woman symbolizes continuity and reproduction of the nation. These developments illustrate how political narratives can be both strategic and contradictory using cultural narratives of identity, security and sense of belonging to secure women’s support.

3.2 Why far right parties for female leaders? Why female leaders choose far-right?

This section explores how women position themselves within far-right movements, and why these political spaces attract both female leaders. Far-right female leaders often construct a political identity that combines traditional gender roles with political authority. (Bale & al., 2025) Both Giorgia Meloni and Marine Le Pen frame themselves as women and mothers who understand and defend the concerns of women in their respective countries (Marton, 2025, p. 66)

Alestra explains that some women (regardless of their nationality) join far-right activist movements in order to be accepted and to belong to a dominant group (white people in the EU, for example). The dominant group is seen as the group that matters, in contrast to the group that does not matter: the group fighting against systems of domination. (Alestra, 2025) These women accept being considered ‘second-class’ to men in society in order to belong to the ‘right’ social group. Since these women believe they are ‘doing everything right’ and are part of the right group, they do not feel affected by the sexist remarks that may be made by certain far-right parties. (Alestra, 2025)

Della Sudda adds that women are increasingly turning to the far right to oppose the feminism advocated by left-wing parties. They do not identify with feminist policies or with the image of ‘women’ that is portrayed by “modern feminism”. (Della Sudda, 2022, p. 31)

The group *Némésis*, clearly rejects feminism and reappropriates the rhetoric of anti-white racism, reframing it to challenge women about the inaction of mainstream feminist organisations ‘which obscure the role of men of foreign origin in violence against women’ (Della Sudda, 2022, pp. 160–161). These far-right women, whether politicians or ordinary citizens, claim that they are already fully emancipated and have achieved sexual self-determination thanks to Christian and Western culture. This stance allows them to portray equality policies and gender mainstreaming as harmful, arguing that they serve only to undermine women who are already fully emancipated. (Dietze & al., 2020, p.13) *Les Antigones*, a women’s movement in France that describes itself as feminist, even go so far as to say that feminism is an ‘outdated ideology’. Indeed, feminism has been useful but is no longer relevant today, since, in their view, conventional feminists are fighting an imaginary patriarchy, it is a feminism disconnected from reality that has no answers to offer French women. (*Les Antigones*, 2016).

They present Christian culture as the source of women's emancipation, in contrast to Islam, and use this stance to justify anti-immigration policies and reinforce the idea of national superiority. (Dietze & al., 2020, p.13) In her work “La forza della regione”, Fallaci, an Italian journalist, describes Islam as an inferior civilisation compared to Western Christianity. There is a clear trace of femonationalism here, as she also describes Muslim men as barbarians for the way they treat Muslim women (implying that Islam is a sexist religion) (Farris, 2017, p.73).

At this point, the question raised by Okin's famous article comes to mind: 'Is multiculturalism bad for women?' In her book, Okin argues that collective rights granted to minorities can conflict with feminism when they protect patriarchal cultures that oppress women. She suggests that cultures which restrict women’s freedom should be abolished in favour of integration into more egalitarian societies. (Okin, 1999, pp. 9–24). In her book “Il prezzo del velo: la guerra dell’Islam contro le donne” (*The Price of the Veil: Islam’s War Against Women*), journalist Giulia Sgrena describes the veil as a symbol of oppression and suggests that Islam is synonymous with misogyny and gender-based violence. (Farris, 2017, p. 74). Lanfranco even goes so far as to claim that *laïcité* is an urgent ‘human necessity’ in countries governed by Sharia law, where women are subordinate to men. (Farris, 2017, p. 74). These women justify their political involvement by arguing that multiculturalism (and Islam in particular) is, in some way, bad for women.

It is interesting to note that this type of argument is used by activists on both the left and the right wing, these women share anti-Islam views despite their major differences on other issues. In Italy, the *Unione Donne Italiane* (Italian Women's Union), traditionally associated with the left and the Communist Party, adopts the same stance. It, for instance, supported a legislative proposal to ban the burqa and the niqab in public places. (Farris, 2017, p.75)

Through their political or activist involvement, they claim to offer a new form of feminism, or at least a feminism that differs from the 'mainstream': a feminism that fights against the oppression of women by Islam. These new right-wing feminists view sexual violence through the lens of race rather than gender (Della Sudda, 2022, p.280).

3.3 Why do women support parties that are against them ? the paradox of the new right-wing women.

An analysis reveals several contradictions between the private lives of Giorgia Meloni and Marine Le Pen and the political narratives they promote within their respective parties.

The most striking paradox concerns the notion of the traditional family. Both female leaders emphasize the centrality of the family in the construction of their public image, particularly the "nuclear family" (Griffini & al., 2023, p. 7).

In Italy, the 2022 programme of the party Fratelli d'Italia was firmly rooted in a family-centred vision, citing Pope John Paul II's statement that "the family is the founding element of society and what makes a nation truly sovereign and spiritually strong" (FdI manifesto, 2022). Similarly, in France, the 2022 *Rassemblement National* manifesto states that the family is "the root of the French social and civilizational model" (RN Manifesto, 2022).

Yet in practice, neither Le Pen nor Meloni conforms to the model they advocate. Le Pen is twice divorced and has three children from her first marriage (Beaucarnot, 2026). She also identifies as a "non-practicing Catholic," which contrasts with the moral traditionalism she promotes. Meloni, for her part, comes from a divorced family and is herself separated from the father of her daughter. Despite this, she continues to foreground traditional family values and Catholic identity, even though she never married her child's father (Latz, 2023).

Another paradox concerns the tension between Giorgia Meloni's professional life and her personal discourse. Meloni is the first woman to serve as President of the Council of Ministers in Italy, breaking the country's political glass ceiling (Griffini & al., 2023, p. 14). Her individual

success can be interpreted as a form of progress for women's representation. However, in her political rhetoric, she consistently portrays women as mothers within the traditional heterosexual family structure (Griffini & al., 2023, pp. 7–8).

This contrast between individual success and collective rights is shared by both Meloni and Marine Le Pen. Although they are examples of female achievement in male-dominated political environments, this does not necessarily translate into broader advances for women's rights. According to Lasio & al., these cases “highlight the importance of distinguishing between descriptive representation and substantive feminist gains: women's visibility in power does not necessarily advance feminist politics but can instead sustain conservative or even anti-feminist projects” (Lasio & al., p.2, 2026). Their political agendas have been described as conflicting with the rights of women and LGBTQ+ minorities (Griffini & al., 2023, p. 2). The feminist movement *Non Una di Meno*, which campaigns against gender-based violence, has openly criticized Meloni's policies. During a demonstration in Rome in 2022, activists displayed a portrait of the Prime Minister with the slogan “*la violenza sulle donne ha molte facce*” (“violence against women has many faces”) (Fodaro, 2022).

These contradictions could be seen as a coherent ideological framework that redefines a new feminism, rather than as paradoxes.

3.4 What makes these women powerful?

3.4.1 Ideological factors/capitalization on the gender:

A key factor in the political success of figures such as Marine Le Pen and Giorgia Meloni lies in their ability to strategically mobilize gender as a political resource. Both leaders capitalize on their gender softening and present themselves as a deliberate break from the male-dominated political establishment that preceded them (Spierings & Zaslove, 2015).

In France, Marine Le Pen has consciously distanced herself from the aggressive and inflammatory style of her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen. This process of “de-demonization” allowed her to rebrand the party and contrast with the masculine authoritarianism historically associated with the *Front National* (now *Rassemblement National*). According to Baider, Le Pen's discourse deliberately blurs traditional binaries: masculine/feminine, left/right,

rational/emotional, granting her greater flexibility and enabling her to appeal to a broader electorate (Baider, 2015, p. 226).

Similarly, in Italy, Giorgia Meloni has positioned herself as an alternative to a male political class marked by corruption, scandal, and institutional fatigue, including figures such as Silvio Berlusconi and Matteo Salvini. Her self-presentation as a disciplined, moral, and maternal leader contrasts with the hyper-masculine political style that dominated Italian politics for decades. (Marton, 2025, p.72)

In both cases, gender becomes a political tool to construct an image of credibility, ethics, and protection, allowing these leaders to embody a form of political renewal. This use of gender is linked to deeper cultural and historical norms. From an historical point of view, a part of the explanation lies in ideological factors related to culture and identity. (Bale & al., 2025)

Cultural traditions and collective identities have long shaped expectations of women's roles. For instance, the concept of "marianismo" in Hispanic cultures refers to "an idealized traditional feminine gender role characterized by [...] selflessness, chastity, hyper-femininity, and acceptance of male dominance". Similarly, long standing European norms have associated womanhood to domestic roles and caregiving. Women have historically been encouraged to see themselves as mothers, caretakers and moral anchors of society. (APA, 2018) (Bale & al., 2025). This belief is echoed in cultural expressions such as the French sentence "*la femme est l'avenir de l'homme*" (woman is the future of man), reflecting a long tradition that attributes superior ethical and moral qualities to women.

These values provide a sense of "continuity and belonging". Many women agree with such roles because they feel familiar and safe. (Bale & al., 2025). As Dietze explains, this attraction can also be understood as a response to "emancipation fatigue". Some women perceive liberal feminism as an elitist demand that imposes a double burden: achieving professional success while maintaining responsibility for domestic life, often without adequate structural support. In contrast, far-right discourse offers a more reassuring alternative, in which the role of the stay-at-home mother is not only accepted but valorised. This model provides a sense of dignity and security in the face of neoliberal modernity and is framed as a courageous choice, positioned in opposition to modern feminism (Dietze, 2020, pp. 150–152).

Within this framework, motherhood itself becomes a source of political legitimacy. Dietze introduces the concept of "new maternalism," according to which maternal qualities are

reinterpreted as political competencies (Dietze, 2020, pp. 156–159). The ability to care for a family is thus extended metaphorically to the ability to care for the nation. This idea has been explicitly mobilized in political discourse. For example, Viktor Orbán justified his support for Ursula von der Leyen by emphasizing that she is a mother of seven children, implying that this makes her qualified to lead the European Commission (Dietze, 2020, p. 158).

Giorgia Meloni embodies this logic particularly clearly. She has made her identity as a mother and a Christian inseparable from her political persona, presenting herself as a “mother of the nation.” This framing allows her to legitimize her authority and portray her political actions as driven by a desire to protect her “children,” that is, Italian citizens (Marton, 2025, p. 72). More broadly, this maternal framing reinforces the perception of female leaders as moral, protective, and trustworthy figures.

3.4.2 Structural factors:

In France, public attitudes toward the European Union and free trade have progressively deteriorated over time. This trend has been visible in recent political controversies, such as attempts by several far-right RN mayors to remove the European flag from their town halls, a symbolic action reflecting rising Eurosceptic sentiment (Gomez & al., 2026). The roots of this scepticism can be traced back to the eurozone debt crisis, during which France entered the crisis with the second-highest deficit among eurozone members (Marton, 2025, pp. 60–61).

This economic instability was intensified by a broader crisis of confidence in political leadership during the 2010s. High-profile scandals involving male politicians from mainstream parties, such as Nicolas Sarkozy, who was convicted in multiple cases involving illegal campaign financing and corruption (Schofield & al., 2025), and François Hollande, who reached a record 90% disapproval rating during his presidency), fuelled widespread distrust toward traditional parties and their representatives (Noack, 2016).

Italy has faced similar economic and political challenges. According to Pianta, Italy’s long-standing structural economic difficulties have historically created fertile ground for “political outsiders,” including figures like Silvio Berlusconi, who is often considered a mentor to Giorgia Meloni (Pianta, 2021, pp. 82–85). Recent economic instability has further eroded public confidence in the government’s ability to manage economic issues effectively (Marton, 2025, p. 60) In addition, this environment has been reinforced by growing anti-globalization

sentiment and rising Euroscepticism. By 2024, only half of the Italian population reported having confidence in the European Union (Statista Research Department, 2025), illustrating a significant decline in trust toward supranational institutions.

In both France and Italy, the combination of all of these factors led to public distrust. This distrust set the scene for the success of the far-right. Indeed, citizens increasingly sought alternatives to the political mainstream, turning toward leaders who presented themselves as outsiders capable of breaking with the status quo. (Marton, 2025, p.61-64) Marine Le Pen and Giorgia Meloni have both capitalized on this context to succeed. As two of the first prominent women to lead far-right parties in Europe, they have positioned themselves as innovative political figures. They often employ rhetoric that blends traditional nationalist themes with elements that echo feminist discourse. This allows them to distinguish themselves from the male political leaders who have contributed to public distrust. They succeeded in framing themselves as a credible alternative to mainstream parties by addressing issues that resonated strongly with the electorate. (Marton, 2025, p.61-64). From economic anxiety to cultural concerns, economic and political distrust emerged in connection with cultural and identity-based fears around globalisation, migration and national cohesion.

France and Italy share a similar socio-political context: both countries are marked by Euroscepticism, defined as “a political resistance to the power of the European Union”, economic insecurity, anti-migrant sentiment and the broader impact of the migrant crisis (Biscontini, 2023) (Marton, 2025, p.59) .

In France, Euroscepticism became closely associated with rising anti-globalization sentiments (BBC, 2016). These attitudes gradually turned into strong anti-migration views, especially during the 2015 migrant crisis, which significantly influenced public opinion (Marton, 2025, p. 62). Marine Le Pen took advantage of this by offering an interpretation of the crisis that reinforced her party’s policy proposals. She framed migration as a direct threat to the safety of the French people and the stability of the national economy.

This narrative gained even greater popularity after the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015 and in Nice in 2016. These events heightened public fears and made Le Pen’s message more persuasive to certain voters (Marton, 2025, pp. 62–64). Concerns about declining cultural homogeneity and the rise of multiculturalism further strengthened the RN support. Such rhetoric found fertile ground in political and social debates, enabling Le Pen and her party to expand their influence

and establish the RN as a normalized and enduring force within the French political landscape (Marton, 2025, p. 64).

Italy experienced a similar dynamic, though shaped by its geographical position. With its long Mediterranean coastline and status as one of the EU's primary entry points for asylum seekers, Italy became a central stage of the migrant crisis beginning in the mid-2010s. The government's handling of the situation was widely perceived as inadequate and controversial, creating an opening for Giorgia Meloni to integrate this discontent into her rhetoric and policy agenda (Marton, 2025, p. 63).

Italian public opinion toward immigrants and asylum seekers has been predominantly negative, aligning with the major talking points of several Italian political parties. Voters expressed concerns about terrorism, economic strain, and the potential erosion of Italian cultural hegemony, concerns that resonate with broader definitions of nationalism discussed earlier (Marton, 2025, p. 63). Meloni strategically amplified fears surrounding cultural decline, notably by emphasizing Italy's low birth rate and warning that the Italian population risked being "overtaken," a message designed to mobilize voters. (Marton, 2025, p.63)

For both countries, the stigmatisation of migrants is rooted in a specific Western European context. Indeed, the arrival of millions of migrants (from the Global South) after the Second World War was primarily driven by the need for labour in industry and the reconstruction of the continent. But despite their crucial role in rebuilding Western European economies, migrants were perceived by many Northern Europeans as 'lazy, uncivilised, aggressive, backward...' (Farris, pp. 38–39, 2017).

In both France and Italy, structural factors created conditions favourable to the rise of female right-wing leaders. Giorgia Meloni and Marine Le Pen successfully harnessed public discontent, particularly on the issue of migration. They positioned themselves both as political alternatives to the establishment that had governed in recent years and as leaders who articulated and validated the electorate's concerns (Marton, 2025, p. 65).

4. Comparative analysis:

Comparative analysis is a structured research approach that systematically examines two or more cases in order to identify their similarities, differences, causal mechanisms, and recurring patterns, it enables researchers to “trace causal processes and account for similar political outcomes across divergent contexts” (Landman, p.3-6, 2002).

This analytical lens is particularly relevant for understanding why France and Italy despite their different historical trajectories, political cultures, and party systems have converged toward a similar outcome: the strategic deployment of femonationalist rhetoric in debates on migration and Islam. Examining the political context in each country is therefore essential, as it sheds light on how specific environments have shaped the conditions of possibility for such discourse and helps address the research question. A comparative analysis at the actors involved (political leaders, party organizations, and media figures) helps show how two very different national contexts can still produce similar outcomes.

4.1 Global national context:

4.1.1 France :

France, like several other member states of the European Union, has experienced a rise in far-right support in recent years. This growing support is partly driven by shifting societal and structural factors, as discussed in the previous chapter.

At the same time as the rise of the National Rally (RN), France went through a significant economic crisis that affected the country and more generally, the eurozone. The eurozone crisis started in 2009 when some eurozone member states were unable to pay back governmental debts, leading to slowed economic growth in the eurozone for several years. (Frieden & al., 2017, p.376). Following this period, France faced several political scandals which led to political distrust among the population. In the meantime, the country experienced major social and political changes, including the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2013, post-pandemic governance and reforms, made abortion a constitutional right in 2024, and a broader decline in Catholic religious influence (Clegg, p.184, 2022) (Marton, 2025, p.28).

Over the past decade, these transformations have fuelled public and political debates on a range of issues, which far-right parties have sought to exploit (Marton, 2025, p. 28–29). They have

promoted narratives centred on fears of declining cultural homogeneity, portraying migration as a threat to French culture and identity (Marton, 2025, p. 28).

Historically, French public opinion has often viewed globalization as somewhat socially taboo, partly due to a strong attachment to national culture and identity (Marton, 2025, p. 29). The population has tended to hold negative perceptions of free trade and the international economy (Marton, 2025, p. 29). Globalization is perceived as synonymous with traditional jobs disappearing from people's home towns and with increasing population flows and immigration. (Beddiar & al., p.33, 2017) This has contributed to widespread anxiety rooted in the belief that free trade and globalization imply open borders, which in turn are linked to perceived threats such as terrorism, European regulations from Brussels, and immigration. According to Beddiar & al., "the disappearance of France's identity is considered a reality by 3 out of 5 French people (59%), with almost a third (28%) fully agreeing with the statement that 'French identity is disappearing'" (Beddiar & al., 2017, p. 33).

The irony is that France is a post-colonial state with a long history of immigration. Within this context, Islam has increasingly been constructed as a perceived threat. The French "laïc" framework has long had a complex and often tense relationship with its Muslim populations, dating back to the colonial period (Escafré & al., 2023, p. 674). In the early 20th century, groups such as Poles and Italians were the primary targets of xenophobic fears and rejection. Over time, however, racism took on a more "religious dimension", with Islam now occupying this role (Escafré & al., 2023, p. 674).

Today, part of the French population fears that allowing Muslims refugees and immigrants to arrive (there is a belief that new arrivals are mainly Muslim) will erode French culture and identity. (Beddiar, 2017, p.33) The study by Beddiar & al. highlights a "relatively high level of distrust" toward Islam within French society. Several major events such as the Charlie Hebdo attack, the November 13th attacks and Samuel Paty's assassination have intensified these tensions (Samba & al., 2025, p.2) (Beddiar, 2017, p.61) (Marton, 2025, p.30). These developments highlight how core elements of French identity and values have become sources of tension, often amplified by the Front National and other far-right actors. (Beddiar, 2017, p.61). According to Moser, right-wing sexual politics are paired with specific forms of racism and have led to expressions that could be interpreted as defending women and homosexuals against supposedly misogynist and homophobic migrants. (Moser & al., 2022, p.6) As early as

1975, Jean-Marie Le Pen with RN (former FN) had already positioned immigration as a central electoral issue (Blanchard & al., 2021, p.74).

Another key point concerns the political representation of minority groups. There is an ongoing debate about whether increasing representation of people from immigrant backgrounds might disadvantage “native” French citizens’ representation. Actually, minorities remain underrepresented in the French political system, accounting for only around 7% of members of the National Assembly, even though many belong to second- or third-generation immigrant communities (Blanchard & al., 2021, p.74).

In response to these issues, there has been a political effort (seen as naïve for some scholars) to remove references to race from legal texts in order to combat racism. On July 12, 2018, the French Parliament (*Assemblée Nationale*) removed the concept of “race” from the Constitution (Escafré & al., 2023, p. 667). Article 1 states that “France is an indivisible, secular, democratic and social republic. It guarantees equality before the law for all citizens, regardless of their origin, religion. It respects all beliefs”, reflecting a *colorblindness* approach. (constitution de la cinquième république, 1958). This approach implies that the French state “does not recognize racial or ethnic groups either as legitimate social or political categories or as targets for policy” (Escafré & al., p.667, 2023).

Laïcité

Within this broader socio-political context, debates around Laïcité have become increasingly central. Laïcité occupies a prominent place in public discourse and remains deeply divisive. As said by Nicolas Cadène, “laïcité is the subject of multiple debates concerning its definition itself”(Cadène, 2015, p. 2) there are different conflicting views but the definition used by French state is based on article 10 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789, which states that “no one should be troubled for their opinions, including religious ones, provided their expression of opinions does not disturb public order established by laws” (Cadène, 2015, p.2) (déclaration du 26 août 1789 des droits de l’homme et du citoyen) In principles, the key issue in laïcité is to ensure national cohesion through equality of beliefs. However, several scholars warn that this goal can only be achieved if laïcité is interpreted inclusively, otherwise, alternative interpretations may lead to division and exclusion (Cadène, 2015, pp. 2–3).

Escafré & al. propose a more concise definition of laïcité as “the French understanding of secularism, commonly interpreted as confining religion to the private sphere” (Escafré & al., 2023, p. 674). This debate is closely linked to feminist discussions and is mobilized by left and right-wing as a means of defending women’s rights. The will of laïcité has also led to what Escafré & al. describe as a political backslah, which has taken both social and legal forms. (Escafré & al., 2023, p.675) Several key legislative measures illustrate this trend:

- 2004: A law reaffirmed laïcité and banned the conspicuous display of religious symbols, such as the Islamic veil, in public schools (Escafré & al., 2023, p. 674).
- 2010: “law banned the covering of one’s face in public” (such as burqa) Escafré & al., 2023, p.674) A parallel can be drawn here with Italy. Although the relationship with religion and laïcité is not the same in both countries, the outcome is similar. Indeed, in Italy, the ban on wearing the burqa in public places is also a subject of debate. A draft law has been proposed that reflects a paternalistic view of Muslim women. Officially, the idea is justified on security reasons, but in reality, several Italian media reports suggest that it would allow Muslim women to free themselves from the burden of the full veil, based on the premise that they are forced to wear it, and thus forms part of Islamophobic propaganda (Farris, p.60, 2021).
- 2013: a “laïcité chart” became mandatory in all public schools. Escafré & al., 2023, p.674)
- 2017: every NGO needs to sign the Chart if it applies for public subsidies. Escafré & al., 2023, p.674)
- 2020-21: Adoption of the “separatism bill”.

The « separatism bill » has been used to justify what some interpret as a democratic backsliding. Indeed, in the name of « laïcité », this law aims to “strengthen the values of the republic”, it has resulted in increased state control and surveillance of non-profit organizations, as well as simplified procedures for their dissolution. Within society, the law has often been perceived as specifically targeting Muslim civil society. For instance, organizations such as the Collective Against Islamophobia in France and the Collective Against Racism and Islamophobia were dissolved in 2020 and 2021. (Escafré & al., 2023, p. 675).

These tensions have also extended into the academic sphere. In 2021, members of the government under President Emmanuel Macron accused social science researchers of promoting “Islam-leftism”. the president ordered an internal investigation to the national

centre of research (CNRS). The CNRS refused, arguing that it constituted a witch hunt. (Escafré & al., p.675, 2023).

In recent years, the French political climate has been marked by economic upheaval linked to the eurozone crisis, significant social and political transformations, and increasing distrust toward political authorities and globalization (Marton, 2025, p. 30). Overall, this has contributed to a climate of uncertainty, tension, and polarization within French society.

Public opinion plays a central role in this context, as it both reflects and shapes political dynamics. It is closely connected to electoral outcomes, the behaviour of political representatives, and the policies that are ultimately implemented.

4.1.2 Italy

In recent years, Italy's national context has been shaped by a succession of major economic crises which have led to significant political instability. The 2008 financial crisis marked the start of an extended period of economic difficulties, but it also coincided with important transformations in Italian politics (Bull & al., 2018, p.1) Italian politics is characterized by “a long tradition of unstable cabinets” and a high turnover of governments. Between 2018 and 2022 alone, the legislature experienced three ideologically heterogeneous governments, this instability is an indicator of the fragile state of Italian democracy. (Improta & al., p.4, 2022).

Economic crisis

The country has faced economic insecurity, including high public debt, the eurozone crisis and the socio-economic consequences of the COVID 19 pandemic. Following the pandemic, GDP fell and 600 000 jobs were lost, mainly among fixed term and self-employed workers. (Pianta, 2021, p.83)

The eurozone crisis also contributed to the fall of the government and ended a long period of centre-right political dominance (Bull & al., 2018, p.5) These crises profoundly reshaped “*the social fabric of the country*”, such as a rise of poverty and the growth of inequality under the influence of neoliberal policies (Bull & al., 2018, p. 4). This deterioration fuelled widespread distrust toward politics and institutions. This phenomenon of distrust in Italian politics is part of a broader crisis of political representation (Bull & al., 2018, p.7).

This distrust was visible in the 2022 elections, which recorded a historically high abstention rate of 36.1%. The decline in electoral participation is an indicator of the quality of democracy

but also signals a worrying disengagement from political institutions (Improta & al., 2022, p. 6). It is not only Italian politics that is affected, but the European Union is also concerned by euroscepticism fuelled by the perception that EU undermines Italian sovereignty and is failing to manage the crises affecting the country. (Improta & al., 2022, p.6). In addition, since the early 2000s, Italy, and Europe more broadly, has witnessed the rise of anti-liberalization and anti-globalization protest movements (Bull & al., 2018, p. 3).

The long-term erosion of trust in traditional parties, combined with the economic crisis, reshaped Italian system and provided foundation for the rise of far-right parties (Bull & al., 2018, p.4-5). Italian politics has been marked by a strong populist tradition embodied by figures such as Silvio Berlusconi and parties like the Lega. (Marton, 2025, p.42)

Far-right parties have benefited from “the lack of institutional change, or rather the lack of any perceptible change in everyday politics” (Marton, 2025, p.42). Giorgia Meloni’s party, Fratelli d’Italia (FdI), is rooted in Italy’s post fascist tradition (Improta & al., 2022, p.4) In the 2018 parliamentary elections, the coalition formed by Forza Italia and FdI, both far right parties, won a relative majority. (Marton, 2025, p.42) Later in the 2022 elections, FdI received substantial support, partly due to the abstention of about one third of the electorate. Italian politics thus shifted sharply to the far-right. (Marton, 2025, p.42)

The rise of far-right parties in European union opened a debate about historical memory. Across Western countries, “memory laws” have been adopted to counter this trend and reaffirm the importance of remembering World War II. Italy is polarized between those alarmed by the potential return of fascism and those, mainly the Lega and FdI, who pursue a dual strategy of rejecting liberal self-critique and seeking to normalize the past. (Rosenfeld, 2023, p.823)

Italy was severely affected by the COVID 19 pandemic, which triggered both a health and economic crisis. According to Battista, the pandemic accentuated “the division that has gripped all the political systems of Western democracies, effectively threatening the stability of the political system” (Battista, 2023, p. 3). Far-right leaders capitalized on the post-COVID instability, while the crisis also reshaped public opinion.

In this public opinion, Improta identifies a paradox of the electorate: despite the electoral success of the far-right after COVID-19, Italian public opinion expressed a strong desire for economic stability and progressive positions on several issues. For instance, 90% of Italian voters prioritize the fight against unemployment, and 84% support social measures such as

introducing a minimum wage and reducing income inequality. Moreover, 71% of respondents support stronger penalties for discrimination against LGBTQ+ people; yet they elected a far-right female leader (Improta & al., 2022, p. 13–17).

Could we say that there exists an electoral paradox comparable to the paradox of far-right female leaders?

The success of Meloni is part of the “fourth wave” of postwar far-right politics. (Baldini, 2024, p.404). According to Mudde, this wave is “characterized by the relationship to the political mainstream. [...] Far-right ideology had become global and normalized due to shifting and porous boundaries.” Radicalization has pushed some governments from radical right to extreme right positions due to nativist narratives. These discourses shift focus from socio-economic issues to socio-cultural issues, it uses nativist narratives, include post 9/11 Islamophobia and rhetoric around the refugee crisis and immigration issues (Mudde, 2023).

According to Mudde, a key far-right strategy is to control the framing of political issues and present their positions as “common sense”. I can identify a connection with the women policies, indeed this dynamic also appears in attempts to redefine feminism or promote traditional gender roles as a form of “new progress”(Mudde, 2023).

Migration

Migration policy is a key political issue in Italy. Due to its geographical position, Italy serves as a major entry point for migrants crossing the Mediterranean. (Panebianco, 2022, p.1402). Although Italy is a key actor in European migration policy as a frontline state, hostility towards immigration is increasing.

An Ipsos MORI survey shows that two out of three Italians believe that there are “too many immigrants in the country”(Holloway & al., 2021). The public opinion also thinks that “refugees would increase the likelihood of terrorism in the country” and that they are more to blame for crime than other groups. Migrants are perceived as a threat to the labour market and social benefits (Holloway & al., 2021, p.8). This negative perception is partly the result of racist and xenophobic campaigns and policies promoted by Matteo Salvini and the Lega Nord. In the early 2010s, the Lega Nord drew a distinction between “good migrants” and “bad migrants” who were non-western men portrayed as inherently misogynistic. By contrast, non- western migrant women were perceived as passive victims. During this period, Salvini explicitly linked Muslim male migrants to violence against women. He also promoted a website called “*tutti i*

crimini degli immigrati” (all the crimes of immigrants), which reported exclusively violent acts (such as rapes or sexual aggressions) committed by non-western migrants (Farris, 2021, p.61).

Overall, a majority of the electorate wants to reduce migration flows and to reduce the number of immigrants welcomed in Italy. This flow control is seen as a higher priority than issues relating to migrants’ individual rights (Improta & al., 2022, p.14).

Two paradoxes are highlighted: firstly, despite a desire to reduce migration flows, Improta & al. state that 57% of the electorate supports maintaining access to social services for immigrants and making it easier to obtain Italian citizenship. (Improta & al., 2022, p.14) Secondly, only 15% of the Italian public believes that immigration is good for the Italian economy, even though Italy is facing a significant natality decline. Moreover, the COVID 19 crisis has shown the importance of foreign-born workers (who represent 18% of the essential workforce in Italy) in delivering public services and working in critical sectors across the country (Halloway & al., 2021, p.8).

Italian society remains deeply shaped by Catholicism. Unlike France, where “la laïcité” constitutes a central core of the national model, Italy continues to be a predominantly Catholic state. According to a Pew Research Center study, 78% of adults identify themselves as Catholic in Italy (Starr, 2018). While in France, only 29% of citizens declare themselves as Catholics, and 15% describe themselves as religiously observant (Drouhot & al., 2023, p.39). The presence of the Vatican reinforces the symbolic weight of Catholicism in the Italian national imagination. Beyond this symbolic dimension, the Catholic ideological framework has concrete political impacts: it influenced migrations policies and shaped public perception of migration.

The presence of religion impacts social policies, Catholics tend to be socially conservative. For instance, regarding women’s rights, access to abortion is made more difficult in Italy (Armellini & al., 2024). Indeed, in 2024, the Italian Ministry of Health reported that 63% (up to 80% in the south!) of gynaecologists are “conscientious objectors”, making the procedure more difficult. (Armellini & al., 2024) A member of the medical or auxiliary personnel who is conscientious objector is someone who refuse to participate in procedure or interventions for the abortion because such acts would violate their deeply held ethical, moral, or religious convictions. There is a primacy of individual conscience over the law. (Zamaro, p.15, 2024)

4.2 Actors :

The integration of rhetoric and migration policies into the struggle for women's rights by the far right: opportunism or genuine concern? While immigration is inherently linked to human rights, and therefore to women's rights, the ways in which certain actors frame and connect these issues may reveal racist and xenophobic positions.

For an issue to emerge, gain visibility, and be shaped into a public debate, it must be carried, framed, and circulated by specific actors and actants. It's essential to focus on these actors because they are not only participants but active producers of meaning: they frame the terms, frame the debate and influence how the issue is perceived by the public.

This subsection aims to present the key actors in Italy and France. First non-human actors will be discussed, then female leaders and finally activists.

4.2.1 Actants/ non-humans

I choose to integrate non-human elements into the research paper. Non-humans, also referred to as actants, are components that must be included in political analysis.

The consideration of actants forms part of an approach that encourages us to view social and human phenomena as an integral part of non-human networks. The concept of the actant was developed by Bruno Latour in "actor network theory", this theory « does not limit itself to human individual actors but extends the word actor or actant to non-human, non-individual entities" (Latour, p.2, 1997). This theory incorporates the actant, which Latour defines as "something that acts or to which activity is granted by others. An actant can literally be anything provided it is granted to be the source of an action." (Latour, p.5, 1997).

An actant is an entity that participates in an action and creates change. Latour emphasises the role of non-human entities in social interactions, for him "everything is connected"/ interconnectedness. (McAlister, p.533, 2021)

Political parties:

Among the actants playing a role in national politics, influencing the political landscape in France and Italy, there are political parties. And more specifically, for our purposes, far-right

political parties. Indeed, through its actions and organisation, a political party is a force that shapes, conditions and structures public debate and the socio-political environment, acting as a crucial link and platform between citizens and politicians, as well as a key player in the political life of a democratic state. It brings people together and helps to drive certain ideas in a specific direction.

A political party is the illustration of “interconnectedness” between networks: a party brings humans together (members, voters) but depends also on non-human actors such as the framework provided by legislation, funding and infrastructure.

Italy:

In Italy, the Fratelli d'Italia party is a structuring force in Italian politics. Its creation was the result of a split in December 2012, when Meloni left Silvio Berlusconi's party and, together with her colleagues, founded the new Italian right-wing party (Martellini & al., 2022). The history of the party is rooted in the traditions of post-fascist movements, yet it has adopted the principles of Western democracy while also maintaining a relationship “with Italy's past national grandeur”. (PolitPro, 2026)

The party is classified as ‘right-wing populist’ and is part of the ‘European Conservatives and Reformists Group’ within the European Parliament (MEPs, 2026). The FdI is founded on the three pillars of God, family and homeland (FdI Trieste, 2026). It seeks to protect Italian identity and national sovereignty. To achieve this, the party advocates a strong state that protects traditional values (FdI, 2014, art1). FdI's political agenda focuses on several key issues, such as a restrictive immigration policy, promoting the birth rate, and prioritising Italian products and the ‘national’ over the international. Furthermore, within the European Union, it advocates for more national sovereignty and less delegation to the supranational level (FdI, 2024, p.2).

Key issues for the FdI party:

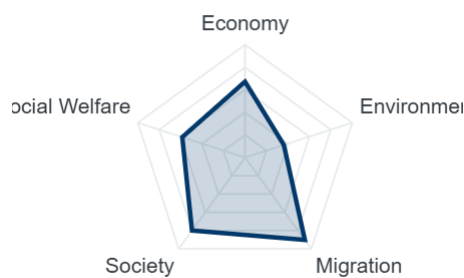


Figure 4: Politpro, “Fratelli d’Italia : data analysis, current polls, and policy positions”, *PolitPro*, 2026

Since its clear victory during the 2022 elections, the party has been in power with Giorgia Meloni at the head of the country. She became the first woman at the head of Italy. (Bonnell & al., 2022).

France :

Historically, the National Rally, originally called the National Front, was a minority and marginalized party. The party has its roots in a small far-right group and was officially founded in 1972 with Jean-Marie Le Pen, Marine Le Pen’s father, as its president. Marine Le Pen later took leadership of the party and transformed its image. She also changed its name from the National Front to the National Rally in 2018, primarily to demonise the party. (Hutton, 2024) Today, the RN is classified as “a far-right populist to far-right extremist party”(PolitPro, 2026).

The party's main objective is to prioritise French citizens over foreigners, reserving social benefits, employment access and housing primarily for French citizens (RN, 2022). To achieve this, the party promotes strict nationalism and Euroscepticism, advocating the repatriation of EU competencies to France, as well as a hardline stance on immigration policy to protect French sovereignty and cultural identity against external influences (RN, 2022, p.2) (RN, 2026). The issues of immigration, Islamophobia and securitization have continued to become increasingly mainstreamed in French political discourse (Startin, 2022, p.431). The party's agenda primarily concerns immigration, as illustrated by the graph:

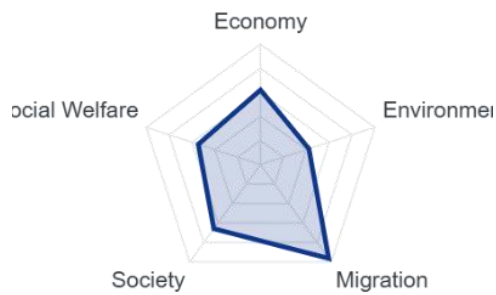


Figure 5: PolitPro, “Rassemblement national : data analysis, current polls and policy positions”, *politpro*, 2026

The party’s target audience is primarily working-class and rural voters, but also those who feel marginalised. Following the 2024 European elections, the RN became France’s largest political party, a historic first, giving it a majority in parliament. (Hutton, 2024)

Media

In the same way as political parties, the media are key players in structuring the political landscape. They are also hybrid actors that integrate into a network of actors. The media play a key role in spreading information and ideologies. Startin states that “the role of media as part of the mainstreaming process of the Radical right [...] should not be underestimated” (Startin, 2022, p.431). They act as a relay for political figures and ensure the effective functioning of a democracy. Therefore, the lack of media coverage for political figures can have a significant impact on their political progress. This is where the media cordon sanitaire comes into play, or rather, the absence of such a cordon in France and Italy.

The absence of a cordon sanitaire plays a role and contributes to the rise of the far right and the easier spread of its ideology. Indeed, the political and media cordon sanitaire (that exists in Belgium) has historically aimed to ‘reject any alliance with the far-right at all levels of government’ with the aim of ‘combating anti-democratic ideologies. (Debras, pp. 1–2, 2024). In practical terms, politicians commit to not collaborating with far-right parties, and the media commit to not giving far-right parties a platform in political debates. (Debras, p.1- 2, 2024). Consequently, the cordon sanitaire and its absence can be seen as actants.

4.2.2 Female leaders

Le Pen's background

In the case of France, Marine Le Pen stands as one of the most prominent right-wing female political leaders. She has played a central role in increasing the visibility of women within far-right parties. A lawyer by profession, Le Pen followed in the footsteps of her father, taking over the leadership of the Front National (renamed Rassemblement National) in 2011 (Magnin, 2026). Although her political career began under his influence, she publicly distanced herself from him in 2015, ultimately expelling him from the party after Jean-Marie Le Pen described the Holocaust as a “mere detail of history” (Startin, 2022, p. 435).

As party president, she reshaped the RN's discourse by presenting herself as the voice of “the people” against the failures of traditional parties. Her leadership contributed to the RN's growing number of seats in the National Assembly (Startin, 2022, p. 428). Marine Le Pen has run for presidency three times (2012, 2017, 2022). Under the French two-round electoral system, all candidates compete in the first round, and the two candidates with the most votes, advance to the second round. Le Pen reached the second round twice, scoring 33.9% in 2017 and 41.45% in 2022. These high figures reflect her significant electoral appeal (Startin, 2022, p. 428). According to Startin, « the 2022 presidential and parliamentary results serve to underline the RN's continued journey from the margins to the mainstream of French politics”. (Startin, p.428, 2022)

She is not only a political figure within the party and a candidate for the presidency, but she is also the deputy for the Pas-de-Calais constituency, located in northern France. Le Pen has been elected on several occasions, in total, she has served as a deputy in the National Assembly for nine years. (Datan, 2026).

As popular female politician, Le Pen is seen as having broken the glass ceiling in a political environment traditionally dominated by men. She is considered as a durable/ stable and influential figure within the far-right landscape. (Startin, 2022, p.434-436) Marine Le Pen no longer leads the party, she handed over the leadership to Jordan Bardella in 2022. She stepped down to pursue other ambitions, such as campaigning for the presidency in 2027. This strategic transition was accelerated by the legal proceedings and Marine Le Pen's conviction. Indeed, Marine Le Pen was condemned in 2025 for misappropriation of public funds to four years in prison and five years of ineligibility (Bezzina, 2025). An appeal against her conviction is

ongoing. However, should her ineligibility be upheld, Jordan Bardella has confirmed that he would take Marine Le Pen's place in the 2027 presidential election.

Marine Le Pen is regarded as a key figure in French femonationalism. She uses her femininity to frame the migration issue in gendered terms. She adopts a different stance from certain far-right figures: whereas some men oppose migrants in the same way that they oppose women/misogyny, Marine Le Pen positions herself as a champion of women's rights (Startin, 2022, p.438). a champion of women's rights, although she does not describe herself as a feminist because 'she defends the rights of women who are threatened by Islam' exclusively. According to her, if France is a sexist country, it is because of the Muslim presence (Farris, p.55, 2021).

Meloni's background

The contemporary landscape of Italian far-right women is dominated by Giorgia Meloni, leader of the *Fratelli d'Italia* party and in power since 2022. Until that year, Meloni had remained in the opposition, but after the Covid-19 crisis the *Movimento 5 Stelle* (M5S), then governing, lost significant democratic support, creating an opening for Fratelli d'Italia to rise to power (Garzia, 2022, p. 1043). She became the first woman to serve as President of the Council in the history of the Italian Republic. Like Marine Le Pen, Meloni broke the glass ceiling by accessing power in a traditionally male-dominated political sphere (Bottini, 2024, p. 1).

Meloni frequently presents herself as coming from a modest background, but above all as "Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother, I am a Christian," a formula she has turned into a core component of her political identity (Meloni, 2019).

Her political activism began at the age of 15 within the MSI (Movimento Sociale Italiano), a movement founded by followers of Benito Mussolini, in other words, a neo-fascist movement (Bottini, 2024, p. 2). She gradually climbed the ranks, becoming national head of Student Action within the student movement of AN (Alleanza Nazionale), the successor party to the MSI. She was then elected to the Council of the Province of Rome in 1998 and became Vice-President of the Chamber of Deputies in 2006. Finally, she was appointed minister in 2008 at only 31 years old, under Silvio Berlusconi's government. (Cavalieri & al., 2023, p.110-111) Following disagreements over Berlusconi's leadership, she founded the new party *Fratelli d'Italia* together with other former members of AN (Cavalieri et al., 2023, p. 110–111).

Meloni has a distinctive leadership style that combines two opposite registers: firmness and verbal aggression combined with the compassion and the maternal figure she projects. Her

leadership appears effective in governing the Italian state, as her government has demonstrated exceptional longevity in Italy's political history, a factor that contributes to projecting the image of a stable and strong Italy (Gibault, 2025). It is worth noting that Le Pen and Meloni are both considered to be stable political figures.

As head of government, Meloni is firmly consolidated in her position. Indeed, even though a majority of Italians believe that their country is heading in the “wrong direction,” Giorgia Meloni maintains a solid trust rating of 39% in April 2026 (Kaval, 2026) (Frisbie & al., 2026). With this level of support while leading the country, Meloni occupies a key position and acts as a central political actor. She has access to all the instruments necessary to disseminate her femonationalist ideology.

4.2.3 Activists

Nationalist parties, to use Farris's term, are not the only ones to appeal to women's rights in opposition to Muslim men. In both France and Italy, feminist women, whether acting alone or in groups, from the right or sometimes the left, denounce Islam as undermining women's freedom and security. It is worth noting that most of the groups or figures present today in France and Italy are women or are composed of, or created by, women.

Activism in France:

In France, several civil society groups are femonationalist. These ideas are also promoted and disseminated by citizens, both men and women, who are not elected officials but are activists.

The example discussed in this section is the Nemesis group, which positions itself on the right, but there are also left-wing actors in France who, for example, adopt anti-veil rhetoric in the name of women's rights (such as the Left Front and the New Anti-Capitalist Party) (Farris, p.70, 2021).

The *groupe Némésis*, founded in 2019 and active in France, is currently in expansion. The group is described as “feminist activism hostile to feminists” (Della Sudda, 2022, p.284). They present themselves as an alternative to traditional feminist movements because, as they claim these movements prefer to promote a “left-wing ideology to the detriment of women”. (Collectif Némésis, 2026). On their Instagram account, they describe themselves as “whistleblowers” and an “association for the protection of women against all forms of violence”. (Instagram: Collectif..nemesis, 2026).

The collective is exclusively for women and consists of ‘mostly young Parisian women’, all of them being white. (Collectif Nemesis, 2025) The activists claim to ‘defend Western women’ through three objectives: “to denounce all violence against women”, “to denounce the dangerous impact of mass immigration on Western women so that this issue becomes a matter of public debate” and, finally, “to promote European civilisation” as the “place where women achieve fulfilment”. (Collectif Nemesis, 2025).

The collective’s actions can be described as femonationalist. They interpret violence against women primarily through the lens of race rather than gender, arguing that immigration poses a threat to women’s safety. They have appropriated the #MeToo movement, rebranding it as #MeTooImmigration. During feminist demonstrations, they appear ‘disguised’ as veiled women displaying racist slogans. they organise a ‘No Hijab Day’ – examples that illustrate the femonationalism they employ. (Nemesis Collective, 2026). In the cases cited by the collective, the victim is always a white woman who has been sexually assaulted by men or women from migrant backgrounds. After analysing the approach of the collective and their demands, I note that the group barely addresses women’s rights but focuses primarily on anti-immigration policies.

Although the collective claims to be apolitical and non-partisan, it maintains links with the right and the far right (Collectif Nemesis, 2026). On Instagram, Alice Cordier, the collective’s founder and director, describes herself as a ‘right-wing feminist’ and takes part in the activities of far-right groups. Furthermore, on social media, the collective promotes the rassemblement national, revealing a certain paradox. (Collectif Nemesis, 2025). Moreover, on its website, the collective clearly goes against the French left, stating that they are “a bunch of violent aggressors towards women and supporters of terrorists”. (Collectif Nemesis, 2026).

It is, first and foremost, an online collective: the Nemesis activists are primarily an online collective, meaning they have a strong presence on social media. Social media is the main platform used by the collective to win over a female audience and make a name for itself in the public sphere. As a result, it is difficult to estimate the actual number of followers drawn to this femonationalist rhetoric.

Activism in Italy

Regarding activism in both countries, an indicator of divergence can be observed: in Italy, there is no clearly identifiable group within civil society. Instead, we find several dispersed and heterogeneous actors, using femonationalist narratives or mobilizing women's rights to oppose migration and, more broadly, Islam. In this context, I focus on two Italian figures who actively engage with these issues: Souad Sbai and Daniela Santanchè.

Souad Sbai, originally from Morocco, is a journalist who describes herself as a feminist. She was elected to Parliament in 2008 for *Il Popolo della Libertà* (a right-wing party led by Silvio Berlusconi). As a right-wing deputy, she supported a draft law proposing the prohibition of the burqa and the niqab in public spaces. She has since become a central figure in the critique of Islam and gender inequalities within Muslim communities in Italy (Farris, 2021, p.75).

Sbai's main political focus is the regulation of the veil in public spaces, which she frames as a visible marker of women's subordination. She bases her argument on the premise that veiled women are submissive victims. She is not alone in thinking this way: 'the vast majority of Italian feminists associate the Muslim veil with submission, violence, passivity and suffering', as discussed earlier¹, Giulia Sgrena, Lanfranco, and also the Union Donne Italiane (a left-wing organisation) agree on this assumption (Farris, pp. 75–77, 2021). "The anti-Islam feminist movement in Italy appears to be rather heterogeneous [both left-wing and right-wing] but united in its stance" (all are against the veil). (Farris, pp. 76–77, 2021).

More broadly, Sbai aligns with Okin's argument, a position she further develops in her book *L'inganno: vittime del multiculturalismo* ("The Deception: Victims of Multiculturalism"), in which she accuses Western multiculturalism of failing to protect the rights of migrant and Muslim women. Sbai regularly denounces the oppression of women within Muslim communities, adopting a stance centred on saving women (Farris, 2021, p. 75).

Sbai is also the president of an association. Her organization, *Acmid-Donna Onlus* (*Associazione Donne Marocchine in Italia*), intervenes in public debates to assert that the emancipation of Muslim women necessarily requires rejecting religious symbols such as the hijab (Acmid Donna Onlus, 2026) (Farris, 2021, p. 75).

The second relevant figure for this paper is Daniela Santanchè. She is a right-wing feminist who presents herself as a defender and "rescuer" of Muslim women in Italy. She was

¹ Ref. page 28

elected as deputy for the post-fascist party Alleanza Nazionale in Berlusconi's government, a party through which Giorgia Meloni also passed. During this period, she supported the prohibition of the veil in public education (Farris, 2021, p.75).

She later led a campaign against Islam following the murder of Hina Saleem by her Pakistani father and other members of her family (Farris, 2021, p. 75). This murder became a symbolic case mobilized by certain activists to argue that "Islamic gender violence" is inherent or even "genetic," and that this culture and religion are intrinsically violent toward women (Farris, 2021, p. 75). She was seen as a free girl who rejected the Islamic tradition and was killed for being "too occidental" while her family members were described as fundamentalists, oppressors, misogynists.

Santanchè instrumentalized this event, as well as the broader issue of Muslim women's rights, to advance her ideological agenda. Her positions increased her visibility and popularity within civil society and among the electorate, enabling her to consolidate her place in the Italian political landscape and to run in the 2008 national elections (Farris, 2021, pp. 75–76). She held the position of Minister of Tourism under the Meloni government from 2022 to 2026, from which she resigned (Presidenza della repubblica, 2026).

Conclusion:

At this stage, several points of comparison can be identified. In Italy, the dominant rhetoric is framed around the need to "save women," whereas in France the emphasis falls more squarely on opposing immigration and denouncing men portrayed as dangerous to women. The starting point of the argument is therefore not the same.

Another major difference with France concerns the nature of the actors involved. In Italy, the most influential figures are directly engaged in politics or are openly affiliated with political parties. In France, by contrast, the issue is more sensitive, and non-elected activists tend to present themselves as apolitical and non-partisan.

Summary comparative analysis :

	France	Italy
Ideological framework	- Exclusion based on laïcité: no place for religion in the public sphere. - A strong commitment to French values - Progressive in social policies	- Exclusion based on the name of Catholicism: the only way to live together is by following Christian values - Symbolic weight of the Vatican - Conservative in social policies
Femonationalist rhetoric	Focuses on opposing immigration by portraying Muslim men as a threat to women's safety	More paternalistic view, there is a need to save women perceived as submissive victims of Islam.
Activism	- Structured groups like Collectif Nemesis	- Individual figures often involved in or elected by political parties
Immigration framing	- Immigration central to RN agenda (Farris, 2021) - Securitization - Islamophobia mainstreamed in RN discourse (Startin, 2022, p.431)	- Immigration framed as a threat - Distinction between “good” and “bad” migrants - Frontline state for Mediterranean routes - Majority of the public believes that they are too many (Holloway & al., 2021, p.8).
Core ideological positions of the parties	- National preference	- “God, Family, Homeland”

	- Euroscepticism - Anti-immigration - Protection of cultural identity (RN, 2022) (RN, 2026)	- National sovereignty - Traditional values - Restrictive immigration (FdI, 2026) (FdI, 2014)
Far-right Parties	- RN (ex FN) founded in 1972 by Marine Le Pen's father - Rebranding under Marine Le Pen - RN becomes largest party after 2024 elections (Hutton & al., 2024)	- FdI founded in 2012 - Rooted in post-fascist tradition - Rise accelerated by political instability - FdI wins 2022 elections - Meloni becomes first female PM (Martellini & al., 2022)

5. Femonationalism : the far-right toolbox; Meloni & Le Pen.

Following the previous analysis of national contexts, the broader political framework, and the evolving role of women in the growing instrumentalization of feminism within anti-immigration discourse, let's recap the research question: "How and why do female far-right leaders instrumentalize women's rights to frame immigration as a threat to women?"

This chapter seeks to answer this question by examining how femonationalism moves from theory to practice. Its objective is to analyse the toolbox mobilized by Marine Le Pen and Giorgia Meloni. Focusing specifically on the French and Italian contexts, this section aims to present and examine the strategies and tools employed by these two leaders, rather than generalizing about all far-right women politicians. The first tool to be analysed is the narrative tool, including a form and a content analysis. The form analysis is part of a non-human network analysis in the sense of Latour. The second tool to be examined is the political and institutional tool available to Meloni and Le Pen. This section aims to demonstrate how femonationalist discourse translates into practice. The example used is that of integration policies, which Farris identifies as the primary institutional manifestation of femonationalism (Farris, 2021, p.150).

5.1 Narrative tool :

Among the various tools mobilized by both leaders, narrative plays a central role. According to Attinà, narrative constitutes an explanatory tool through which political actors frame problems and propose solutions according to a specific ideological perspective (Attinà, 2025, p.58).

In their discourse, both Giorgia Meloni and Marine Le Pen construct interpretations of society that redefine the terms of political debate and shape public perceptions with a certain ideological view. Attinà argues that "language can [...] imply moral judgments, frame issues as legitimate or illegitimate, and define what is considered normal, necessary or possible" (Attinà, 2025, p.58). Multiple communication channels could be mobilized including official political speeches, party manifestos, interviews, traditional media, social media, ... Discourse therefore becomes a crucial political instrument, not only because of what is said, but also because of how it is said and the context in which it is expressed. As Attinà explains, "rather than focusing only on what is said, discourse analysis investigates how something is said, and how language shapes the way political reality is understood. Discourse analysis is a qualitative method that

examines how meaning is constructed and communicated through language and other symbolic forms” (Attina, 2025, p.58).

This section therefore proposes a discursive analysis that first examines the form of the speeches delivered by Meloni and Le Pen and then analyse their content. The form analysis refers to how discourse is communicated, with a focus on the structure, the style, the linguistic choices and the context in which it is produced. (Attina, 2025, p.57) (Silva Rhetorical, 2026). While the content analysis refers to what is said in a discourse, the focus is more on the ideas, the arguments, themes and patterns that help explain the research object. (Attina, 2025, p.57) (Silva Rhetorical, 2026). This paper explores how far-right actors appropriate women’s rights in order to stigmatize migrants and sustain nationalist agendas. Through the cases of Giorgia Meloni and Marine Le Pen, it identifies the discursive strategies through which women’s rights are mobilized to legitimize anti-immigration positions (Lasio & al., 2026, p.114).

5.1.1 Discourse forms analysis :

Discourse can take many forms, and the content analysis in this study focuses on several types of narrative. However, with the growing use of the internet, digital platforms and social media have transformed political communication; social media now appears to be an essential tool for politicians (Cacopardi, 2025, p. 26–27). Although the issues and debates have not changed much, the context in which opinions are shaped has. It is this new form of communication that has exploded in recent years, and according to Della Sudda, most of far-right activists are ‘keyboard’ activists (Della Sudda, 2022, p.152).

In line with actor-network theory, social media platforms must be understood as actants in Latour’s sense². These platforms participate in shaping interactions between political leaders and their electorate. They structure the possibilities of interaction through their algorithms and interfaces, determining which information becomes visible, what circulates and how users engage with one another through the comments section or direct messaging (Latour, 1997, p.5). Because social media influences audience perception, for example, by enabling the circulation of emotionally charged content, they do not simply “host” political communication, they act within it. Social media platforms filter, prioritize and shape interactions, therefore, form part of the non-human network that contributes to political action. All these reasons explain why we focus on this dimension here.

² Reference p. 43

The political sphere is undergoing a transformation driven by the process of mediatization, and political leaders are now almost required to maintain an online presence. Social media has become an extension of television, and political figures adapt to the logic of these platforms. They often adopt a more informal tone, use less formal language, and present themselves as ordinary people who are close and relatable to voters. The proximity created by social networks enables political figures to develop new communication strategies: they can react instantly to current events and remain permanently accessible to the public (Cacopardi, 2025, p.27). Political communication on social media increasingly resembles a permanent electoral campaign. Politicians maintain their visibility through their online presence, interactions, and exchanges with the public, which fill the gap between elections and major political events such as rallies or debates (Blumenthal, 1980). Furthermore, this constant online presence reflects a capitalist logic, according to Charles Girard: what matters is not necessarily the quality of publications, but rather their quantity and the ability to constantly remind voters of the politician's presence (Girard, 2022). For example, Giorgia Meloni has a highly active Instagram account, with 9 741 posts (May 9 2026). She publishes content very frequently, often sharing several posts per day (Instagram Account Giorgia Meloni, 2026)³.

Giorgia Meloni and Marine Le Pen are no exception to this trend. Both are active on several social media platforms, although Instagram remains one of their main communication tools. On Instagram, Giorgia Meloni is followed by more than 6 million people and had published a total of 9, 741 posts (May 9 2026), while Marine Le Pen had around 715 000 followers and 1426 posts on the same date (Instagram accounts Meloni and Le Pen, 2026).⁴ Meloni's audience is significant: her 6 million followers represent almost 10% of the country's population (Reuters, 2026).

In their online publications, both politicians frequently use slogans, emphatic expressions, and striking statistics figures. These communication strategies are designed to leave a strong impression on voters, although they often simplify or reduce the complexity of political discourse (Cacopardi, 2025, p.31) (Debras, 2024). This strategy is part of a femonationalist approach. Both politicians reduce the complexity of reality in favour of an ideological framework. Short, striking slogans that proclaim 'one truth' allow deeper issues, such as patriarchy, to be ignored. For example, in 2021, in response to a femicide, Marine Le Pen spoke

³ Consulted on 9 May 2026

⁴ Consulted on 9 May 2026

of a ‘Talibanisation of some neighbourhoods’. She reduces the complexity and reality of a neighbourhood and draws a parallel with the danger to women (Diette, 2022). For instance, Marine Le Pen recently highlighted a publication on Instagram built around a short slogan that mobilized Euroscepticism and presented a shocking financial figure without providing contextual explanation behind the claim (Marine Le Pen account Instagram, 2026).⁵

Thanks to social media, politics has become increasingly personalized. It is no longer simply the RN, but rather Marine Le Pen herself; no longer only FdI, but Giorgia Meloni as an individual figure. Both politicians adopt a strategy of hyper-personalization and, more broadly, of “normalizing” the image traditionally associated with far-right ideology. On their social media accounts, they place themselves at the centre of communication. They appear in almost every post, or at least occupy the foreground, leaving limited space for the political parties they represent, their collaborators, or the idea of collective political work. ⁶Their online presence therefore focuses more on individual leadership and personal identity than on party structures. However, an important difference can be observed between the two women. While Giorgia Meloni’s communication remains strongly centred on her own image, Marine Le Pen progressively introduces Jordan Bardella in her publications, gradually giving him greater visibility alongside her on social media (Instagram accounts: Marine Le Pen & Giorgia Meloni, 2026).

Valorisation of normality, saying I am like you, you can trust me: On Instagram and her other social media platforms, Giorgia Meloni alternates between posts that portray her as an ordinary woman and posts that emphasize her role as Prime Minister leading a country. She presents herself in “ordinary” settings, in order to create a sense of closeness with her electorate: she also has a family, she also takes educational outings with her daughter, and she also cooks traditional Italian dishes (Larkin, 2024, p.41). At the same time, she reassures voters by publishing posts in which she adopts a serious and authoritative posture during official events. Even if the colours of Italy are not always displayed explicitly, national symbolism remains present, suggesting the message that “the country is in safe hands” (Larkin, 2024, p.41) (Instagram Account Giorgia Meloni, 2026)⁷. Marine Le Pen, by contrast, reveals far less about her private life online. However, she also strongly promotes an image of “normality.” Her publications frequently show her visiting markets, eating traditional meals, or interacting with

⁵ Consulted on May 2026

⁶ Consulted on May 2026

⁷ Consulted on May 2026

ordinary citizens. At the same time, she stages herself in official representations, often wearing the tricolour scarf as a national symbol but also as an indicator of her legitimacy. In many of the posts published after official events, she is also surrounded by male political figures, appearing as the only woman in a predominantly male environment. This strategy contributes to the image of the only woman within a political sphere traditionally dominated by men (Instagram Account Marine Le Pen, 2026).

The form of their social media content reflects the themes and values expressed in their political discourse. Both emphasize the nation, national identity and traditional values in their publications. For example, when they publish posts with crowds of citizens, the people represented are mostly white while racialized minorities appear far less visible. Their communication strategies are also aligned with their respective ideological positions regarding religion. Giorgia Meloni regularly highlights her Catholic faith, notably by appearing publicly alongside the Pope and by integrating references to Christian identity into her communication. In contrast, Marine Le Pen, in line with the French principle of *laïcité*, avoids openly displaying religious symbols or references in her publications. (Instagram account Marine Le Pen and giorgia meloni, 2026)

5.1.2 **Discourse content analysis:**

According to Colella, the nationalist and feminist discourse on the one hand “reinforce social and cultural hierarchies built on gendered and racial stereotypes, and consequently result in the stigmatisation and exclusion of groups labelled as racial and sexual deviants” and on the other it reshapes the feminist and immigration debates using far-right and nationalist terminology, reframing gender equality issues as racial and immigration issues. (Colella, p.271, 2021)

A comparative discursive analysis between Giorgia Meloni and Marine Le Pen reveals striking similarities in the use of femonationalism. In both cases, feminism is not presented as a universal struggle for equality, but rather as a way to defend national identity against immigration and multiculturalism. Women’s rights are used to support nationalist and anti-immigration ideas. This dynamic can be demonstrated through corpus-based discourse analyses conducted by Debras on the Rassemblement National and by Lasio & al., Otto Vitali, and Colella on Fratelli d’Italia and Giorgia Meloni. These studies analyse speeches, campaign interventions, parliamentary debates, press releases, legislative proposals, and social media posts. (Debras, 2023) (Otto Vitali, 2023) (Colella, 2021) (Lasio & al., 2026).

Otto Vitali's analysis focuses on 15 speeches delivered by Giorgia during her election campaign between 1 and 22 September 2022. While the data used by Lasio & al. consists of "Meloni's social media posts published on her official accounts on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube" between 2015 and 2022. Furthermore, they selected posts that "contained explicit reference to three themes: gender, women's rights and migration". Applying all these criteria, the analysis ultimately covers 41 posts (Lasio & al., 2026, p.4). While for France, Debras analyses a corpus of 5,148 RN documents published between January 2015 and December 2021 (Debras, 2023, p.17). His analysis shows that discussions about women and gender are mostly connected to immigration and security. Among 1200 occurrences linked to gender, 68% are associated with words such as "immigration", "Islamism", "veil", "security", or "violence", while only 12% concern feminist topics such as equal pay or political representation (Debras, 2023, p.17). The term "feminism" appears around sixty times, but it is rarely linked to women's emancipation itself. Debras also notes that the word "gender" appears only fifteen times and is often presented negatively, associated with "woke ideology" or "far-left ideology" (Debras, 2023, p.18).

Beside these quantitative patterns, Debras shows that the RN seeks to reshape the terms of feminist debate by reframing gender equality issues as matters of race and immigration. In his discursive analysis, the term "feminism" is frequently confused with "the feminine," and appears alongside words such as "veil" and "violence" (Debras, 2023, p.18). Within RN discourse, feminism is strategically mobilized to discredit what is portrayed as "traditional" feminism. Indeed, according to the RN, defending women's rights requires denouncing both immigration and Islam, something that "traditional feminists" refuse to do (Debras, p.18, 2023). Debras's findings confirm that feminism is instrumentalized by Marine Le Pen and the RN: in practice, the term "feminism" is more often associated with migration than with women's rights themselves.

This rhetorical strategy is not new. As early as 2010, Le Pen employed explicitly racist narrative, claiming that in certain French neighbourhoods (described as predominantly Muslim) it was difficult to be white or to be a woman. In the same speech, she compared Muslim street prayers to the Nazi occupation during world War II (LeMonde, 2010). In the same idea, the RN has also run a campaign portraying a young woman of clearly North African origin dressed in "modern" French clothing. The implicit message is that French cultural norms or more broadly western norms, is the "correct" choice for young women, regardless of their background, suggesting that Muslim culture is inherently against women's will (Farris, 2021, p.54).

A similar pattern appears in Giorgia Meloni's discourse. Otto Vitali's analysis demonstrates that themes linked to women were systematically connected to migration, women's safety, demographic decline and national identity with the invocation of the great replacement (Otto Vitali, 2023, p.30–32). According to Vitali, migration appears in almost all the speeches analysed, often associated with ideas of danger, civilisation, and protection of women and families. Through what he calls the "topos of threat", Meloni presents immigration as a danger for Italian women and for the survival of Italian civilisation itself (Otto Vitali, 2023, p.36). In a speech in Matera she states that "Italy is a country destined to perish" (Otto Vitali, 2023, p.36). Migrants, especially non-white and Muslim men, are described as violent, misogynistic, and unable to integrate into Western society. In contrast, Italian and French women are presented as vulnerable and in need of protection by RN and FdI (Otto Vitali, 2023, p.41).

Meloni supports her argument by drawing a clear comparison between Ukrainian refugees and migrants from Tunisia or Libya. She explained that Ukrainian refugees are "women and children fleeing war", whereas migrants arriving from Tunisia or Libya are "boats full of men, alone and of working age" (Otto Vitali, p.40, 2023). She established a hierarchy among migrants, or at least a distinction between "good" and "bad" migrants : white women and children are framed as legitimate victims, while non-white male migrants are described as threatening, misogynistic and culturally incompatible. This narrative reinforces the idea that protecting women requires limiting immigration (Otto Vitali, p.48, 2023). Several recurring expressions confirm this logic. In a speech in Perugia, Meloni states: "I would like that the children were born from Italians", directly linking demographic decline with immigration and the preservation of national identity (Otto Vitali, p.54, 2023). In other speeches, she argues that migration cannot solve Europe's demographic crisis and insists that European nations must "build their own future" through higher birth rates among national populations rather than immigration (Ansa, 2023).

The lexical fields used by Meloni is similar to those identified by Debras in RN discourse. Terms related to "family", "birth rate", "identity", "security", and "civilisation" frequently appear together with references to migration (Indelicato, p.1, 2024). At the same time, themes traditionally associated with feminism, such as wage inequality, domestic violence within Italian society, or patriarchal structures, remain marginal. Even when Meloni speaks about women, she mainly discusses motherhood, demographic decline, or women's protection against migrant violence rather than gender equality itself. (Otto Vitali, p.30-35, 2023). Within their discourse, themes related to gender and gender equality are consistently articulated alongside

issues of security, identity, and culture, demonstrating that the party's proposals reflect an instrumental use of feminism aligned with a far-right political agenda (Colella, 2021, p.276).

The femonationalist rhetoric appears clearly in Meloni's speeches about sexual violence and femicide. Colella provides a clear illustration of this narrative in the case of FdI, showing that it contributes to growing public anger and strong anti-immigration sentiments. She explains that FdI's narratives have shaped public perceptions of two feminicides, of Pamela Mastropietro and Desirée Mariottini (Colella, 2021, p.276). In both cases, the perpetrators were identified and described primarily as migrants, labelled as irregular migrants and criminals, reinforcing a perceived link between sexual violence and the race and culture of the individuals involved (Colella, 2021, p.278-279). The press reports the facts, providing plenty of details on the men's nationality and their irregular immigration status. They have focused more on the attackers' nationality than on the facts themselves or on the victim, everyone remembers the attackers' nationality, while the victims are erased from the narrative. Femicide has been described as a consequence of immigration rather than a consequence of entrenched patriarchy. Giorgia Meloni also instrumentalised these events to promote her own political agenda. She states that these young women were victims of immigration. She argues that with FdI, she has "the courage not to deny that there is a link between the rise in cases of gender-based violence and the growing illegal immigration" (Locano, 2018).

Colella presents a word cloud "showing the first 100 most frequently recurring terms in the description of the perpetrators in the press" (Colella, p. 278–279, 2021). There is a very clear prevalence of adjectives referring to nationality and their status (such as Nigeriano or africani, soggiorno...). (Colella, p.279, 2021).



Figure 6: Colella, “Femonationalism and anti-gender backlash: The instrumental use of gender equality in the nationalist discourse of the Fratelli d’Italia party”. *Gender & Development*, 2021, Vol. 29, p.269–289

These incidents have also caused disproportionate reactions within the far-right activist community. In 2018, following the murder of Pamela Mastropietro, Luca Traini declared his intention to take revenge for the young woman and randomly shot at Black people from his car (six people were hit). The shooting was racist and specifically targeted immigrants. After opening fire, he went to stand in front of a ‘fascist monument’ with an Italian flag and raised his arm in a fascist salute. Afterwards, Meloni justified his actions by saying that they were caused by ‘the appalling management of immigration’ (Colella, pp. 278–279, 2021) (La Repubblica, 2025). Such reactions illustrate how femonationalist narratives can legitimize racist violence.

This broader public reaction to feminicides, the way they are perceived, and the language used to describe them, often racist and xenophobic, can be understood as a direct consequence of narratives promoted by far-right leaders. These dynamics are further intensified when such rhetoric is voiced by a woman, reinforcing the figure of the racialized or black rapist. Violence against women becomes politically important mainly when the perpetrators are racialised migrants. Violence committed within the national community is often treated as an individual act, while violence committed by migrants is presented as proof of a misogynist culture. As a result, feminicide is no longer understood as a consequence of patriarchy and inequalities in society but as a consequence of immigration and multiculturalism (Colella, p.271, 2021). By

focusing on uncontrolled immigration, Meloni ignores the real causes of gender-based violence, such as “the perpetuation of unequal power relations and the enforcement of gender-biased norms, attitudes and practices to maintain men’s dominance and privileges in all patriarchal contexts” (Colella, p.280, 2021).

An analysis of the discourses of Marine Le Pen and Giorgia Meloni reveal a redefinition of who is framed as the primary threat to women and their safety. Their rhetoric marks an ideological shift: violence against women is no longer presented as the product of patriarchal or unequal social structures, but rather as the consequence of immigration or what Marine Le Pen describes as a “foreign cultural occupation.” (LeMonde, 2010).

Within this framework, gender-based violence is attributed to the figure of the non-Western migrant man, portrayed as inherently and culturally predisposed to violence. In this narrative, such individuals are constructed as “naturally” aggressive, shaped by a misogynistic and violent culture, in contrast to an implicitly safer and more egalitarian Western culture (Ambrosini, 2025, p.6). As a result, gender-based violence is increasingly interpreted through a racial lens rather than a gendered one.

This shift redefined the source of women’s insecurity: instead of being linked to systemic inequalities or patriarchal dynamics, it is framed as the outcome of external cultural intrusion. By advancing this narrative, far-right actors obscure the structural causes of sexist violence, such as entrenched power imbalances, and instead focus on the alleged “illegality” or foreignness of perpetrators. Ultimately, this redefinition constructs the immigrant as the central enemy of women. It promotes the idea that protecting women necessarily entails opposing immigration, thereby aligning feminist concerns with exclusionary and anti-immigration agendas.

This shift transforms feminism and the rhetoric surrounding women’s rights into a tool of polarization, aimed at “protecting” the white European woman against a constructed public enemy: the migrant man from a non-Western culture.

Both Giorgia Meloni and Marine Le Pen build their discourse around a clear opposition between “us” and “them.” The “other” is depicted as the Muslim man with a migrant background, while “we” refers to native, white populations, often implicitly associated with Catholic. Within this framing, Muslim culture is portrayed as inherently oppressive toward women and as restricting

their freedoms, in contrast to the European and Western culture these leaders present as guarantors of women's safety and rights.

Meloni and Le Pen thus shape the debate to emphasize a supposed gap in women's rights between countries like Italy and France and those of the Global South. This opposition reinforces a polarized vision opposing "white Europeans" to the figure of the "migrant rapist."

According to Eugenio & al., immigration becomes a key axis of polarization when political narratives emphasize migrants by portraying their values and practices as unacceptable and incompatible with those of the host society (Eugenio & al., p.4, 2023). It should be noted that this axis of polarization: "us" versus "them" is also part of a strategy to simplify political messages and complex realities. They use short, shocking slogans that ignore colonial and patriarchal realities and even more, to serve their own far-right ideologies.

Both Meloni and Marine Le Pen therefore create an opposition between a safe Western culture that protects women and non-western cultures (especially Muslim one) that are presented as dangerous and misogynistic. At the same time, migrant and Muslim women are often portrayed as victims of their own culture who need to be saved through integration into French and Italian culture and society (Colella, p.276, 2021). The comparison between RN and FdI narrative shows similarities in vocabulary they employed. In both corpus, words linked to women are often associated with terms related to borders, insecurity, Islam, violence, demographic decline, and civilisation. By contrast, topics such as wage inequality, domestic violence within national communities, or patriarchal structures appear much less frequently (Debras, 2023, p.17-18) (Colella, 2021, p.276-280). Feminism is therefore not used as a tool to challenge gender inequality itself, but as a political instrument to justify anti-immigration and nationalist policies.

These discursive strategies confirm Farris's definition of femonationalism: the use of feminist themes by nationalist and far-right actors to support xenophobic and anti-immigration agendas. In both Italy and France, women's rights are transformed from a progressive struggle for equality into a conservative and exclusionary discourse centred on national identity, borders, and the fear of immigration.

5.2 Political-institutional tool :

Giorgia Meloni and Marine Le Pen possess political and institutional tools that allow them to diffuse their ideologies through the implementation of public policies, parliamentary voting, and legislative proposals. But are their femonationalist discourses merely forms of political opportunism, or do they reflect social realities on the ground? What do these narratives of “saving” women mean in practice?

In both France and Italy, femonationalism is becoming institutionalised through policies of civic integration for third-country nationals (Farris, 2021, p.110). According to Farris, these policies constitute the most concrete example of femonationalism: nowhere else does this ideological formation appear so clearly as a narrative of rescuing migrant women framed within a nationalist framework (Farris, 2021, p.115). These policies are not new and were adopted at European level between 2007 and 2013, but they have become increasingly gendered in the national implementations of the European programme in recent years (Monod, 2007).

The aim of these integration tests is to make long-term residence dependent on passing an exam or agreeing to learn the language, culture, and values of the host country. Gender equality and women’s rights are presented as key national values that migrants are expected to know and respect, even if they do not fully share them (Farris, 2021, p.110). Farris argues that the use of women’s rights and gender equality in these civic integration programs shows a stronger connection between nationalism and racism (Farris, 2021, p.114). Between 2005 and 2012, France and Italy adopted laws promoting cultural assimilation and rejecting cultural differences (Farris, 2021, p.117–118). The main idea behind these policies is: in the name of women’s rights, multiculturalism should be reduced.

5.2.1 Through a femonationalist analysis:

In France, the adoption of laws on mandatory integration programs resulted from several factors. First, there were European directives. Second, the electoral success of the far right contributed to the development of stricter integration policies that emphasized “Republican values” and French citizenship. Over time, integration policies became a central part of debates about immigration (Farris, 2021, p.123). In Italy, the process was similar. Integration programs became linked to security concerns and Islamophobia with the rise of right-wing parties in government (Farris, 2021, p.124). As Farris explains, “integration is now considered a duty rather than a right” (Farris, 2021, p.124).

The gender dimension become very important in integration policies. In France, respect for gender equality is presented as a key element of successful integration for migrants. The Haut Conseil à l'Intégration published a report explaining that women of immigrant background should be a priority in the integration process within French society (Haut Conseil à l'Intégration, 2004).

Already in the early 2000s, several French philosophers claimed that secularism was “the best antidote” to what they described as the oppressive and sexist nature of Islam toward women (Farris, 2021, p.133). According to French institutions, one of the main obstacles to the integration of migrant women is their lack of knowledge of their civil rights. Non-European migrant women are often presented as victims of sexist violence linked to their culture and religion. (Haut Conseil à l'Intégration, 2004).

Farris highlights a paradox in the French integration system. Gender equality is repeatedly described as a fundamental value of French society, but the integration program also communicates strongly gendered and sometimes sexist ideas. In the booklet called *Vivre en France* (“Living in France”), which is used as part of the integration program, gender equality is mainly discussed in relation to family life, for example by stating that “the husband and wife are equal.” The family is presented as the central unit of integration, based on the idea that the “failures of multiculturalism” come from migrant families (Farris, 2021, p.135).

In this context, women are reduced to the role of mothers and mothers are given the responsibility of integrating both their children and the whole family into French culture. However, there is another paradox: mothers are encouraged to help integrate children through education, while the French state bans the wearing of the veil in schools. As a result, some Muslim mothers are excluded from access to their children's schools (Farris, 2021, p.136).

In Italy as well, the Charter of the Values of Citizenship and Integration (*Carta dei valori della cittadinanza e dell'integrazione*) limits gender equality mainly to the private and family sphere. The charter suggests that women from non-European countries experience unequal treatment within their families. For example, it states that domestic violence is not common in Italian families and that it is illegal. This statement indirectly suggests that violence is widespread in non-Western or migrant families (Farris, 2021, p.138). Another example appears in Article 26 of the charter, which discusses freedom of dress. The text explains that “in Italy there are no restrictions on clothing as long as it is freely chosen and does not harm the dignity of the person. Clothing that covers the face is not acceptable because it prevents the recognition of the person

and makes relations with others more difficult” (Ministero dell’Interno, 2010). This idea clearly targets Muslim women who wear the veil, suggesting that they do not freely choose their clothing. .

Overall, gender equality is translated into family policy within national integration programs. Non-Western migrant women are not perceived as individuals in their own right, but rather as cultural vectors and mothers responsible for transmitting culture to their children. Because they are reduced to their role as stay-at-home mothers, they become the primary targets of integration policies. These policies aim to prevent them from reproducing “non-Western” cultural and familial patterns and transmitting them to future generations (Farris, 2021, p.140-141).

According to Farris, integration policies therefore constitute a racist and nationalist institutionalization of femonationalism for several reasons. First, France and Italy are represented as societies where women’s rights, sexual freedom, and gender equality are fully achieved, in opposition to non-Western societies portrayed as patriarchal, misogynistic, and homophobic. Second, gender inequality is systematically reduced to the family sphere, emphasizing women as victims of their cultural heritage. Third, migrant women become the principal targets of integration policies precisely because they are reduced to their role as mothers (Farris, p.150, 2021).

The femonationalist ideological framework thus lies on the image of a misogynistic Islam and of the Muslim man as inherently incapable of respecting women’s rights (Farris, 2021, p.152). More broadly, the convergence of civic integration policies around women’s rights and gender equality demonstrates the ability of nationalism to adapt to different historical periods and political contexts (Farris, 2021, p.155).

5.2.2 A political and institutional tool used by Le Pen and Meloni

In practice, both Giorgia Meloni and Marine Le Pen often link migrants’ rights to the adoption of Western values, especially gender equality between men and women. Their political discourse presents the protection of women’s rights as a condition for the integration of migrants into society.

France provides a clear example that supports Farris's theory of femonationalism. In recent years, French migration laws have become increasingly strict regarding the "integration" of migrants, and these measures have been strongly supported by RN and Marine Le Pen. Thanks to her role as a member of the French National Assembly and her influence within the RN, Le Pen has promoted migration policies framed around femonationalist ideas. In 2024, "the Law n°2024-42 dated from January 2024 to control immigration, improve integration", a stricter immigration law was adopted by the French Parliament with the support of the 89 RN members of parliament during the vote (Le Borgne & al., 2022)(République Française, 2026). Le Pen described the reform as an "ideological victory" because several amendments included in the law came directly from her party (J.F, 2024). This shows that Le Pen and her femonationalist ideology have a real influence on migration policy even when the RN is not in government.

The 2024 immigration law strongly reflects the ideology promoted by Marine Le Pen and the RN, especially their idea of "national priority." (Fautrat, 2023). The RN argues that French citizens should come before foreigners in access to rights, social benefits, and public resources. This logic is visible in the law. For example, access to certain social benefits is now conditioned on five years of legal residence in France, which excludes many migrants from these rights (CGT, 2023) (Fautrat, 2023). The law also requires migrants to prove their adherence to French republican values, including *laïcité* and gender equality, with a "contract of commitment to the principles of the Republic" (CGT, 2023). By presenting migrants as people who must first demonstrate that they are compatible with French values before accessing rights, Le Pen and the RN place the protection of national identity and the interests of French citizens above all else. This approach directly reflects the femonationalist framework described by Farris, where women's rights and secularism are used to justify stricter migration control and the exclusion of certain migrant populations, particularly Muslims.

Although the law does not explicitly ban the wearing of the veil, it does in certain situations, such as "any religious sign [...] or clothing that would signify the inferiority of women to men" (Art.146 rect.bis). (SENAT, 2026). This article was adopted and directly reflects the model described by Farris in which Muslim women are seen as victims who must be "saved" from their own religion. The RN pushes for even stricter measures. The party regularly proposes amendments focused on the "respect of the principles of the Republic," emphasizing *laïcité*, equality between men and women, and references to the "French way of life". (SENAT, 2026) Ideologically, and sometimes more subtly, references to *laïcité* and "French values" often target

the veil worn by Muslim women in practice. As Cremer argues, “the RN employs Catholicism and laïcité as cultural identity markers against Islam” (Cremer, 2023, p. 40).

In contrast to Le Pen, Meloni has held more power as president of the country since 2022. She has promoted a migration model based on national assimilation, where migrants must fully adopt Italian cultural values to be considered legitimate members of society (RAI, 2024) (Indelicato & al., p.6, 2024). This approach rejects multiculturalism and frames integration as a one-directional process: migrants must adapt to Italian norms, not the reverse.

In practice, the Italian integration pathway places strong emphasis on cultural conformity. Access to rights, such as long-term residence, depends on demonstrating adherence to Italian values. gender equality has become a central test of “cultural compatibility,” functioning as a moral filter rather than a legal criterion (Lasio & al., 2026, p. 4). Gender equality between men and women is presented as a Catholic value and a fundamental aspect of Italian identity. This equality, which derives from the Christian religion, serves as a criterion for cultural compatibility in contrast to the Muslim religion, which is presented as inherently patriarchal, thus implying adherence to Catholic values (Dona, 2026) (Lasio, 2026, p.5). The Meloni’s government ideology reflects a form of national priority similar to the French RN. Policies supported by FdI prioritise Italian citizens and the traditional heterosexual Christian family which is presented as the foundation of the nation and the normative model to which migrants must conform (Lasio & al., 2026, p.2).

Finally, Giorgia Meloni has portrayed Islam and Muslim migration as incompatible with Christian cultural values and identity (for example, the feminicides discussed earlier, which she presents as the result of a failure of integration)., suggesting limits to full integration (Lasio & al., p.4, 2026). Therefore, Meloni’s government has increasingly turned toward externalisation strategies rather than national integration. Several agreements with third countries to process asylum applications or preventing departures before migrants reach Italian territory reflect the idea defended by Meloni that certain migrant groups are difficult or impossible to integrate to the national population (Fontana & al., 2024, p.1449) (Ambrosini, 2025, p.7). These measures are justified through a femonationalist narrative because restrictive migration control is presented as necessary to protect Italian women and preserve the nuclear family.

5.3 Conclusion:

These developments illustrate how Marine Le Pen and Giorgia Meloni concretely mobilise femonationalism in their political strategies. The instrumentalization of women's rights serves to legitimise nationalist and anti-immigration agendas. Their narrative strategy is increasingly present on social media, both leaders cultivate an image of ordinary, thereby normalising their political presence and creating a sense of proximity with their audiences. These platforms are also used as key channels to spread femonationalist messages.

The analysis shows both construct their discourse with an enemy: gender-equality themes are systematically linked to insecurity, Islam and migration. Migrant men from non-western countries are portrayed as the primary threat to women's safety, using this framing, they ignore the structural patriarchal roots of gender based violence.

As Farris demonstrates, femonationalism becomes institutionalised notably through integration policies. In both France and Italy, gender equality is used as a test of cultural compatibility, requiring migrants to adhere to specific values in order to access residence permits. Le Pen and Meloni influence these policies through the political direction they impose. In Italy, however, Meloni increasingly shifts towards externalisation policies rather than integration policies.

6. Conclusion

This paper aims to answer the question “How and why do female far-right leaders instrumentalize women’s rights to frame immigration as a threat to women?” through a comparative analysis of Marine Le Pen in France and Giorgia Meloni in Italy. The findings demonstrate that femonationalism is not only a rhetorical discourse but also a political strategy that can lead to concrete policy outcomes. The comparative analysis reveals that despite different historical and national contexts, with *laïcité* playing a central role in France and Catholicism remaining important in Italy, both leaders reach a similar result. They shift the origin of insecurity and violence against women away from patriarchal structures and instead place the responsibility on non-European immigrants, especially Muslims.

The analysis of narrative and institutional tools demonstrates that both leaders justify their femonationalist strategies through political narratives and implement them through public policies. In their speeches, public statements and social media posts, Giorgia Meloni and Marine Le Pen construct a strong opposition between “us” and “them”, where gender equality is presented as an already achieved Western value that is now threatened by a Muslim culture described as inherently misogynistic. At the institutional level, this ideology appears in strict integration policies in which respect for national values becomes a moral condition for obtaining residence permits.

The analysis of institutional and political tools is mostly based on the work of Farris, which demonstrates that the femonationalist discourse promoted by Giorgia Meloni and Marine Le Pen is translated into concrete migration and integration policies and served to justify these policies. In both France and Italy, migrants’ access to rights and long-term integration increasingly depends on their supposed adherence to national values, particularly gender equality between men and women. These policies present women’s rights not as universal rights but as cultural markers that migrants must adopt in order to prove their “compatibility” with the nation.

Although Le Pen and Meloni have broken the political glass ceiling, their rise to power does not necessarily represent progress for women’s rights at the national level. On the contrary, they support policies that value women mainly as reproducers and protectors of national identity. In this way, feminist causes are instrumentalized to legitimize exclusionary, anti-immigration and nationalist agendas. The feminism they promote is therefore not a progressive tool of liberation

but rather a political instrument used to secure borders and justify policies of externalization as well as racial and cultural hierarchies.

The political success of these two leaders is linked to the strategic use of their personal identities. Giorgia Meloni has built her image around the idea “I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother, I am a Christian”, connecting her private identity with her political authority to present herself as the mother of the nation. Her political style combines verbal aggression with maternal compassion allowing her to project strength while appearing trustworthy. In contrast, Marine Le Pen has used the strategy of de-demonization through a controlled femininity, using a softer approach/image to distance her party from its past. Both leaders embody a blonde and strong approach that serves as a tool to normalize exclusionary ideologies and far-right ideology. Paradoxically, while they promote the traditional nuclear family as a civilizational pillar, their own lives diverge from these models, showing that their use of gender is primarily a strategic political resource.

Although the topic of Giorgia Meloni and Marine Le Pen has already been widely studied, this thesis offers an original contribution by providing a detailed analysis of the paradoxes surrounding female far-right leaders and by examining the political toolbox used by both leaders through a femonationalist lens. Building on Farris’s theoretical framework, this study also provides a contemporary update by analysing how social media platforms act as political actors that shape feminist and migration debates and contribute to the normalization of far-right ideas.

This study acknowledges several limitations. For reasons of feasibility, the research focuses exclusively on two case studies: France and Italy. While these cases are relevant and contemporary, they do not represent the full diversity of the topic and therefore do not allow for broader generalizations at the European level. In addition, the qualitative data used in this research remains limited in scope.

Concerning the comparative interest, while both leaders achieve similar outcomes, the cases illustrate different ideological pathways. In France, the discourse is strongly shaped by *laïcité* which allows others religions to be framed as incompatible with republican and gender-equality values. Anti-immigration rhetoric is a central organizing principle through which many broader political issues are interpreted and justified. In Italy, the approach is rooted in Catholicism and maternalist ideas that emphasize the protection of the traditional family and national identity. Giorgia Meloni integrates anti-immigration discourse into a wider conservative agenda that also prioritizes themes such as family values, nationalism and demographic concerns.

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