

The Revival of the Far-Right in Italian Politics: A Visual Narrative Analysis of Images of Giorgia  
Meloni

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**Abstract**

This paper uses visual narrative analysis and the strategy of *layering* to study five images of Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni. I argue Meloni has used the medium of images to push her political agenda and legitimize her power. By doing so, this paper aims to answer the question: how does the Italian far-right mobilize images in order to frame and amplify their political agendas? With this, I find that Meloni has been able to effectively use images to evoke emotion, frame her ideas, and gain popularity among Italian voters. Moreover, I find that Meloni has also been able to insert herself into a larger far-right movement that has taken place across the world. Theoretically, this paper contributes to a popular area of international relations scholarship which covers visual narrative analysis writ large.

**Keywords: Visual Narrative Analysis, Layering, Giorgia Meloni, Emotions, Framing, Populism**

*“Mussolini was a good politician, in that everything he did, he did for Italy. There haven't been any politicians like that in the last fifty years.”*

*- Giorgia Meloni, 1996*

## **Introduction**

Following her victory in the September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022 general election in Italy, Giorgia Meloni was appointed Prime Minister of Italy by Italian President Sergio Mattarella on October 21, 2022. While Meloni's victory did not come as a shock, many have called this Italy's farthest-right government since Benito Mussolini in the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> As leader of the *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brothers of Italy) Party, she joined with Matteo Salvini's *Lega* (League) Party and former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* (Go Italy) Party to form the centre-right coalition.<sup>2</sup> Despite promising President Mattarella that her government would govern for all, she has stuck true to her right-wing politics since becoming Prime Minister. This, however, is not surprising. Between Hungary's Viktor Orbán and Sweden's Ulf Kristersson, Europe has not been immune to the rightward shift of politics across the world. This global shift in politics has been studied at lengths in international relations scholarship, however, there is a renaissance of scholarship surrounding the use of images in global politics. According to Michael C. Williams, “images pervade contemporary politics” as the international public has always been closely connected to the power of images and visual storytelling to produce and stabilize the

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Kirby, “Giorgia Meloni: Italy's far-right wins election and vows to govern for all,” *BBC*, September 26, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63029909>.

<sup>2</sup> Due to his recent death, Silvio Berlusconi is no longer the leader of *Forza Italia*. At the time of writing, a new leader has yet to be elected. For more on this, see Angela Giuffrida, “Berlusconi's death poses challenge for his party and for Meloni,” *The Guardian*, June 12, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/12/berlusconis-death-poses-challenge-for-his-party-and-for-meloni>.

political authority and their political leaders.<sup>3</sup> With this, it is expected that the far-right would use images to their advantage. Images in themselves are very powerful as they have the ability to bring life to an event that has occurred. Pair this power with deliberate framing, storytelling, and the amplifying voice of a politician, and what you get is an image that becomes a visual representation of a policy, a leader, or a group of people.

While this may seem far-fetched, it is quite easy to look at examples of images throughout history that immediately connect the viewer to a historical event or a government policy. For example, in the early 2000s the photo of the “Hooded Man” was released to the public and has since become synonymous with the illegal torture tactics used by United States in Abu Ghraib,<sup>4</sup> or the photo of the American sailor kissing a woman in New York’s Time Square that has become a symbol of American triumph in the Pacific during the Second World War. While not all images may have the same “icon” status as these examples, it is clear that images can contribute to our understanding of the world. The negative response from the world upon seeing the “Hooded Man” is just one example of how images can easily evoke emotions from its audience. Politicians have learned to grasp this emotion that comes from images and have used it to their advantage. Whether it be to attack their political opponents, voice their support for a policy, or to propose a new law, politicians from all sides of the political spectrum have used images to their advantage.

This paper seeks to analyze the use of images and their impact that they have on the world. More specifically, I will explore a number of images of Giorgia Meloni and apply what Freistein & Gadinger have called visual narrative analysis in order to argue that Meloni has used

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<sup>3</sup> Michael C. Williams, “International Relations in the Age of the Image,” *International Studies Quarterly* 62 (2018).

<sup>4</sup> Lene Hansen, “How images make world politics: International icons and the case of Abu Ghraib,” *Review of International Studies* 41 (September 2014).

the medium of images to push her political agenda and legitimize her power. By doing so, this paper aims to answer the question: how does the Italian far-right mobilize images in order to frame and amplify their political agendas?

In this analysis, I will use strategy of *layering* in order to analyze each image. Coined by Freistein & Gadinger, layering is a strategy for visual narrative analysis that consists of four parts.<sup>5</sup> The first step is to describe and analyze the image.<sup>6</sup> Step two is to turn to the textual comments in order to reconstruct how the image and text are positioned (or not) towards each other.<sup>7</sup> Third is to add the narrative context, in terms of plots, roles, and relations.<sup>8</sup> The last step is to identify a larger structure which refers to how the image can fit into a larger societal or global discourse.<sup>9</sup>

This paper will begin with a literature review on the study of images in international relations and how it relates to visual narrative analysis. In doing so, I will be able to effectively show the linkages between images, emotions, and framing. This argument then turns to an overview of far-right Italian politics post-1945, as well as a background of Meloni's political party to provide a background of the far-right politics that currently exist in Italy, specifically focusing on migration and nationalism in order to illustrate the relevance to my analysis. This essay will then provide analyses of five images of Giorgia Meloni and apply the strategy of layering as a way of dissecting the images and the importance of their use. I will then conclude with a larger analysis of all five photos as a way of fitting them into the larger far-right global movement.

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<sup>5</sup> Katja Freistein and Frank Gadinger, "Populist stories of honest men and proud mothers: A visual narrative analysis," *Review of International Studies* 46 (December 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Freistein and Gadinger, "Populist stories".

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

## Literature Review

Visual narrative analysis has created a renaissance-like spike in international relations literature as it has allowed scholars to understand the importance that images play in our everyday lives. It has allowed for new understandings of political ideologies, decision-making, as well as public opinion. Moreover, it opens the opportunity for a deeper grasp on the connection between images, emotions, and storytelling.

The following section will analyze the relevant literature on the study of images and visual narrative analysis in international relations. The section will be broken into three separate parts: (1) emotional responses to imagery; (2) visual framing; and (3) layering.

### *Emotional Responses to Imagery*

The literature surrounding visual narrative analysis focuses heavily on the emotional effects of imagery and visuals on the audience. Authors like Crilley and Chatterje-Doody dive deeply into this with their article *Emotions and war on YouTube: affective investments in RT's visual narratives of the conflict in Syria*.<sup>10</sup> Although Crilley and Chatterje-Doody applaud the “visual turn” within international relations scholarship that draws attention to the importance of visual media within contemporary global politics, they are quick to identify the lack of scholarship that engages with how people actually interpret, make sense of, and express emotions towards the visual media that they view.<sup>11</sup> By looking specifically at how the Russian government justified its intervention in Syria, they posit that visual media has political significance not simply because of its content, but because of the ways in which this content

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<sup>10</sup> Rhys Crilley and Precious N. Chatterje-Doody, “Emotions and war on YouTube: affective investments in RT’s visual narratives of the conflict in Syria,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 33 (2020).

<sup>11</sup> Rhys Crilley and Precious N. Chatterje-Doody, “Emotions and war.”

evokes an affective and emotional response to its audience.<sup>12</sup> Words alone often are unable to carry the power that images and visuals are able to. As a result, emotions are effectively manifested through the media in which they are expressed.

Crilley and Chatterje-Doody specifically analyze the emotional response to media through a qualitative analysis of the Russian state-funded international broadcaster RT (previously known as Russia Today) and its videos produced and uploaded to YouTube surrounding the Russian military presence in Syria. As this was Russia's first "live television war," RT spared no expense in using semi-staged spectacles to allow the audience to experience a controlled and safe version of the action.<sup>13</sup> For example, RT's videos would sometimes discuss a "breaking news" event in which Russian president, Vladimir Putin had authorized an airstrike on a specific target. A clip would then be showed of the target before the airstrike, when the airstrike hits, as well as the immediate aftermath of that airstrike.<sup>14</sup> They conclude that not only are these videos crucial for understanding how Russia claimed legitimacy for military intervention, but the legitimacy itself relied heavily on the emotions of the audience. As they put it, "how people come to know, think about and respond to developments in the world is deeply entangled with how these developments are made visible to them," and RT was able to execute this flawlessly through a series of YouTube videos aimed towards the Russian public.<sup>15</sup>

While an effective way of studying visual narratives, analyzing emotional response to an image is a difficult task, at least in terms of international relations, as is apparent in Alder-Nissen, Andersen and Hansen's *Images, emotions, and international politics: the death of Alan Kurdi*.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Rebecca Adler-Nissen, Katrine Emilie Andersen, and Lene Hansen, "Images, emotions, and international politics: the death of Alan Kurdi," *Review of International Studies* 46 (October 2019).

In this article, the public response to the photographs of Alan Kurdi, a young Syrian child refugee, who was found dead along the shore of the Mediterranean Sea. As they note, the photographs of Kurdi did not produce new information about the refugee crisis as it was well known that people, including children, died trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea. The power of the image came with the photograph's ability to shift the epistemic terrain of migration discourse from statistics and numbers to a human with a face and a story.<sup>17</sup> More specifically, they argue that the photo had an "iconic victim effect" that captured people's attention and generated immediate empathy.<sup>18</sup> They note that the image of Kurdi is a clear illustration of an image that constitutes an emotional register of sympathy, pity, and compassion and how those emotions can be connected to different policies.<sup>19</sup>

The image of Kurdi was able to evoke such an emotional response as visual representations mobilize populations through emotive-aesthetic forms of communications. These responses were, as analyzed by the authors, mobilized specifically through various policy responses regarding the refugee crisis with specific reference to Kurdi. As such, the iconic image of the young Kurdi had become a symbol for the refugee crisis facing Europe. Resulting from this, as the authors put it, the "emotional bundling" that is paired with this iconic symbol of young Kurdi increased the pressure on foreign policymakers, and also decreased the precision of what policy changes are being demanded.<sup>20</sup>

Diving deeper into the idea of "icons" and "iconic images" in global politics, it is clear that they have a place in the ability of an image to evoke emotions to its audience. As Hansen puts it in her article *How images make world politics: International icons and the case of Abu*

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<sup>17</sup> Alder-Nissen, Andersen, and Hansen, "Images, emotions, and international politics."

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

*Ghraib*, images do more than just transmit “what happens”: they condense and constitute the meaning of major events.<sup>21</sup> Through an analysis of the image of the “Hooded Man” that surfaced in 2004, she finds that the image’s rise to iconic status has been reproduced not just by its frequent reproduction, but by the numerous ways in which it has been appropriated across a variety of genres, media, and locations.<sup>22</sup> In this article, Hansen sets out to provide a set of concepts and distinctions that allow us to identify “international icons” and to develop a framework through which one can analyze the ways in which icons impact world politics.<sup>23</sup>

Icons themselves do not “speak” foreign policy. They rely upon text and media for their production and circulation. On top of this, images may be iconic in different ways to different people. Hansen suggests a tripartite into the categories of a “foreign policy icon,” a “regional icon,” and a “global icon” based on how widely an image is circulated and recognized.<sup>24</sup>

However, it is hard to quantify and measure the extent to which people recognize images, even within domestic contexts. This is especially true for “regional icons” as the iconic image may contain reference or explicit representation to a local or domestic issue that would only make sense to those who live in that region.

Nonetheless, in the case of “international icons” and the image of the “Hooded Man” from Abu Ghraib, Hansen finds that this image has become synonymous with the American invasion of Iraq in an entirely negative way.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, this image has had such an “iconic” effect that it is has the potential to be appropriated into commentary not related to the United States’ involvement in the region.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Hansen, “How images make world politics.”

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

Not all images, however, have to be “iconic” to evoke emotion. In *Visualising the foreign and the domestic in diaspora diplomacy: images and the online politics of recognition in #givingtoindia*, Jen Dickinson suggests that images can evoke emotion so long as they resonate within the viewer.<sup>27</sup> More specifically, the paper suggests that in an era of the increased use of digital platforms in diplomatic work, answering the question of emotional response to diplomatic work requires engagement with the visual richness of images found in online political representations.<sup>28</sup> From this, Dickinson argues that images were used to envision diaspora as part of a “network of networks” that connected them together via domestic and foreign policy interests with the Indian state.<sup>29</sup> The practice of diaspora diplomacy requires a wide range of consular and public activity that strengthen the emotional bonds that diaspora communities retain with their home countries. In other words, diaspora diplomacy is only effective if the country is able to emotionally connect with their audience. In order to do this, the use of images is deployed. More specifically, the images were used to envision diaspora as part of a “network of networks” that connected them to domestic and foreign policy interests of the Indian state.<sup>30</sup>

Through her analysis of social media images, Dickinson finds that digital mediums have the potential to empower those with an existing structural advantage.<sup>31</sup> More so, she finds that the Indian government was able to effectively connect with diaspora across the globe by effectively tapping into their emotions, specifically surrounding their connection to their home nation.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Jen Dickinson, “Visualising the foreign and the domestic in diaspora diplomacy: images and the online politics of recognition in #givingtoindia,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 33 (2020).

<sup>28</sup> Dickinson, “Visualising the foreign and the domestic.”

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

### *Visual Framing*

Aside from the emotional response to images, a large portion of the literature on visual narrative analysis is focused on the idea of visual framing. More simply put, the way in which the visual is given context and presented to the audience. In their paper *The age of terrorism in the media: The visual narratives of the Islamic State Group's Dabiq magazine*, Fahamy argues that visual framing is an organizing mechanism that contributes to our understanding of the world.<sup>33</sup> From a theoretical perspective, the process involves the selection of images to guide a dominant narrative. As Fahamy puts it, images are never neutral.<sup>34</sup> Even if images are not staged, images still need to be selected to portray specific events, and these images cannot possibly portray the multifaceted reality that we live in.

The easiest way to explain framing is as an attempt to present complex issues “efficiently and in a way that makes them accessible to lay audiences because they play to existing cognitive schemas.”<sup>35</sup> As revealed by Fahamy, there are four levels of visual framing. First, visuals are denotative systems, in which visuals are described.<sup>36</sup> In other words, it answers what or who is being portrayed. The second level takes into account pictorial conventions including social distance (i.e., camera angle and focus), visual modality (i.e., colour and depth), and subject behaviour (i.e., poses and actions).<sup>37</sup> The third step refers to the connotative systems in which the visual suggests ideas and concepts attached to it.<sup>38</sup> The final step refers to visuals as ideological

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<sup>33</sup> Shahira S. Fahamy, “The age of terrorism in the media: The visual narratives of the Islamic State Groups *Dabiq* magazine, *The International Communication Gazette* 82 (2020).

<sup>34</sup> Fahamy, “The age of terrorism in the media.”

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

representations.<sup>39</sup> This step analyzes how images are employed as powerful tools to shape public consciousness and understanding.

Using this methodological framework, Fahamy analyzes visual framing in the Islamic State's English version of the *Dabiq* magazine. This magazine is used primarily as a recruitment tool for the Islamic State. In her findings, Fahamy argues that the images produced by the Islamic State follow a narrative central to the organization's strategic communications: being called an "Idealistic Caliphate".<sup>40</sup> On top of this, the brutality of the group that was jumped on by mainstream media was only around 10% of the images portrayed. Almost 90% of the visual messages in the magazine were framed as power, both political and religious.<sup>41</sup> As Fahamy puts it, this was possible due to the fact that framing is less obtrusive in images than it is in text. This is due to the "convincing nature of photographs, their ability to mimic the appearance of the real world, and their ability to convey the impression that they are documentations of reality".<sup>42</sup>

A similar study was done in Winter's *Framing war: visual propaganda, the Islamic State, and the battle for east Mosul* in which the effects of how propaganda is used to create counter-factual visual narratives during times of war are studied.<sup>43</sup> More specifically, it looks at how the Islamic State communicated the 100-day battle for East Mosul.

Using a methodological framework developed by French theorists Jacques Ellul, Winter employs a qualitative analysis of over 1,200 media products published by the Islamic State.<sup>44</sup> Winter found that the Islamic State used an array of propaganda to repudiate enemy information

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Charlie Winter, "Framing war: visual propaganda, the Islamic State, and the battle for east Mosul," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 33 (2020).

<sup>44</sup> Winter, "Framing war."

operations and establish a visual strategic narrative that would ultimately enable it to emerge from the fight unscathed.<sup>45</sup> The visuals were framed in a way that perpetuated the myth of the Islamic State utopia, similar to the findings of Fahamy. The visuals used served as supporting evidence for its narrative of defiance that the Islamic State has used since its creation.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, the Islamic State framed and entertained media events of their own accord that were geared towards giving pause to supporters online and fighters on the ground, prompting them to think and suppress any personal doubts or concerns of their actions.<sup>47</sup>

Continuing down the path of digital communication, van Noort's *Strategic narratives, visuality and infrastructure in the digital age: the case of China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative* explores the methodological foundations of visual narratives through a case study of China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative.<sup>48</sup> According to van Noort, visual narratives are "a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors."<sup>49</sup> As such, visuality is an important communication tool for political actors to give meaning to infrastructure, and to achieve public approval among target audiences.<sup>50</sup>

Van Noort goes on to explore how images give meaning to visual narratives, specifically through framing. More specifically, the visual "offers *alternative forms* of presenting information."<sup>51</sup> For example, images can alter the scope of information depending on how it is

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Carolijn van Noort, "Strategic narratives, visuality, and infrastructure in the digital age: the case of China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 33 (2020).

<sup>49</sup> van Noort, "Strategic narratives."

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

framed by the producer.<sup>52</sup> Looking at van Noort's case study, it is clear that China's visual communication of the Maritime Silk Road Initiative is carefully framed to elicit support for their infrastructure vision. More specifically, China associates infrastructure projects with desirable behaviour in a state's foreign relations.<sup>53</sup>

### *Layering*

The final portion of the literature on visual narrative analysis is focused on the concept of *layering*. First introduced by Freistein and Gadinger in their article *Populist stories of honest men and proud mothers: A visual narrative analysis*, layering is a multi-layered framework for analyzing images, particularly useful when studying the far-right.<sup>54</sup> This article attempts to explore images in their larger political context to show how they function as attempts at interpretive closure by conveying what is politically possible in terms of policy options.<sup>55</sup> Often, imagery used by the far-right appeals to fantasy, which with embedded narratives, allow for a variety of responses from the audience. While a speech or interview can often be seen as detached from reality and elite-driven, images are "vital elements of political storytelling whose universality allow them to address issues in a manner that is distinct to official statements."<sup>56</sup> In other words, images allow for politicians and political figures to create their own narrative with storytelling that will better connect with their audience.

Freistein and Gadinger argue that narrative constructions of the world are attempts at making sense of reality.<sup>57</sup> When narrative is the main device for making sense of social action, it

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Freistein and Gadinger, "Populist stories."

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

is simultaneously a political device that generates legitimacy and mutual agreements. With this, it can be argued that the successful legitimation of a political project relies on the narrative that is attached to it.<sup>58</sup> When applying the process of layering to this, they state that it is crucial to understand images and metaphors are key points that interweave storylines, exemplify certain plots and are established means of transporting emotions.<sup>59</sup> Images themselves do not play a passive role but can be understood as an “iconic act” that underlines the performative dimensions of showing and seeing. The metaphors and images allow for the reconstruction of narratives, and may eventually, over time, become so accepted that they are no longer considered metaphorical by the audience.<sup>60</sup> The metaphors and images are characterized by descriptive and perspective power. By highlighting some aspects and obscuring others (framing), they organize perceptions of reality and suggest appropriate actions in light of those perceptions.<sup>61</sup>

In terms of doing visual narrative analysis, they argue that images are another shortcut to identifying narratives since they incorporate different layers of information, ranging from obvious depictions to allusions and interrelation between “being, knowing and becoming.”<sup>62</sup> With this, images that also include written text, such as an election campaign poster, combine imagery with clear textual messages, often “with allusions to political narratives in both genres.”<sup>63</sup> Layering, as a technique, combines both the iconological and narratological approaches to understanding images and visuality. It is a reconstruction of narratives that starts by contextualizing metaphors and images. Layering also makes a further interpretive move towards understanding the underlying presuppositions of the images and their performative

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

dimension by pointing out the interpretive closure that narratives may produce for future political action.<sup>64</sup>

Layering is a four-step process in which each step builds off the last in order to provide a “full picture” of the image being studied. The first step consists of describing and analyzing the image; the composition, the atmosphere, and the symbolism can be studied in isolation from all other contextual information.<sup>65</sup> In step two, the textual comment is added. In other words, reconstruct how the image and text are positioned towards each other. For example, whether they are complementary or juxtaposed.<sup>66</sup> With this, we can analyze how they create and delimit opportunities for certain interpretations and affective responses. The third step adds the narrative context, in terms of plots, roles, and relations.<sup>67</sup> Different images can be related to each other to show how a political narrative is created around metaphors and images. The final step involves identifying a larger, polyphonic structure which “most explicitly demonstrates the importance of narrative studies in social sciences.”<sup>68</sup> This can be achieved by, for example, connecting a series of images to a larger policy decision, political movement, or political ideology.

Freistein and Gadinger continue their work on layering and visual narrative analysis in their paper *Performing leadership: international politics through the lens of visual narrative analysis* in which they follow the trend of reflecting on the combination of visuality, narratives, and emotions.<sup>69</sup> The authors follow from their last article and argue that images are key points that interweave storylines and exemplify certain plots.<sup>70</sup> They are indicators of different

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Katja Freistein and Frank Gadinger, “Performing leadership: international politics through the lens of visual narrative analysis,” *Political Research Exchange* 4 (September 2022).

<sup>70</sup> Freistein and Gadinger, “Performing leadership.”

narratives and therefore the first available object for interpretation. That is where layered analysis is crucial: to capture the interplay between the elements of the image.<sup>72</sup>

Continuing even further in their literature on layering and visual narrative analysis, Freistein and Gadinger provide three examples of a layered analysis in their book chapter *Deconstructing the “Hollow Man”: visual narrative analysis and world politics*.<sup>73</sup> With this chapter, they argue that current international relations literature on the far-right “downplays the deeper changes and fundamental democratic risks posed by right-wing populist styles and practices for the underlying rules of how world politics is conducted.”<sup>74</sup> They continue to state that the success of narratives depends on established sociocultural narrative conventions that build on cultural repertoires, including iconic images or common stories that do not necessarily make sense in other communities.<sup>75</sup>

In this paper, their analysis is oriented towards the use of the iconological approach for analysing images.<sup>76</sup> This approach allows us to see how images symbolically perform what we see by taking their social embeddedness into account.<sup>77</sup> In a layered analysis of three images of Donald Trump, they find that Trump’s message of business instead of diplomacy and hyper-masculinity are established by means of visual self-representations.<sup>78</sup> Donald Trump’s personal inclinations, which bent American policy to his beliefs, challenged former allies, and weakened

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Katja Freistein and Frank Gadinger, “Deconstructing the ‘Hollow Man’: visual narrative analysis and world politics,” in *The Routledge Companion to Narrative Theory*, edited by Paul Dawson and Maria Mäkelä (New York: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>74</sup> Freistein and Gadinger, “Deconstructing the ‘Hollow Man’.”

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

multilateral institutions, are all present in some way in each of the photos analyzed by the authors.<sup>79</sup>

All in all, the relevant literature on visual narrative analysis is quite extensive. Understanding the emotions that images evoke are crucial for grasping the importance that visual narrative analysis plays. On top of this, as was previously stated, all images are framed in some way, there are no “neutral” images. As a result, a deep understanding of how framing plays into the selection of images is crucial for the success of a visual narrative analysis of images. With all of this, the strategy of layering encapsulates all of these elements of visual narrative analysis and allows us to effectively study the less-than-obvious messages hidden within them by the producer.

## **Methodology**

As mentioned earlier, this paper will provide a qualitative visual narrative analysis of five images of Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni using the technique of layering. Undertaking a layered analysis of the chosen images, it will aim to answer the question: how does the Italian far-right mobilize images in order to frame and amplify their political agendas? In doing so, I will also provide insight into a secondary question: what can visual narrative analysis teach us about image mobilization writ large?

The images I have selected span across Meloni’s rise to power. The images encompass Meloni at her party rallies, her political campaign running for Prime Minister, a campaign poster for her most recent election campaign, as well as recent and current photos as Prime Minister. Each photo selected has been heavily circulated and used around Italy, with some being circulated heavily around the world.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

### *Limitations*

I have chosen to limit the scope to images after Meloni held a *Fratelli d'Italia* convention in December of 2017 in the city of Trieste. It was only at this point that she emerged from the shadows of Berlusconi (in whose government she had been a Minister) and the Lega leader Matteo Salvini. Her rise to fame really accelerated after the *Fratelli d'Italia* party forged its ideology in that convention. Secondly, I have only selected photos that are well-known around Italy and have been heavily circulated and used. Although lesser-known photos may be great examples for a layered analysis, the photos themselves had not been seen by many people so their effects were electorally insignificant. Lastly, the photos chosen are all staged, or at least semi-staged. I have chosen to select only staged photos to highlight how the far-right uses images to advance their political agenda. This is best seen in images staged by the party and by Meloni as a great deal of thought has gone into producing the photo.

## **Background of the Italian Far Right and the *Fratelli d'Italia* Party**

### *Post-War Italy, Birth of the Movimento Sociale Italiano, and Silvio Berlusconi*

Prior to his death, notorious fascist Benito Mussolini had ruled Italy since 1922. However, the conclusion of the Second World War in Europe brought about a time of great change. The *Partigiani* (partisans; a group of anti-fascist resistance fighters in Northern Italy), along with support from the allied powers had retaken control of Italy and determined to rid the country of fascism. However, after the Germans and fascists surrendered, the Partisans were quickly disarmed and disbanded, and the police were purged of any partisan elements as a way to

ensure the security of the “continuity of the state.”<sup>80</sup> Soon after, the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI; Italian Social Movement) was founded in December 1946 by second-level leaders of the fascist regime and of the Italian Social Republic.<sup>81</sup> The stated purpose of the party was to give voice to those who still identified with the past regime.

Despite the first postwar governments consisting of parties of the left, the MSI party seemed to have immediate success as by the 1948 election, the social groups which had supported the fascist regime had managed to climb back into their positions of influence, despite the best efforts of the Italian state to purge all the former fascist supporters from the government.<sup>82</sup> However, the Italian state has usually been considered to have a weak central government and inefficient bureaucracy that consist of a multitude of powers often at odds with each other. On top of this, the judiciary had not been in favour of these purges due to the fact that the purges go against the pillar of nonretroactivity, a pillar of law seen across most “rule-of-law” states. All of these factors combined to create a climate in which the groups in power refused to undergo judgement for their past deals with the fascist regime and hindered the work of “de-fascization” in all possible ways.<sup>83</sup> As a result, by 1960, out of the 64 first-class prefects, 62 had served under fascism, along with all 241 deputy prefects, the 135 chiefs of the state police, and the 139 deputy police.<sup>84</sup>

During the 1950s, under the direction of Giorgio Almirante, the MSI had moderate influence in the country’s politics. However, in July 1960, following a violent protest outside of a

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<sup>80</sup> Franco Ferraresi, “Fascist Resurgence and Reorganization, ca. 1945-1955,” In *Threats to democracy: the radical right in Italy after the war* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996).

<sup>81</sup> Mario Caciagli, The Movimento sociale Italiano-Destra Nazionale and neo-fascism in Italy,” *West European Politics* 11 (1988).

<sup>82</sup> Ferraresi, “Fascist Resurgence.”

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

convention held by the MSI in the city of Genoa, there was a reorientation of the Italian political system which changed the relative position and role of the MSI.<sup>85</sup> For the rest of the decade, the party was, except for very rare occasions, excluded from parliamentary and political alliances and had been reduced to a position of complete isolation.<sup>86</sup> By the early 1970s, Almirante had succeeded in re-establishing the position of the MSI among the leading actors of the Italian political scene despite its youth movement intensifying its terrorist operations on the streets of Italy.<sup>87</sup> Despite these efforts, the MSI party had seen relatively small amounts of political success and was eventually disbanded in January 1995.

Its dissolution had come as no surprise, most of its supporters had already left and joined to support various other far-right parties, namely *Lega Nord* (Northern League; now known solely as “*Lega*”). Originally a northern secessionist and regional party, Lega had managed to garner large amounts of support due to its populist appeal.<sup>88</sup> However, the success of the party of was overshadowed by Silvio Berlusconi’s announcement that he was forming his political party, *Forza Italia* (FI), and was making a bid for Prime Minister.<sup>89</sup> Berlusconi’s run for Prime Minister had begun with slight uses of populist tactics, however, the populist rhetoric had slowed shortly after his successful election campaign.<sup>90</sup> Berlusconi formed four governments as Prime Minister and was until his recent death still the leader of his party, FI, that participates in the current centre-right coalition that leads Italy’s government in the present.

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<sup>85</sup> Caciagli, “The Movimento sociale Italiano.”

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Roberto D’Alimonte, “How the populists won in Italy,” *Journal of Democracy* 30 (2019).

<sup>89</sup> Antonio Castaldo and Luca Verzichelli, “Technocratic Populism in Italy after Berlusconi: The Trendsetter and his Disciples,” *Politics and Governance* 8 (2020).

<sup>90</sup> Castaldo and Verzichelli, “Technocratic Populism.”

*Fratelli d'Italia and the Rise of Giorgia Meloni*

Born in Rome in 1977, Giorgia Meloni grew up in a middle-class neighbourhood and was always involved in politics. In the early 1990s she joined the youth wing of the MSI and in 1998 she was elected as a councillor in the provincial administration of Rome.<sup>91</sup> Meloni's success, in large part, can be attributed to Berlusconi. During Berlusconi's fourth government, while Meloni was a member of the *Alleanza Nazionale* (National Alliance; AN), he had appointed her as Minister of Youth, making her the youngest minister in Italian history, as well as the first woman to hold that post.<sup>92</sup>

Meloni, along with other former members of the AN, formed the *Fratelli d'Italia* (FDI) party in 2012 as a result of the split of the centre-right party, *Il Popolo della Libertà* (The People of Freedom), created by Berlusconi in November 2007.<sup>93</sup> Berlusconi's coalition party was dissolved due to the discontent many had with his leadership after his resignation as Prime Minister following an ongoing eurozone crisis.<sup>94</sup> While Meloni could have easily joined either Lega or FI as they both were already established right-wing parties, she felt that there needed to be a party that better represented the Italian people who identified with the right-wing of politics.

Upon its creation, the FDI was relatively weak and had little support. Their first real party ideology came from Meloni after the 2014 general election, in which she claimed it was necessary to return to the "early days of identity politics and nationalist ideology."<sup>95</sup> However, far-right had the opportunity to really re-emerge in Italian politics following the Renzi

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<sup>91</sup> Alessia Donà, "The rise of the Radical Right in Italy: the case of Fratelli d'Italia," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 27 (2022).

<sup>92</sup> Barbie Latza Nadeau, "Femme Fascista: How Giorgia Meloni became the star of Italy's far right," *World Policy Journal* 35 (2018).

<sup>93</sup> Donà, "The rise of the Radical Right in Italy."

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

government, which held power from 2014-2016. As Prime Minister, Renzi failed to recognize the depth of the post-2008 recession and the gravity of the unemployment it generated. He also underestimated the effect that immigration was having on voters.<sup>96</sup> And after a planned constitutional reform failed in a national referendum, he resigned as Prime Minister.<sup>97</sup>

With this opportunity, the FDI held a convention in 2017 convention in which they announced their turn to far-right politics. The political manifesto presented at this convention contained rhetoric of carnal nationalism. At its core, carnal nationalism is a far-right ideology which states that immigrants are never able to assimilate into a society as they do not share a single, shared history with the people who live in the country that they immigrated to. For carnal nationalists, communities and cultures must be forcefully defended because they express the spirit of a specific context, a unique way of life, personality, and destiny.<sup>98</sup> In Meloni's case, she called for the centrality of a national identity, expressed the desire of a single and homogenous community sharing a common history, cultural heritage, and traditional values.<sup>99</sup> In other words, the FDI had appointed themselves as the protector of national interests and of national identity.

It was also here that the FDI took their first Euro-sceptic position. Meloni had emphasized the necessity of reforming treaties towards a confederal Europe made up of free and sovereign states and proposed that Italy should hold a referendum on European Union membership.<sup>100</sup> She also accused the European Union of "ethnic replacement" in which the national community is substituted with another through massive migration in a country with low

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<sup>96</sup> D'Alimonte, "How the populists won in Italy."

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> José Pedro Zúquete, *The identitarians: The movement against globalism and Islam in Europe* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018).

<sup>99</sup> Donà, "The rise of the Radical Right in Italy."

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

birthrates.<sup>101</sup> Meloni refers to this as the “Islamification” of Italy. Meloni stressed that the core aim of the FDI is the defence of national borders and community by restoring a sense of national belonging and of national pride among Italians. According to the FDI, feeling and acting as a patriot represents the “only antidote against the two threats of culture homologation and the Islamification process.”<sup>102</sup>

Looking at immigration specifically, Meloni stated that immigration is not a right and neither is a migrant’s access to Italian citizenship. Rather, immigration should be a concession of the State, according to its necessity.<sup>103</sup> On this basis the FDI argued that Italy has the right to defend its national borders and stop illegal immigration in all cases, even with military action. At this conference, Meloni also introduced the idea of *Prima gli Italiani* (Italians First), a policy in which priority is given to Italian citizens for jobs, housing, and social benefits.<sup>104</sup>

The 2018 general election saw a large increase in support for the FDI, with 6.44% of the vote. In the subsequent years, Meloni continued to hold political rallies and publicly speak out against the ruling party in Italy, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic due to stringent lockdowns in Italy, and for what she claimed were “ineffective recovery policies.”<sup>105</sup> With her rising popularity, paired with a crisis in government which led to the fall of the Draghi government, Meloni and the FDI claimed victory at the September 2022 snap election with almost 26% of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies. Currently, she sits as the Italian Prime Minister and as the head of the centre-right coalition, consisting of the FDI, Salvini’s Lega, Berlusconi’s FI, and Lupi’s *Noi Moderati* (Us Moderates).

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

## **Visual Narrative Analysis**

The following section will analyze five photos of Giorgia Meloni. Through this analysis, I will show that analyzing photos is not only useful for understanding how Meloni carefully plans her image, but I will also identify how each photo fits into a larger political ideology that Meloni is trying to present. The first of the photos is from a rally held by Meloni in the city of Bologna in December 2019. The second photo is of a campaign poster placed inside of one of her political rallies in Rome in the lead up to the September 2022 election. The third photo features Meloni, along with her fellow political leaders of the centre-right coalition that currently makes up Italy's government. The fourth photo is the most recent, from May 2023, of Meloni in the aftermath of the floods in the region of Emilia-Romagna. The final photo is from a small demonstration that Meloni organized in Bergamo, a city in the region of Lombardy, in August 2019. With these photos, I will be able to effectively point out where and how Meloni uses the images to frame and amplify her political agenda and appeal to her followers.

*God, Homeland, and Family*



Figure 1 God, Homeland and Family, December 2019

Photo Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2022/sep/24/giorgia-meloni-is-a-danger-to-italy-and-the-rest-of-europe-far-right>

Politicians are no stranger to political rallies, no matter what side of the political spectrum they fall under. However, not all political rallies garner as much attention as the one depicted in the picture. We see Giorgia Meloni, arms outstretched holding a banner that translates to, “we defend god, homeland and family”. Meloni is placed at a podium, likely just after giving a speech. The venue, *Europauditorium* in the Piazza della Costituzione in Bologna, features a rather old-looking, run-down stage featuring two monitors on the floor – likely for notes that Meloni has prepared for the speech – and features a row of white flowers along the front of the stage. The room itself, although able to seat 2,000, seems very small as the crowd behind Meloni is packed in tightly.

The crowd is composed of cheering supporters as Italian flags and FDI party flags wave throughout the room. The front rows of the crowd are all older men in suits, likely members of the press as some appear to have necklaces resembling press badges. Looking at Meloni herself, her attire resembles something of “business casual,” while most other politicians would usually opt for a more formal outfit. This style fits in well with her middle-class upbringing, as well as the type of politician she projects herself as to her followers. She is wearing a red blazer with a red shirt underneath, along with black dress pants. Her choice of colour is likely no accident, red is one of the colours on the Italian flag. Traditionally, red represents the bloodshed from the wars of independence fought in Italy during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This choice of clothing is paired with a wide smile, looking directly into a camera, but not the one that is taking this photo. While this may not seem to be too extraordinary, the image of a smiling, younger woman is not a common sight in an Italian political sphere that has traditional been dominated by older men. While her political ideologies themselves represent a stark change towards an even farther-right in Italian politics, it is not noticeable as the change Meloni herself represents as a young woman.

The banner itself puts forth an interesting message. It not only reflects the FDI’s beliefs as a party, but it marks a connection between this rally and the rally held in Trieste in 2017 that was discussed earlier. Meloni has gone out of her way to securitize “god,” the “homeland,” and “family.” Traditionally, these are not topics that are thought about in the context of security or defence. However, Meloni’s securitization of the issues shows that she believes these, as she puts it, “traditions and values,” are under attack in Italy, previously calling for, “... patriots to defend our identity from the process of Islamification.”<sup>106</sup> On top of this, the order in which the words are listed is very intentional. She begins by stating that god is, above all else, defended within her

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<sup>106</sup> Giorgia Meloni, “Le Tesi di Trieste per il movimento dei patrioti,” December 2019, Available at: <https://www.fratelli-italia.it/le-tesi-trieste/>.

party. Next is the homeland, which calls to her anti-migrant/anti-refugee rhetoric that she made herself famous on. Lastly, family, which falls third on the list of priorities, speaks to the weight that she places on the idea of the “replacement” and “Islamification” of Italy. Meloni herself has children and will often describe herself as a mother before all else. This follows suit with her ideological beliefs of family, and the importance that family plays in Italian culture.

On the screens placed on either side of her on the floor, the words, “Italy thinking big... business, jobs, infrastructure – the other possible maneuver.” On the one hand, this is the classic politician rhetoric of “we will create jobs and invest in business.” On the other hand, it specifically mentions infrastructure. With Meloni’s past involvement in fascist parties, as well as the FDI being referred to as the new fascist party in Italy, it is hard not to draw the connection to Benito Mussolini. If Italians are asked in about Mussolini, their usual response falls along the lines of, “at least the trains were always on time.” This is due to Mussolini, although being a brutal dictator, heavily investing in, and creating new infrastructure in Italy.

For Meloni, choosing Bologna for this rally was a strategic move. At the rally, she stated that, “... we have not chosen Bologna by chance... because Emilia-Romagna is in danger of being one of the regions most taxed by a government that is making a maneuver all about threats, handcuffs, taxes and waste.”<sup>107</sup> This was paired with a Christmas tree in the foyer of the venue featuring presents referring to the party’s beliefs: a naval blockade stopping refugee seekers, free nursery schools, aid to families, and more.<sup>108</sup> In other words, Meloni chose an area of the country where she knew disenfranchisement of the current government would be most present and used this feeling to garner as much support as possible.

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<sup>107</sup> Neomi di Leonardo, “Regionali, oggi Giorgia Meloni in città: “Lucia Borgonzoni è la nostra candidate,” *Bologna Today*, December 1, 2019, <https://www.bolognatoday.it/politica/elezioni-regionali-emilia-romagna-2019/meloni-salvini-conferenza-stampa-oggi.html>.

<sup>108</sup> di Leonardo, “Regionali, oggi Giorgia Meloni in città.”

*We are Giorgia*



*Figure 2 We are Giorgia, September 2022*

Image Source: [https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2022/09/25/elections-en-italie-sur-les-plages-d-ostie-comme-dans-les-sondages-la-meloni-tient-la-corde\\_6143069\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2022/09/25/elections-en-italie-sur-les-plages-d-ostie-comme-dans-les-sondages-la-meloni-tient-la-corde_6143069_3210.html)

Politician's campaign posters are meticulously planned and staged to invoke the greatest response from anyone who views it. Because they know that they will be viewed by everyone, not just their followers, they seek to get their message across to the greatest number of people. In this poster, we see Meloni in a rather relaxed state with her hand placed on her chin holding the weight of her head. Her smile is not as forced and pronounced as it was in the last photo, and her facial expressions give off feelings of calm and welcoming. Her eyes are looking in the direction

of the camera, but they are not looking directly at the camera. Meloni is wearing a light blue shirt that is not very visible in the photo but gives the same feeling of calm that her facial expression gives.

The image of Meloni is itself an anomaly in terms of the political ideology she represents. Traditionally, fascism was paired with a macho, hyper-masculine man with a stoic face that represented their “strongman” ideologies. However, this image shows something that is the exact opposite of this. While this connects to the idea that Meloni is “breaking the norm” that was introduced in the previous photo, it also shines a light into how Meloni wants to be viewed. This image does not portray a far-right politician, fascist, or populist; rather, it portrays an inviting, calming, and loving woman who seems at peace with the world around her.

Following this, the party logo, edited to also include her name, is present in the bottom corner of the photo. The logo present in this poster is very important as it contains the image of the tricoloured flame, better known as the *Fiamma Tricolore* in Italy. The three colours on the flame represent the colours of the Italian flag; however, the flame was also the logo of the MSI, which became the AN in 1995, in which Meloni was part of their youth wing. In Italy, for a political party to have a flame as their logo, it is, in some ways, showing that you are a descendant of the MSI party. The flame itself is seen as a representation of Mussolini and represents the eternal flame on his tomb. With Meloni’s involvement with fascist parties and rhetoric that matches that of *Il Duce*, it is clear that Meloni wants this connection to be made.

The poster itself is placed in the Piazza del Popolo in Rome, her hometown. This specific photo was taken just after one of her rallies only a few days before the election. The crowd can be seen not engaging with the photo, rather they are occupied in their own conversations.

Nonetheless, the flags of the FDI, and one lone Italian flag, still fly despite the fact that the rally is not happening at that moment.

Another interesting aspect of this photo are the words. The words themselves are translated as, “We are Giorgia.” The first two words are written in a block font and are blue. The colour of blue could be to represent the party’s colours, but they are also the colours of the Italian national soccer team, known as *Gli Azzurri* (the blue). With soccer being the most popular sport in Italy by far, any fan would be able to easily connect the colour to their beloved national soccer team. However, the word “Giorgia” is written on a slight slant, in a red font, and in cursive. This choice of font, as well as the slant, is meant to make her name seem as if it is handwritten by Meloni herself. In other words, she is attempting to make the sign more genuine and personable, as if she was creating drawing it out herself. It is an effective way to connect with the people of Italy as giving the illusion of a handwritten name is symbolic of any handwritten letter or note that people get in their everyday lives.

Focusing specifically on what the words say, she seems to be telling Italians that they are all like her. “We are Giorgia” evokes an emotional response in which the viewer places themselves in the shoes of Meloni. In other words, Meloni uses this slogan as a populist strategy to connect with “the people.” A strategy in which “the people” are a representation of the politician themselves. She is claiming that she is a person of “the people”: that the Italians are all just like her and she is like all Italians. She once again uses her middle-class upbringing as a way to prove she is able to connect with “the people” of Italy. Moreover, this statement “We are Giorgia” is a direct reference to a speech that Meloni made in a 2019 rally with Berlusconi and Salvini. In the speech, she famously stated, “I am Giorgia. I am a woman, I am a mother, I am Christian.” While this is no different than her regular speeches and the overall ideology of the

party, these specific words became famous in Italy. After the rally, someone in Italy tried to make a mockery of her speech by creating a song out of those words.<sup>109</sup> However, the song did not work as intended as it shined a light onto Meloni's politics and only amplified her support across the country.

### *The Centre-Right Coalition*



*Figure 3* The Centre-Right Coalition (From left to right: Salvini, Berlusconi, Meloni, Lupi), September 2022

Photo Source: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/09/23/is-italy-seeing-the-rise-of-a-new-fascism/>

While this photo features Meloni with the leaders who make up the centre-right coalition, it can still tell us many things about Meloni and her agenda. This photo is from a political rally that took place in Rome only days before the election in which Meloni was victorious. Likely on

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<sup>109</sup> The song “Io Sono Giorgia” can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fhwUMDX4K8o>.

some sort of stage, the candidates of the Right are placed in front of a blue wall with the word “*Insieme*” (together), along with at least one other word that is too covered to make out, in large, white block letters. Like in her previous rally, Meloni is not dressed formally as she sports a beige blazer-type jacket with what seems to be a white blouse and brown pants. Joining her in the less-than-formal attire is Lega leader Salvini who, true to his personality and persona as a politician, is wearing a blazer with an unbuttoned white dress shirt, paired with some blue jeans. FI leader Berlusconi, on the other hand, is wearing what one would expect of one of the richest people in Italy. He is sporting a black suit, with a white dress shirt, topped off with a dark-coloured tie with white spots. This has been the traditional look for Berlusconi, one that Italians have become accustomed to. Last is Lupi, leader of the Us Moderates party, wearing an unbuttoned black suit, paired with a blue tie.

While the contrast of the clothing choices may seem strange, they represent the clear contrasts of political ideology in this coalition. On the one hand, Berlusconi and Lupi are both dressed very formally, an indication that they represent a more traditional sense of conservatism. On the other hand, Meloni and Salvini are both dressed in a much more casual attire, representative of their desire to appear no different than “the people” of Italy. This, once again, shows Meloni’s goal to break away from the tradition and the norms of Italian politics, while simultaneously pushes both her and Salvini’s image as a populist leader.

All four are joined in hands, raised high in the air, with Salvini giving a “thumbs up” to the crowd of supporters. While all of their hands are raised, Meloni’s is raised higher than the others. While this may be due to her height, it seems more so that she is strategically placing her hand the highest. Her arm is straight up, while all the others are only half-raising their arms. This

shows Meloni's drive to be the true leader of the group after years of sitting in the shadow of Salvini, and especially Berlusconi.

Another interesting aspect of this photo are the facial expressions of all four of them. While Salvini, Berlusconi, and Lupi all appear to be smiling wide, Meloni is only giving a slight smirk. This is significant because upon closer inspection, you can see that Berlusconi's hand is lightly touching her side. While Meloni must no doubt give credit to Berlusconi for accelerating her political career by making her Minister of Youth during his fourth government, it is also very well documented that she and Berlusconi do not get along. While he boosted her political career, Meloni has veered further right than Berlusconi ever was, causing conflicts between the two before the election was even called. On top of this, tensions grew between the two after Meloni vetoed Berlusconi's request for cabinet, which included giving the Minister of Justice position to a member of his FI party in order to ensure he is protected as his legal battles continue.<sup>110</sup>

After this event, Berlusconi furthered this rift between the two, calling Meloni, "patronizing, bossy, arrogant, and offensive." He continued by saying that she has no willingness to change, and that she is someone who is impossible to get along with.<sup>111</sup> In response to this, Meloni was quoted stating that Berlusconi is incorrect, and that he is missing a key point, "I am not blackmailable."<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Angela Giuffrida, "Italy: Berlusconi calls Meloni 'patronising' and 'bossy' as relations fray," *The Guardian*, October 16, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/16/italy-berlusconi-calls-meloni-patronising-and-bossy-as-relations-fray>.

<sup>111</sup> Giuffrida, "Italy: Berlusconi calls Meloni."

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

## *The Flood*



*Figure 4 The Flood, May 2023*

Photo Source: <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230523-italy-unveils-two-billion-euro-package-for-flooded-northeast>.

Politicians are notorious for visiting areas affected by some sort of natural disaster or tragic event. Think of American presidents visiting the sites of mass shootings condemning gun violence, or of former Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison visiting the families affected by the massive wildfires in 2020. In this picture, we see something similar. This photo takes place in May 2023, shortly after devastating floods affected the Northern Italian region of Emilia-Romagna. It was said that around six months' worth of rain fell within 36 hours, causing the riverbanks of the numerous rivers that run through the region to explode.<sup>117</sup> As a result of the

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<sup>117</sup> Barbie Latza Nadeau and Allegra Goodwin, "Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni visits region struck by deadly floods," May 21, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/21/europe/meloni-deadly-flooding-northern-italy-intl/index.html>.

flooding and the more than 240 landslides, 36,000 people needed to be evacuated, and fourteen were killed.

This specific photo shows Meloni shaking hands with someone, likely a resident affected by the floods, or a political figure in the area. There is also a woman standing behind both, hands on hips, staring into the distance and seeming to not pay attention to what is happening in front of her. All three are standing in about a foot of water in what is likely a street. While the man seems to be smiling in the photo, Meloni is looking very intently at the man, as if she is listening very carefully to what he is saying despite the fact that he does not appear to be speaking. The man is wearing a pair of khaki pants with a blue and white striped dress shirt, with the sleeves rolled to his elbows. Meloni is dressed in a pair of jeans, with a turquoise blouse with the sleeves rolled up to her elbows, and her hair tied back as if she is already physically working to help clean up the affected areas. Her choice of clothing itself is representative of the classic populist “down to earth” persona. Her clothing is neither too cheap or expensive, and looks much like someone who is there to volunteer, not the Prime Minister of the country.

This narrative was entirely planned. She is trying to show that she is not solely going to work behind the walls of the government to rebuild the region, but she is there helping with the clean-up. This can be further seen through her decision to leave the G7 summit in Japan early due to the flooding, stating that her conscience could not allow her to stay in Japan any longer with what had happened in Italy.<sup>118</sup> These actions, paired with the photo showing that she is ready and willing to work, plays into the narrative that she is no different from any other Italian. While most politicians would opt to survey the situation from a helicopter, or drive through the affected areas in a car, she instead is portraying a very humbled approach. Her actions portray

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<sup>118</sup> Keith Weir, “Italy's Meloni vows support for flood-hit Emilia-Romagna,” *Reuters* May 21, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/italys-meloni-visits-flood-hit-emilia-romagna-region-2023-05-21/>.

her as an equal with those whose homes were destroyed, those who needed to evacuate, and those who are working to rebuild the region. She prides herself on being portrayed as the same as everyone else and wants to show her supporters that they can see themselves in her.

*The Crisis does not go on Vacation*



Figure 5 The Crisis does not go on Vacation, August 2019

Photo Source: <https://www.fratelli-italia.it/flash-mob-ministero-sviluppo-economico/#prettyPhoto>

While all politicians aim to be relatable to the public that they are hoping to represent, Meloni seems to have a special knack for appealing to “the people.” In this photo from August 2019, we see Meloni taking a “selfie” with members of the FDI party, as well as some supporters. Those in the selfie are holding a banner that states, “the crisis does not go on

vacation” while standing in front of the Ministry of Economic Development building in Bergamo, a city in the region of Lombardy.

Looking specifically at Meloni, she is dressed in a white blouse with bracelets on both of her wrists. She is holding up a cellphone inside of a green case, smiling wide as she is posing for the selfie with those behind her. Those in the crowd that are in the FDI party appear to be dressed somewhat formally, at least more than Meloni herself. Those in crowd are also posing, with all smiling and angling their heads towards the phone, while one is giving a thumbs-up of approval. There are also two flags visible in the crowd, one appears to be the Italian flag while the other, while it has green, red, and white in it, is not completely visible in this photo.

The demonstration itself appears to be held in the middle of the street outside of the run-down ministerial building. The demonstration likely forced the police to close the street, possibly even the surrounding streets so that they would not be impeding any traffic. Also visible in the photo are the numerous members of the press taking note of the event by taking photos and recording video.

The words “the crisis does not go on vacation” on the banner are in the party colours, and written in clear, capitalized block letters. The words themselves are reference to the “vacation” that the government, as well as virtually the entire country, takes during the majority of August. This demonstration was organized in order to protest the lack of work being done by the government at the time to fix the financial crisis that Italy was facing. With Italy having a history of poorly run economies, especially within the last decade, the message is that Meloni and her party were not satisfied with the government taking a break during the economic hardships. In a Facebook livestream on the day of the demonstration, Meloni stated, “...to remind the

Government that, despite the summer, Italian companies continue to be in great difficulty and that they need active company policies to safeguard the fabric of production.”<sup>119</sup>

Her livestream only further points to her desired appeal to the working-class of Italy. While it is known across Italy that the month of August is a time for vacation, she is attempting to appeal to the workers who are unable to afford missing work. During the summer of 2019 in Italy, around 600,000 workers were at risk of losing their job due to the ongoing economic crisis at the time.<sup>120</sup> Meloni uses this discontent among the working-class and stages this demonstration purposely in front of the ministry of economic development as much of the economic crises experienced in Italy are caused by lack of investment in Italian industries.

Meloni and her party received a boost only days after this demonstration as Salvini, then Minister of the Interior, stated that there were irreconcilable differences between his party and the Five Star party that made the basis of the centre-right coalition at the time.<sup>121</sup> Salvini doubled-down on his comments by calling for a snap election to be held. This snap election, however, was never held. Nonetheless, while indirect, support from Salvini gave a big boost to the FDI and Meloni’s platform. Her legitimacy and popularity were growing during a time of great discontent amongst Italians.

### **Analysis – Do the Images Contribute to a Larger Context?**

After analyzing each of the five images separately, it is easy to see how each connect to each other. While on the rise, Meloni and the FDI were much more direct about their messaging.

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<sup>119</sup> Giorgia Meloni, “La crisi non va in vacanza,” Facebook, August 6, 2019, [https://fb.watch/ItybAv\\_1jg/](https://fb.watch/ItybAv_1jg/).

<sup>120</sup> “‘La crisi non va in vacanza’, Fratelli d’Italia manifesta davanti al Tribunale fallimentare,” *BergamoNews*, August 6, 2019, <https://www.bergamonews.it/2019/08/06/la-crisi-non-va-in-vacanza-fratelli-ditalia-manifesta-davanti-al-tribunale-fallimentare/319134/>.

<sup>121</sup> Peter S. Goodman, “Italy’s Biggest Economic Problem? It’s Still Italy,” *The New York Times*, August 9, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/09/business/italy-economy-debt.html>.

She openly securitized issues that normally would not be seen as an aspect of life that needs to be defended, she openly appealed to the everyday “people” of Italy and criticized elites and governments for causing numerous issues in the country. However, nearing the 2022 general election, as well as her time as Prime Minister, the images had become less intrusive to her and the party’s ideology. Upon analysis, there is no question that the elements of older photos are still present; however, they are not as directly stated. While this can be due to many reasons, it is most likely done as a way to appeal to a wider audience.

Nonetheless, another question remains: do these photos fit into a larger context or story? The answer to that question is an overwhelming yes. Meloni is not the first, nor the only far-right politician to utilize images as a way to garner support and push their political agenda. As was discussed earlier, images evoke emotions that words are unable to tap into. Images not only show the viewer a true representation of an event or a specific moment, they also transport the viewer to that moment. Paired with the use of captions or words in the photo and the creator of the image is able to forge a compelling narrative.

This tactic is used by far-right politicians across the globe. Whether you look at Viktor Orbán or Donald Trump, there is no question that they use images to push their political agendas. As I argued earlier, politicians across the globe understand the power that images hold, and the far-right are experts at this. This is likely due to the fact that until recently, they were never taken seriously. While they always existed, as I showed with Italy but also around the world, they never had any success at the polls come election. As a result, they needed to fine tune these skills in order to give themselves enough legitimacy to compete with more traditional political views. With this, their “outlandish” claims could be attached to a very real image which has the potential to portray just about anything the politician wants. For example, while Meloni

securitized issues surrounding immigration and asylum seekers, Donald Trump did the same with the American-Mexican border. Both politicians were able to effectively create a securitized narrative surrounding migration and uses images to push this claim, as seen in the figure 1, as well as with Trump's "build the wall" images.

Meloni's use of imagery also sheds light into another aspect of the global far-right movement: the idea surrounding a single, shared identity consisting of shared histories, cultures, and especially religion. These thoughts have been a point of contention for much of the far-right movement in Europe, but also in the Western world as a whole. Some members of the far-right across the Western world claim that they need to defend their borders and protect their history because they come from a single European history that is shared by all white people around the world. This idea is furthered by the replacement theory, originating from Renaud Camus' *Le Grand Remplacement*, which is endorsed by not only Meloni, but other far-right leaders like Marine Le Pen in France and, once again, Hungary's Orbán. In fact, Orbán has been explicitly clear that he is trying to ensure that Hungary remains a Christian nation that defends against outsiders, while simultaneously becoming a haven for those around Europe seeking to live in a "truly Christian" society.<sup>122</sup>

## Conclusion

"A picture is worth a thousand words" is often said by people across the globe, yet images and their importance are constantly underestimated. While politicians strategically use

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<sup>122</sup> Isaac Chotiner, "Why conservatives around the world have embraced Hungary's Viktor Orbán," *The New Yorker*, August 10, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/why-conservatives-around-the-world-have-embraced-hungarys-viktor-orban>.

images and meticulously think about every little detail, the audiences often overlook the subtle messaging that informs their opinions when looking at the image. As a result, politicians have come to understand that through strategic uses of images, they can attract popularity without having to directly speak to every voter. In this paper, by using visual narrative analysis and a layered approach, I argued that Meloni has used the medium of images to push her political agenda and legitimize her power. Whether it is portraying specific messaging through individual pictures, or connecting a series of photos to a larger, over-arching political ideology, Meloni has embraced the use of images to spread her ideas and gain power in Italy.

While Mussolini's reign came to end during the Second World War, I have showed that Italy has always had some elements of far-right politics in power, especially within the last three decades. However, Meloni was able to see that Italians were not happy with the current right-wing parties and through the use populist rhetoric and some elements of fascism, she was able to amass a large following and join into a global far-right movement. Securitization of issues, carnal nationalist ideologies, and a "down to earth" persona has catapulted herself, and her party, to leadership in Italy in a relatively short time.

As I previously stated, there has been a renaissance-like spike in visual narrative analysis scholarship in the field of international relations. Much of this scholarship focuses on the emotions that images can evoke, and the framing of images by those who produce them. As such, a possible avenue for future research could surround analyzing images that are not entirely framed or staged to see if those same elements I have discussed in this paper still hold true. Moreover, future research on the topic could also take different images from different far-right politicians across the globe in order to see if there is a link between their ideologies and framing.

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