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Through the colonial lens: the Italian populist radical right and foreign policy relations with Italy's former colonies

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws attention to the role of colonial memory in the Italian populist radical right's views on Italy's foreign policy with its former colonies across the Mediterranean (i.e. Libya, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia). While recent academic scholarship has studied the influence of colonial memory on anti-immigrant sentiment, the role of colonial memory in contemporary parties' appraisal of Italian foreign policy towards its former colonial territories remains understudied. This paper aims to fill this gap, by investigating how colonial memory shapes the populist radical right's views of Italy's foreign policy towards its former colonies. Through a Critical Discourse Analysis of interviews¹ with Italian populist radical right representatives from the Lega and Fratelli d'Italia (FdI), complemented by relevant public speeches delivered by FdI's leader Meloni, this paper highlights Italy's selective colonial memory cleansed of the most controversial aspects of the colonial past and associated with a subtle postcolonial nostalgia. This nostalgia manifests as scepticism towards colonial apologies, indifference to the enduring hardships of former colonies and friendly relations with dictatorial rulers. Alongside it, a sense of national pride underwrites a paternalistic outlook, visible in the more recent Mattei Plan for development and cooperation in Africa.

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Introduction

In 2023, Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, leading the populist radical right party Fratelli d'Italia (FdI), went on a state visit to Ethiopia, a former Italian colony. In a press meeting, she proudly affirmed that Ethiopia warmly welcomed Italy's desire to 'bring development' in a non-predatory way (Ciriaco 2023), and, responding to a journalist's query about Italy's colonial past, she dryly claimed that the topic had not come up during bilateral diplomatic meetings with Ethiopia's representatives. This statement stirred up only moderate public debate, especially in the left-wing press. The centre-left newspaper *Repubblica* accused Meloni of being hypocritical in forgetting colonial crimes perpetrated by Italy during its occupation of Ethiopia (Ciriaco 2023). Overall, however, Meloni's indifference towards the Italian colonial past and her controversial depiction of Italy's

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planned involvement in the country went largely unnoticed. This points to the marginalisation of colonialism in Italian public and political debate, dominated by neglect of Italian colonial wrongdoings, appreciation for Italy's colonial deeds and paternalism in current efforts at cooperation with the former colonies.

While recent academic attention has been devoted to the selective colonial memory seeping into Italian party politics, scarce attention has been paid to colonial memory in contemporary Italian foreign policy. Siddi's (2020) foundational work sheds light on the nexus between memory and foreign policy in the Italian milieu, by drawing attention to how the Italian foreign policy discourse, during the refugee and migrant crisis in 2014–2018, negated the contentious elements of Italy's colonial past. This selective 'silencing' of the colonial past was embedded in Italy's myth of *Italiani brava gente*, which depicted Italians as intrinsically humane, kind-hearted and incapable of any wrongdoing (see Del Boca 2003). Griffini (2023) further contributed to the debate through a postcolonial examination of the Italian populist radical right's discourse on the colonial past against the broader context of anti-immigrant sentiment. The aim of this paper is to go beyond an insular treatment of party politics and foreign policy, extending the examination of the role of colonial memory in Italy's foreign policy relations with former Italian colonies, with a specific focus on populist radical right parties.

The reasons for the choice of the Italian populist radical right as a case study are twofold. First, the Italian populist radical right has been experiencing remarkable growth in Italian politics, especially since the Lega's entry as a partner in the Conte I government (2018–2019) (with the catch-all populist Five Star Movement). This rising trajectory is further proved by Fdl's sweeping victory at the 2022 legislative elections that saw the formation of a coalition government led by Meloni and encompassing Fdl, Lega and the populist (but not radical) right-wing Forza Italia (FI). Second, with regard to Fdl, the genealogical connection between the party and the fascist era, under which colonialism prospered, extended its reach and intensified its atrocities, further consolidates the relevance of the case study selection.

As a comprehensive investigation of the discourse of the Lega and Fdl regarding the whole history of Italian foreign policy vis-à-vis its colonies is not possible, given space constraints, this paper zooms in on four salient issues in Italy's foreign policy with its former colonies since the beginning of Italy's so-called Second Republic in the early 1990s. These issues, eliciting specific emotions in the Lega and Fdl, are as follows: (1) colonial apologies; (2) diplomatic involvement in former colonies; (3) diplomatic relationships with dictators; and (4) the Mattei Plan for the cooperation and development of African countries.

Methodologically, this paper applies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to textual data, encompassing 50 semi-structured interviews with representatives of the Italian populist radical right and 10 Prime Minister's official speeches. Interviews provide historical depth and are complemented by the more contemporary analysis of Meloni's official speeches delivered at critical junctures in 2024–2025 regarding the so-called Mattei Plan for cooperation and development with Africa, officially launched in April 2024. The timing is significant: conducted in two waves between 2016 and 2021, the interviews span the populist radical right's remarkable period of ascent in Italy. In 2018–2019, Lega enjoyed its fourth stint in office, before plummeting to irrelevance after becoming a junior coalition partner in the Meloni government in 2022.

Focusing on the Mattei Plan through the analysis of Meloni's official speeches is an important addition to the interviews, on three counts. First, from the point of view of thematic salience, the Mattei Plan (whose implementation is still ongoing) represents a landmark policy in Italy's foreign relations with Africa, which is a core theme of this paper. Second, from a temporal perspective, the Mattei Plan represents an evolution of the relationship between Italy and its former African colonies, which is captured by the interviews. Third, the Mattei Plan presents an interesting case study of a foreign policy evoking Italy's colonial past.

CDA is a methodological tool particularly valuable to expose the discursive techniques employed by the populist radical right to establish their authority and generate anxieties over the present (Wodak 2015). In the context of this paper, CDA sheds light on the power hierarchies constructed by the Lega and FdI vis-à-vis former Italian colonies. CDA has proceeded through deductive coding based on key themes drawn from the literature on postcolonialism at large and on the postcolonial context in the case study of Italy.

The findings show that the populist radical right, when quizzed about the colonial past and Italian foreign policy vis-à-vis former colonies, constructs a narrative permeated by a mix of emotions, grounded in selective colonial memory. The latter is cleansed of its most controversial aspects, resulting in a subtle form of postcolonial nostalgia, akin to that observed in different European former colonial powers. However, in the Italian milieu, nostalgia is not articulated as an explicit and intense feeling of longing for the return of colonial times and dynamics but subtly creeps into political discourse, leaving a mark on how parties deal with different themes related to the colonial past. This nostalgia manifests as scepticism towards colonial apologies, indifference to the enduring hardships of former colonies, and friendly relations with their dictatorial rulers.

Alongside subtle postcolonial nostalgia, a sense of national pride underwrites a paternalistic outlook, visible in the more recent Mattei Plan for development and cooperation in Africa, which Meloni launched shortly after her 2023 visit to Ethiopia. The Mattei Plan is enthusiastically seen as consolidating foreign relations between Italy, former Italian colonies, and the broader Africa and Middle East area. The Mattei Plan, oblivious to the catastrophic legacies of colonial domination, instead positions itself as the herald of a reinvented (postcolonial) partnership between Italy and Africa and the Middle East.

The paper will proceed by contextualising the case study in the Italian political milieu, followed by a theoretical discussion of postcolonialism as an analytical framework. Then, the paper will present the Lega's and FdI's assessment of selected pivotal moments in the history of Italy's foreign policy with its former colonies, and the related emotions: a subtle form of nostalgia, which underpins scepticism of colonial apologies, indifference and hypocrisy in diplomatic relations, and pride in paternalistic cooperation links with the former colonies. The analysis covers the following themes: (1) belated and lukewarm colonial apologies; (2) diplomatic indifference towards former colonies in the 1990s; (3) close diplomatic relationships with dictators; (4) current plans of development and cooperation. It is important to note that no substantively meaningful difference between the two parties emerges that would warrant treating them as distinct cases in our analysis. Finally, the article will offer concluding thoughts about the significance of the findings.

The Italian political milieu: memory, colonialism and the populist radical right

Memory is the conceptual pillar of this paper and is here understood as the mental faculty that allows individuals and groups to remember information from the past, with far-reaching effects on their identity formation (Lowenthal 1985, 197; Oppenheimer and Haakvoort 2003, 94). As memory distils only some aspects of the past (Lowenthal 1985, 201), it is intrinsically subjective in its interpretations, including narratives around wrongdoings (Forchtner 2016). Similarly, through the process of forgetting, certain aspects of the past are expunged from the construction of individual and collective identity (Laplanche and Pontalis 1988, 390–394). Notably, forgetting traumatic events becomes a coping mechanism, in order to protect the integrity of the subject's identity (Mellino 2012, 115). Importantly, memory and forgetting are laden with political connotations, as they reflect and enforce power dynamics, and contribute to shaping national identity.

Previous literature has focused on the selective construction of memory in foreign policy and the politics of multiculturalism, which testifies to the fact that Italy's selective memory work is not unique in Europe (Klymenko and Siddi 2020; Siddi 2020; Sierp 2020). Klymenko and Siddi (2020) suggest that the marginalisation and forgetting of the past (broadly speaking) are affected by the process of selective remembering, which unavoidably involves the exclusion of some historical facts. This selective memory is arguably architected by political actors based on foreign policy necessities (Klymenko and Siddi 2020). For instance, as Sierp (2020) contends, the EU has engaged with memories of its member states' colonial past only in a selective way, thus constructing specific narratives functional to the creation of an EU identity that hinders the promotion of multiculturalism.

Italy is no exception to selective colonial remembrance (Giuliani 2018; Griffini 2023; Proglío 2019; Siddi 2020). In this context, Proglío (2019) uses the metaphor of a ghost to represent the kind of colonial memory permeating the Italian political discourse on immigration. In fact, colonial memory in Italy was hardly ever publicly acknowledged and became silently forgotten, despite influencing foreign policy towards former colonies (Siddi 2020). Moreover, Italian colonial memory substantially, though subtly, impacts Italy's anti-immigrant sentiment targeting the descendants of formerly colonised people (Griffini 2023). The nexus between colonial memory and anti-immigrant dynamics is not exclusive to Italy. For instance, Lotem (2022) suggests that in France, colonial memory deeply affects the relationship with French former colonies, whether abroad or, figuratively, at home under the guise of immigrants.

In the context of the political parties' spectrum, nativist anti-immigrant sentiment is the hallmark of the populist radical right. Indeed, the populist radical right is, by definition, characterised by the call for a strong state against perceived impending decline, anti-elite populism against a multifarious establishment and nativism against the national out-group (Mudde 2007). According to nativist logic, the nation should be inhabited only by natives (Moffitt 2020). Thus, it is relevant to focus on the populist radical right when studying the role of colonial memory in driving the tripartite relationship between a former colonising country, immigrants and former colonies.

Italy presents a paradigmatic case study to explore the behaviour of the populist radical right, since it is the first Western European country to be led by a fully populist

right coalition government, spearheaded by Fdl, with the Lega and the populist right-wing FI as junior coalition parties. Here a brief clarification is warranted: FI does not fall under the remit of this paper, as it is a populist right-wing party, but not a populist *radical* right party, while the Lega and Fdl fall squarely in this category (Albertazzi, Bonansinga, and Zulianello 2021; Taggart and Pirro 2021).

The Lega and Fdl present a different historical trajectory and foundational ideology. The Lega was born in 1991 from the merger of regional leagues, while Fdl emerged later, in 2012, from the ashes of the defunct radical right party Alleanza Nazionale (AN). AN, in turn, originated from the ruins of the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), the first Italian neo-fascist party established after World War II. Therefore, without implying that Fdl is neo-fascist, it is possible to trace a loose genealogical connection between the current Fdl and the then Fascist party, under which Italy consolidated its colonial domination. The same does not apply to the Lega, due to its much more recent origins and its foundational ideology anchored in regional identity. Nevertheless, the Lega shares with Fdl nativist beliefs hostile to the immigrant Other, who often comes from formerly colonised countries (Griffini 2023).

The figure of the Other, against which national identity is constructed, has been attached to different subjects throughout Italian contemporary history. In early twentieth-century Italian nativism, the Other was symbolised by the Italian southerner. It was under fascism that the Other became embodied by the colonised African (Giuliani 2018). In that period, colonisation was driven by Italy's ambition to carve out a prestigious position among the great powers of the time, thus emancipating itself from its inferiority complex of being Europe's internal Other, weaker and exoticised (Allen and Russo 1997). This geopolitical ambition translated into the colonisation of territories across the *Mare Nostrum*, i.e. the Mediterranean, to revive the grandeur of the Roman Empire and to provide an outlet for the excess population that the Italian peninsula could not feed (De Grand 2004).

Through the postcolonial lens: memory and emotions in foreign policy

Having engaged with the concept of memory, especially colonial memory, and its impact on the populist radical right's anti-immigrant sentiment, let us now turn to the theoretical framework that helps draw the link between the populist radical right's colonial memory and its attitudes towards former colonies and their inhabitants. For this purpose, this paper relies on postcolonialism. Among the wide range of available definitions (see, for instance, Loomba 2005; Young 2003), this paper understands postcolonialism as a theoretical framework uncovering the legacy of colonialism in today's politics (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2012). As such, it illuminates the ways in which the colonial past, through memory, permeates the populist radical right's attitudes towards postcolonial immigrants, shapes foreign policy with former colonies and the populist radical right's appraisals of such foreign policy.

In the literature, postcolonialism has fruitfully been deployed as an analytical prism providing an in-depth and critical understanding of how selective colonial memory, and the related emotions it elicits, influences states' relations with former colonies and with immigrants coming from formerly colonised countries. In the French context, Noussis (2020) illustrates how colonial memory resurfaced in Macron's admission, in 2018, of the

French use of torture in the Algerian War. Such remarkable acknowledgement interrupted the French silence on the Algerian War, which had been negated a place in French collective memory for a long time. Moreover, it marked a neat departure from Sarkozy's 2007 condemnation of a critical assessment of the colonial past, and the related repentance and self-flagellation over French colonial atrocities in Algeria (Noussis 2020).

In the Netherlands, Couperus and Tortola (2019) note that the populist radical right has utilised memory selectively, to highlight the allegedly most positive aspects of the colonial past and fabricate historical colonial narratives. Digging deep into the emotions attached to this kind of selective memory, Mols and Jetten's (2014) study of Dutch, French and Belgian populist right-wing parties sheds light on the nostalgia permeating their discourse. A partial memory characterised by nostalgically reminiscing about an idealised colonial past overshadows potential colonial misgivings (Mols and Jetten 2014). Through rose-tinted glasses (Zavatti 2021), nostalgia covers up wrongdoings and marks the difference between a glorified past and a perceived bleak present (Mols and Jetten 2014). The dreary present is blamed on multiculturalism, which generates longing for a by gone golden era (Mols and Jetten 2014). This nostalgic narrative the populist radical right constructs panders to collective fears about ethno-cultural change and is instrumental in legitimising the anti-immigrant sentiment (Mols and Jetten 2014).

A seminal contribution to the study of the longing for an idealised colonial past is provided by Gilroy (2005) through the notion of postcolonial melancholia, which is adjacent to the notion of nostalgia adopted in this paper. Gilroy derives the concept of *melancholia* from Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich's (1975) definition of the stalled mourning and simultaneous denial of Nazi history in post-World War II Germany (Gilroy 2005, 88). In the United Kingdom, Gilroy observes that the colonial past, usually buried, comes to the surface in the service of melancholia (2005, 13), manifesting the persistent incapacity to deal with the loss of colonial prestige and with uncomfortable narratives around the colonial past (Gilroy 2005). Melancholia has intensified following the arrival of postcolonial migrants, seen as unwelcome carriers of a painful past and reminders of a gloomy present, seen as threatening a distinctive binding national culture (Gilroy 2005).

Italy's colonial past presents a very different case. Italy was a latecomer to the scramble for the colonies and did not face substantial anticolonial struggles during the decolonising process, since decolonisation was a consequence of Great Powers' decisions. Yet, Italian colonialism merits attention, as a prolific historiography urges (see, for instance, Ertola 2022; Srivastava 2018). Part of this historiographical tradition has shed light on the affective dimensions of colonial memory in Italy. Andall and Duncan recognise that post-war Italy nurtured nostalgia for its colonies, due to their abrupt loss (Andall and Duncan 2005). Triulzi adds that 'waves of ambiguous nostalgia' concerning the colonial past pervaded Italy (2006, 157). Giuliani (2018) and Lombardi-Diop and Romeo (2012) illustrate how colonial nostalgia has enveloped Italian culture and politics since the post-war period. More recently, Burdett and Mancosu (2024) and Mancosu (2024) reorient academic attention to repatriates' associations and how they nurtured colonial nostalgia for the demised Italian Empire, while interacting with Italy's post-war far-right groups.

Building upon Griffini's (2023) previous examination of the concept of colonial nostalgia, this paper maintains that nostalgia, understood as an emotion, does not pervasively and explicitly permeate the Italian political debate. Yet, a milder and less explicit form of nostalgia, which we term 'subtle nostalgia', characterises the affective dimension of the

populist radical right, even if the latter is not fully aware of it. This subtle nostalgia latches on to a specific mnemonic reception of the past, which influences the relationship between Italy, former colonial countries and incoming immigrants. The latter, who are perceived with fear, are related to the colonised by their relationship of descentance and shared Otherness (Deplano 2020; Gilroy 2005).

Postcolonial nostalgia

The selective memory of colonialism, consigning to forgetting the more negative aspects of the colonial past, reverberates in Italy's foreign policy towards its former colonies (Griffini 2023). As mentioned above, a thriving strand of historiography (for instance, Burdett and Mancosu 2024; Mancosu 2024) has spotlighted the colonial nostalgia some political factions nurtured during the history of the Italian Republic. The interviews with the populist radical right confirm an appreciative stance regarding the work Italian colonialism performed in Africa, especially infrastructural projects, such as schools, hospitals and roads. This is predicated upon the conviction that Italians were 'good colonisers', incapable of any wrongdoing, munificent, chivalrous and generous (Griffini 2023), as the deep-rooted myth of *Italiani brava gente* (i.e. *Italians good people*) suggests (Del Boca 2003).

The self-redemptory myth of *Italiani brava gente*, a recurrent thread in Italian history, has percolated into Italy's foreign policy narratives, which are affected by the Italians' distorted perception of themselves as characteristically polite and kind-hearted international actors (Siddi 2020). This myth is clearly refracted in the populist radical right's appraisal of Italy's postcolonial foreign policy, glorifying the colonial past while forgetting colonial brutalities. This dynamic is evidenced in the interviews. For instance, a Lega representative contended that 'concentration camps in Libya did not exist' (Interview 17 2016). This amounts to the negation of colonial brutalities, which included the use of asphyxiating gas in Ethiopia and napalm in Eritrea, severe bombing in Somalia (Del Boca 2003), and concentration camps in Libya following the mass deportation of the population of the Cyrenaican Gebel (Randazzo 2006).

A postcolonial lens illuminates how this distortedly positive memory of colonialism, which brackets off colonial atrocities, shapes the populist radical right's nostalgic emotional response to colonialism. Analogously to the case study of the Dutch, Belgian and French populist radical right outlined above (Mols and Jetten 2014), the Italian populist radical right deploys a subtly nostalgic narrative, to mark the discontinuity between a magnificent colonial past and a miserable present. In an alarmist tone, the parties contrast a golden past characterised by the bestowing of material and moral improvements on the colonies with a bleak present affected by immigration and decline.

However, it is important to note that the populist radical right does not advocate the return of Italian colonialism, nor does it melancholically struggle to mourn the loss of Italian colonies. This sets it apart from Gilroy's (2005) conceptual understanding of postcolonial melancholia, which implies a pervasive sense of loss, mourning and sadness that nostalgia instead lacks. As Dodman (2023) clarifies, the fine distinction between melancholia (adopted by Gilroy 2005) and nostalgia (adopted in this paper) centres on the fact that 'Nostalgia was to be a form of melancholia', i.e. the sadness generated by the longing for one's homeland. Instead, lacking any feeling of sadness

and mourning, the FdI and Lega look at the colonial past with nostalgic pride for Italy's past colonial deeds. The latter are fondly reminisced about, while colonial misdeeds are utterly rejected (Triulzi 2006).

Colonial apologies and their instrumentality

This intertwining of idealisation and forgetting of the colonial past, which constitutes the subtle form of postcolonial nostalgia at issue, is tangible in Italy's delayed colonial apologies and in the populist radical right's refusal to recognise their morality and their utility.

Irrespective of the ideological positioning of the parties in power, Italy's foreign relations with its former colonies have been characterised by a relatively late official acknowledgement of Italian colonial crimes. In the early 1990s, half-hearted colonial apologies were issued by representatives of different political parties. For instance, then President of the Republic and Christian-Democrat Oscar Luigi Scalfaro recognised Italian colonial crimes; the Minister of Defence Domenico Corcione admitted the use of gas in Ethiopia (Labanca 2005, 38); and left-wing Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema deprecated Italian colonial misdeeds in Libya and offered apologies (Del Boca 2005, 200). Yet, despite official formal apologies, Italian society remained attached to the distorted view of Italy's colonialism as particularly humane when compared to other states' colonial practices (Focardi and Pes 2023).

In the context of the populist radical right, nostalgia subtly emerges in the interviews with regard to the utility and necessity of colonial apologies. In fact, colonial apologies are frowned upon as 'ridiculous' (Interview 18 2018) and 'superfluous' (Interview 10 2017; Interview 1 2018). Even when recognising colonial atrocities, interviewees expressed sharp scepticism over the value of apologies, due to the time lag between when the facts occurred and when apologies were provided. Moreover, when the utility of apologies is timidly acknowledged, they are deemed instrumental to foreign policy purposes: they have the strategic aim of stopping immigration. An FdI representative captured this well: 'I don't think we have to apologise, but if it becomes fundamental to do so in order to stop migrants' boats from coming to Italy, I will apologise, even if I don't know why, because Italy does not have anything to apologise for' (Interview 8 2017).

The strategic deployment of colonial apologies becomes patent in the case of Libya. In 1998, following Gaddafi's diplomatic pressures and military menace, the Italo-Libyan Commission acknowledged and showed regret for Libya's suffering under Italian colonialism and committed itself to providing aid to de-mine the Libyan desert and build a hospital for mine victims (Coralluzzo 2008, 121). After 1998, a series of agreements between Italy and Libya were signed, including a 2000 memorandum of intent addressing terrorism, drug trafficking, crime and irregular migrants, a 2003 agreement on intelligence exchange on migrants and a 2007 agreement to jointly patrol Libyan coasts (Paoletti 2011, 274). Their common denominator was the pledge to collaborate in the fight against terrorism and irregular immigration (Coralluzzo 2008), which culminated in the 2008 Italy-Libya Friendship Treaty, signed by Berlusconi and Gaddafi. The Treaty promised Italian investments in Libyan oil, healthcare, education and highways, in return for Libya's cooperation on immigration control (De Cesari 2012, 319–320). Notably, the Treaty merely

alluded to Italy's 'painful chapter of the past', without ever explicitly mentioning colonial wrongs. Instead, the Treaty clearly declared that colonial wrongs had been settled (317).

The reluctance to offer colonial apologies in the Lega and FdI takes place against the historical backdrop of Italy's post-war experience, marred by the lack of a critical assessment of colonialism, due to multiple reasons. First, the myth of *Italiani brava gente*, establishing that Italians, *a priori*, were incapable of doing any harm (Del Boca 2003). Second, the perceived need to lift Italy out of its condition of seeming inferiority compared to other greater European powers (Allen and Russo 1997, 3), which was exacerbated by the sense of victimhood triggered by the 1941 British occupation of Italian colonies in Africa (Ben-Ghiat 2006, 389).

Victimisation is recurrent in the populist radical right's approach to memory in Italy and beyond (see, for instance, Ortiz Cabrero and Sierp 2024; Wodak 2015). In Italy, it has contributed to the detachment from feelings of culpability and guilt over fascism, with repercussions on Italy's approach to its fascist past (Caramani and Manucci 2019). With respect to the colonial past, Italy's victimisation induces the populist radical right to nostalgically extol apparently good colonial deeds and to consign to oblivion the shameful ones (Griffini 2023). As Focardi (2025) warns, Italy has a 'deficit' in its public discourse on the fascist colonial past.

Distant relatives? Diplomatic indifference towards former colonies

A cleansed memory of colonialism underpinning subtle postcolonial nostalgia is also displayed in Italy's indifference towards its war-torn former colonies of Eritrea and Somalia. Eritrea, the *colonia primogenita*, provided what were considered the best indigenous troops to the Italian colonial army (Del Boca 2003, 28). But, when Ethiopia incorporated Eritrea into the Ethiopian Empire in 1962, Italy responded with indifference and sent economic aid only in 1992, 1 year after Eritrea *de facto* declared independence (28–29). Italy displayed similar indifference towards the fate of its former colonies also in the case of Somalia, when it intervened only in 1992, after failing to act when Siad Barré established a dictatorship in 1969 (30–31). Postcolonial Italy's emotional indifference towards its former colonies hindered an authentic relationship conducive to reconciliation. As Ben-Ghiat argues, colonialism has remained undigested (2006, 390) and has been either selectively consigned to oblivion or selectively extolled in a distorted way. In any case, it has lacked a comprehensive and critical assessment.

As the interviews suggest, some representatives recognised diplomatic indifference, while others ignored it. Overall, the Italian populist radical right did not regret Italy's lack of intervention in Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia. In the interviews, the Lega and FdI justified Italy's diplomatic indifference towards its former colonies by asserting that Italy did not have any responsibility towards them. 'It is as if [the former colonies] had never been our colonies' (Interview 14 2017), claimed an interviewee. Other excuses for diplomatic indifference are that Italy's intervention would have otherwise appeared to be motivated by strategic interests (Interview 4 2017; Interview 13 2018), slowed down Italy's growth (Interview 12 2017) and lacked any economic profit (Interview 2 2016; Interview 19 2018). The hypothetical scenario of an intervention motivated by a sense of moral responsibility for the formerly Italian territories is dismissed as 'fanta-politics' (Interview 3 2017). Only

a few Lega representatives contended that Italy should have intervened, by virtue of its duty to protect former colonial territories (Interview 11 2018; Interview 15 2017).

Too close friends? Cooperation with dictators

A sanitised version of colonial memory underpinning subtle postcolonial nostalgia and manifested in Italy's indifference towards its former colonies appears in conjunction with the failure to condemn the dictatorships that took hold in Italy's *Oltremare*.² This is revealed by a Lega representative's convoluted words: 'We need to stop accusing a dictator only because he is a dictator' (Interview 14 2017). This statement is a glaring demonstration of the lack of a sense of moral responsibility towards Italy's former colonies ruled by dictators, and clemency towards the latter, who are deemed not to be condemned. This leniency towards dictators also became clear when a Lega councillor in Regione Lombardia defined the bloody dictator of Eritrea Isaias Afewerki, who took power in 1991, as 'a friend', 'a wise and skilful man', who governed his country 'with paternal and firm hand' (Stella 2018). Notably, the Lega also forbade the Italian military ship *Diciotti*, carrying mainly Eritrean migrants, to moor in the port of Catania in August 2018. This is a further example of the Italian populist radical right's lack of acknowledgement of the destructive consequences of Afewerki's brutal dictatorship.

The close relationships between Berlusconi and Libya's dictator Gaddafi further testify to Italy's penchant for cooperating with dictators in former colonies. The above-mentioned Italy-Libya Friendship Treaty was motivated by Italy's strategic interest in Libyan cooperation on immigration control (De Cesari 2012, 319–320). Particularly attractive to the Berlusconi government was the possibility to return migrants to Libya, where they may then be detained in camps, abused and tortured (Del Castillo 2011, 5). Interestingly, also on this occasion, colonial memory was foreclosed as the Treaty hastily referred to Italian colonialism as a 'painful chapter of the past' (De Cesari 2012, 317–318).

In the interviews, the Lega and Fdl positively reviewed the 2008 Berlusconi-Gaddafi Friendship Treaty, emphasising how it managed to contain immigration to Italy. Therefore, political strategy took priority over a sense of colonial guilt and the need to apologise to Libya for Italy's colonial cruelties. As a Lega representative argued, 'the Treaty was purely strategic, this argument [that] it may have been driven by a sense of guilt can be put forward only by some "innocent soul" of the left that feels perennially guilty towards Africa' (Interview 21 2018). Moreover, in the interviews, Gaddafi is praised as a pragmatic statesman (see, for instance, Interview 6 2017; Interview 7 2018) of 'sharp intelligence' (Interview 5 2018), who managed to stave off the danger of the Arab Spring (Interview 1 2018; Interview 17 2016; Interview 20 2018).

Only a few Italian populist radical right representatives explicitly recognised the moral and ethical challenge of signing a Treaty with a dictator (Interview 11 2018; Interview 18 2018; Interview 9 2017). Even in this case, condemnation is overshadowed by strategic needs; in an Fdl representative's words, 'Gaddafi was a bloody and violent dictator, (...) but the only one capable of stopping this wave of invasion' (Interview 22 2018). Hence, the pure fact that Gaddafi was a dictator is offset by his ability to halt immigration to Italy.

A break with the colonial past? The Mattei Plan

The current Meloni government presents the prime example of how the populist radical right conceives foreign relations with former colonies. This paper now proceeds to analyse the main emotion evoked in the FdI's discourse on the Mattei Plan³ for development and cooperation with Africa.

Since 2023, the FdI-led government has showcased the Mattei Plan with unwavering pride. The Plan provides a (so-far) vague blueprint to guide bilateral agreements with select African countries (Meloni 2024b, 2024d), such as Tunisia, Egypt and Ethiopia, among others. Hence, the Mattei Plan purports to be a strategy for development and cooperation with countries that were colonised either by Italy or by other European powers. In Central Asia and the Middle East, Meloni has explored synergy opportunities with states of the likes of Azerbaijan and Saudi Arabia. In an interview with *Il Sole 24 Ore*, Italy's leading business newspaper, Meloni proudly lauded the Mattei Plan as a 'strategic initiative' embodying Italy's national interests and its 'geopolitical vocation' for forging partnerships designed to foster mutual economic prosperity (Meloni 2024c).

Pride derives from Italy's special role in the Mediterranean, when it comes to the economic sphere and migration management. Notably, Meloni announced at the prestigious Conference of *Confindustria*⁴ that the Mattei Plan promotes a 'new kind' of cooperation and development with African states, through 'non-patronising or paternalistic approaches', and a 'reciprocal and equal relationship' (Meloni 2024c). The Mattei Plan is said to introduce a new paradigm of foreign relations breaking away from the exploitation, belittling and misunderstanding that Africa has been subject to in the past (Meloni 2024c).

This affirmation seems to reckon with the colonial past of exploitation and inequality that plagued African countries, although it clearly steers away from any form of nostalgia. No longing for or idealisation of the colonial past is evident. However, it is still unclear whether the Mattei Plan marks the start of a critical appraisal of the Italian colonial past with the genuine aim of building equal partnerships (Meloni 2024c) or is just a rhetorical veneer for the paternalistic facilitation of development (Griffini 2025). The fact that Meloni specified that development would, in turn, trigger a virtuous circle bringing democracy to Africa seems to support the hypothesis that paternalism is still present (Meloni 2024e).

In June 2025, Meloni celebrated the partnership between the Mattei Plan and the EU Global Gateway investment initiative, which is based on strategic partnerships with African states (Meloni 2025b). Meloni marked the occasion by reiterating that 'We Europeans have been called to make a difference' with the purpose of generating not dependency but self-sufficiency in the African continent (Meloni 2025b). The way in which Italy, spearheading the EU, is framed as a necessary and benevolent presence letting African countries tap into their potential and thrive, carries subtle echoes of colonial narratives. Yet, neither explicit nor subtle colonial nostalgia has a place in these official speeches.

In line with a number of previous strategic agreements between Italy and African countries to contain immigration, the Mattei Plan proposes to reduce the flow of migrants undertaking the Mediterranean Sea route from the African continent to Italy. Hence, the Mattei Plan has become a tool to control immigration through cooperation with the countries of origin or of transit of migrants. Proudly, the populist radical right government

hopes that the Mattei Plan will chart the way for the EU to mitigate the challenge of immigration (Meloni X 26/06/2024). This ambitious aim reveals the instrumentality of foreign relations that we observed in the section above on the strategic Treaty between Italy and Libya in 2008, whose actual goal was to gain Libya's cooperation in tackling irregular immigration. Within the framework set out in the Mattei Plan, Meloni spotlighted bilateral cooperation with Egypt (Meloni 2024a) and with Tunisia (Meloni 2025a), praising the shared commitment to combat irregular immigration.

Overall, the Mattei Plan embodies Fdl's pride in positioning Italy as an exemplary partner for cooperation and development with African countries, while simultaneously instrumentalising cooperation for the purpose of migration control. Although explicit postcolonial nostalgia is clearly absent from Meloni's discourse and Meloni explicitly disavows paternalistic approaches to development, her words betray an underlying paternalism and the lack of a genuine reckoning with Italy's colonial past.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has shed light on a compelling research puzzle that has not been illuminated enough yet: the role of colonial memory in the Italian foreign policy towards former colonies, and, especially, the populist radical right's appraisal of Italy's foreign relations with its former colonial territories. To fill this research gap, this paper has investigated how the populist radical right's colonial memory influences its understanding of foreign relations with former colonies.

Methodologically, this paper has applied CDA to semi-structured interviews with Italian populist radical right representatives from the Lega and Fratelli d'Italia (Fdl). Interviews are complemented by a selection of relevant official speeches recently delivered by Fdl Prime Minister Meloni on the theme of cooperation and development strategies between Italy and former colonies, in particular, the so-called Mattei Plan (launched in 2024). Analytically, given the significant overlap in their positions on Italy's foreign relations with its former colonies, we have not distinguished between Lega and Fdl as separate case studies. This consideration points to the fact that, while being different in their ideological lineage and longevity, Lega and Fdl share substantial consensus on the issue analysed.

From the theoretical point of view, this paper has drawn on postcolonialism as an analytical framework to examine how the colonial past is still shaping present foreign policy. What emerges is a selective type of colonial memory underlying delayed and half-hearted colonial apologies, the neglect of former treasured colonies, a hypocritical cooperation with their dictators, and the paternalistic development and cooperation strategy Italy recently launched, under the name of Mattei Plan, in partnership with African countries.

A sanitised memory of the Italian colonial past also shapes the Italian populist radical right's erasure of the most uncomfortable aspects of colonialism and emphasis on those considered the most positive ones. The emotional outcome of this selective memory is subtle postcolonial nostalgia, manifested through scepticism towards the usefulness of colonial apologies, indifference towards the dire conditions of former colonies in the 1990s and the hypocritical instrumental cooperation with dictators ruling them. A further emotion that emerged from the analysis is the pride infusing

the current Mattei Plan for development and cooperation with African countries. The latter are considered opportunistically for the populist radical right's chief purpose of immigration control.

As the Mattei Plan evolves, this paper hopes to trigger academic debate on the Plan's developments and their relation to Italy's colonial past. Overall, the paradigmatic case study of Italy is meant to inaugurate a new direction of the research agenda, through the analysis of the underexplored case studies of the booming populist radical right parties in former European colonising countries, such as Portugal and Spain, which maintain a controversial relation to their colonial past.

Notes

1. Ethical approval and consent from the participants were obtained. Details of ethical approval may be obtained upon request.
2. Former overseas territories.
3. The Mattei Plan is called after the Chairman of the Italian energy company ENI (*Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi*) Enrico Mattei, who, in the post-war period, advocated Italy's energy cooperation with African countries.
4. The largest business association in Italy represents companies in commerce, tourism, services, transport, and small and medium enterprises.

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Author contributions

CRedit: **Marianna Griffini**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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