IDS Bulletin
Transforming Development Knowledge
Volume **56** | Number **1** | August 2025

DEMOCRACY CONTESTED

Issue Editors **Shandana Khan Mohmand and Marjoke Oosterom**

The Transnationalisation of Illiberalism (and Democratic Resistance) in Europe

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Abstract The transnationalisation of illiberal far-right parties and social movements is increasingly evident in Europe today. While there is a growing body of research on different types of regressive illiberal political actors (for example, anti-immigration parties, anti-gender organisations) and their cross-border political mobilisation, research has tended to focus on a 'division of labour', pertaining to either political parties or social movements. Applying the concepts of 'transnationalisation' and 'diffusion' as used in collective action research, this article seeks to bring these strands of analysis together in a common analytical framework to understand the transnationalisation of different types of illiberal far-right actors (including both political parties and non-party organisations) in terms of organisational networks, identity frames, and protest events. All aspects of the framework will be shown through the cases of the anti-gender movement in Europe, the European 'counter-movement' (against the populist far right), as well as the 'wokeism' frame.

Keywords contentious politics, transnationalisation, far-right politics, social movements, mobilisation, illiberalism.

1 Introduction

The transnationalisation of illiberal[3] and far-right parties and social movements is increasingly evident in Europe today. They do not only develop transnational networks but thanks to the increasing use of the internet and social media platforms, their ideas are also spreading across borders. Anti-immigrant and anti-gender actors – in addition to right-wing actors mobilising in relation to various crises, in particular the Covid-19 pandemic – now rally at events internationally, which supports the diffusion of frames and strategies and lends them invaluable international insight. This is true for both political parties and movements amidst the fourth wave of the far right, which has seen the

The *IDS Bulletin* is published by Institute of Development Studies, Library Road, Brighton, BN1 9RE, UK.
This article is part of *IDS Bulletin* Vol. 56 No. 1 August 2025 **'Democracy Contested'**; the Introduction is also recommended reading.

emergence of increasingly hybrid actors on this side of the political spectrum.

One of the latest, and in some respects boldest attempt of the intensification of cooperation among right-wing illiberals occurred on 2 July 2021, with the 'Declaration on the Future of Europe' (Gotev 2021) signed by many far-right parties in Europe. Moreover, a parallel arena of cooperation exists outside the institutional setting. It has been argued that 'transnational processes of exchange and learning play an important role in the success of right-wing extremism and right-wing populism in Europe' (Langenbacher and Schellenberg 2011: 22). Attempts to create a transnational network based on a global white identity, or the organisation of transnational meetings such as the World Congress of Families or the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) can be considered as examples of activities carried out by various types of far-right political and social groups as well as civil society organisations (Caiani 2018).

Despite these changing dynamics, the literature on the transnationalisation of far-right politics is yet to be developed. Historians can be considered as the pioneers who demonstrate that an ethnocentric focus on nationhood (also termed nativism) does not inherently preclude transnational mobilisation by investigating the experiences of German Nazism and Italian fascism (e.g. Schir 2022; Dafinger and Florin 2022; Macklin 2013; Fangen and Weisskircher 2024). The historical precedent for this phenomenon can be traced back to the Fascist International Conference, established by Mussolini in 1934, which demonstrates the long-standing efforts of far-right groups to establish transnational alliances (Albanese and del Hierro 2016).

The increasing trend of transnationalisation of the far right in twenty-first century politics is partly explained by academic silos, with scholars of party politics looking primarily at the Europeanisation of political parties (e.g. McDonnell and Werner 2020), and scholars of social movement studies looking at the transnationalisation of the extra-parliamentary right and often focusing on the most extreme actors (e.g. the identitarians; see Zúquete 2018). Despite these efforts by different disciplines, empirical research on the recent transnationalisation of far-right politics within sociology and political science is relatively less explored, compared to research on the transnationalisation of the libertarian left.

Applying the concepts of 'transnationalisation' and 'diffusion' as used in collective action research, this article seeks to bring these strands of analysis together into one analytical framework. The aim is to understand the transnationalisation of different types of illiberal far-right actors (including both political parties and non-party organisations such as far-right social movements, anti-gender organisations, neo-fascist groups, and

so on) in terms of organisational networks, identity frames, and mobilisation events. In our framework, the far right is conceived as a plural actor (Caiani, della Porta and Wagemann 2012), a plural 'movement sector' including both political parties and social movements intertwined and interacting.

Drawing on social movement studies, this framework addresses the dynamics of internationalisation of far-right politics, paying special attention to the activities and interactions of both party and non-party actors, as well as the political opportunities that European integration provides for this transnationalisation process. The increasing significance of new internet technologies, the role of social media platforms along with physical meetings in the organisation of transnational events, and ideological and narrative frames will also be addressed within the scope of our research (Caiani 2023).

In this article, we firstly look at the transnationalisation of illiberal right-wing organisational networks in Europe, aided by social media, underscoring the development of a strong European anti-gender 'hub'. Secondly, we argue that identity frames (and 'master frames') based on an exclusivist idea of Europe constitute another important aspect of the transnationalisation of the illiberal right today. These frames, which distance themselves from European rejectionism and instead embrace the idea of transnational European integration, allow far-right actors to symbolically construct a political and social reality that integrates various issues into a new European collective identity to overcome traditional conflicts over nation and nationalism. Here we use the case of the 'wokeism' frame, based on both social and cultural appeals, which is on the rise among European right-wing groups.

Finally, we consider the movement/counter-movement dynamics of the transnationalisation of far-right mobilisation, by examining the development of an anti-populist movement in Europe from below to counter the illiberal populist right. This constitutes an alternative power that could be a transnational force for European democracy. In this article, we stress the significance of conceptualising the transnationalisation of the current far right in Europe based on three forms, which constitute a framework for the analysis: (1) transnational and cross-country networks and organisations; (2) common frames and identities; and (3) common or coordinated actions, initiatives, and events.

Section 2 initially presents a comprehensive theoretical framework that outlines the transnationalisation and cross-national diffusion of far-right politics. The three major pillars of the approach – identity frames, organisational networks, and mobilisation events – are also introduced in this section. Section 3 explores the emergence of far-right organisational networks and their role in the transnationalisation process. This section presents a case study of the anti-gender movement across Europe, exploring the

interactive multi-actor dynamics of far-right politics. Section 4, which analyses the case of 'anti-wokeness' in Europe, investigates the diffusion of the common identity frames that are adopted by various far-right actors across countries. Finally, Section 5 explores the dynamics of mobilisation in far-right politics. To do so, the section adopts a movement/counter-movement perspective and presents the case of the anti-populist Italian 6000 Sardine and Finnish Silakkaliike movements. Section 6 concludes.

2 Transnationalisation and diffusion of collective political mobilisation

The literature on the supranational politics of far-right forces has predominantly focused on far-right-wing political parties (and electoral success) and their 'Europeanisation' (e.g. Conti 2011). On the other hand, although left-wing transnationalisation is well documented and researched in social movement studies (e.g. della Porta and Caiani 2009; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001), the increasing consideration given to the regressive side of political contention and its transnationalisation arguably suffers from disciplinary boundaries. There is an abundant corpus of studies on anti-gender far-right social movements – solidly transnational from the outset (e.g. Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Lavizzari and Siročić 2022; Caiani and Tranfić 2024), while research on the diffusion of far-right anti-vax groups is still developing (e.g. Caiani, Susasnzky and Saridakis 2024; Fominaya 2022; Ringe and Rennó 2023).

Many studies focus on the use of social media by far-right actors for the transnationalisation of (illiberal) content (e.g. Heft *et al.* 2022; Ahmed and Pisoiu 2021; Davis 2019) and their networks (e.g. Froio and Ganesh 2019; Törnberg and Nissen 2022; Ahmed and Pisoiu 2021). Research has underlined the importance of far-right transnationalism, in terms of both ideology and practice (e.g. Pinheiro-Machado and Vargas-Maia 2023; Berntzen and Weisskircher 2016; Dafinger and Florin 2022; Anievas and Saull 2023), although this latter aspect is still far from being widely explored (Fangen and Weisskircher 2024).

In social movement studies, the transnationalisation of collective actors is defined comprehensively (i.e. multidimensionally), as sustained contentious interactions with opponents – national or non-national – by connected networks of challengers organised across national boundaries (Tarrow 2005). The literature distinguishes between transnational issues, targets – the subject towards which the claim or the mobilisation is directed – and mobilisation (McAdam and Rucht 1993; Schain, Zolberg and Hossay 2002).

For social movements, transnational mobilisation can mean organising collective action around the sites of supranational institutions (e.g. the European Parliament, the World Health Organization, WHO) and/or organising protests simultaneously

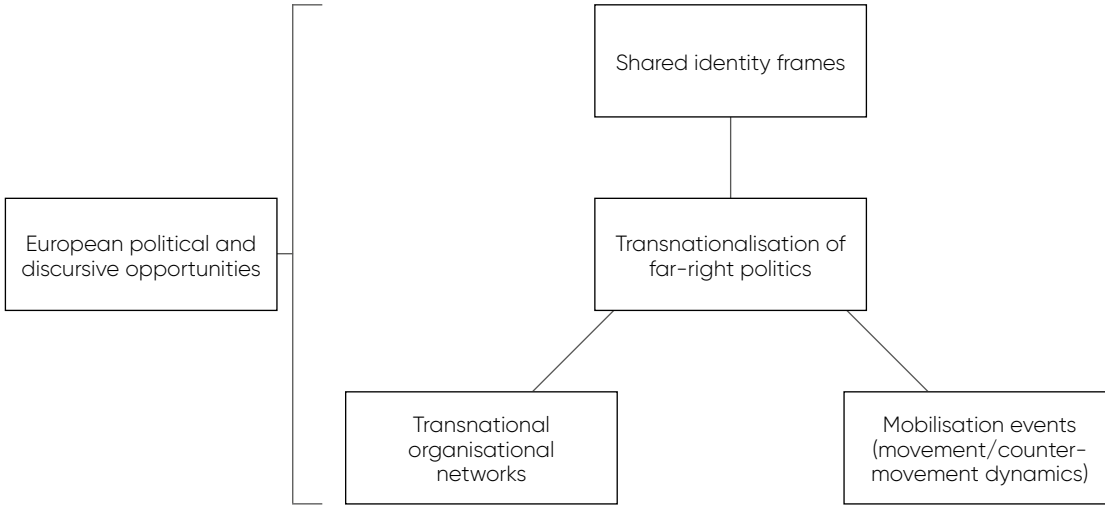
in different countries (della Porta and Caiani 2009). Bourne and Chatzopoulou argue that the collective political Europeanisation of actors 'occurs when movements collaborate, or make horizontal communicative linkages with movements in other countries, contesting authorities beyond the state and framing issues as European while claiming a European identity' (2015: 34). In this sense, the European Union (EU) arena not only presents new potential targets for protest, but also furnishes a shared space of contention for collective actors from across the EU member states (Monforte 2014).

Other scholars describe transnationalisation on the far right as a shared issue focus among (nationally bound) individuals and organisations that have sustained ties across the borders of many nation states, including interactions that range from low to high levels of institutionalisation (Froio and Ganesh 2019). Far-right transnationalisation occurs when closely interrelated groups and organisations from more than one country place a similar discursive emphasis on issues and collective identities related to these issues.

On transnationalisation as cross-national organisational networking, research demonstrates how far-right political parties and politicians use digital platforms for both internal communication and targeting wider audiences (e.g. Ackland and Gibson 2013; Larsson 2015). These groups and networks are considered part of a global far-right ecosystem that scholars have begun to map (e.g. Baele, Brace and Coan 2020; Haller, Holt and de La Brosse 2019; Holt 2020). Becker (2019) describes this ecosystem as an international disinformation machine, devoted to the cultivation, provocation, and amplification of far-right, anti-immigrant passions and political forces. The internet can bring people together across national borders, while reducing the costs of communication, thus solving challenges with leadership and networking, but certain right-wing extremists use the internet to circumvent the law and escape police control (Caiani *et al.* 2012; Caiani and Kröll 2015).

Transnationalisation is also closely connected to diffusion, another concept from social movement studies, which can be described as the adoption of similar frames and strategies of action across distant locations, in two different social movements (della Porta and Mattoni 2014). According to the classical understanding of diffusion, the ideational (frames, ideas, and so on) and behavioural (tactics, strategies, slogans, and so on) of collective action can spread from a transmitter group to an adopter group through various relational and non-relational channels as well as mechanisms such as attribution of similarity and emulation (della Porta and Diani 2020; McAdam and Rucht 1993).

Figure 1 Analytical framework to study the transnationalisation of illiberal and far-right politics among political parties, social movements, and civil society organisations



Source: Authors' own.

Recent research on the progressive side of mobilisation has emphasised the importance of cognitive, relational, and emotional mechanisms for the diffusion of contention such as the cathartic stimulation of the emotional energy required for mobilisation, beyond the more conventional considerations such as cultural and geographical proximities (Eren 2023).

Thus, transnationalisation of the far right can refer to different dimensions. In this article, we argue here that the transnationalisation of the far right in Europe can take at least three forms: (1) in terms of the development of transnational networks among groups; (2) in terms of transnational identity frames which define the identity of contenders and who are the 'us' and the 'them' (Tilly 2003); and (3) in terms of protest mobilisation (see Figure 1). For this last part, we will look more specifically at movement/counter-movement dynamics (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996), illustrating the development of a European anti-right-wing populist movement as a political counter-strategy (Pennucci 2023) against the common diffusion and consolidation of the far right in various countries. In the following sections, we will focus on each of these aspects of potential transnationalisation of the illiberal far right (networks, identities, actions, and events), and reflect on each of them in relation to both far-right social movements and political parties.

3 Far-right illiberal transnational networks (and social media)

As for any political party, networking represents an essential political activity for the far right, particularly on an international level, and it functions as a crucible for the exchange of ideas and

information on policy and praxis (Graham 2013: 177). Transnational far-right networks have emerged in recent decades, including neo-Nazi groups and other actors such as the Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West (PEGIDA) and Generation Identity (GI). As stated above, the internet has played a major role in the ability of far-right actors to create networks and coordinate actions and even global events (Hall, Heft and Vaughan 2024).

Using the case of the anti-gender movement in Europe, we will discuss the three parts of the framework, starting with the transnational network aspect, followed by frames and identity, and finally, coordinated action. Overall, we observe that contextual opportunities (such as European integration and far-right political parties' transnationalisation in the European Parliament), the framing of 'gender ideology' and 'natural family', as well as some international events such as CPAC in the United States (US) and Hungary (CPAC 2025), nurture both transnational networking and common framing (Caiani and Tranfić 2024). In particular, the interplay of religious resources and conservative familial identity politics are diffused bottom-up within national networks and top-down by domestic anti-gender actors that act as brokers in the international arena (*ibid.*). Key aspects (or moments) of the transnational anti-gender community or network can be distinguished.

First, various forms of cooperation and interaction have been established in the past decade among non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and political parties, churches, foundations, and thinktanks which can be identified as 'anti-gender movements'. Recent studies show that these interactions are particularly nurtured within and through social media (Caiani, Tranfić and Eren 2024). The anti-gender movement includes anti-abortion and pro-family associations, and conservative Catholic and far-right groups (Scrinzi 2024). It opposes policies promoting gender equality and sexual democracy, regarding them as an attempt by 'globalist elites' to transform the fundamental basis of human society. The 'gender ideology' frame serves as a floating signifier, allowing diverse illiberal actors to form coalitions around a common cause (Mayer and Sauer 2017).

This rhetoric was first forged by the Vatican in the 1990s and has spread internationally since (Lavizzari and Prearo 2019). Generally speaking, traditional conservative national actors share best practices and help spread know-how and resources to develop a new transnational anti-gender forum, while regional and global anti-gender actors help support the creation of new local initiatives or chapters of existing pro-life and anti-gender organisations (Caiani and Tranfić 2024). Coalition building seems to be crucial for the development of transnational anti-gender networks as observed at, for instance, the 2019 World Congress of Families in Verona, Italy. Transnational anti-gender politics

become embedded in concrete, everyday local spaces, resonating with situated histories of far-right and religious conservatism (Demirsu 2024).

Second, international frames and framing, making salient 'international' issues, play a specific role in the transnationalisation of the anti-gender movement in Europe. For example, in 2021, WikiLeaks published the 'Intolerance Network' – 17,000 internal documents of two Spanish organisations important to transnational anti-gender mobilising efforts (Cariboni 2021). The documents provide solid evidence of a vast global network of financial, ideological, and strategic links between far-right parties and ultra-conservative religious groups tied to various Christian denominations. This transnationalising includes appealing to the 'common-sense' of essentialising differences between women and men, and extolling the virtues of the nuclear family to enable far-right actors to circumvent uncomfortable political contradictions pertaining to history and ethnic and religious differences.

The rise of anti-gender actors in Europe and the increasing salience of religion in political discourse are closely interrelated phenomena. The revival of 'religious language' extends beyond Western European political landscapes: think of US President Donald Trump's association with evangelical Christianity and Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini's embrace of Catholicism (Caiani and Carvalho 2021). In Brazil, former president Jair Bolsonaro aligned with Pentecostal churches, and in India Prime Minister Narendra Modi promotes Hindu nationalism (Steinmetz-Jenkins and Jager 2019). Moreover, the informal alliance between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin in promoting traditional Christian values and politicised homophobia led to a period of intensified cross-denominational and cross-border diffusion of anti-gender contention across the Atlantic (Edenborg 2023).

Regarding the third part of the framework, international coordination/mobilisation, it has been observed that international exchanges among anti-gender forces have intensified in the past 5–10 years through the cooperation between right-wing authoritarians, in particular political parties at European and global levels (Lavizzari and Siročić 2022). Graff and Korolczuk (2022) conceptualise this relationship as an opportunistic synergy in which religious conservatives seek political alliances among right-wing populist parties, who, in return, infuse their ideology with anti-gender claims to increase their legitimacy and voter pool.

Furthermore, when states adopt anti-gender politics and politicised homophobia/transphobia as a part of their international agenda of protecting traditional values and Christian heritage, it provides unique political opportunities

for anti-gender actors in other contexts, and can serve as a mechanism for anti-gender diffusion and/or transnationalisation. Additionally, international institutions and polities such as the United Nations and the EU serve as 'coral reefs' (Tarrow 2005) around which movements and actors cluster. In the case of anti-gender movements, these include transnational advocacy groups, NGOs, and thinktanks such as the International Organization for the Family, Alliance Defending Freedom, and the European Centre for Law and Justice, to name a few.

Moreover, triangular cooperation between Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Christian churches is established via international links and made easier given a common Christian identity and the supranational ambitions of religions claiming universal validity and scope. Finally, the EU serves as a particularly important vehicle of transnationalisation, not only for advocacy groups but also via EU-level political groups and parties, among which the European Christian Political Movement, European Conservatives and Reformists, and Identity and Democracy figure as central actors. In the following section, we unpack the social movement literature on transnationalisation and movement diffusion to see how it can be applied to far-right social movements.

4 Frames and new political supranational identities of the illiberal far right

Scholars increasingly look at the transnationalisation of collective actors as a diffusion of ideas, norms, and values (Caiani and Tranfić 2024) and indicate processes of diffusion of 'frames' as a precondition for the formation of transnational cooperation and identities. These in turn can function as a basis for the development of cross-national linkages (della Porta and Diani 2020). Recent literature has alluded to the combination of social networks and underlying motives as the basis for movement recruitment and the path to popular mobilisation (Diani and McAdam 2003). This 'diffusion' of shared 'frames' and common 'repertoires of protest' also facilitates a further development of 'tolerant' support networks for 'intolerant' ideologically inspired action, which can yield logistical and indeed emotional support to activists who are frequently marginalised within the context of their domestic politics (della Porta and Tarrow 2004). The diffusion of ideas can be analysed by applying frame analysis, focusing on the social construction of problems and solutions, and the way organisations spread their vision of society and the social identities of contenders (who is in the in-group and who is out) (Caiani 2023).

Analysis of the frames on Europe and European integration as used in the documents and statements of current far-right social movements and their leaders in Europe shows the ideational foundations of far-right transnationalism (Caiani and Weisskircher 2022). Far-right actors are not merely 'nationalists': they positively identify with exclusionary visions of Europe too. They can be

labelled as 'pro-European nationalists', underlining the existence of strong European identities across various types of groups, deeply embedded in the mindset of activists even when they sharply criticise European integration in its current form. While emphasising a European identity, including a diversity of nation states, they exclude non-European immigrants, especially Muslims, viewing 'Europe' as a 'bulwark' against Islam and immigrants from other continents (see Brubaker 2017). As recent gatherings in Budapest, Madrid, and Pontida in Northern Italy show, far-right leaders have clearly understood the political benefits of establishing political cooperation across borders while vociferously asserting: 'We should not withdraw from #Brussels, but occupy it. We will take back Brussels from the bureaucrats and return it to the European people!' (Orbán 2024).

Such emphasis on the exclusivist European identity frame has also been integrated into wider illiberal frames that also include explicit opposition to various minority and disadvantaged groups in Europe. A prominent example is the increasing popularity of the 'anti-wokeism' frame among far-right actors in Europe. Our ongoing research in the AuthLIB project is based on analysis of content diffused through social media within and across national contexts from 2008 to 2022 by the main far-right parties and movements in various European countries (Italy, Austria, France, Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary).[4] Our analysis reveals that the use of the 'wokeism' frame is visible in far-right illiberal debates among both political parties and movements, especially in discussions of political issues concerning education, culture, and citizenship.

'Wokeness' or 'staying woke', which dates back to early twentieth-century political awareness about racism and social injustices towards the African-American community in the US, has become significantly prominent in the twenty-first century both in terms of activism and the culture/entertainment industry in the US. After the Black Lives Matter protests in the 2010s and the expansion of the meaning of the concept to include advocacy and social consciousness on diverse justice issues – including the rights of women, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex (LGBTQI+), and other minorities – 'wokeness' became a contentious concept and has been targeted by Republican and far-right figures across the US (Richardson and Ragland 2018; Cammaerts 2022). This 'anti-wokeness' position has diffused to Europe and started to become a prominent frame used by various actors in different countries including the United Kingdom, Netherlands, Belgium, and France (Richardson and Ragland 2018; Cammaerts 2022; Johnson 2024; Campangne 2023).

During this adoption process, 'anti-wokeness' gained a European character: wokeism has been framed by conservative and far-right actors as a 'US-imported ideology' aligned with 'Islamo-leftism' that 'infects' and 'divides' European society

(Campangne 2023; Johnson 2024). In this framework, 'wokeness' has been targeted as 'anti-European' while an 'anti-woke stance', with its alignments to various illiberal ideas ranging from climate change denialism to anti-gender, has been explicitly advertised to defend the values and society of Europe. Considering that 'anti-wokeness' represents a general political position that targets progressive politics and aligns with ultra-conservative ideas ranging from anti-LGBTQI+ rights to nativism, we may consider it as a potential 'master frame' for its potential to unite several different issues intrinsic to the far-right political discourse (Snow and Benford 1992).

Considering these debates, it can be argued that the anti-wokeism frame highlights concern over the impact of contemporary progressive ideologies on traditional educational and cultural values. The frame, arguably, is spreading widely across Europe among the far right insomuch as it binds various frames, traditional and novel, and ideological tropes including gender, European integration, and nationalism. Furthermore, we can argue that these similar interpretative schemes across European far-right organisations on current politics also serve to create what in sociology is called the 'structure of discursive opportunities'; that is, the political-cultural or symbolic opportunities that determine what kind of ideas become visible to the public, resonate with public opinion, and are held to be 'legitimate' by the audience (della Porta and Diani 2020). This is particularly relevant for the mechanism of European democracy.

5 Transnationalisation of populist far-right mobilisation and 'counter-movement' European resistance

In this section, we focus on the protest events dimension of the transnationalisation of far-right politics by adopting a movement/counter-movement perspective to investigate the development of a European anti-populist movement as a reaction to this transnationalisation pattern. Movement/counter-movement dynamics are important for political mobilisation, also transnationally, as we argue here. Social movements often create their own opposition, sometimes in the form of counter-movements (Tarrow 2021). In fact, right-wing mobilisation does not take place in a vacuum but in interaction with a range of different actors whom far-right groups confront and address (e.g. anti-racist groups, squatted autonomous centres, and political institutions) (della Porta and Diani 2020).

Movement/counter-movement mobilisations are interrelated and sometimes imitate each other (della Porta and Diani 2020). This section traces a case of an anti-right-wing populist counter-movement, examining all three aspects of the framework. The emphasis on the emotional aspects of transnational diffusion (and the microscopic approach) indicates potential avenues for further research, particularly for scholars seeking to elucidate the

mechanisms of transnationalisation of the reactionary side of political contention.

A study conducted by the authors investigating the dynamics of the emergence and spread of recent anti-far-right populist movements in Europe was carried out through a comparative analysis of the 6000 Sardine movement in Italy and the Silakkaliike (herrings) movement in Finland (Caiani and Eren 2023). The movements are similar cases of 'anti-populist' mobilisation from below, forming against the same illiberal far-right enemy, on a different scale (national or local) – Silakkaliike inspired by 6000 Sardine. Challenging the populist and polarising discourse, these value-oriented movements represent a hope for democracy in their focus on politicising and mobilising apolitical citizens, through socialisation in the streets, social media platforms, and new repertoires of positive actions and emotions.[5]

The 6000 Sardine movement was formed in Italy as a reaction to the electoral campaign of the right-wing coalition led by Matteo Salvini and his Lega party for the regional election in January 2020. The movement originated in Emilia Romagna, a historically left-wing 'red belt' region (Caruso and De Blasio 2021) that was about to fall under the control of the right-wing populist Lega. While Lega had organised an electoral campaign event in Bologna on 14 November 2019, four young people – Mattia Santori, Roberto Morotti, Giulia Trappoloni, and Andrea Garreffa – called for a flash mob in the main square of Bologna on the same day. Announced on a Facebook page called '6000 Sardines against Salvini', organisers aimed to mobilise more people than the 5,750 seats in the PalaDozza, a sports arena in Bologna where Lega's event was scheduled. In fact, 15,000 people attended the demonstration.

Within a month of the first flash mob, several similar demonstrations had been organised in other large Italian cities, such as Florence, Turin, Milan, Naples, Rome, and Palermo. They drew the participation of tens of thousands of people. The 6000 Sardine movement captured significant media attention. On 14 December, the movement's leaders released a manifesto stressing the need for a more transparent political atmosphere in Italy without any discriminatory and alienating agendas or discourse. The movement also expanded beyond Italian borders, as similar flash mobs named 'Sardines' were organised in countries such as Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands.

The Silakkaliike movement, on the other hand, was born approximately one month after the 6000 Sardine on 25 December 2019 in Helsinki. It was initiated after public debate following the government's decision to repatriate two Finnish children from al-Hol refugee camp in Syria in December 2019. Some right-wing groups and MPs from the main right-wing populist party, True Finns, criticised the government and

demanded that the children's identities be revealed during livestreaming of the repatriation operation. Triggered by these events, Silakkaliike's founder Johannes Koski and his friends decided to set up a Twitter account to combat populism and hate speech in Finland, with a proposal for Finnish activists to 'have their own Sardine movement' (see Koski 2019).

Although Silakkaliike (which means 'herrings' in Finnish) explicitly referred to the 6000 Sardine movement as an inspiration, it was founded as an independent movement, with no organisational affiliation to Italy's movement. In the words of the founder, they took 'the example of the Italian Sardine movement' (*ibid.*). Within a month, the Silakkaliike had reached around 30,000 people in its Facebook group and organised a flash mob that drew the attendance of thousands of people on 1 February 2020. The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic and its associated restrictions hampered physical gatherings for both movements. However, Silakkaliike actively used its Facebook group as a vital platform for discussion and has continued its online activities since that time.

Despite the absence of geographical proximities or strong cultural, linguistic, and historical connections between the two countries and movements, the 6000 Sardine movement was an inspiration for the Silakkaliike mobilisation. Finnish activists adopted the Sardine movement's model including its ideas, frames, and repertoires of action. Our analysis of 27 in-depth interviews with representatives and participants of the 6000 Sardine in Italy and Silakkaliike in Finland, along with offline and online documents released by the two movements (public statements, manifestos, Facebook pages, and websites), demonstrate that three major factors shaped the diffusion of this anti-populist movement model: the contextual similarities shaped by right-wing populist and far-right discourses and practices in politics; the emotional and cognitive resonance of shared values and principles; and the success of the 6000 Sardine movement's model. These factors effectively enabled and inspired the founders and participants of Silakkaliike to emotionally and cognitively identify with their counterparts in the 6000 Sardine movement, thereby facilitating the spread of collective action from Italy to Finland. The framings used by the two movements were partially different and are conceivably linked to different political opportunity structures in the two contexts, especially those whom they oppose and the ideological underpinning of the two movements.

Research on protest diffusion emphasises that the attribute of similarity is required as adopters must identify at some minimal level with transmitters if diffusion is to occur (McAdam and Rucht 1993). Eren (2023) argues that contextual and motivational similarities provide a cognitive ground for protesters to identify with other protesters in different countries. A comparable sense of similarity exists in these two cases. The findings demonstrate

that both actual and perceived similarities of political context related to the activities and agendas of right-wing populist actors created a cognitive ground for the founders/organisers and participants of Silakkaliike to identify with the 6000 Sardine movement.

Although Italy and Finland are different countries in distinct parts of Europe, the movements emerged in a similar context in which far-right populism was gaining traction. The two cases shared similar contextual political opportunities related to populism. In Italy, the Lega party was part of a government coalition with the Five Star Movement (M5S) from 2018 to 2019, while in Finland the 2019 national election saw the right-wing Finns Party attain 17.5 per cent of votes versus 17.7 per cent for the Social Democratic Party. The Finns Party became the second-largest party in parliament and one of the junior partners in a coalition cabinet with the Centre Party and the National Coalition Party. The impact of the transnationalisation of far-right and populist parties became visible during this period: an institutional alliance between the Italian Lega party and the Finns Party was announced after the 2019 Finnish national elections. Matteo Salvini celebrated the success of 'populist friends' – although his European Alliance of Peoples and Nations (EAPN) was not successful.

In the interviews with Silakkaliike's founders/organisers and participants, these contextual similarities and the increasing trend of transnationalisation of far-right/populist actors (and their impact on activists' perceptions) appeared as pivotal factors for the diffusion of the Sardine model from Italy to Finland. Right-wing populism and its negative impact on society and politics has been framed as a common problem not only in Italy and Finland but also in wider Europe by Silakkaliike organisers and participants. Despite the absence of detailed knowledge of the Italian political context, the Sardine model became a benchmark as an 'anti-fascist and anti-populist movement' (interview 11, Finland) that was 'able to make a difference' (interview 5, Finland).

As the organisers stated, the movement 'took inspiration from the Italian Sardines, which opposes the right-wing populist Matteo Salvini's La Lega' because 6000 Sardine was a successful movement model 'saying no to aggressive populism' (interview 2, Finland). Based on this model and concerned by rising populism in Finland, Silakkaliike was similarly formed as a 'counterforce against right-wing populism' (Koski 2019). As previously mentioned, the interviews show that the reaction towards right-wing populism and far-right politics was not limited to their impact on the national context but also their transnational impact. As a Silakkaliike movement organiser argued, 'Europe definitely has a problem' of populism and far-right politics and 'the populist attitude is what we all find dangerous… towards our society and globally' (interview 1, Finland). She added that it is crucial to

organise 'similar types of movements in other European countries to provide a counterforce that is based on the appreciation of basic human rights for everyone', so progressive actors 'can really make a difference' (interview 1, Finland). From a similar perspective, a participant also highlighted that,

> *[I am] really angry about this right-wing populist party. They are gaining popularity because they are bullying people if you criticise them… It is not just the Finnish populist party, it is everywhere, in the Western countries… They are violent, extremist right wingers, racist groups.*
> (Interview 10, Finland)

As can be seen from these interviews, the transnationalisation of far-right politics also causes the emergence of counter-movement dynamics in the form of a transnational movement against right-wing populism and far-right politics. Although 6000 Sardine and Silakkaliike were not officially affiliated, the values they shared, the emotional and cognitive reactions they embodied, and the perceived similarities that they observed at national and transnational levels activated similar motivations to resist the common threat in different political contexts. Similar to the spread of far-right and illiberal frames, strategies, and ideas, the ideational, behavioural, and emotional components of collective action against this political trend also diffuse cross-nationally as can be seen in this case. Exploring not only the organisational networks and proximities, but also emotional and cognitive mechanisms that facilitate the diffusion of these movements is particularly significant in understanding the dynamics of the recent European political context, which is mostly shaped by far-right politics.

6 Conclusion: multidimensional transnationalisation and the 'plural' far right

Using concepts of social movement studies, this article proposes an analytical framework which conceptualises (1) the transnationalisation of the far right in terms of international and cross-national networking, and relational contacts among groups in different countries; (2) the development of transnational (i.e. European) collective identities (namely identities built on the idea of a transnational polity and demos, although 'exclusive'); and (3) transnationalisation in terms of common and coordinated actions and events, including movement/counter-movement dynamics. The argument is that while these concepts have been largely applied to left-wing libertarian and progressive collective actors *vis-à-vis* understanding their paths towards a transnational political mobilisation, they can be a useful heuristic lens to explain current far-right dynamics beyond national borders.

In this article, we apply a collective action approach to the examination of the transnationalisation of the far right, including both political party organisations and movements. We emphasise

the importance of frames and framing for the development of common transnational European identities by the far right, which traditionally exhibits Euro-rejectionist or -sceptical tendencies. The pivotal function of networking, facilitated by the internet and by critical occurrences offline, is exemplified by the anti-gender case (Lavizzari and Siročić 2022). A pivotal network 'hub' in Europe is manifested by the gradual yet effective evolution of a transnational far-right, anti-gender movement. Finally, the resurgence of the far right in many European countries is noteworthy as this trend has engendered movement and counter-movement dynamics. Consequently, it has fostered the diffusion of an anti-populist European resistance from below in various countries.

As can be seen throughout the article, the concepts derived from social movement research (frames, networks, and political protest mobilisation) are useful tools when endeavouring to understand the increasing phenomenon of the transnationalisation of the far right, in that they allow researchers to stress the agency, the political and discursive opportunities created by far-right actors, and the processes of their mobilisation in time rather than as static factors, as well as meso-level intervening mechanisms (such as the role of the internet and individuals and leaders).

We believe that adopting the theoretical and analytical framework and tools from social movement scholarship can help scholarship on far-right politics to understand how its dynamics have been shaped from below. In addition to pioneering studies such as Hainsworth's (2000) work on analysis of the far right's impact on mainstream politics through electoral success, political alliances, and public visibility, and more recent studies focusing on the role of networks and practices in mainstreaming far-right ideologies and actors (Fangen and Weisskircher 2024), such a framework of transnationalisation based on social movement studies has the potential to explore the uncharted territories of this rising trend.

Notes

1 Manuela Caiani, Associate Professor, Scuola Normale Superiore, Italy.
2 Batuhan Eren, postdoctoral Research Fellow, Scuola Normale Superiore, Italy.
3 For the purposes of this article, we use a broad and inclusive meaning of the far right, which encompasses other labels commonly used in the literature, such as 'radical right', 'populist radical right', or even 'extreme right'. This is consistent with the increase in internal heterogeneity in far-right parties in the current context of the so-called global 'fourth wave' of the far right (Mudde 2019). Illiberalism is defined as the erosion of freedoms, censure of individualism, and politics of exclusion at the expense of minority rights (Enyedi 2024).

4 The data set of the content analysis will be available soon at the **AuthLIB website**.
5 This section is based on 27 in-depth interviews with activists and representatives of two bottom-up anti-populist movements analysed through grounded theory.

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