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Fratelli d'Italia in the European Parliament: between radicalism and conservatism

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ABSTRACT

This article studies the behaviour of Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) in the European Parliament (EP). Analysing a large sample of roll-call votes in the ninth EP (2019–2022), together with a selected sample of highly significant votes on COVID-19 and post-pandemic recovery, it shows that FdI has the strongest voting agreement with its allies in the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group and votes more often with the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) than with the more extreme Identity and Democracy (ID) group. FdI is often part of the winning coalition, shaping legislation or seeking to influence the policy agenda of the EU. On COVID-19 and post-pandemic votes, FdI often took a moderate approach on key issues, and did so even when it was the only party in opposition to the Draghi executive in Rome. At the same time, FdI has not renounced its ideological battles on specific policies, such as those having to do with socio-cultural issues and, to some extent, EU institutional issues. Yet, notwithstanding the evidence of more moderate and cooperative behaviour at the EU level, FdI may find it challenging to fully recast itself as a conservative, rather than a radical-right party, at the national level.

KEYWORDS

Fratelli d'Italia; conservative; European Parliament; European Conservatives and Reformists; Next Generation EU; radical right

1. Introduction

As it became clear that Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI) was going to become the largest party in Parliament following the general election in September 2022, several observers suggested that there were risks for Italian democracy. Commenting in *The Guardian*, the writer Roberto Saviano (2022), for instance, warned that Meloni was 'a danger to Italy and the rest of Europe'. While leading the polls, the leader of FdI felt the need to record a message in several languages, reassuring international observers that there was no risk of any 'anti-democratic drift' (Reuters 2022).

Founded in December 2012 as a breakaway from Silvio Berlusconi's Popolo della Libertà (People of Freedom, PdL), FdI has, due to its small size and marginal role, until recently attracted little academic attention. Yet, following its growing success, which eventually led it to become the leading party of the Italian centre-right coalition formed

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in October 2022, scholars have started to analyse its organization, supporters, communication strategies, and alliances (i.e. Baldini, Tronconi, and Angelucci 2023; Vassallo and Vignati 2023; Vampa 2023). Depending on their vantage points, scholars have also reached different conclusions on its ideological position. Based on a new and systematic analysis of the voting behaviour of FdI's representatives in the European Parliament (EP), this article contributes to this thriving debate. It concludes that, at the EU level at least, FdI has attempted to reposition itself as a conservative party, collaborating with mainstream groups and differentiating itself from the more radical right and Eurosceptic Identity and Democracy (ID) group.

Our analysis makes a significant contribution to the debate for at least two reasons. First, despite some attention to the international and EU position of FdI (e.g. Vassallo and Vignati 2023, 165–180), no systematic analysis of its behaviour in the EP has, so far, been attempted. Second, we tackle a much debated and controversial issue – namely the (evolving) identity of FdI – *sine ira et studio*, basing our conclusions solely on the analysis of a large sample of voting data rather than more *ad hoc* evidence or normative considerations.

More broadly, our analysis casts further light on the importance for political parties of the EU, in general, and the EP, in particular. The case of FdI – a leading member of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group and of the associated Europarty – shows that the EU arena can be exploited by parties which, moving from the margins of their party systems, aim to acquire domestic and international legitimacy by repositioning themselves as more mainstream actors (McDonnell and Werner 2019). By analysing the (final) roll-call votes that took place in the EP plenary from July 2019 to June 2022, and the positions of FdI on the most salient legislative and non-legislative proposals on the COVID-19 crisis and post-pandemic recovery until February 2023, we also assess whether the new governing role has had a moderating effect on the positions of FdI representatives in Brussels.

The article starts with a review of the scholarly literature positioning FdI within the traditional party families. In [Section 1.2](#), we state our research question and aims, and trace the party's positioning in the international and EU arenas. Next, we outline our research strategy and apply it in [Sections 1.4](#) and [1.5](#). The final section contains our conclusions.

1.1. Fratelli d'Italia: between radicalism and conservatism

Scholars have categorized FdI in contrasting ways, first as a post-fascist party. Despite its brief history – the party was only founded in December 2012 and held its first congress in Fiuggi in March 2014 – the party is heir to the Movimento Sociale Italiano (Italian Social Movement, MSI), the neo-fascist organization established in 1946 by survivors of the Fascist regime, and its successor, Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance, AN), a party that was post-fascist but still firmly rooted in the family of parties of the far right (Ignazi 2023). From an organizational point of view, a large majority of FdI's elites had had a background in the former party organizations (Puleo and Piccolino 2022). Meloni herself had led Azione Giovani, the youth organization of AN. Among the three founders of FdI – Meloni, Ignazio La Russa and Guido Crosetto – only the latter was without experience in the MSI or AN.

From an organizational perspective, therefore, the roots of FdI are to be found in neo-fascist and post-fascist parties, whose legacy and symbols (i.e. the tricolour flame) FdI has retained. This reading is also confirmed by an assessment of the symbolic values embraced by FdI. For instance, while dismissing suggestions that Meloni and her government may lead to a return of fascism in Italy, Agnew (2023, 311) writes that she may well be a ‘right-wing culture warrior with nostalgia for the hierarchy and order of Mussolini’s regime’. Broder (2023) also challenges the claim that fascism is no longer relevant for FdI, arguing that the party draws significantly upon the fascist tradition. While acknowledging that several features of fascism have been rejected by the party leadership – especially antisemitism, the cult of violence, and military expansionism – he maintains that the ‘core of the fascist worldview’ remains present. Other analyses also note the attractiveness of FdI for ‘post-fascist members’ (De Giorgi and Tronconi 2018, 7).

For a second group of scholars, FdI is firmly placed in the family of parties of the radical right. As Cas Mudde (2019) puts it, the radical right – unlike the extreme right – accepts democracy but challenges core values and institutions of liberal democracy, such as the separation of powers, the rule of law, and minority rights. While labelling it a ‘rooted newcomer’, counting on pre-existing organizational resources and building its appeal on symbolic elements known to the electorate when the party was established, Baldini et al. (2023, 4) stress the ‘ambivalent nature’ of the party, caught between its ‘post-fascist profile’ and ‘more moderate (conservative) positions’. Drawing on an analysis of a wealth of primary sources – such as party manifestos, speeches, congressional documents, and parliamentary activity – Baldini et al. show the similarities between FdI and the Hungarian Fidesz and the Polish Law and Justice, and categorize the party as an ‘unequivocally populist radical right’ entity (Baldini, Tronconi, and Angelucci 2023, 9). This assessment is widely shared in the literature. Thus, Puleo and Piccolino (2022, 20) claim that the ‘core of its ideology’ makes it ‘one of the most prominent members’ of the populist radical right family in Europe, while Donà (2022), analysing the party platforms between 2013 and 2019 together with various other documents, labels it a ‘radical right party’, without the populist qualifier. She argues that the formalization of the radical right shift occurred at the second party congress in Trieste in late 2017, when the party endorsed the defence of national identity and made its Euroscepticism explicit (2022, p. 785).

In contrast, a third interpretation rejects the categorization of FdI as a (post)fascist or (populist) radical right party. Vassallo and Vignati acknowledge that, in the first decade since its foundation, ‘FdI’s search for identity has been a work in progress’ (Vassallo and Vignati 2023, 165, our translation). They classify Meloni’s party as ‘national-conservative’, where ‘the label “conservative” gives recognition to the right within the broader centre-right coalition, giving it a distinctive identity’ (Vassallo and Vignati 2023, 267). While the origins of the party have been neither forgotten nor dismissed, the memory of fascism is no longer central to the party’s identity, as it considers instead parties like the Republicans in the USA or the British Conservatives to be its reference models. This perspective finds echo in a study analysing the policy overlap between the Draghi and Meloni governments (Genovese and Vassallo 2023), pointing to the remarkable continuity between the two. Against a backdrop of ideological polarization, they suggest that executive office has had a moderating effect on FdI’s position and identity.

1.2. Establishing transnational alliances in and through the European Parliament

In contrast with the existing literature, we address the question of the ideological positioning of FdI by looking at its transnational group affiliation and behaviour in the ninth European legislature (EP-9). Affiliation with the EP party groups is one way to classify parties in terms of ideological families (Mair and Mudde 1998). Parties form political groups in the EP at the beginning of each legislature, with seven groups having been formed at the beginning of EP-9, elected in May 2019.

FdI officially entered the EP for the first time that year,¹ having failed to pass the four percent national threshold in 2014. Its success in gaining about six percent of the vote enabled the party to elect six members (MEPs), with the delegation later growing to nine. In November 2018, seven months prior to the European elections, FdI pledged to join the ECR group in the next legislature, a decision announced on Twitter following a meeting in Brussels between Meloni and ECR members (Meloni 2018). At present, not only does FdI represent the second-largest national delegation in the group (although it is far smaller than the Polish delegation of 27 MEPs)² but it also provides one of its two co-chairs. Moreover, its leader, Meloni, has served as leader of the corresponding Europarty since September 2020.

As FdI is classified by a large majority of experts as a radical-right party, its membership of the ECR may appear surprising. The ECR group was originally constituted by the British Conservatives after exiting the centre-right and pro-EU European People's Party (EPP). However, it is the ID group that brings together in the EP those nativist and sovereigntist parties with the hardest Eurosceptic positions. Looking at their positioning in Figure 1 on the classic bi-dimensional space of EU politics, one can see that ECR member parties are generally mildly opposed to EU integration (on the vertical axis)³ and almost indistinguishable from the EPP on the left-right (horizontal) axis. ID member parties are, in contrast, more Eurosceptic and located further to the right. At the same time, the ECR features substantial intra-group variation on the left-right axis, larger than for the EPP and the ID groups.⁴

According to the placement suggested by the Chapel Hill expert survey (2019), FdI is both more Eurosceptic and more right-wing than all other ECR members, with the exception of the Spanish Vox. All in all, then, FdI would appear to fit the ID group better. To further support such classification, one can point to the party's cultivation of international relationships with prominent representatives of the radical right family, including the ultraconservative niece of Marine Le Pen, Marion Maréchal, and the mastermind of Donald Trump's success, Steve Bannon (Vampa 2023, pp. 72–73).

Yet, we can observe a repositioning of FdI in recent years, in line with the party's decision to join the conservative group in the EP. For instance, while Meloni openly supported Le Pen in the 2015 regional elections (Meloni 2015) and 2017 national elections in France (Fratelli d'Italia 2023) and appeared in a selfie with the French leader during the campaign for the 2014 EP election (Meloni 2014), her position became more ambiguous in the spring of 2022. At that time, she declined to endorse the leader of the National Rally, noting that neither candidate in the second round of the French presidential elections belonged to the ECR, the party she represented (la Repubblica 2022). By then, FdI's status in both the domestic and European arena had significantly changed. Not only was the party now a member of the ECR group, and Meloni the leader of the

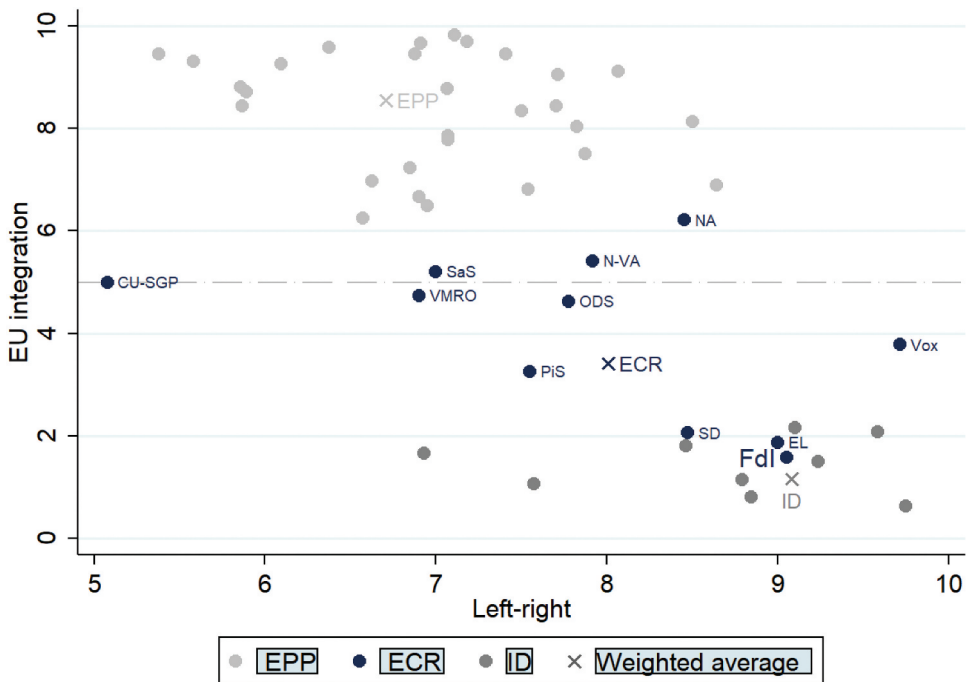


Figure 1. The (centre-)right in the EP (2019). Source: Chapel Hill Expert Survey (2019)

corresponding Europarty, but FdI had also become the largest party in Italy according to polls, a position held since the summer of 2021.

Further evidence of FdI's commitment to making the ECR its new home comes from the refusal to support League leader Matteo Salvini's plan to create a large sovereigntist group by combining all Eurosceptics in the EP, ranging from the soft Eurosceptics of the ECR group to the more hard-line members of the ID group. As a review of the Italian press suggests, Salvini initially launched his idea in 2018, before the 2019 EP elections, and attempted to pursue it twice again in 2021, ahead of the renewal of key leadership positions in the EP – an attempt Meloni opposed on both occasions. Different, but not mutually exclusive, explanations can be suggested for why Meloni was not in favour of merging the two parliamentary groups. From a strategic standpoint, it appears plausible that Meloni rejected the idea because she did not want to risk the ECR group being dissolved. Meloni, as the president of the associated Europarty, recognized the pivotal role that FdI was playing within the ECR group, which it co-chaired despite the relatively small size of its delegation, and therefore did not want to jeopardize this position. Moreover, being a member of the ECR offered FdI advantages in terms of obtaining and influencing official positions in the EP. In early 2023, the ECR held one of the EP vice-presidencies and provided the chairs of several committees.⁵ Conversely, ID members, often subject to a cordon sanitaire erected against it by the other political groups, are *de facto* excluded from the distribution of leading official positions (Ripoll Servant 2019). The 'respectable marriage' theory (McDonnell and Werner 2019, 88) lends further support to this explanation. According to this theory, more radical parties leverage the EP arena to enhance their domestic images and reputations. To achieve this goal, they

often seek to align with more moderate parties instead of joining forces with extremists. By aligning with the ECR group and declining to merge with the hard Eurosceptic ID group, FdI has been able to position itself as a more moderate alternative to the League, a member of the latter group. This strategic manoeuvre has seemingly aided Meloni in reassuring both domestic and international observers that FdI is not a threat to Italian democracy, as it is a member of a 'respectable' political group in the EP.

However, there may be more to the story, as Meloni's opposition to Salvini's plan could also be attributed to ideological differences. The ECR group has a distinct conservative position combining social and cultural conservatism with market-oriented economic policies, which FdI and its leader increasingly find appealing. Members of the ECR group, which includes the Polish Law and Justice party and the Czech Civic Democratic Party, have embraced what they call a Eurorealist⁶ approach to the EU and European integration. The most Atlanticist in the current EP, this group promotes values that resonate strongly with the type of conservatism found in the Anglo-American sphere (Steven and Szczerbiak 2022).⁷ Speaking as leader of the ECR party, Meloni has consistently emphasized that the European conservatives are committed to a confederal EU rather than to its dismantling (see, e.g. Meloni 2022). She described her stance on European integration as a 'right-wing Blairite third way' between dogmatic European federalism and outright opposition to the EU (Paci 2020; our translation). Such a position represents a significant departure from the one that Meloni and her party used to take just a few years ago. It suffices to consider the party's 2014 EP election manifesto, which advocated dismantling the Eurozone among other things (Fratelli d'Italia 2014).

Clearly, since its foundation in 2012, FdI has undergone a significant reorientation of its international alliances. The origins of this transformation can be traced back to November 2018, when FdI decided that it would join the ECR group if it were to elect MEPs at the following EP elections. In a Facebook video announcing the decision, Meloni praised the parties of the Visegrad group, which then provided the ECR's leadership, for their commitment to defending borders, Christian traditions, family values, and the European identity (Fratelli d'Italia Senato 2018). In Meloni's words, the ECR group was 'the fundamental link for the construction of a great alliance between the people's parties and the sovereigntists' (Fratelli d'Italia Senato 2018; our translation). Hence, FdI's decision to join the ECR group and to resist the dissolution of the group in favour of a larger Eurosceptic group was not made impulsively; it had been carefully planned well in advance of the 2019 EP elections and appears to have been motivated by a shared (and relatively new) commitment to the ECR's values and policies. The party's repositioning within the European arena has been accompanied by a similar shift in the broader international realm, where it has been particularly active (see Vampa 2023, p. 73). As tweeted by Raffaele Fitto, Meloni's former right-hand man in the EP, FdI's leader has cultivated crucial relationships with conservatives from Britain, the United States, and Israel (Fitto 2022). Taking the stage in important conservative gatherings, including the National Conservatism conference held in Rome in 2020 and the Conservative Political Action Coalition conference in the United States in 2022, Meloni has thus been able to form alliances and (attempt to) reposition herself as a conservative leader well beyond Europe.

The above raises questions about the ideological positions of FdI. Analysing the behaviour of FdI in the EP, we seek to understand whether its membership in the ECR group is supported by deeds, or whether more radical alternatives such as the ID group would fit it better.

1.3. Research strategy

To address our research question, we draw on both quantitative and qualitative data. First, we provide a bird's-eye view of the behaviour of FdI representatives in the EP by analysing all final plenary votes on both legislative and non-legislative proposals from July 2019 to June 2022. More specifically, our analysis starts with the vote cast in the plenary of 15 July 2019, the first one after the inaugural session, and ends with a plenary vote on 9 June 2022, thus covering the first three years of the legislature. EP-9 was the first legislature to include FdI MEPs. Relying on the VoteWatch dataset created by Hix et al. (2022), which collects all roll-call data until June 2022, we assess the voting alignment of FdI with its own group, with the centre-right EPP group, and with the ID group. We only selected final votes, as they are necessarily taken by roll call (Rule 188, European Parliament 2019b). Since, for strategic reasons, roll calls can be requested in writing by a political group or by at least one-twentieth of MEPs (Rule 190, European Parliament 2019b), by only selecting final votes we eliminate a significant source of bias in the data. In addition, final votes indicate the positions of MEPs – in favour, against, or abstaining – on the whole text, rather than on sections of it. In total, our sample consists of 1,223 final votes in the EP plenaries.⁸

We complement the quantitative analysis with an in-depth qualitative analysis of key votes (cf. Table 3) related to the COVID-19 crisis and post-pandemic recovery. Specifically, we examine how the party voted, whether its position was consistent with that adopted by the majority of the ECR group, and whether the FdI delegation was part of the EP winning majority. To gain further insight into FdI's position and to understand the circumstances that led FdI to diverge from its parliamentary group, we also analyse parliamentary debates and key amendments. These mainly concern financial support to Member States through the Next Generation EU (NGEU) package, making them relevant to this analysis for two reasons. The first has to do with their temporal span, during which FdI moved from the opposition to government. We investigate whether this change was reflected in FdI's position on post-COVID recovery in the EP, asking whether FdI exhibited less confrontational behaviour with respect to the mainstream political groups after assuming its new governing role. The second reason has to do with the content of the parliamentary debates and amendments. Italy, as the country most severely affected by the crisis, and as the third-largest economy in the EU, is the main recipient of the NGEU financial package (Freier et al. 2022). Opposition parties may find it challenging to oppose life-saving and financial-aid legislation and be inclined to adopt a more consensual approach due to the 'rally round the flag' effect (Louwerse et al. 2021). FdI not only remained in opposition until the early autumn of 2022, but was also the only party in the Italian parliament opposing the Draghi government.



Figure 2. FdI's voting agreement in EP-9 (2019–2022).

1.4. The behaviour of FdI in the ninth European parliament

Taking stock of all final votes in EP-9, we calculate the agreement between the FdI delegation and the three political groups on the (centre-)right of the policy spectrum.⁹ There is voting agreement when the majority of the FdI delegation and the majority of a political group vote the same way, which can be in favour, against, or abstaining on a particular legislative or non-legislative proposal. As [Figure 2](#) shows, in aggregate the votes unambiguously show that FdI sides with (the majority of) the ECR group more than 90% of the time. Next, Meloni's party sides with the EPP group – they vote together in about 74% of final votes – which is worth stressing as the EPP is the key 'governing' party in Brussels, leading both the Commission (with Ursula von der Leyen) and the EP (with Roberta Metsola). Unexpectedly, the lowest level of voting agreement is with the ID group: in almost half of the votes, FdI and the (majority of) ID take different sides. Again, this is something worth highlighting, given that the ID group brings together the most Eurosceptic and far right parties.

To obtain a more fine-grained picture, we disaggregated the data and calculated voting agreement across policy areas. [Table 1](#) indicates strong agreement in green (when there is consensus in a clear majority of votes), weak agreement in yellow (between 50 and 59% of the votes), and disagreement in red (below 50% of the votes). In all policy areas, agreement with fellow members of the ECR group is very strong. The lowest score is on economic affairs, where the FdI delegation disagrees with the (majority of) the ECR in 31% of the votes. There are several policy areas (e.g. Budgetary control, Development, Fisheries, and Industry) where the voting agreement is almost complete. Moving to the EPP, the voting agreement is strong in 15 policy areas – ranging from 93% on Transport and Tourism to 61% on Economic affairs. There is, instead, weaker agreement on the Environment and on Civil liberties. In contrast, FdI diverges from the EPP (majority) on Constitutional affairs, Development, Gender issues and Employment and social policies. Finally, agreement with the ID group is strong in 11 policy areas and weak in seven other areas. On Budgetary control and Foreign affairs, FdI and the ID group often oppose each other.

Table 1. FdI's voting agreement with the (centre-)right by policy area.

Agreement with/ Policy	EPP		ECR		ID	
	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Agriculture	2 (8%)	23 (92%)	2 (8%)	23 (92%)	3 (12%)	22 (88%)
Budget	20 (22%)	71 (78%)	7 (8%)	84 (92%)	41 (45%)	50 (55%)
Budgetary control	30 (10%)	259 (90%)	0 (0%)	289 (100%)	246 (85%)	43 (15%)
Civil liberties	52 (45%)	63 (55%)	16 (14%)	99 (86%)	30 (26%)	85 (74%)
Constitutional affairs	17 (68%)	8 (32%)	5 (20%)	20 (80%)	10 (40%)	15 (60%)
Culture	5 (29%)	12 (71%)	3 (18%)	14 (82%)	8 (47%)	9 (53%)
Development	6 (60%)	4 (40%)	0 (0%)	10 (100%)	5 (50%)	5 (50%)
Economic affairs	20 (39%)	31 (61%)	16 (31%)	35 (69%)	22 (43%)	29 (57%)
Employment	17 (53%)	15 (47%)	5 (16%)	27 (84%)	15 (47%)	17 (53%)
Environment	60 (48%)	65 (52%)	14 (11%)	111 (89%)	41 (33%)	84 (67%)
Fisheries	4 (10%)	38 (90%)	1 (2%)	41 (98%)	17 (40%)	25 (60%)
Foreign affairs	34 (22%)	121 (78%)	10 (6%)	145 (94%)	78 (51%)	77 (49%)
Gender	19 (76%)	6 (24%)	4 (16%)	21 (84%)	11 (44%)	14 (56%)
Industry	9 (31%)	20 (69%)	1 (3%)	28 (97%)	9 (31%)	20 (69%)
Internal market	3 (20%)	12 (80%)	2 (13%)	13 (87%)	5 (34%)	10 (66%)
Internal regulations	0 (0%)	3 (100%)	0 (0%)	3 (100%)	0 (0%)	3 (100%)
International trade	9 (20%)	35 (80%)	9 (20%)	35 (80%)	18 (41%)	26 (59%)
Legal	5 (19%)	22 (81%)	7 (26%)	29 (74%)	5 (19%)	22 (81%)
Petitions	4 (24%)	13 (76%)	2 (12%)	15 (88%)	7 (41%)	10 (59%)
Regional Development	3 (12%)	23 (88%)	1 (4%)	25 (96%)	3 (12%)	23 (88%)
Transport & Tourism	4 (7%)	56 (93%)	3 (5%)	57 (95%)	6 (10%)	54 (90%)

Key: green – agreement ($\geq 60\%$); yellow – weak agreement (51–59%); red – disagreement ($< 50\%$)

Another indicator we use to assess the position of FdI in the EP party system is its inclusion in the ‘winning majority’ (Table 2), asking whether FdI is part of the EP ‘governing coalition’, or whether it is a marginalized outsider. While the Von der Leyen Commission is officially supported by a ‘grand-coalition’ formed by the EPP, the S&D and

the Renew groups, some members of the ECR – but not FdI – have also supported it, both when voting on the president (by secret vote) and, in November 2019, when voting on the whole college of commissioners. Yet, when looking across policy areas, in most cases FdI is part of the winning majority. In only four areas – Civil liberties, Constitutional affairs, Development and, most clearly of all, Gender issues – does FdI stand in opposition, with two others (Employment and Environment) on the edge. These areas need to be scrutinized further, as they mostly relate to socio-cultural and identity issues, or institutional affairs. In such areas, FdI – sometimes, in contrast with the political group it belongs to – takes a more hard-line position, often voting together, and losing together, with the ID group.

Table 2. FdI on the winning side by policy area.

Policy area	Winning majority	
	No	Yes
Agriculture	2 (8%)	23 (92%)
Budget	20 (22%)	71 (78%)
Budgetary control	31 (11%)	258 (89%)
Civil liberties	59 (51%)	56 (49%)
Constitutional affairs	17 (68%)	8 (32%)
Culture	5 (29%)	12 (71%)
Development	8 (80%)	2 (20%)
Economic affairs	20 (39%)	31 (61%)
Employment	16 (50%)	16 (50%)
Environment	51 (41%)	74 (59%)
Fisheries	5 (12%)	37 (88%)
Foreign	39 (25%)	116 (75%)
Gender	22 (88%)	3 (12%)
Industry	9 (31%)	20 (69%)
Internal market	3 (20%)	12 (80%)
Internal regulations	0	3 (100%)
International trade	10 (23%)	34 (77%)
Legal	7 (26%)	20 (74%)
Petitions	6 (35%)	11 (65%)
Regional Development	4 (15%)	22 (85%)
Transport & Tourism	4 (7%)	56 (93%)

Note: the winning majority can be in favour or against on a vote.

Table 3. Fdl's position on the EU's responses to the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2023).

Proposals (vote date)	Fdl's position	ECR's position	Fdl: winning coalition	Italian gov	EPP's position	ID's position
1. EU coordinated action to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences (17 April 2020)	Against	Against	No	Conte II	In favour	Against
2. The new MFF, own resources and the recovery plan (15 May 2020)	Abstain	In favour	No	Conte II	In favour	Against
3. Conclusions on the extraordinary European Council meeting of 17-21 July 2020 (23 July 2020)	Abstain	Against	No	Conte II	In favour	Against
4. Additional resources in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic: REACT-EU (15 December 2020) (Legislation)	In favour	In favour	Yes	Conte II	In favour	In favour
5. Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) (10 February 2021) (Legislation)	Abstain	In favour	No	Draghi (from 13 Feb)	In favour	In favour
6. Own resource based on non-recycled plastic packaging waste and certain aspects of the GNI-based own resource (25 March 2021)	Against	Against	No	Draghi	In favour	Against
7. Collection of own resources accruing from Value Added Tax (25 March 2021)	Abstain	Against	No	Draghi	In favour	Abstain
8. The right of information of the Parliament regarding the ongoing assessment of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) (20 May 2021)	In favour	Against	Yes	Draghi	In favour	Against
9. The views of Parliament on the ongoing assessment by the Commission and the Council of the NRRP (10 June 2021)	Against	Against	No	Draghi	In favour	Against
10. The rule of law and potential approval of the Polish NRRP (9 June 2022)	Against	Against	No	Draghi	In favour	Against

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

11. Implementation report on the RRF (23 June 2022)	Against	Against	No	Draghi	In favour	Abstain
12. REPowerEU chapters in RRFs (10 November 2022) <i>(Legislation)</i>	In favour	Abstain	Yes	Meloni	In favour	In favour
13. The assessment of Hungary's compliance with the rule of law conditions under the Conditionality Regulation and state of play of the Hungarian RRF (24 November 2022)	Against	Against	No	Meloni	In favour	Against
14. REPowerEU chapters in RRF (14 February 2023) <i>(Legislation)</i>	In favour	Abstain	Yes	Meloni	In favour	Against

1.5. From opposition to government: the COVID-19 outbreak and post-pandemic recovery

To obtain a more detailed understanding of FdI's behaviour in EP-9, we now shift our attention to an issue that has been the subject of much controversy in Italian politics: the COVID-19 crisis and the proposals – both legislative and non-legislative – that were voted on by the EP between March 2020 and February 2023. In Table 3, we have indicated FdI's stance regarding each of the selected acts, including how the party voted, whether its position was in line with the ECR majority, and whether it was in accordance with the majority position in the EP. The colour coding is used to indicate the level of agreement between FdI and the ECR group: green denotes agreement between the two; yellow indicates disagreement with one party abstaining; red indicates opposing votes with one party in favour and the other against. To gain further insight into FdI's positions on the various issues, we analysed all available interventions made by FdI MEPs in the plenary debates. These data were complemented with an analysis of the amendments tabled, focusing specifically on those amendments where the positions of FdI and the ECR group diverged.

The first finding to highlight is that FdI was outside the EP winning coalition on 10 occasions out of 14: overall, Meloni's party was critical of the EU strategies and actions to tackle the pandemic and boost Europe's recovery. Secondly, FdI voted with the ECR group's majority seven times out of 14, six of which saw the majority opposing the proposal. The FdI delegation opposed the two resolutions criticizing rule of law violations in Poland and Hungary (proposals 10 and 13) and the resolution on the Council regulation on the EU's own resources based on plastic levies (proposal 6). More surprisingly, it also voted against the very first COVID-19 resolution of April 2020 (proposal 1) – which contradicts the 'rally round the flag' hypothesis – while the pandemic was hitting Europe the hardest. In his plenary speech, Fitto, the head of the FdI delegation, reproached the EU for its timid and limited intervention and condemned the resolution for its political exploitation of the conditionality principle and its references to the Green deal. Echoing his colleague's stance, Carlo Fidanza lamented the lack of closure of external borders 'while Europeans [were] locked up in their homes [and] NGOs continue[d] to operate in the Mediterranean'.

FdI abstained on four occasions between May 2020 and March 2021, while the majority of the ECR group took stances in one direction or the other (proposals 2, 3, 5, and 7). The decision to abstain rather than to vote against these four proposals is noteworthy.¹⁰ Given that the party was in opposition ‘at home’ on all these occasions, its elected members might as well have voted against the proposals. Indeed, the tone and narrative – not typically associated with abstentions – of the speeches delivered by FdI MEPs during plenary debates both in Brussels (and in Rome, for that matter) provide evidence of an adversarial and strongly critical stance towards the Commission’s proposal on the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) and towards the national governments’ approach to handling the pandemic. For example, intervening in the EP plenary on the resolution regarding the European Council meeting of 17–21 July 2020 (proposal 3) – where the key decisions on the funding of the NGEU were agreed – Fidanza argued:

[...] apart from rhetoric and triumphalism, it only took a few hours to discover that the agreement of 21 July is not the best possible agreement. This very resolution, authored by the same people who greeted their prime ministers with standing ovations in national parliaments, as happened to Conte yesterday in the Italian parliament, tell us that. We were right when we said that the response is late and insufficient, when we said that it is wrong to go ahead with the discounts on national contributions, that the subsidies have been reduced too much, that the money will arrive too late [...] (Our translation)

The decision to abstain during the February 2021 vote is particularly remarkable, as then FdI was poised to become, in a matter of days, the sole opposition party to Mario Draghi’s government.¹¹ Arguably, FdI made a strategic decision to abstain from voting due to the significance of the RRF regulation (proposal 5), which was indeed necessary for securing critical funding for Italy.

The FdI delegation voted in opposition to its political group on one occasion only: the May 2021 vote on the resolution on keeping the EP informed of the Commission’s assessment of the National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRP) (proposal 8). Instead, on both votes concerning the Commission’s proposal to introduce new chapters in the NRRP to address the energy needs arising from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (proposals 12 and 14),¹² FdI voted against the majority of the ECR group and in line with the majority in Parliament. The ECR position – a majority of its MEPs abstained – was expressed in the plenary by the Belgian MEP and Chair of the Budget Committee, Johan Van Overtveldt, who noted that ‘a sustainable transition without a prominent role for nuclear energy is doomed to fail’ (our translation). FdI’s full support for REPowerEU was also captured in the domestic arena, where it was presented as an opportunity for both Italy and the EU (e.g. Fratelli d’Italia 2022, 25). Therefore, FdI’s positions with respect to proposals 12 and 14 seem to signal that the party moderated its position on EU matters as it moved from opposition to government.

Given the content of the 14 proposals here analysed on COVID and post-pandemic recovery, the speeches made by FdI MEPs during the accompanying discussions predominantly focused on economic issues. Notably, a recurring theme emerging from their interventions is the fear that COVID-19 financial support from the EU could lead to the reintroduction of austerity measures ‘through the back door’. They are highly critical of the European Stability Mechanism and of other key instruments of EU economic governance like the European Semester, which they see as an attempt to undermine

national sovereignty. They also frequently advocate for non-repayable grants instead of loans, which, as one of its MEPs argued during the EP plenary (proposal 2), ‘have turned Europe into a pawn shop’ (our translation). Yet, when voting on REPowerEU, FdI’s delegation supported the proposal despite its emphasis on loans for financing investments in the field of gas infrastructure, something that was harshly criticized by fellow ECR colleagues in the debate. While FdI’s MEPs did not take the floor in the plenary of February 2023, the decision to vote in favour, when the majority of the ECR group abstained, confirmed their support for the new REPowerEU chapters, marking a shift from the party’s previous position on loans.

A more moderate stance can also be observed on environmental issues. FdI has been highly critical of the so-called green agenda pursued by the EU and, more generally, by mainstream parties. This is a position that was reflected in their vote against the 2021 regulation on ‘Own resource based on non-recycled plastic packaging waste and certain aspects of the GNI-based own resource’ (proposal 6) and that emerged from several of the plenary speeches of its MEPs. However, despite its ambitious call for 45% of energy to come from renewable sources by 2030 – a target set by the very green agenda Meloni’s party so vehemently rejected – FdI supported REPowerEU. Furthermore, the REPowerEU chapters include only sporadic references to nuclear energy, whereas FdI had campaigned in favour of the latter to be environmentally sustainable (e.g. Fratelli d’Italia 2022). It is also worthwhile highlighting that, on 14 February 2023, the EP voted on two amendments tabled by the ID group, which identified nuclear energy as an important step towards achieving energy independence for the EU. Remarkably, FdI voted against them and in line with the EP majority.

In contrast, we have not observed any significant change in the party’s position on conditionality and respect for the rule of law. Even as a governing party, FdI has consistently demonstrated its commitment to supporting allied governments in Hungary and Poland (see proposals 10 and 13). Hence, as described further in the next and final section, FdI is a party that has, seemingly, tempered its position without, however, relinquishing key ideological battles.

2. Conclusion

Analysing FdI’s alliances and behaviour in Europe, we have assembled strong evidence that Meloni’s party has not been relegated to the margins of the EP party system but, together with its political group, takes an active part in key decisions with the mainstream political groups. First, our systematic analysis of all final votes in the EP-9 plenary from July 2019 to June 2022 has shown that Meloni’s party has the strongest voting agreement with its allies in the ECR group. More surprisingly – considering the widely shared perspective, in the literature and in public discourse, on FdI as a radical right party (but see Vassallo and Vignati 2023) – our analysis also shows that its voting agreement is higher with the centre-right EPP than with the more extreme ID group. Moreover, FdI is often part of the winning coalition, shaping legislation or seeking to influence the policy agenda of the EU. The findings of the quantitative analysis, therefore, show that FdI’s membership of the ECR group fits it well. In turn, this allows Meloni’s party to be actively involved in EU politics, cooperating more with the mainstream than with the fringe ID group. This positioning may well pave the way for new coalitions and alliances among the Europarties – i.e. between the EPP and the ECR – in the context of the 2024 EP elections.

The analysis of important legislative and non-legislative proposals concerning the COVID-19 crisis and post-pandemic recovery qualifies the above conclusions. FdI's delegation sided with the ECR group in about half of the votes. It also embraced a more critical and adversarial stance towards the actions of the EU, an approach that could arguably be justified by the prominent visibility among domestic audiences of the pandemic and the subsequent recovery. Yet, it abstained both on the resolution on the European Council agreement on the NGEU (with Giuseppe Conte as Prime Minister) and on the RRF regulation (approved a few days before Mario Draghi took office). In both cases, FdI was in opposition in Rome, and, in the latter case, it was the only party in the Italian parliament opposing Draghi's large coalition government. FdI's decision to abstain rather than vote against is, therefore, quite remarkable.

Finally, a few weeks after Giorgia Meloni became Prime Minister, FdI voted in favour of REPowerEU, reiterating its support in February 2023. This support should not be taken for granted given that FdI (and the ECR group, which eventually abstained on both REPowerEU votes) had previously strongly criticized several provisions of REPowerEU, such as loans for financing investments or the emphasis on renewable energy. While this is only a single regulation – albeit an important one – and further research is certainly needed to confirm our claim, executive office appears to have had a moderating effect on FdI's positions. This case further supports recent research that highlights the policy continuity between the Draghi and Meloni administrations (Genovese and Vassallo 2023).

Yet there is more to the picture. While this article provides data pointing to more cooperative behaviour than it is normally expected from a radical right party, our analysis also shows that FdI has not abandoned its ideological battles on specific policies. This is the case for policy areas encompassing social and cultural issues, specifically Civil liberties, the Environment, and Gender, where the party seldom finds itself among the winning majority. In these domains, FdI consistently aligns with its political group, registering high voting agreement rates ranging from 84 to 89%. Another area where FdI takes a distinctively adversarial stance pertains to EU constitutional matters, notably in relation to the rule of law in the Member States. FdI has indeed consistently supported the Polish government – led by Law and Justice, the largest party in the ECR group – as well as Hungary. Even as Prime Minister, Meloni has vigorously opposed what she perceives as the EU encroaching upon national sovereignty and, together with her party colleagues, has raised questions about the EU's authority in defining fundamental values. Hence, although the days of the party campaigning for the dismantling of the Eurozone are long gone, it is evident that its vision of the EU and of EU values remains at odds with that of mainstream political groups.

All in all, corroborating previous analyses underscoring FdI's congruence with the agenda pursued by its fellow ECR members (Steven and Szczerbiak 2022, 14–16), FdI's adversarial position on socio-cultural issues and EU constitutional matters is particularly revealing and merits further scrutiny, as it appears to go to the heart of the party's identity. This identity is seemingly taking on a dual nature, with more moderate conservatism in some areas juxtaposed with radical approaches in others. At the same time, however, further research is needed to compare FdI in the EU and the domestic arenas. The limited competences of the EU on some of the issues where FdI's radical nature is more likely to manifest itself (i.e. socio-cultural issues), and the more limited visibility and media salience of politics within the EP compared to national politics, should not be forgotten. Time will also confirm whether the behaviour of FdI is triggered by a fundamental ideological repositioning or rather by more

strategic motivations (purely tactical motives can be excluded, given the time-range of our analysis). Certainly, FdI is likely to find it challenging, if it wishes to maintain its traditional basis of support, to recast itself fully as a conservative, rather than radical right party, at the national level. Yet, the changing configuration of the centre-right post-Berlusconi may well offer it a window of opportunity.

Notes

1. While there had been individual members belonging to FdI previously, they had originally been elected to represent the PdL or Forza Italia (FI) (see [Table A1 in the Appendix](#)). The two MEPs who left FI for FdI in 2018 abandoned the EPP to join the ECR group. This move mirrored that of Raffaele Fitto (Minister for European Affairs, Cohesion Policies and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan in Meloni's government), who left FI and the EPP group in December 2015 to form his own political party in Italy (now defunct), revealingly called *Conservatori e Riformisti* (Conservatives and Reformists), before joining FdI in 2019.
2. See [Table A2 in the Appendix](#) for the full list of countries and ECR member parties.
3. The EU integration dimension has been re-scaled from 0 (outright opposition) to 10 (total support for EU integration) to make it comparable with the left-right scale. The original EU integration dimension in the Chapel Hill expert survey (2019) ranges from 1 to 7.
4. The standard deviation on left-right scale of ECR member parties (weighted by the number of EP seats) is 1.23. It is 1.01 for the EPP and 0.48 for the ID.
5. In addition to the vice-presidency of the EP, the ECR chairs the Committee on Budgets and chaired the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs (until its chair left the ECR to join the Renew group in 2021). Additionally, as of May 2023, the group has vice-chairs of 10 committees or subcommittees.
6. Eurorealism is presented by the ECR group as a pragmatic vision of the EU and European integration, one that calls for a reformist approach to European institutions and policy-making.
7. Steven and Szczerbiak actually consider membership of FdI an 'anomaly' (Steven and Szczerbiak 2022, 8).
8. The voting cohesion of the political groups in the EP is remarkably high. In EP-9, both the S&D and the G-EFA have an agreement index (Hix, Noury, and Roland 2007, 91) higher than 0.95, while the EPP's and Renew's are higher than 0.9 (where 1 indicates complete agreement among all MEPs on final votes). Cohesion is lower for The Left and the ECR – respectively at 0.81 and 0.76 – and much lower for the ID. See [Table A3 in the Appendix](#).
9. It should be noted that the FdI delegation is very cohesive, with an agreement index (based on Hix, Noury, and Roland 2007, 91) higher than 0.9 on final votes (cf. [Table A4 in the Appendix](#)).
10. It is worth noting that these abstentions were consistent with FdI's stance in the national parliament, where the party abstained on crucial votes related to the RRF, such as the ones that took place on 13 October 2020, during the Conte II government, and on 27 April 2021, during the Draghi government.
11. The Draghi government was officially sworn in on 13 February 2021, just three days after the EP voted on the RRF. However, it was already evident at the beginning of February that Draghi, former President of the European Central Bank, was the likely candidate for the position of Prime Minister when the President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, invited him to form a new government.
12. The vote on 10 November 2022 is the first one following Meloni's appointment as PM.

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Appendix

Table A1. MEPS acquired through the legislature, or elected by Fdl.

	Elected MEPs		Acquired MEPs	
EP-7 (2009–2014)	0		2	Carlo Fidanza (PdL; joins Fdl but remains in the EPP group), Marco Scurria (PdL; joins Fdl but remains in the EPP group)
EP-8 (2014–2019)	0		2	Stefano Maullu (FI), Innocenzo Leontini (FI)
EP-9 (2019–2024)	6	Sergio Berlato, Carlo Fidanza, Raffaele Fitto (replaced by Denis Nesci on 2/11/2022), Pietro Fiocchi, Nicola Procaccini, Raffaele Stancanelli*	3	Giuseppe Milazzo (FI), Vincenzo Sofo (Lega), Chiara Gemma (Ind.)

*Giorgia Meloni was the most-voted candidate in all constituencies but relinquished her seat.

Table A2. The ECR group in EP-9.

Member Country	Delegation size (July 2019)	Delegation size (September 2023)
Poland	26 (PiS)	27 (1 × PR, 24 × PiS, 2 × SPZZ)
Italy	5 (Fdl)	9 (Fdl)
Czech Republic	4 (ODS)	4 (ODS)
Netherlands	4 (3 × FvD, 1 × Coalition CU-SGP)	5 (1 × JA21, 2 × Independent, 1 × MDD, 1 × Coalition CU-SGP)
United Kingdom	4 (Conservative Party)	-
Belgium	3 (N-VA)	3 (N-VA)
Spain	3 (VOX)	4 (VOX)
Sweden	3 (SD)	3 (SD)
Bulgaria	2 (VMRO)	2 (VMRO)
Finland	-	2 (PS)
Latvia	2 (Coal. NA – TB/LNNK+VL!)	1 (Coal. NA – TB/LNNK+VL!)
Slovakia	2 (SaS)	1 (SaS)
Croatia	1 (Coal. Hrv. Suverenisti)	1 (Coal. Hrv. Suverenisti)
Germany	1 (Familie)	1 (BD)
Greece	1 (EA/EL)	1 (EA/EL)
Lithuania	1 (LLRA-KŠS)	1 (LLRA-KŠS)
Romania	-	1 (PNȚCD)
TOTAL	62	66

Source: European Parliament, 2019a

Table A3. The voting cohesion of the political groups on final votes (2019–2022).

	EPP	S&D	Renew	G-EFA	Left	ECR	ID
2019	0.870	0.932	0.835	0.931	0.856	0.752	0.698
2020	0.927	0.956	0.918	0.967	0.807	0.778	0.673
2021	0.928	0.971	0.928	0.979	0.815	0.754	0.599
2022	0.909	0.965	0.930	0.976	0.786	0.748	0.632
Tot	0.919	0.961	0.917	0.970	0.810	0.761	0.639

Note: Cohesion scores calculated using the Agreement Index (Hix, Noury, and Roland 2007, 91).

Table A4. The voting cohesion of Fdl on final votes (2019–2022).

	Fdl
2019	0.884
2020	0.872
2021	0.958
2022	0.988
Tot	0.927

Note: Cohesion scores calculated using the Agreement Index (Hix, Noury, and Roland 2007, 91).