The Far Right Across Borders

Networks and Issues of (Trans)National Cooperation in Western Europe on Twitter

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Historically, far-right activism[2] has had a transnational dimension.[3] More recently, across Europe, various far-right organizations including the Identitarians and also the more established Italian Ligue have come together to promote continental campaigns targeting European borders and refugees. In an increasingly globalized world, information and communications technology plays a prominent role in fostering communication exchanges between far-right organizations across borders (Burris et al. 2000). More precisely, hashtags like #DefendEurope, #StopMigrantsAlpes or #chiudiamoiporti (let's lock the harbors) underline the importance of Twitter in contemporary right-wing activism. Low costs and the opportunity to produce and rapidly spread user-generated content online should ease international cooperation between like-minded groups, especially those that do not enjoy similar opportunities in other parts of the public (offline) sphere. This chapter analyzes transnational exchanges between audiences of far-right organizations on Twitter, comparing parties and social movements across the borders of nation states.

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1 | This chapter draws upon material from Froio/Ganesh (2018).

2 | The chapter uses the umbrella concept of far right to refer both to extreme and radical right populist organizations sharing nativism, authoritarianism and populism (Mudde 2007: 15–30) and encompassing political parties and social movement organizations.

3 | For a discussion on the history of far-right transnationalism see Albanese/Hierro 2016; Macklin 2013; Mammone 2015; Zuquete 2015.

Defining the transnational aspect of far-right activism is not an easy task. Social movements literature distinguishes between transnational issues, targets, and mobilization (Rucht 1999; Schain et al. 2002). We qualify far-right activism as transnational when organizations from more than one country place similar discursive emphasis on particular issues. In our understanding, focusing on common issues (such as immigration or European integration) is a preliminary step in the construction of the necessary interpretative frames, i.e. interpretations of social reality elaborated by the leaders of organizations who orient activists' actions (Snow/Benford 1988; Castelli Gattinara 2017). In doing so, we do not claim that common issue attention is disconnected from other dimensions of transnationalization or more important than the others. We simply argue that focusing on similar issues provides a fertile ground for other forms of mobilization and organizational cooperation across national contexts.

While existing studies dealing with progressive movements show that Twitter facilitates transnational mobilization and frames (Castells 2012; Gerbaudo 2012), to the best of our knowledge no systematic study exists that accounts for the way in which Twitter might ease the construction of a transnational discourse between parties and movements on the far right. Here, we focus on retweets across country borders, which we understand as signs of transnational discourses (more on this below). To do so in an evidence-based way, this chapter relies on a dataset collated by us (Froio/Ganesh 2018) on the activities and audiences of far-right Twitter users in France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom.

Data and Methods

Although established and less established far-right organizations of the sort we studied are active in the four countries, the configuration of the far-right spectrum in each differs. While France and Italy host two of the most electorally successful and long-lived radical right populist parties (the Front National and the Ligue respectively), in Germany and the United Kingdom the far right has experienced only modest electoral performances so far (for instance, the National Front then British National Party in the UK) and the success they have enjoyed has mainly been achieved recently (like the Alternative for Germany). Less established far- right organizations like movements and other loose groups

are particularly active in Italy and France, where political opportunity structures for the far right have been shown to be more open than in Germany and the UK.[4]

To begin with, based on official reports and secondary literature by scholars and watchdog organizations, we built an initial purposive sample, identifying the most important far-right actors (e.g. established and non-established organizations, as well as individuals related to them) that are active in the four countries and that use Twitter. Subsequently, we built a network graph of Twitter users that retweeted one of our selected far-right accounts more than five times. Retweeting is a function on the platform that allows a user to share another's Tweet with their own followers. While there are debates about whether retweeting constitutes support for a cause or a statement, it is the best available metric for identifying users that seek to engage with far-right discourse by embedding themselves in a particular discursive context (Murthy 2012a; Boyd, et al. 2010). Many who seek to disrupt a far-right group on Twitter might follow its account, but retweeting such content and sharing it with their own set of followers suggests that a user is using their political agency to broadcast an idea or statement (Bruns/Stieglitz 2012; Williams/Burnap 2016: 215; Murthy 2012b: 7). Thus, the retweet resonates with the user retweeting it and that they have a desire for the message to reach other users of the platform (Halavais 2014). Retweets, then, allow us to explore the resonance of the messages of a given user.

Finally, we analyzed the content of retweets that remained within the national community and retweets that did not to identify the types of content that are most likely to garner transnational audiences. Because our data spans far-right content from 2016 and 2017, we are able to go beyond specific issues and analyze discourse trends over time rather than those that centre around specific events.[5]

4 | For a discussion of this trend, see Castelli Gattinara/Pirro (2018).

5 | For further methodological details please refer to Froio/Ganesh (2018).

Results

How transnational is the far right on Twitter? Figure 1 shows how complex the far-right network is, including accounts belonging to far-right parties (like the party Forza Nuova), social movements (UKPegida), grassroots groups (Riposte Laïque), and far-right leaders (Marine Le Pen Officiel). The far-right network includes 6,454 nodes representing unique Twitter users. Each edge in the graph represents a retweet. There were 2,398 unique tweets authored by the named nodes which were retweeted 55,983 times in total. Of these retweets, only 1,617 retweets were identified as transnational (in term of content).

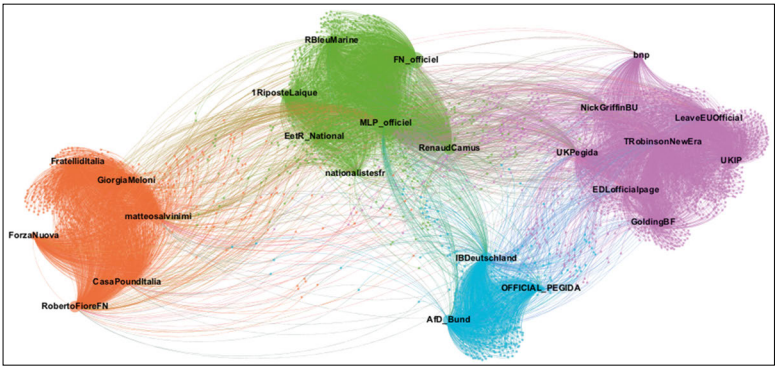

Figure 1: Far-right retweets network, 2016 and 2017. From left to right: Italy, France, Germany, UK (Froio/Ganesh 2018).

To begin the investigation, we explored whether the network could be partitioned into communities that represented each of the countries sampled, in different colors in Figure 1. Using a community detection algorithm (Blondel et al. 2008), four communities emerged corresponding to each of the four countries from which we had gathered samples. Nodes that have edges between one or more communities – and were consequently located between clusters in the graph – are identified as transnational retweeters. The results appear in Table 1.

Type of retweet	Initiator				Total
	Party		Movement		
National	1099	45.83%	1299	54.17%	2398
Transnational	411	51.83%	382	48.17%	793
Total	1510	47.32%	1681	52.68%	3191

National and transnational far-right retweets by parties and movements
Source: Froio/Ganesh 2018

The results show that most retweets stayed within country borders and so were intranationally connected. Thus, far-right transnationalization, at least as it regards its audiences' willingness to retweet, is a relatively rare phenomenon and accounts for less than 3% of activity in the filtered network. There are 2,398 unique tweets, of which 793 were retweeted by a user belonging to a different national community. A small majority of the tweets are authored by accounts of individuals belonging to far-right social movements or the official accounts of movements themselves.

We then shifted to examine the issues that are more likely to garner attention and retweets from transnational audiences. To address this question, we qualitatively analyzed the content of the tweets to identify the interpretative frames accompanying transnational issue focus between parties and movements. In other words, we are interested in understanding which arguments are chosen by political actors to justify their positions and mobilize activists and supporters transnationally. Of all issues, it seems tweets that reflect anti-immigration and economic discourses are more likely to gain traction beyond the national context.

To begin with, the importance attributed to immigration in transnational retweets is hardly surprising and it mirrors broader offline tendencies. In his seminal 2007 study, Cas Mudde suggested that nativism – i.e. xenophobic nationalism – is indeed a core ideological feature of the far right, despite the heterogeneity that characterizes this side of the political spectrum. More precisely, it is an ideology that wants congruence between the state (a political unit) and nation (a cultural unit). Nativists want a state for every nation and one nation for every state. They perceive all non-natives (people or ideas) as threatening (2007: 18–20). Still, by analyzing the content of tweets in this category, it appears that, at least in our sample, nativism is driven far more by Islamophobia than by other

forms of xenophobic and exclusionary nationalism. Although other minorities are mentioned (such as Roma people in Italy) or vaguely referred to as "asylum seekers", Muslims are targeted most vehemently. They are described by two main interpretative frames, positioning Muslims as a cultural threat to the West or as security threats.

To portray Muslims as a threat in cultural terms, tweets emphasize a classic fear of cultural invasion and replacement. The transnational form of such a discourse is well illustrated in a tweet from UKPegida, ideologically related to its sister organization Pegida in Germany. The tweet includes a video of an allegedly Muslim preacher shouting about an Islamic takeover in a city square. UKPegida posted the video with the following text: "Islamic cleric in Germany warns Germans at a city square: Sharia Law is coming. 'Yr [your] daughters will marry Muslims.'" Reminiscent of Huntington's theory of the Clash of Civilizations and by civilizationist understandings of national identities (Brubaker 2017), in this worldview the 'West' is portrayed as vulnerable to the invading Muslims and their purported plan to institute Islamic law in Europe. Islam is described as being homogeneous, inherently fundamentalist, and as a "religion cum ideology" (Mudde 2007: 84). This frame incorporates liberal and civic characteristics of national identity such as women's rights, animal well-being and halal slaughter, and LGBTQ rights to paradoxically present the far-right actors as the only 'authentic' defenders of the nation's reputation for tolerance (Froio 2018; Halikiopoulou et al. 2013). In March 2017, referring to a morning radio broadcast, Marine Le Pen provides an example of such a frame, quoting herself in a tweet: "I defend women's rights in the face of fundamentalist Islam. I am, by the way, the only candidate to speak about this problem."

Such stereotypes are well documented in literature on far-right discourse (Virchow 2016; Berntzen/Weisskircher 2016). What our findings add is that Islamophobia and anti-Muslim claims are more frequent in transnational rather than in national retweets. Given the well documented links between anti-Muslim ideologues in the US and Europe (Bail 2015), we demonstrate that Islamophobia is a cornerstone of the production of transnational far-right social movements and parties. Beyond culture-based prejudices, tweets often relate Muslims to domestic security threats, most notably terrorism, but also frame them as criminals and violent sexual deviants. One tweet from UKPegida referred to migrants as "rapefugees" with photographs of a march in 2016 that protested "migrant

sex attacks". While 'Muslims' are not mentioned specifically in the tweet, the implication is clear from Pegida's counter-jihad stance that this is specifically a 'Muslim' problem. In response to an article about prominent British celebrities signing an open letter calling for migrant children to be rescued from the Calais 'jungle', the British National Party reiterated this discourse more explicitly: "How many jihadi rapists will these hypocrites be welcoming into their homes…I bet a £ to a penny it will be none." This is characteristic of the ways in which Islamophobia is at the core of far-right animosity toward migrants, as when they ask why it is that British police do not prosecute the 'Muslims' who they idenitify as 'jihadi rapists'. The allegation that rape, molestation, and crime are natural, inherent tendencies for Muslims is repeated frequently in far-right discourse (Awan 2016; Tell MAMA 2014; Tufail/Poynting 2016).

A third emphasis of the transnational tweets is put on the economy. The economy has traditionally been part of far-right discourses, however it does not constitute an ideological priority for these actors. As illustrated by Mudde (2007: 119–137), over time far-right parties do not hold a coherent position on the dominant state-market axis even if these organizations may differ somewhat with respect to their economic program (Betz 1994; Betz/Johnson 2004; Kitschelt/McGann 1997). In the same way, third-way ideologies associated with programs that reject both the free market and the state economy are common among far-right movements but not shared by all of them (Albanese/Hierro 2016). In the tweets, we find a major interpretative frame through which the economy features at the core of far-right transnational concerns: economic nativism. Just as it happens offline, also online such organizations use their economic programs in a nativist way, assuming that the economy is not a goal in itself but only a means at the service of the interests of the (native) nation. In accord with this framework, in the tweets, economic procedures concerning budgets, labor and industrial development should serve only the economic interest of the country. This economic nativist rhetoric is particularly evident in a tweet referring to a speech from Marine Le Pen calling for economic protection of the nation's sovereignty after the eurocrisis, stressing that the French want to decide their own economic fate rather than face anything imposed by foreign pressure. This interpretation is particularly the case for organizations coming from the so-called tradition of the Social Right (Destra Sociale) in Italy and France, like the party Fratelli d'Italia and the

Front National, as well as the less established extreme-right groups, like CasaPound Italia and Egalitè et Reconciliation.

On the matter of economic nativism, our results confirm previous findings about far-right transnationalism offline (Macklin 2013) and online (Caiani/Kröll 2015). What our data adds is that, compared to the national level, at the transnational level the economy is described more and more in nativist political terms rather than merely economic ones. In other words, if there is a form of economic discourse that is likely to favor the construction of a transnational far-right discourse, it is less about the state-market dichotomy *tout court* than about a political and nativist interpretation of this economic cleavage. This in turn might ultimately lead to incoherent economic positions that are sufficiently free-market to appeal to petty bourgeois supporters while simultaneously arguing to increase welfare spending to avoid alienating support by the working-class.

In sum, our discourse analysis reveals that two main interpretative frames operate as unifying factors for the far right in Western Europe: the idea of a 'civilizational conflict' that targets Muslims, which has cultural and security dimensions, and nativist economics, which is associated with the state and/or market-based protection of the economic interests of the native population by those in power.

Finally, it is important to highlight that in our dataset the category of 'Electoral Politics' does not receive much attention in transnational retweets. This category includes general references – with no policy content – to domestic political opponents, and electoral debates. Although this is a rather crude measure for 'populism', it appears that anti-establishment tweets are less frequent than anti-Muslim ones. While populist tendencies might be prevalent in the national discourses of these groups, their development of international audiences depends on their politicization of Islamophobic feelings.

So what?

This chapter has explored a dimension of far-right politics that is surprisingly neglected in an otherwise rich literature: the transnational efforts of parties, movements, and organizations on Twitter. We considered four Western European democracies to examine how these audiences share information, map salient issues and explore interpretative frames that

favour transnational exchanges despite differences in the configurations of the far-right spectrums in each of those countries. To do so we used Twitter data.

We illustrated that while the internet may provide the far right with better opportunities for exchanges (Davey/Ebner 2017), far-right transnationalism on Twitter is moderate at best, and it depends on issue focus. Our network analysis has shown that the number of cross-border retweets is particularly limited, suggesting that far-right Twitter activity remains mostly intranational.

As for issue focus, the qualitative content analysis shows that the issue emphasized in any tweet plays a key role in whether it gets shared transnationally or not. We found that tweets that reflect two issues have the greatest likelihood of becoming transnational: anti-immigration and the economy. More than immigration in general, it is an opposition to Islam and Muslim minorities, based on arguments referring to cultural difference and security, that garners cross-border attention for far-right social media content. As far-right anti-Muslim prejudices are well-established in previous research, our results add that Islamophobia seems to be the transnational glue of these networks, bringing together extremely heterogeneous organizations operating in different political systems.

For future analyses, it might be worth re-evaluating the relative importance of nativism and populism on the far right and their combination at the transnational level at least. Given the resonance of Islamophobic tropes in these discourses, reference to such organizations as simply 'populist' might obscure the nativist and specifically anti-Muslim beliefs that underlie their ideologies and that may fuel their anti-establishment critiques. In addition, the description of the economy in nativist (rather than just economic) terms is also favoured in transnational exchanges on Twitter. At that level, the economy is politicized by describing economic programs as catalyzers of the interests of native people. Here again anti-migrant nativist arguments prevail over economic ones, or (at least) encompass them. Hence, more than the state-market dichotomy in general, the far right speaks about protectionism or neoliberalism to preserve the nation's economic interests, at least in our sample. New studies may use our data to investigate how economic issues are framed in more detail, also in relation with European integration, and may hopefully disentangle similarities and differences between left and right organizations.

Although interesting for specialists on far-right politics and the internet, these results are likely to be affected by at least three major shortcomings of our research. First, our 'minimal' definition of transnationalism focused exclusively on common issue emphasis across state borders. Future contributions might expand it to account simultaneously for other dimensions of transnational activism by the far right, such as targeting and mobilization. This major emphasis on issue focus, organizational types and analyzing interpretative frames to explain far-right transnationalism pushed us to downplay other important factors connected with the ideological differences and divisions between extreme and radical right populist organizations. Second, this chapter does not consider that there may be obstacles to far-right transnationalism online, such as language differences and attempts by governments and tech companies to counter extreme content. Finally, any future contributions which include more countries may integrate our inferences with others to account (more accurately) for political opportunity structures both online and offline. These and other related research questions that arise from our work could further benefit from comparisons with other social media platforms (e.g., Facebook or Youtube) and in-depth studies of users' profiles.

Despite these limitations, what we have shown is the limited transnational potential of the far right on Twitter. At least in Western Europe, the idea of a 'dark international' is far from reality, even when considering social media, which are commonly described as 'perfect' habitats for radicalization. The ideological and organizational heterogeneity that characterizes this side of the political spectrum appears to be too big to be overcome, even virtually. Indeed, only two issues appear to be able to build transnational audiences: opposition to Muslims and opposition to 'anti-native' economic programs. Transnational counteraction should probably invest energy in creating counter-narratives to these specific issues, issues that the far-right's discourses demonstrate an increasingly hegemonic stance regarding.

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