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The transnationalisation of far right discourse on Twitter

Issues and actors that cross borders in Western European democracies

Caterina Froio^{a,b} and Bharath Ganesh^c

^aEuropean School of Political and Social Sciences, Lille, France; ^bC-REX, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway; ^cOxford Internet Institute, Oxford University, Oxford, UK

ABSTRACT

How transnational are the audiences of far right parties and movements on Twitter? While an increasing number of contributions addresses the topic of transnationalism in far right politics, few systematic investigations exist on the actors and discourses favored in transnational exchanges on social media. Building on the literature on the far right, social movements, transnationalism and the Internet, the paper addresses this gap by studying the initiators and the issues that are favored in online exchanges between audiences of far right organizations, e.g. political parties and movements across France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom. We use a new dataset on the activities of far right Twitter users that is analyzed through a mixed methods approach. Using social network analysis, we detect transnational links between far right organizations across countries based on retweets from audiences of far right Twitter users. Retweets are qualitatively coded for content and compared to the content retweeted within national communities. Finally, using a logistic regression, we quantify the level to which specific issues and organizations enjoy high levels of attention across borders. Subsequently, we use discourse analysis to qualitatively reconstruct the interpretative frames accompanying these patterns. We find that although social media are often ascribed much power in favoring transnational exchanges between far right organizations, there is little evidence of this. Only a few issues (anti-immigration and nativist interpretations of the economy) garner transnational far right audiences on Twitter. In addition, we find that more than movements, political parties play a prominent role in the construction of a transnational far right discourse.

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KEYWORDS Far right; transnationalism; Twitter; issues; movements; social network analysis

CONTACT Caterina Froio  caterina.froio@eui.eu  European School of Political and Social Sciences (ESPOL), 60 boulevard Vauban, F-59016 Lille, France.

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Introduction

The internet can be the perfect habitat for transnational exchanges between far-right¹ organizations. Low costs and the possibility to produce and rapidly spread user-generated content should ease cooperation between like-minded groups that do not enjoy similar opportunities in other parts of the public sphere (see Davey and Ebner 2017). While an increasing number of contributions addresses the topic of transnationalism in far-right politics, existing accounts mostly focus on offline dynamics and links between individuals and/or organizations, so far downplaying the role of the Internet and of the content of the message conveyed through it. With some remarkable exceptions (Burris *et al.* 2000; Caiani *et al.* 2012; Caiani and Kröll 2015; Gerstenfeld *et al.* 2003; O’Callaghan *et al.* 2013), few systematic investigations exist on transnational exchanges online though none of them focus specifically on the interactions between established and non-established organizations² on social media. Our paper addresses this gap studying the initiators and the issues favoring exchanges between audiences of far-right organizations on Twitter, comparing parties and movements across the borders of nation-states.

The transnational aspect of the far right may refer to different dimensions. The literature distinguishes between transnational issues, targets and mobilization (Rucht 1999; Schain *et al.* 2002). We qualify transnationalization on the far right as a shared issue focus among sustained ties of persons and organizations across the borders of multiple nation-states, including interactions that range from low to high levels of institutionalization. In this regard, we refer to the far right as transnational when closely interrelated groups and organizations from more than one country place similar discursive emphasis on particular issues. In our understanding, common issue attention is an important step in the construction of transnational interpretative frames, e.g. interpretations of social reality elaborated by leaders of organizations orienting activists’ actions (Caiani and della Porta 2011). Common issue attention is not disconnected from other dimensions of transnationalization or more

¹As per the focus of the special issue, we define the far right following Mudde’s definition (Mudde 2007: 15–30) referring to extreme and radical right populist organizations as sharing three ideological cores: nativism, authoritarianism and populism. Within the far right organizational variants exist ranging from more to less established organizations (Hirsch-Hoefler and Mudde 2013).

²In the paper, we follow Minkenberg’s definition to distinguish between far right parties and movements (2011: 37–56). These might be distinguished depending on their approach to institutional political power and public support. Political parties run for elections and offices while social movement organizations mobilize public support without running for offices.

important than the others. It simply provides a fertile ground for further mobilization and organizational cooperation across countries.

The study relies on a novel dataset on the activities and audiences of far right Twitter users in France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom. The accounts selected represent different configurations of the far right spectrum (mostly in terms of electoral success, the intensity of street-based and internet-based mobilization), maximising variance across cases. We follow a mixed methods approach. First, we explore the resonance of particular issues and users using a network analysis of retweets to understand the development of transnational audiences of far right discourse. These retweets are qualitatively coded for content and compared to the content retweeted within national communities. Next, using a logistic regression, we quantify the level to which particular issues and organizations enjoy high levels of attention across borders. Finally, we qualitatively reconstruct the interpretative frames accompanying these discourses.

Though language-related constraints limit the number of countries that we can consider, and the time sensitivity of the data demands caution in generalizing our findings, they highlight three broader patterns for future research. First, although social media are often ascribed much power in favouring transnational exchanges between far-right organizations, we found little evidence of this 'dark international', at least on Twitter. Most far right Twitter-related activity remains national and focused on domestic organizations and concerns. Second, only a few issues (anti-immigration and the economy) garner transnational far-right audiences on Twitter. We show that a transnational far right discourse is built around interpretative frames of Islamophobia and nativist interpretations of economic programs. Third, although both established and less established organizations participate in the transnationalization of the far right, together with individual sympathizers and leaders, we find that parties are the main drivers of transnational networks suggesting that established organizations within the electoral arena (more than grassroots ones) are the engines of a far right transnational discourse.

The paper begins by offering an overview of existing literature dealing with the far right, social movements, transnationalism and the internet. Then we introduce the data and methods before presenting the results. The conclusion discusses the implications of our findings and suggests avenues for future comparative research in the field of far right transnational politics.

Far right politics, transnationalism and the Internet

In European democracies, the far right is believed to have intensified its efforts to create a common opposition against the weakening of nation-states resulting from processes such as globalization and European integration. Although nativist and nationalist, in the last century the far right has been concerned with the establishment of connections with like-minded organizations beyond state borders (see Bar-On 2008; Zuquete 2015). More recently, the Internet constitutes a precious tool for the facilitation of exchanges and easing the construction of cross-border collective identities and interpretative frames (Caiani *et al.* 2012). Yet although scholars recognize to the internet a privileged role in favoring far right transnational exchanges, existing studies focus exclusively on official websites and/or on extreme right organizations, downplaying the role of social media and the organizational variety that exists within the far right. As a result, little is known about whether social media play a role in the transnationalisation of far right politics and how far right parties and movements compare on their transnationalisation efforts on Twitter.

The concept of transnationalism received increasing visibility in social sciences and more recently in the study of far right parties and movements (see Remennick 2007).³ It was originally applied to research on migrations and more recently to the study of left-wing social movements opposing supranationalization processes like globalization and European integration (Ayres 2001; Porta 2015; della Porta and Tarrow 2012; Smith 2004: 200). In its minimal definition, transnationalism refers to organized networks across national borders characterized by exchanges, information flows, and ties between groups and individuals (Vertovec 2009: 9). As such, the transnational aspect of a movement may refer to different dimensions of it: issues, targets, mobilization and organization (Rucht 1999). Even when one of those takes a transnational dimension, the others may remain national. In this sense, social movements scholars illustrate that transnational collective action does not necessarily exclude or substitute mobilization at the local and/or international level and that should not be reduced to the usage of a common language between activists (Rucht 1999). In addition, exchanges and interrelations across borders suggest that different groups try to coordinate themselves in a

³Recently a special issue of the *Journal of the European Institute for Communication and Culture* addressed the same theme for populist organizations, including -but not limited to- the far right. See Moffitt (2017).

sustained way to achieve common goals that may (or may not) be transnational in nature (della Porta and Tarrow 2005). Engaging in a transnational collective action signals the will of movements to establish links with like-minded formations across borders based on a common discourse built on shared interpretative frames. Within social movements literature, frames are defined as ways in which actors define the issue for their audience to mobilize activists (Caiani and della Porta 2011). The study of transnationalism in the far right followed a different path and started focusing on online interactions between parties and movements only recently.

By looking at the experiences of Italian fascism and German Nazism, historians were the first to show that an ethnocentric focus on nationhood (also called nativism) does not necessarily exclude transnational mobilization (Macklin 2013; Mammone 2015). As illustrated by the creation in 1934 of the Fascist International by the fascist dictator Mussolini, attempts of finding allies beyond state borders are not a new endeavor in the far right (Albanese and del Hierro 2016). By switching the focus and placing the magnifier on far right organizations that emerged in Western party systems in the late 70s (Ignazi 1992), political scientists and sociologists started studying the transnationalisation of contemporary far right parties (Schain *et al.* 2002; Zuquete 2015) and movements (Bar-On 2011). Studies on far right political parties mostly focus on patterns of cooperation and opposition in the European Parliament (Schain *et al.* 2002). They show that in the EU parliament, far right parties do not form a coherent group and do not exhibit a coherent voting behavior like it is the case for other party families (De Lange *et al.* 2017). Other scholars shed light on extra-institutional forms of transnational cooperation between far right parties. They focus on the organization of informal events like concerts and meetings (Camus 2009). In parallel, social movement scholars started exploring the transnationalization of far right movements. Researchers highlight that as for left-wing movements, transnationalism in the far right occurs via shared issues, targets, mobilization and organizational strategies (Caiani and Kröll 2015). Recent studies show that transnational cooperation between far right movements is rarely the result of formalized agreements between organizations. Often, collaborations are based on activists' personal connections in other countries (Albanese *et al.* 2015). Other scholars focusing on online transnationalization of far right movements demonstrate that modern means of communication and information technology are particularly useful to organizations willing to expand their support across

borders. Although hyperlinks between websites or accounts do not mirror real relations between these groups, previous studies on right-wing online radicalism confirm that they can be apprehended as indicators of ‘closeness, traces of communication, instruments for reciprocal help in attaining public attention’ (Burriss *et al.* 2000: 215; Caiani *et al.* 2012). In this sense, weblinks represent interactions in ‘an area of virtual activity and of social exchange between right-wing groups which use the Internet as an additional channel in order to construct their common identity’ (Tateo 2005). By focusing on the case of white supremacist blogs, Burriss *et al.* show (2000) that the white supremacist movement online is a cyber-community including similar organizations in different countries sharing some core issues (such as Holocaust denial) and not others (Christian Identity theology). In a more recent study Gerstenfeld *et al.* (2003) confirm these results, by adding also that urge for political violence creates divisions within the transnational network of extremist groups.

In another study addressing the relationship between social media and transnational interactions between extremist right-wing communities, O’Callaghan *et al.* (2013) find that Twitter interactions between far right movements across countries originate stable virtual communities sharing common perceived ‘threats’ such as the preservation of the white race. Although insightful in illustrating the potential of using Twitter data to assess interactions between far right communities, the study focused exclusively on extreme right organizations and individuals, hence neglecting more established radical right organizations and the possible interactions between the two. Dealing mainly with extremist white supremacist organizations, the study only considers a small number of issues (related to race and ethnicity) that could structure exchanges within the virtual community. This is slightly limited, considering that within the far right nativism is a core ideological pillar, but at the same time it informs the discourse of these organizations on other topics, such as welfare provisions (e.g. more social aids only for the natives), labor rights (more rights only for native workers) and other more classic policy areas (Mudde 2007: 119–37).

For long-time research on transnationalisation of the far right kept parties and movements separate probably because of the difficulty to find data allowing to account for both simultaneously. Only recently have efforts accounted for both organizational types and their interactions, suggesting that the Internet constitutes a precious source of data in this respect. Caiani and Kröll (2015) used internet data to explore transnational networks of far right organizations, including political parties and

movements. In their 2014 study considering 336 right-wing websites in different European countries and the United States, the two researchers focus on the intensity and trends of far right transnationalism. They show that parties and movements in the far right are indeed transnationalized in terms of issues addressed, targets and organizational strategies. Although insightful both in methodological and theoretical terms, the study is limited to far right websites, not accounting for social media that constitute instead a primary arena for mobilizing protest action at the transnational level as it has been shown for progressive movements (Theocharis *et al.* 2015).

Building on this literature on transnationalism, the far right, social movements and the internet, we wish to contribute by focusing on the discourses favoured by audiences of like-minded far right organizations. To do so, we focus on cross-border networks of both parties and movements of the far right on Twitter and on the content of issues spread across these networks. Twitter is an awareness system allowing immediate and widespread information diffusion (Kwak *et al.* 2010) and offering various means to create information streams and emotions (Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira 2012). While existing studies dealing with progressive movements show that Twitter facilitates transnational mobilization and frames (Castells 2012; Gerbaudo 2012), to our best knowledge no systematic study exists accounting for the way in which Twitter might ease the construction of a transnational discourse between parties and movements in the far right.

Research design, data and methodology

The study follows a most different research design to compare transnational issue focus and initiators in France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom. Although established and less established far right organizations are active in the four countries (see Mudde 2007), the configuration of the far right spectrum differs. While France and Italy host two of the most electorally successful and long-lived radical right populist parties (the Front National and the League respectively), in Germany and the United Kingdom the far right has experienced so far modest electoral performances (like Front National then British National Party in the UK) and mainly recently (like the Alternative for Germany). Less established far right organizations like movements and other loosely organized 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 United Kingdom (see for a discussion Caiani *et al.* 2012). The research combines network analysis, visualization, logistic regressions and discourse analysis to identify the issues, initiators and interpretative frames that favor far transnationalization. Our strategy allows us to identify links, key issues as well as the relative influence of particular actors, being those parties or movements in these transnational networks. In doing so, we hope to provide future researchers with a broader methodological contribution to combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to analyze Twitter data.

Based on official reports and secondary literature by scholars and watchdog organizations, we build an initial purposive sample identifying the most important far right actors (e.g. established and non-established organizations, as well as individuals related to those) that are active in France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom that use Twitter (11 in France, 9 in Germany, 10 in Italy, and 10 in the UK).⁴ Data were collected on each of these users from Twitter's REST API (REpresentational State Transfer Application Programming Interface), referred to below as 'Twitter API'.⁵ This allows for the collection of longitudinal data on users, and with further requests to the REST API, traces of interactions and representations of audiences of specific Tweets. While Twitter data does suffer from certain limitations, its relative openness is a useful resource to gather comparable data on both established and less established far right organizations and their usage of the internet.

The analysis focuses on content produced by the selected far right actors and their audiences on Twitter that retweet them. This diverges from other studies of Twitter networks which are often event-based and focused on hashtags and search queries. Because our data spans far right content from 2016 and 2017, we are able to go beyond specific issues and analyze transnationalization of far right discourse over time rather than centred around specific events. In order to understand the audiences that this content receives, we focused on retweeting, 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 and embed

⁴The list is available in the Appendix, Table A2.

⁵Twitter data may be captured by researchers using the REST API or the Streaming API. The latter allows for the collection of up to 1% of Tweets in real time. Unlike the Streaming API, the REST API allows for limited data collection of user accounts, going back a variable amount of time (Gaffney and Puschmann 2014: 59). For example, it is possible to capture the most recent 3200 Tweets of any given user, as well as anyone that they have chosen to follow or who may follow them.

themselves in a particular discursive context (Boyd *et al.* 2010; Murthy 2012: 1068). 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 and Stieglitz 2012: 161; Murthy 2012: 7; Williams and Burnap 2016: 215). Thus, the retweet suggests a resonance of the message with the user retweeting it and a desire for the message to reach other users of the platform: ‘Retweeting a message represented both an affirmation of the contents of a tweet, and a way of spreading a conversation more widely’ (Halavais 2014: 35). Retweets, then, allow us to explore the resonance of the messages of a given far right user. In our study, we operationalize retweets to explore the issues and messages that have the most resonance for audiences of a given user in different countries.⁶

We then built a network graph of Twitter users that retweeted one of our selected far right accounts more than five times. Using visualization and social network analysis measures, we detected four distinct national communities corresponding with the national audiences of the selected far right accounts. We then find transnational users by identifying those that retweeted content from more than one national community, such as a user that retweeted content from Italy and the United Kingdom. Subsequently, we conducted a content analysis to code each of these Tweets and discourse analysis to identify relevant frames. We use the codebook originally developed by Kriesi *et al.* (2012) and adapted to the study of the far right by Castelli Gattinara and Froio (2017).⁷ Next, the content of the Tweets that were not retweeted by transnational users was coded, allowing for comparison between the types of Tweets that were retweeted transnationally versus those that remained within a national community. Finally, we employ a logistic regression model to identify the types of content and initiators that are most likely to garner transnational audiences on Twitter and we analyze Tweets’ content qualitatively.⁸

⁶Further details of data collection procedures are provided in the Appendix.

⁷The original categories are Welfare, Economic liberalism, Budget, Cultural liberalism, Europe, Education, Anti-immigration, Defense, (internal) Security, Ecology, Electoral politics, Infrastructures, Ideology, Other. In this paper, we recoded: Economic liberalism and Budget in “Economy & Budget”, Defense and Security in “Defense & Security”, Ecology and Infrastructures in “Ecology & infrastructures”.

⁸Network visualization and analysis is a tool for identifying who is transnational rather than this network itself being the object of the study. It is important to note that the descriptive statistics given here do not suggest that the far right is structured differently than other Twitter networks, which is outside the scope of the present study and would require different quantitative and comparative methods. The network analysis is used mostly for visualization and identification of transnational users. Consequently, the metrics we use to understand the network are limited to degree, modularity and centrality. Our claims do not focus on the structure of the network but rather the content being shared within it;

A weakly transnational network: cross-countries retweeting patterns

How transnational is the far right on Twitter? [Figure 1](#) shows the far right network. It includes 6,454 nodes, representing unique Twitter users.⁹ Each edge in the graph represents a retweet. There were 2398 unique Tweets authored by the named nodes which were retweeted 55,983 times in total. Of these retweets, only 1617 retweets were identified as transnational.

To begin the investigation, we explore 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 sampled.¹⁰ 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](#).

The results show that most retweets stayed within countries. Thus, far right transnationalization, at least as it regards audience willingness to retweet, is a relatively rare phenomenon and accounts for less than 3% of activity in the filtered network. There are 2398 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. However, the transnational links we identified favor political parties more so than they do movements.

consequently, our objective in this section is to explain how descriptive statistics were used to identify relevant content for qualitative analysis.

⁹This network is filtered only to include users that retweeted a user in our purposive sample more than once. While this reduced the total users and relevant retweets, this allowed us to focus specifically on those users that engaged with far right content more than once, reducing noise in the graph. The network is based on 2399 unique Tweets. Collecting and mapping the retweeters gave a total of 26,494 unique Twitter users that had retweeted a piece of content produced by one of our selected far right users and 36,971 total edges, which represent a variable number of retweets per user (edges are weighted based on the number of times an individual might retweet the same user).

¹⁰To evaluate the quality of this partition, we compared the modularity of each node with the language code provided for the user from Twitter (see [Table A1](#) in Appendix). This code is based on the version of the user interface that the user prefers upon starting their Twitter account. While this is not a perfect measure – for example, fluent French speakers might prefer to have a Twitter interface in English – it is a good indicator of which linguistic community the user belongs to. It is much more reliable than user location which is declared by the user and often contains unreliable data, such as sarcasm, nonsense, or no data at all. Based on these two measures – modularity from an algorithm and declared language from the Twitter API – we could determine that our partition of the graph was adequate, with a reasonable amount of error.

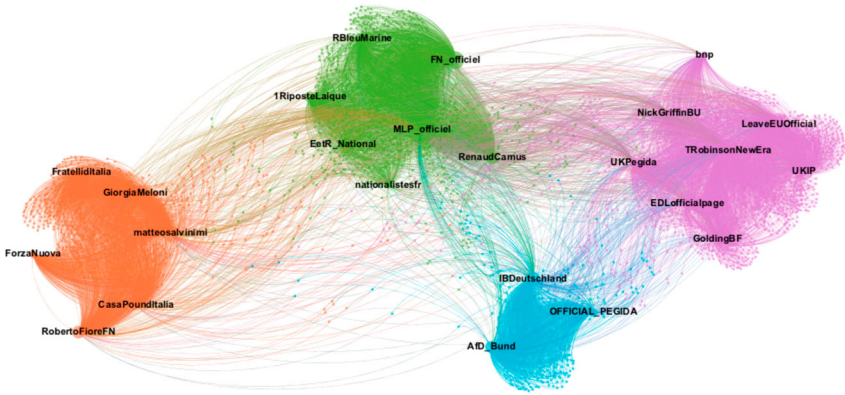


Figure 1. Far right retweets network, 2016 and 2017.

Note: the network shows cross-country retweets. From left to right: Italy, France, Germany and UK.

Table 1. National and transnational far right retweets by parties and movements.

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

After identifying transnational users and tweets, in [Figure 2](#) we explore which far right accounts enjoy the highest levels of transnational engagement by measuring degree (the number of times the user in the network was retweeted by other users) and differentiating between accounts associated with political parties or movements.

With a total of 6483 retweets, Giorgia Meloni, leader of the party Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*), is the most retweeted, followed by Marine Le Pen, leader of the French National Front with 5472 retweets. Unlike Meloni, Le Pen is much more popular across borders whereas Meloni is rarely retweeted outside Italy. Both Meloni and Le Pen are outliers; the majority of the sampled accounts are located in the bottom-left quadrant of the graph. On average, each account was retweeted 2265.3 times within their own country and 67.4 times transnationally. What is particularly interesting about this plot is that each country has particular far right accounts that have significant transnational visibility. These are associated mostly to individuals on far right involved with both movements and parties (such as Marine Le Pen, Tommy Robinson or Matteo Salvini). In addition, [Figure 2](#) shows that German and British far right accounts

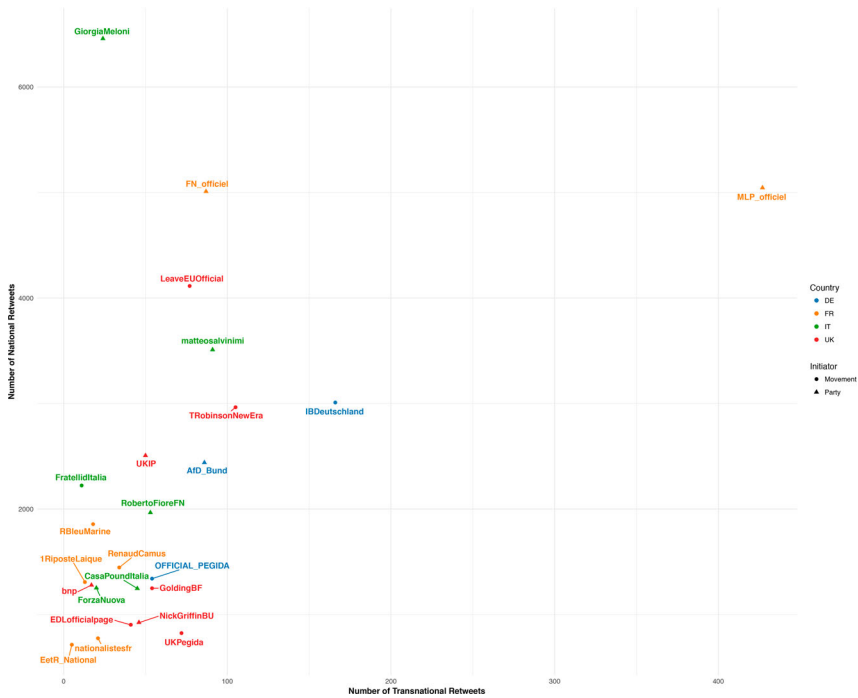


Figure 2. Far right parties and movements by amount retweeted within-country and transnationally.

are retweeted transnationally more frequently than French and Italian ones. While Marine Le Pen is retweeted transnationally the most, other French accounts which mostly represent far right grassroots organizations, have a much more national audience unlike their British and German counterparts (e.g. Pegida, English Defence League, Leave EU Official).¹¹ This suggests that only a few accounts in Germany get significant engagement and they depend more on users outside of Germany than French or Italian accounts do.

Transnational issue attention and initiators

In this section, we explore the issues and initiators that are more likely to garner attention and retweets from transnational audiences. Based on qualitative discourse analysis, Tweets were coded according to specific frames as well as whether or not the author of the Tweet is associated

¹¹Note that there are only three German accounts that appear in Figure 2 because the other seven accounts that were sampled did not produce a significant amount of original content or did not produce 100 tweets that were retweeted more than 10 times during 2016 and 2017.

with a political party or movement. We employ a logistic regression model to identify issues and initiators that are more likely to be transnational on Twitter. The dependent variable is transnationalism. It is measured as a binary variable (coded 1 if the retweet is done in a country that is different from the country of the original Tweet, and 0 otherwise). The main independent variable (*issue*) is categorical and it accounts for the number of Tweets focusing on each of the 10 issue categories identified in the codebook. Welfare is used as the reference category. Another categorical independent variable (*initiator*) indicates whether the author of the original Tweet is associated with a political party or movement. An additional independent variable captures the number of times a given tweet appeared as a retweet in our database (*count*) thus providing a proxy about the virtual 'resonance' of a given message. Finally, the last independent variable measures the number of times a given tweet was retweeted at the time we pulled the data (*global retweets*), providing a more accurate indicator of its visibility online.¹²

A logistic regression model is used to compute the correlation between the national and transnational tweets and our explanatory variables. To control for national differences in far right transnationalism such as far right spectrum characteristics (number of parties and movements, electoral success, intensity of street mobilization, etc.), we include country dummy variables in the model, with Germany serving as a reference category. To correct for the fact that the data are clustered by country we use robust standard errors. The results are presented in [Table 2](#).

The explanatory power of the model is satisfactory ($R^2 = 0.67$) and the test of our model is statistically significant against a constant-only model, indicating that the predictors distinguish in a reliable way between issues and initiators that are national and transnational. The model is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 179.84$, $p < .001$ with $df = 5$). While statistically correct interpretation of odds is an abstract undertaking, for our purposes it is sufficient to know that values that are positive and significant correspond to positive effects of the independent variables. [Table 2](#) shows that both *Issue* and *Initiator* have a positive impact on the likelihood of the transnationalization of a Tweet. This likelihood increases when the content of the tweet discusses Immigration and Economy & budget. In addition, Tweets initiated by political parties have higher probability to be transnational. To account for the substantive magnitude of the likelihood of far right

¹²We only captured the first 100 retweets of each Tweet in our database. This is a research limitation covered in note 15 on page 17.

Table 2. Effects of issues and initiators in generating transnational retweets.

Variable	Odd ratios	SE
<i>Issue</i>		
Welfare	Reference	
Economy and budget	3.033316	1.871981*
Cultural liberalism	.949959	.8108294
Europe	2.037009	1.273332
Education	.8124887	.9042647
Anti-immigration	2.607873	1.274882**
Army and Security	1.264141	.691126
Ecology & infrastructure	2.54914	1.570449
Electoral politics	.8713589	.5719678
Ideology	1.057881	.5702563
<i>Frequency of retweets</i>		
Count	.3331383	.0303459***
Global retweets	1.006014	.0007078***
<i>Initiator</i>		
Party	Reference	
Movement	.2186371	.0663053***
<i>Country</i>		
Germany	Reference	
France	.1572934	.0705958***
Italy	.3031754	.1381459**
United Kingdom	.1566835	.0623947***
Constant	78.22686	59.17773***
Pseudo R ²	0.67	
N	3191	

Note: Table shows odds ratios and robust standard errors. Significance levels as follows: $p < .001$ *** $p < .05$ **; $p < .1$ *

transnationalism, we used the results of the logistic regression to calculate the predicted probabilities. Figure 3 shows the predicted probabilities that tweets dealing with different issues (on the left) and having different initiators (on the right) are transnational.

Tweets focusing on Economy & Budget have about 30% of probability of being transnational, the same applies to tweets with immigrant topics that score 30%. Similarly, the likelihood that a tweet is transnational is higher when it is initiated by a party (47%) rather than by a movement (25%). We found evidence that only a limited number of issues provide ground for far right transnationalism. Further, far right parties are important factors in the transnationalization of Tweets. We now move to explore the interpretative frames accompanying the politicization of those issues on Twitter.

Key interpretative frames: Islamophobia and nativist interpretations of the economy

How do different interpretative frames relate to transnational issue focus? To address this question, we qualitatively analyze the content of the tweets

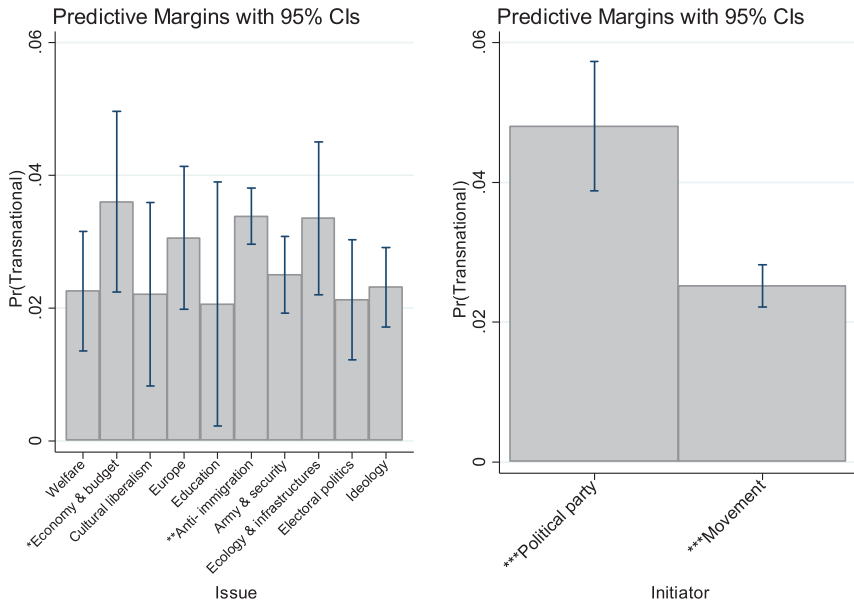


Figure 3. Predicted probabilities of transnational retweeting for a given tweet by type of issue and initiator.

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, tweets that reflect an anti-immigration discourse exhibit the highest likelihood to be transnational. In general, this is hardly surprising and it mirrors offline tendencies. In his seminal 2007 study, Mudde suggested that nativism is indeed a core ideological feature of the far right, despite the heterogeneity that characterizes this side of the political spectrum. 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 in the tweets. They are described by two main interpretative frames positioning Muslims as a cultural threat to the West and as security threats (Allen 2010; Birt 2010; Bleich 2012; Tyrer and Sayyid 2012). To portray Muslims as a threat in cultural terms, tweets emphasize on the one hand, more classic fear of cultural invasion and replacement. The

transnational form of such a discourse is well illustrated in a tweet from UKPegida, closely 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' (Kumar 2012; 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 initiator on the far right as the only, 'authentic', defender of the nation's reputation of tolerance (Halikiopoulou, Mock, and Vasilopoulou 2012). In March 2017, referring to a morning radio broadcast, Marine Le Pen provides an example of such a frame, tweeting a quote of herself: "I defend women's rights in the face of fundamentalist Islam. I am, by the way, the only candidate to speak about this problem." #RTLMatin'.¹³ Such stereotypes are well documented in literature on far right discourse (Berntzen and Weisskircher 2016; Virchow 2016). What our findings add is that Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate resonate more strongly with international audiences of the far right than within national communities. Given the well-documented links between anti-Muslim ideologues in the United States and Europe (see Caiani *et al.* 2012), we demonstrate that Islamophobia is a cornerstone to 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 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 counterjihad 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

¹³All translations by the authors.

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 informative of the ways in which Islamophobia is at the core of far right animosity to migrants when they ask why it is that British police do not prosecute the ‘Muslims’, articulated as ‘jihadi rapists’. In another tweet, the BNP refers to ‘Muslims who are gang raping British white kids every day’. 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 and Poynting 2016).

Finally, it is important to highlight that in our dataset, the category ‘Electoral Politics’ does not reach statistical significance in explaining far right transnationalism. This category includes general references – with no policy content – to domestic political opponents, and electoral debates. Although this is rather a crude measure for ‘populism’, it appears that anti-establishment Tweets are less successful than anti-Muslim ones in favoring a transnational far right discourse. While populist tendencies might be prevalent in national discourses of these groups, their development of international audiences depends on their politicization of Islamophobic feelings.

Nativist interpretations of the Economy

Finally, in the transnational Tweets special emphasis is put on the economy. The economy is traditionally part of far right discourses, however it does not constitute an ideological priority for these actors. As illustrated by Mudde (2007: 119–137), overtime 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 (Kitschelt and McGann 1995). 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 (see for a discussion Albanese *et al.* 2015; Griffin 2000).

In the Tweets, we find a major interpretative frame through which the economy features at the core of far right transnational tweets: economic nativism. As it happens offline also online far right organizations use their economic programs in a nativist way e.g. assuming that the economy is not a goal in itself but only a mean at the service of the interests of the (native) nation. In this framework, in the Tweets economic procedures concerning budgets, labour 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 economic fate for themselves rather than face an imposition from foreign dominance. 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 least established extreme right *CasaPound Italia* and *Egalité et Reconciliation*.

Our results confirm previous findings on far right transnationalism offline (Macklin 2013) and online (Caiani and Kröll 2015). What our data add is that compared to the national level, at the transnational level the economy is described more and more in nativist political terms 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, the discourse analysis reveals that two main interpretative frames operate as unifying factors for the far right in Western Europe: the idea of 'Civilizational Conflict' targeting Muslims and nativist economy associated with the state and/or market-based protection of the economic interests of the native population.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper 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 far right audiences share information, map salient issues, explore interpretative frames and identify the initiators favouring transnational exchanges despite differences in the configurations of the far right spectrum across countries. To do so we offered an innovative methodological framework combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to collect and analyze Twitter data.

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

As for issue focus, the qualitative content analysis and logistic regression showed that the issue emphasized in the Tweets plays a key role on whether it is shared transnationally or not. We found that tweets that reflect two issues exhibit the highest likelihood to be transnational: anti-immigration, and the economy. The discourse analysis enabled us to detect the interpretative frames associated with the politicization of these issues in the far right transnational networks. More than immigration, it is the opposition to Islam and Muslim minorities, based on arguments referring to cultural difference and security, that garners transnational 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 the far right, 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 least at the transnational level. Given the resonance of Islamophobic tropes in the transnationalization of far right discourse, reference to these organizations just as '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 the transnational level, the economy is politicized by describing economic programs as catalyzers of the interests of native people. Here again anti-migrant nativist arguments prevail on economic ones, or (at least) encompass them. Hence, more than about 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 relationship with European integration disentangling similarities and differences between left and right organizations.

Concerning the initiators, the logistic regression indicated that parties and parties' leaders matter more than movements for far right

transnationalisation, In particular two female leaders seem to play a key role: Marine Le Pen and Giorgia Meloni. Still if the former enjoys a genuinely transnational audience on Twitter, made of organizations operating in different countries and languages, the latter seems to appeal more to Italian organizations active in different languages. Our measure of the initiator is admittedly rather simplistic. Starting from the literature on personalization and on the role of individuals in the transnationalization of the far right, future research might consider leadership and individuals' characteristics such as visibility and levels of involvement in social media.

Although interesting for specialists on far right politics, internet and more broadly for researchers interested in the use of Twitter data, these results are likely to be affected by at least three major shortcomings of this 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 the transnational aspect of the far right, such as targets and mobilizations. This major emphasis on issue focus, organizational types and interpretative frames analyses in explaining far right transnationalism, pushed us to downplay other important variables related to the ideological differences between extreme and radical right populist organizations. Second, the paper does not consider that there may be obstacles to far right transnationalism online, such as attempts by governments and tech companies to counter extreme content. Finally, future contributions with larger N 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, we believe however to have brought sufficient evidence of 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 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 overcome even virtually. Only two issues appear to be able to build transnational audiences: opposition to Muslims and to 'anti-native' economic programs.

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Notes on Contributors

Caterina Froio is Assistant Professor in Political Science at the European School of Political and Social Sciences (Catholic University of Lille), and research associate at the C-Rex (University of Oslo). Her research interests are broadly in European politics with a special emphasis on political parties and their transformations, agenda-setting dynamics, e-politics, and the relations between extremism, radicalism and democracy. Since 2016, she is joint convenor of the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) Standing Group on Extremism & Democracy.

Bharath Ganesh is a researcher at the Oxford Internet Institute (University of Oxford). His current research explores the spread and impact of data science techniques in local governments across Europe, right-wing and counter-jihad extremism in Europe and the United States, and uses big data to study new media audiences and networks. He is developing new projects to study hate speech and extremism online and regulatory responses to this problem. Broadly, Bharath's research focuses on the relation between technology, media, and society.

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Appendix

Data collection procedure

Data collection proceeded in two phases. In phase one, we scraped data for 10 Twitter accounts from far-right accounts for each country. Using calls to the Twitter API, we collected the most recent 3200 Tweets – also known as a 'timeline' – from each account on Twitter, which is the maximum allowed by Twitter. Comprehensive data for each account was collected for 2016 and 2017, with some accounts going back further. In addition to collecting all 3,200 Tweets, we also scraped all of the 'followers' of each account, meaning those Twitter users that chose to follow the selected far-right account. As well, we collected the 'friends'

of each account, meaning those Twitter users that the selected far-right account chose to follow. Followers and friends are scraped in batches of 5000 and are limited to one request per minute. Consequently, for certain accounts such as @mlp_officiel (Marine LePen's official personal account) with more than a million followers, scraping the complete list took just over three hours. Data collection proceeded over the course of 5 days, from 11 to 15 May 2017. However, simply exploring follower/friend relationships is not sufficient to determine *influence* and the resonance of particular messages.

Consequently, our second phase of data collection explores retweets that we theorize are representative of behavior that resonates with and affirms *support* the content being retweeted. In the second phase, we selected users that authored more than 100 original Tweets in 2016 or 2017 that were retweeted 10 times or more from our purposive sample.¹⁴ We focus on original content because we are specifically interested in the resonance of the statements and ideas disseminated by the 40 sampled accounts. This reduced the number of accounts from our purposive sample that appear in the final network to 24 from 40. After using this criterion to filter relevant users and their Tweets, we took a random sample of 100 Tweets for each user that were authored in 2016 or 2017. 100 Tweets were selected because the size balances the production of a large enough sample to conduct social network analysis and a sample size that could reasonably be analyzed qualitatively. To produce the social networks, we collected a list of users that retweeted the sampled Tweet from the Twitter API.

Table A1: Modularity class by linguistic community.

Predicted country	Language preference for Twitter interface				
	German (%)	English (%)	Italian (%)	French (%)	Other (%)
Germany (n = 755)	83.4	10.9	0.4	1.3	4.0
United Kingdom (n = 2401)	1.0	94.0	0.4	1.5	3.1
Italy (n = 1484)	0.3	6.3	91.5	0.5	1.4
France (n = 1809)	0.3	8.3	0.9	89.3	1.2

For all countries except Germany, the modularity class algorithm correctly predicted the country of a user in almost 90% of cases. However, we should remember that this is an imperfect measure as there is a significant proportion of users that preferred an English Twitter interface in Germany, Italy, and France. Upon inspection of these users, many of them are indeed French users (for example) based on a qualitative review of their location and there were only a handful of instances in which an individual that lived in the UK was included in the counts. It should not be surprising

¹⁴These parameters were chosen in order to focus on Tweets that had a significant level of salience for the sampled users' audiences. A number of thresholds for the minimum number of retweets were used before settling on 10. When using a very low threshold (greater than or equal to one), random sampling provided 100 Tweets for each user that were only retweeted a handful of times. Increasing the threshold to a higher level, e.g. 50 or more retweets, prevented the many of our 40 sampled users from appearing in our analysis as many of the sampled users did not have more than 100 Tweets with such a high number of retweets. The threshold of 10 provided a balance that allowed us to include the largest number of our sampled users as well as focus on Tweets with resonance across the audiences that we are concerned with. Similarly, by focusing on 100 Tweets, we produced a manageable sample of 2399 Tweets in total which balanced the need for sufficient observations, time required for qualitative analysis of each Tweet, and the time required to collect rate-limited data on retweets from the Twitter API.

that French, German, and Italian speakers, many of whom are bilingual, use English for their interface on Twitter (cf. Graham *et al.* 2014). Consequently, we might argue that the relatively large proportion of English speakers in each predicted country does not refer to users based in the UK or the United States (or other English speaking country) but in fact to users belonging to that country that prefer to have their interface in English. We argue, consequently, that the modularity algorithm gives us a ‘best guess’ of the nationality of a given Twitter user with a reasonably low chance of error.

Table A2: Twitter accounts of parties, movements, and individuals included in the purposive samples

France		Germany	
Name	Twitter Handle	Name	Twitter Handle
Les Identitaires	les_ids	Alternative für Deutschland	AfD_Bund
Riposte Laique	1RiposteLaique	Dritter Weg	Der_Dritte_Weg
Egalite et Reconciliation	EetR_National	Die Rechte	dierechten
Civitas	Civitas_	Pro NRW	BB_PRONRW
Rassemblement Bleue Marine	RBleuMarine	NPD	Npdde
Parti Nationaliste Français	nationalistesfr	Die Identitären	IBDeutschland
Union Populaire Republicaine	UPR_officiel	Pegida	OFFICIAL_PEGIDA
Front National	FN_officiel	Hogesa	ho_ge_sa
Renaud Camus	RenaudCamus	Brigade Halle/Saale	bhshalle
Alain de Benoist	alaindebenoist		
Marine Le Pen	mlp_officiel		
Italy		United Kingdom	
Name	Twitter Handle	Name	Twitter Handle
ForzaNuova	ForzaNuova	English Defense League	EDLofficialpage
Roberto Fiore	RobertoFioreFN	UKIP	UKIP
CasaPound	CasaPoundItalia	British National Party	BNP
Gianluca Iannone	iannoneCpi	Paul Golding (Britain First)	GoldingBF
Lega Nord	lega_nord	Leave EU Campaign	LeaveEUOfficial
Matteo Salvini	matteosalvinimi	Tommy Robinson	TRobinsonNewEra
Fr. D'Italia	FratellidItalia	PEGIDA UK	UKPegida
Giorgia Meloni	GiorgiaMeloni	English Democrats	EnglishVoice
Lealtà e Azione	Lealta_Azione	British Unity	NickGriffinBU
Fiamma Tricolore	FiammaTricolore	North West Infidels	Infidels_NW