Commemoration and radical right-wing populism in European borderlands: A power geometries approach to frontier fascism in Trieste

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Abstract

The success of radical right-wing populist (RRWP) parties is based on discourses displaying "power geometries" (Massey 1993; 1999). These involve the representation of power relations, with on one side a globalized elite, boosting the mobility of human beings, goods and capital across borders, and on the other side, a territorially embedded people subject to this borderless mobility. Power geometries can also be used to approach the chameleonic behavior of RRWP politicians and their allies in the political space. The article uses this concept to interpret the attitude of the Trieste City Executive and the reactions to it when it commemorated a past connected to Italian fascism. The results show that the power geometries involving the RRWP and their allies in European borderlands can lead to discursive ambivalence in two overlapping spaces: the territorial and state-bordered space of representative democracy, and the topological and cross-border space of para-diplomacy.

Keywords: Power Geometries; Radical Right-wing Populism; Borders; Commemorations; Italian fascism; Discourse Historical Approach.

Introduction

Massey defined the concept of 'power geometries' to express the organisation and reproduction of space and mobility determined by power differentials (Massey 1993; 1999). This was reflected on by Mouffe (2013) to think about two phenomena central in populist studies: antagonism and hegemony. The concept of power geometries is perceived by Mouffe (2013) as a spatial frame to grasp the articulation of the antagonistic approach to society and the struggles between hegemonies and counter-hegemonies fixing a "natural order" of society. It is a central concept to approach the populist discourse, including a representation of space in which are the struggling in-group of people defended by RRWP parties, and the out-groups, including the elites and the "others". What is characteristic of the RRWP discourse is the embeddedness of the people in bordered territories (generally the nation state), whose integrity is jeopardised by the multiplicity of movements encouraged/managed by liberal, globalized and mobile elites dismantling state borders to their own advantage and in the interests of others on the move, namely migrants (Lamour 2022a, 2024).

Power geometries can also be a central concept to investigate struggles in the political relational space, including RRWP leaders and their allies. For example, this is the case for the independent mayor of Trieste, Roberto Dipiazza, an ex-member of Berlusconi's Forza Italia party. His local leadership is based on his ability to control a coalition of RRWP political groups, including Salvini's Lega and Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia. Dipiazza is also in charge of a city, the capitalist golden age of which dates to when it was the main port of the Austro-Hungarian

Empire, trading worldwide. Today's European integration and the willingness of China to develop its new Silk Road strategy in the Northern Adriatic Region offers Dipiazza an opportunity to reposition the port in the main global trade routes. This would open a new era, while the long twentieth century of Trieste has been marked by border closures, with a moving of the Italian state border eastward and then westward depending on the outcomes of wars and international agreements. This troubled twentieth-century past has been marked by a hegemonic ideology rooted in today's strong Fratelli d'Italia party: Italian fascism.

In 2019-2020, the City of Trieste was involved in the commemoration of events associated with this Italian fascism in the public history of Italy and its Slavic neighbours. This article asks: How can using the concept of power geometries help us to understand the discourses, actions and reactions produced in relation to these commemorations in this borderland? It is suggested that power geometries offer a key frame to interpret the possible ambivalence of RRWP parties and their allies associated with the fascist past in European border regions. The continued positionality of the mayor and the city in political relational spaces within and across state borders could lead to the circulation of ambiguous and antagonistic messages. Borderland cities being incorporated into state-bordered RRWP alliances probably does not generate, on their part, a univocal interpretation of the fascist past in European borderlands. Instead, it requires them to take a chameleonic attitude to secure their sustainability in co-present relation spaces of power within and across state borders, as space is "the realm of the juxtaposition of dissonant narratives" (Massey 2005, 140). Following a review of literature on power geometries, the relational space of the Italian populist right and its approach to the Italian fascist past, the argument, methodology and case study are presented. The results are structured in two main parts, one per commemoration. The article concludes with a discussion on power geometries and the circulation of radical right-wing populist discourses in the (de)bordered European space in the Northern Adriatic region.

Power geometries and remembering an Italian autocracy: The spatial struggles and the dynamics behind a re-elaborated fascist past

Power geometries is the concept coined by Massey to consider the power differentials framing and defining space, and the mobility within it (Massey 1993; 1999). Place is imagined by Massey as a spatial unit in which different types of struggles emerge and are organized by individuals, groups and institutions that do not all have the same capacity to initiate and manage a diversity of movements in defined relational spaces (Massey 2005). These struggles not only concern control of the mobility of people, goods, services and economic capital, but also the circulation of symbols and hegemonies, as ideas constituting the natural order of society (Mouffe 2013). The relational spaces and the organization of power in them take different shapes. One notes the bordered nation state territories and especially so when considering the struggles among political stakeholders for the control of public authorities. One also sees the presence of topological spaces of power cross-cutting nation states; that is, spaces in which power relationships are "mediated through events, technologies and practices that enable them to be stretched, folded or twisted in such a way as to transcend a landscape of fixed distances and well defined proximities" (Allen 2016, 39). Cities are both in the nation

state territorial spaces of power and in the global topological ones. Local executives struggling in a bordered representative democracy can in parallel, for instance, develop a para-diplomatic strategy across state borders to increase their political centrality and secure a position in the global capitalist grid of power (Keating 1999; Lamour 2020). Each relational space is a frame in which a series of discourses and actions are produced by struggling individuals or authorities, aware of what is expected from them to secure or improve their positionality. Consequently, places can be sites of dissonant narratives when their leaders — including radical right-wing populist (RRWP) ones and their associates — decide to send messages in overlapping spaces of power to secure or preserve their positions in each of them. This can especially be the case during commemorative events, which are often used to reprocess a national "we-ness" (Wodak et al. 2009).

The strengthening of RRWP parties is one of the most structuring elements of contemporary Western democracies (Krzyżanowski et al. 2023; Wodak and Krzyżanowski 2017). These parties have built their electoral-winning discourses on the representation of constantly adapted power struggles revealing the chameleonic dimension of their political positioning (Biancalana et al. 2023; Carls, 2023; Lamour 2023a; Lamour and Carls, 2022; Taggart 2017). This involves a powerless and fixed "people" located in a progressively dismantled sovereign nation state and frustrated by a hegemonic and mobile "elite", managing or intensifying the international mobility of human beings, goods, services and capital for its own benefit and that of mobile "others", such as migrants (Lamour 2022b, 2023d). The hegemony to be fought against by these parties is often a liberal globalization order, organized in an international topological space of power with key influential actors (for example, the financier George Soros according to Salvini, Trump and especially Orbán) (Lamour 2021, 2022c). The proposed counter-hegemony is an illiberal order. It notably includes the criticism or rejection of multi-culturalism, the limiting of human rights, the contestation of the separation of executive, legislative and judiciary powers, and the threat/scapegoating of the critical independent press, as well as a romanticized and rewritten national public history — as proven in Hungary (Lendvai 2017).

Italy is one the rare EU countries with three major populist parties that have been able to enact radicalism depending on the issues to be addressed: Forza Italia, Lega, and Fratelli d'Italia, structured around their respective leaders (Castelli Gattinara and Froio 2021). The Italian populist heads are in competition for the leadership of the right. However, they agree on Italian patriotism, circulating an ambiguous approach to the fascist past in a country where no strong structural "defascisation" policy was implemented after WWII (Manucci 2020). The positive re-elaboration of the fascist era has been based on three strategies: the *heroization* of key figures, presented as disconnected from the fascist past; *victimization,* consisting of creating victimhood external to fascist regimes; and *cancellation*, which involves avoiding the fascist past or some of its aspects (Caramani and Manucci 2019; Manucci 2020). Research has shown the long-term construction of the myth of the "good Italian" and heroes during the time of fascism (Hametz 2002; Scianna 2019), the right-wing-driven rejection of Italian culpability and the harmlessness of Italian fascism (Bernhard 2004), together with the inclusion of Italians among the victims of WWII (Bresciani 2021). The re-elaboration of the Italian fascist past in the political space was boosted by the arrival of Berlusconi in Italian politics in the 1990s (Ellinas 2018). Salvini has replicated Berlusconi's attitude concerning a

more positive re-visitation of the fascist period (Bosworth 2022). By comparison, Meloni reprocesses the heritage of post-WWII neo-fascism and is opposed to commemorations that include a condemnation of fascism (Sondel-Cedarmas 2022).

The three RRWP parties need to form coalitions to access public executives, for instance in the city of Trieste. In 2019–2020, the RRWP-controlled Trieste and its mayor, Roberto Dipiazza, were involved in the commemoration of two historical moments associated with Italian fascism in the public history of Italy and its Slavic neighbours: First, the one hundred years anniversary of the unlawful occupation of Rijeka/Fiume (now in Croatia) by Gabriele d'Annunzio and his men in 1919. Second, the mourning of the fallen associated with Italian fascism, Tito's partisans and the socialist regime in the following decades of the century. How can the discourses, actions and reactions during these commemorations within and across state borders be understood through a power geometries approach?

Argument, methodology and case study

It is suggested that to secure his position as a lasting political leader of Trieste in different relational spaces within and across borders, Dipiazza must negotiate between different antagonistic memories related to Italian fascism. A power geometries approach can help us to explain the alignment of the mayor in two overlapping spaces of power that include Trieste, leading to potentially dissonant narratives on this past: the territorial and state-bordered space of representative democracy, and the topological and cross-border space of para-diplomacy. The positioning of Dipiazza in the first relational space would lead to his ambiguous re-elaboration of the Italian fascist past and consecutive cross-border tensions, while his parallel positioning in the second relational space would require from him an ambiguous condemnation of the Italian fascist past and consecutive border tensions. His potential chameleonic attitude would reflect co-present horizon of expectations and existing hegemonic powers in each relational space.

The methodology is based on a Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA). One of the scope of DHA is "to demystify the hegemony of specific discourses by deciphering the ideologies that establish, perpetuate or fight dominance" (Reisigl and Wodak 2009, 87). DHA is used to investigate the language (oral, visual, written) used by social actors involved in power struggles from an interdisciplinary perspective. It takes into account empirical observations, theories, methods and background information, which enable the analysis of discursive practices situated in a given context. This context has four levels: 1) the immediate interactional context involving co-present social actors and discourse, 2) the inter-discursive context including specific utterances, genres and discourse replicated over time, 3) the extra-linguistic and institutional frames constituting the situational context and 4) the broader socio-political/historical context in which discourse is embedded. This multi-layered context determines the semiotic practices that are constitutive of discourse reproduced and modulated through a set of interactions on specific macro-topics and discursive genres (for politicians: commemorative speeches, media interviews, etc.) (Reisigl 2018; Reisigl and Wodak 2009). From a DHA perspective, discourse is seen as influencing "discursive as well as non-discursive social and political processes and actions" (Wodak 2001, 66). The contexts and discursive genres structuring Dipiazza's narratives are taken into consideration as background

information to explore his discourses and actions in different relational spaces, as these may in turn influence other discourses, processes and actions in the Northern Adriatic region. The discourse of Dipiazza and the other political stakeholders are investigated from three perspectives used to structure the societal horizon through a logic of sameness ("us") and otherness ("they") in discourse (Wodak 2001): the *nomination* of groups and individuals, the *attributes* associated with the in-group (us) and the out-group (they), and the *predication* that is, the positioning of speakers in the argumentation.

The following sources of information were searched: 1) The exhibition and the catalogue of the exhibition titled *Disobbedisco*, dedicated to Dannunzian Fiume, sponsored by the city council of Trieste (Contemplazioni 1999); 2) The website of the city of Trieste; 3) The websites of the Croatian, Italian and Slovenian Presidencies; and 4) The websites of mass media covering the Giulia-Istria-Dalmatia region and targeting the Italian-speaking population (The dailies *Il Piccolo* and *La Voce del Popolo,* in Italy and Slovenia/Croatia, respectively, and the Italian TV station of the Friuli Venezia Giulia region, *Telequattro*). These sources were selected, as they can contain discourses directly targeting political stakeholders and citizens in the cross-border region.

The commemorations considered here took place in the city of Trieste, which is in a frontier zone between the Italian and Slavic cultural world. Here, Italian minorities live in Slovenia and Croatia, while Croatians and Slovenians are rooted on the Italian side of the border (Lamour 2023b). The area of Trieste is also an important location, where some of the 250,000 mainly Italian-speaking exiles have settled. These people left what is now Croatia and Slovenia under the advance of Yugoslavia's Titoist forces in the second part of WWII and up to the early 1950s (Pupo 2005). From a political perspective, Trieste has been strongly associated with the history of Italian fascism, and more precisely "frontier fascism", which "aimed at the defence and imperialist expansion of Italian domination on and beyond the eastern border, and attempted to assimilate the Slav population into a 'superior' Italian civilization" (Baracetti 2009, 660-661). Frontier fascism took place in a regional context previously marked by tensions and violence between co-present national groups over many decades (Pupo 2021). This violence was experienced, for instance, during the illegal occupation of the nearby city Fiume/Rijeka in 1919–1920 by the Italian poet-soldier Gabriel d'Annunzio, whose deeds and ceremonials in this city, together with some of his followers, were later incorporated into the Italian fascist story-telling, rituals and regime (Simonelli 2021). D'Annunzio is not necessarily considered a fascist by historians, but the evocation of the Dannunzian Fiume by the scientific community inevitably leads to a debate on the relationship between D'Annunzio and Italian fascism (Lamour 2023c). D'Annunzio started his illegal march on Fiume from Trieste, which rapidly became one of the first strongholds of fascism in Northern Italy in the early 1920s. It was also here that Mussolini pronounced his discourse on racial laws in 1938. This discourse targeted the Jews and also stressed the superiority of the Roman-based Italian civilisation in this borderland; that is, an expression of frontier fascism (Baxa 2013; Hametz 2002).

During the 2019–2020 commemorations of this troubled past, Fratelli d'Italia, the post-fascist party of Meloni, held a strong position in the polls for the subsequent 2021 city election and was in fact the most voted-for party on the right (Il Piccolo 2021a). It can also be noted that Trieste was where Meloni relaunched herself as the leader of Italian sovereignism during

the 2017 party conference (Sondel-Cedarmas 2022). This conference, attended by Dipiazza, showed the strength of post-fascist hegemonies incorporating elements of past Italian fascism and frontier fascism. Meloni claimed on this occasion that Trieste should have a street dedicated to Giorgio Almirante; a "patriot of the nation" according to her. Almirante was a die-hard Duce follower, a writer in the racist and fascist newspaper *la difesa della razza*, a member of the post-WWII terrorist group attacking left-wing organizations (The FAR - Forze Armate Rivoluzionarie) and founder of a neo-fascist party, the MSI (Movimento Sociale Italiano) (Bosworth 2022). Meloni also insisted that Trieste was "the most Italian of cities", in spite of the presence of Slavic minorities (Telequattro 2017). Dipiazza is in an Italian, bordered and state-national relational space, in which he must avoid any critical approach to past Italian frontier fascism if he wants to gain the support of Meloni and her party for another executive term. However, Dipiazza is also a localized architect of international reconciliation and cross-border regional cooperation. He coordinated a city concert attended by the Croatian, Italian and Slovenian presidents in 2010. The newly appointed Italian ambassador to Croatia came to visit Dipiazza in 2020 and the Slovenian ambassador to Italy also came during the same year, both to discuss the multiple cooperation between Italy and Croatia/Slovenia and the role of Trieste in it. He is notably involved in a cross-border economic regional development programme, including the coordination of port strategies with a view to capturing global trade flows. Dipiazza has developed a para-diplomatic centrality in the international topological space of the Northern Adriatic region, with the influential presence of a global economic power in the background: China (Ažman Momirski 2021; Ghiretti 2021; Stamatović et al. 2020).

Addressing Italian frontier fascism in a Northern Adriatic borderland: The nuanced heroization, victimization and cancellation strategies in overlapping spaces of power

Dipiazza's attitudes during the 2019–2020 commemorations were dissonant to say the least. This dissonance can be explained by the presence of power geometries in overlapping relational space in which certain type of discourse on the interpretation of the Italian frontier fascism are expected from his part. The mayor of Trieste sent messages that were to be expected in the two relational spaces. First, the positive re-elaboration of Italian fascism expected by its RRWP and post-fascist ally, Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia, in the nation state, bordered, and multi-scalar Italian representative democracy. Second, the mourning of Italian fascism's victims, expected by the reconciled nation states shaping a cross-border topological space boosted by global capitalism. The reactions to his attitude show the presence of struggles within and across the state borders concerning the meaning of the Italian fascist past. However, he found the right balance to secure his political resilience in both spaces.

His chameleonic discourse was a product of a multi-layered context associated to the commemorations that represented specific political and institutional events (Reisigl 2018; Reisigl and Wodak 2009). Firstly, the commemorations in Trieste focused on historical events, which were interpreted differently depending on the general socio-political contexts within and across the Italian state border. These socio-political contexts determined the overarching ambivalence of the mayor of Trieste. Secondly, Dipiazza had to take into account the situational context involving an extra-linguistic and institutional framework.

Commemorations are determined by institutions, which expect certain types of discourse from the social actors involved in them. However, this expected and delivered discourse can be challenged by other institutions and their key social actors not in charge of the commemorations. Consequently, Dipiazza's approach to the past was twofold to preserve its position of power in Trieste and in the northern Adriatic cross-border region, framed by different institutions, respectively the city of Trieste controlled by a political coalition including a strong post-fascist party and Italian and Slovenian nation-states engaged in a diplomatic co-operation. Thirdly, Dipiazza's discourse revealed the existence of an inter-discursive context involving utterances, texts and discursive genres reproduced and adapted by social actors including his opponents. Fourthly, Dipiazza's discourse was the product of the co-presence of social actors who either produced their own discourse or simply listened to his discourse and had a horizon of expectation of what was to be said. Dipiazza's attitude differed according to his most significant public and co-present interlocutors (Italian political allies and citizens who ensured his control of Trieste city, or nation-states and Slavic communities who ensured his positioning in the para-diplomatic grid of powers in the northern Adriatic cross-border region).

The two commemorations are studied in succession through a similar approach. First, a synthetic presentation of each commemoration in terms of timing, scope, locations, management and the overall emotions circulated. Second, the presence of verbal and non-verbal references to the fascist past. Third, the specific discourse of the mayor of Trieste, Roberto Dipiazza. Fourth, the reactions to the discourse and actions of Dipiazza within the two mentioned relational spaces.

Celebrating Dannunzian Fiume: The dual heroization, the univocal cancellation and the cross-border reaction

In today's Europe, where controversial statues are pulled down to reconcile different collective memories, the city of Trieste decided in 2019 to inaugurate a statue of d'Annunzio, who illegally invaded a century before Fiume—now Rijeka in Croatia—80 km away. The city council also sponsored an exhibition around Dannunzian Fiume that cost nearly half a million euros. D'Annunzio was celebrated in the commemoration as a hero. However, the city decided to promote a hero with an ambivalent cause, with the support of the president of the museum dedicated to the poet-soldier (Il Vittoriale degli Italiani), the libertarian Giordano Bruno Guerri. The *argumentation* of Guerri was quite clear in the presence of Dipiazza: Guerri: "[Dannunzian Fiume is] not a prelude to fascism, but a revolutionary, libertarian experiment, a forerunner of other ideal and political currents of our time" (Comune di Trieste 2019). The statue itself represents not a standing soldier pointing his finger towards Fiume, but a sitting bourgeois figure, reading a book. It is also located in front of the building most emblematic of the global, borderless and trading Great Trieste under the Austro-Hungarian Empire that Dipiazza would like to see again: the former stock exchange. This global, revolutionary and non-fascist vision of d'Annunzio can be tolerated in an international topological space of a pacified and business-oriented European Union, as it is not an Italian and territorial expansionism that is celebrated, but a global revolution and even a libertarian progressive revolution when one considers a part of the exhibition (Lamour 2023b, 2023c).

The libertarian vision detached from fascism and inducing a borderless global revolution was, however, not the only message circulated by the exhibition and by the city council. First, the statue of d'Annunzio was inaugurated 100 years to the day after the poet-soldier occupied Fiume; a dark day for the Slavic people of the region, as this occupation symbolized a new circle of violence, destruction and a later two decades long occupation and frontier fascism when Fiume was finally included in Italy (Baracetti 2009). Guerri thought it was the worst date to choose for the inauguration (Il Piccolo 2019b). Nevertheless, it was the key date to attract the attention of the post-fascist segment of the Trieste political coalition that has absorbed d'Annunzio into its heritage , Fratelli d'Italia (ANSA 2019). The exhibition sponsored by the city council also *nominated* "Adriatic multiculturalism" as a goal of d'Annunzio. However, there were no displays in the exhibition about the documented intimidation and violence towards the Slavic population of Fiume in the tense nationalistic environment characterizing the city and the region for a while (Pupo 2021). Furthermore, the city council decided to promote the exhibition in the most central place of memory associated with Mussolini's fascism in Trieste and known in the whole of Italy: the massive town hall, in front of which the Duce pronounced his racial law discourse in 1938 promoting partly frontier fascism based on the superiority of the Italian and Roman-based civilisation (Baxa 2013). In 2019, an imposing, red banner—some may say characteristic of European twentieth-century fascist/autocratic regimes—was displayed with the portrait of d'Annunzio and the name of the exhibition, Disobbedisco (I disobey). These words, uttered by the poet-soldier when illegally entering Fiume, have a specific resonance in the twentieth-century democratic and fascist history of Italy. They symbolize both the coming death of the fragile post-WWI Italian liberal democracy and the eastward advance of the Italian state later implemented by Mussolini's imperialism. They express the strength of the broad socio-political context orientating an interpretation of the past (Reisigl 2018; Reisigl and Wodak 2009), here a celebration of Italian territorial expansionism on a monument linked to frontier fascism.

The available public narratives of Dipiazza concerning the d'Annunzio commemoration are rare and were replicated between supporting media. The foreword in the catalogue of the exhibition dedicated to d'Annunzio is the most complete discourse that can be found (Contemplazioni 2019). It has a bordered and exclusionary "we" Italians dimension, which is commonplace in the construction of European national identities during commemorations (Wodak et al. 2009). It is associated with the heroization of d'Annunzio, without any reference to his attack against the Italian state democracy while cancelling the Slavic identity and memories in the region. Dipiazza associates only positive *attributes* to the man ("The greatness of an illustrious Italian", "the charm, mystery, gaiety and splendour of d'Annunzio's world"). This text also proposes a historical approach to Trieste as the centre of Italian expansionism led by this man and later prolonged by the fascist regime ("it was in the Julian capital [Trieste], newly united with Italy, that the first irredentist mobilizations for the annexation of Rijeka and Dalmatia took place").

The commemoration of d'Annunzio in Trieste was accompanied by different reactions and material effects, leading to a hardening of cultural and political borders in the Northern Adriatic region. It is obviously not the message of the libertarian and global d'Annunzio that circulated best. The statue was vandalized, placards celebrating Dannunzian Fiume were placed on the Croatian consulate of Trieste, and far-right Italians displaying an Italian flag of

that period were arrested in Rijeka (Il Piccolo 2019a). At the same time, Rijeka—which was European Capital of Culture and still home to an Italian minority— decided to postpone the planned installation of road signs in Italian. A large red star symbolic of its Jugoslav past and the fight of Tito's partisans against Italian fascism also appeared on the top of a building. The Rijeka-born president of Croatia, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic, made an official complaint after the commemoration, and the mayor of Rijeka, Vojko Obersnel, plainly mentioned in the newspaper for the Italian minority of Croatia and Slovenia, *la Voce del Popolo*, how he had interpreted this commemoration. Obersnel's discourse is interesting, as it is opposite to that of Dipiazza, showing a sealed, state political border regarding the interpretation of the 1919 occupation. For the mayor of Rijeka, the *attributes* associated with d'Annunzio are only negative ("chauvinism", "nationalism", "terror", "proto-fascism", "fascism") whereas the Italian "irredentist mobilization" of the past mentioned by Dipiazza is reinterpreted not as a past but as a contemporary Italian expansionism discourse ("some Italian politicians […] cannot accept today's borders of Italy"). Nevertheless, Obersnel crosscut cultural borders and addressed the Italian minority of Slovenia and Croatia. Furthermore, he did not make any direct reference to Dipiazza, who was responsible for the whole commemoration (Labus Bačić 2019a; 2019b). His discourse did not change in the daily newspaper of Trieste (Il Piccolo 2019b). This non-stigmatization of Dipiazza by Obersnel can be interpreted as a way of preserving appearances for the two interacting mayors. They worked in the same cross-border topological space of para-diplomacy including the Adriatic ports of Rijeka and Trieste, and aimed to be better connected to the world economy re-organized by China (Stamatović et al. 2020).

The ambivalent mourning of the fallen under a totalitarian regime: Victimization and cancellation across borders

A key commemoration supposed to secure the rapprochement of Italy and Slovenia was planned on 13 June 2020 by the two states. This date corresponds to the one hundred years anniversary of Italian fascists setting on fire the Narodni Dom, a building serving as the headquarters of Slovenian organizations in Trieste. Different events took place in the presence of the Italian and Slovenian presidents; respectively, Sergio Mattarella and Borut Pahor. The image retained from that day is that of two heads of state joining hands (as did President Mitterrand and Chancellor Kohl in Verdun in 1984) successively in front of two places of remembrance in Basovizza (Commune of Trieste) dedicated to the fallen of the borderland region due to Italian fascism and Tito's partisans. First, the Foiba of Basovizza, the Italian national monument where on 10 February every year, the people killed in the advance of Tito's partisans and the Istrian-Dalmatian exodus are commemorated. Second, the Slovenian memorial to the TIGR (Trst, Istra, Gorica, Reka) fighters, where four men belonging to this armed organization are buried. They were condemned by a special tribunal of the Italian fascist state and shot in Basovizza on 6 September 1930, a date chosen each year to mourn the fallen. The emotionally charged joining of hands in the two places of memories was followed by two other key events. First, the signing of a protocol concerning the restitution of the Narodni Dom to the Slovenian minority of Trieste. Second, the decoration of a Trieste-born Slovenian novelist, the 107-year-old Boris Pahor. Pahor wrote about the suffering of

Slovenians under Italian fascism, could have seen d'Annunzio heading to Fiume, saw as a boy the burning of the Narodni Dom by Italian fascists, was enrolled in the Italian fascist army, joined the Slovenian resistance, was sent to a concentration camp and rejected Tito's socialism.

One can see this commemoration as showing the ability of the Italian and Slovenian states, as well as the present mayor of Dipiazza, to have a shared and combined condemnation of violence on the part of every autocratic regime in the Giulian-Istrian-Dalmatian borderland region. However, the narratives also show a collective inability to name and shame the respective past fascist or socialist autocracy. The official declarations of presidents Mattarella and Pahor on 13 June 2020 never once mentioned Italian fascism, Tito's partisans or his subsequent socialist regime (Presidenzia della Repubblica 2020a). The communication on the website of President Pahor, reformulated afterwards, shows his partial interpretation of the past. Pahor cancelled the actions of Tito's partisans in the area by not *qualifying* what the Italian Foiba of Basovizza is about, but *nominating* the TIGR's memorial as a "monument to the Bazovizza heroes, victims of fascism", and by making reference to the Narodni Dom burned by "Italian fascists" (President of the Republic of Slovenia 2020). The inability of the two presidencies to overcome this difficult autocratic and violent past is symbolized by the ending of the commemoration. President Pahor left Trieste before President Mattarella met the representatives of Italian exiles in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia autonomous regional council whose president was against the Italian-Slovenian joint commemoration including a respect paid to the Slovenian fighters (Massimiliano Fedriga of the RRWP Lega party). Mattarella mentioned the need not to "cancel" the past in front of these associations. He also insisted on the importance of independent and serious research. The investigation of the past should be done by qualified scholars and not by governments according to him. His message targeted indirectly governing RRWP parties eager to re-elaborate the fascist past even if Mattarella pointed at himself when he mentioned the plural "governments". However, Mattarella made no reference to fascism, let alone frontier fascism, as a political and cultural context characterizing the region where exiles used to live before the advance of Tito's partisans. It was cancelled in the discourse of a president pointing the need not to cancel the past (Presidenzia della Repubblica 2020b). Mattarella was constrained by the absence of "defascisation" in Italy after WWII, three decades of positive re-elaboration of Italian fascism facilitated by Berlusconi, a post-fascist party at the gates of nation-state executive power (Fratelli d'Italia) and the co-presence of exiles representatives who had lost everything in the autocratic Europe of the 20th century. Some of these representatives or their families might be/have been even fascist sympathisers. It was actually the case of the co-present Italian foreign affairs minister and strong man of the current government, Luigi di Maio, whose father and elder brother are active in neo/post-fascist politics in the region of Naples (Horowitz 2018).

The attitude of Dipiazza in this context of mourning was not without risk with regard to maintaining control over his RRWP coalition, including Lega and Fratelli d'Italia, during the subsequent city election. His ambivalence was multi-faceted and determined by a multi-layered context (Reisigl 2018; Reisigl and Wodak 2017). He attended the two presidents' commemorative events and reflected on them, with a somewhat constant cancellation of Italian fascist responsibility in the events commemorated, such as Mattarella, but also with an

evolving victimization discourse. Dipiazza did not always have the same narratives, nor supported the same actions, depending on the individuals and communities he wanted to gain the support of, as well as the relational space in which his words were circulated. His discourse was determined by the co-presence of social actors expecting a certain type of narratives from his part. He only referred to the Italian Foiba of Basovizza in front of a local Italian journalist and in co-presence of Massimiliano Fedriga, the regional Lega leader. The discourse of Dipiazza targeted his Trieste electorate and his political populist right allies who were opposed to the mourning of TIGR fighters hence the invisibility of the commemoration dedicated to the Slovenian men ("Today we came with President Pahor to the foiba of Basovizza, and honestly I think that step by step we are burying the twentieth century's dramas") (Telequattro 2020). The following year, directly addressing President Pahor in a formal diplomatic speech when the president came back to Trieste, Dipiazza merged the two memorials (Foiba and the TIGR monument) by *nominating* one location (Basovizza) with marked emotion ("That day in Basovizza, [...] we shared the complicated history of these lands. When you joined hands, I got emotional and shed a tear") (Comune di Trieste 2021). Dipiazza also went to the TIGR memorial on 6 September 2020, showing his willingness to continue, at his level, the Italian-Slovenian states' reconciliation across cultural and political borders. However, the marked aspect of the speech published in the local press was not a reference to President Pahor's *nomination* of the four men (Slovenian heroes, victims of fascism). The executed TIGR men fighting against the Italian fascist state and frontier fascism were *nominated* in two ways. First, by what they were not (They were not "terrorists"). Second, by what they were, but with no reference to the historical context and with intimate terms generating cross-national emotions and support in the public (They were "sons of mummies and daddies") (Goriup 2020).

Dipiazza was also favourable concerning the restitution of the Narodni Dom to the Slovenian minority of Trieste (in contrast to Fratelli d'Italia and the other populist parties in his coalition). The Narodni Dom is recognized not only by President Pahor, but also historians, as a building burned by Italian fascists. However, the Trieste city council, controlled by Dipiazza, also gave its support to a conference organized by a foundation with an Italian ex-neo-fascist MSI parliamentarian as its leader (Renzo de' Vidovich), in which the burning of the building was presented as the responsibility of "Yugoslavian terrorists" (Tomasin 2020). The term "terrorist" was also used to *label* the four mourned TIGR fighters by Claudio Giacomelli (Fratelli d'Italia), an ally of Dipiazza in the city council. It showed the intertextual level of the discursive context (Reisigl 2018; Reisigl and Wodak 2017). Giacomelli went against the 6 September 2020 commemoration of the Slovenian fallens involving the mayor of Trieste, during which he said they were not "terrorists". By calling them terrorists, Giacomelli did not simply *label* the executed Slovenians negatively, but suggested that they were men putting at risk the Italian state, which was fascist in those days. The representative of Fratelli d'Italia in Trieste also revealed the cohesive identity of the post-fascist political group at the multiple scales of bordered Italian politics in the rejection of such a commemoration (Sondel-Cedarmas 2022). Meloni herself had *nominated* the four TIGR fighters as "terrorists" a few months beforehand, when Mattarella and Pahor came and mourned the Slovenian fallen (Il Piccolo 2020). Giacomelli's *predication* of the attitude of Dipiazza during the remembrance of these four men on 6 September 2020 is not exactly what would be expected of a political ally ("I

think it's fair to acknowledge that, from the post-war period to the present, Dipiazza is the mayor who has worked the hardest to reopen the wounds of the twentieth century") (Goriup 2020). However, it also shows the struggles in the bordered representative democratic space of Italy and the executive control of Trieste. In the same discourse, Giacomelli contested the legitimacy of Dipiazza to be the leader of the centre right in the 2021 city election (Goriup 2020). Nevertheless, Dipiazza was saved by d'Annunzio. Before the election, Meloni came to Trieste, sat on the bench by the statue of the poet-soldier and endorsed Dipiazza, who would subsequently be re-elected (Piccolo 2021b).

Conclusion: *Credere, obbedire, combattere* for a re-elaborated frontier fascism

The 2019–2020 commemorations held in Trieste and involving its mayor are not the first that have led to antagonism around the interpretation of a difficult twentieth-century past in this part of Europe. In the early 2000s, Dipiazza gave the city cultural portfolio to a post-fascist politician, Roberto Menia, a man known to have a nostalgia for fascist Italy and favouring the return of Italians to Istria. As a result, Menia became in charge of the commission managing the Trieste-based, Risiera di San Sabba Nazi concentration camp, where Jews, Slavic people and anti-fascist Italians were killed or transferred to Auschwitz. Dipiazza then associated the martyrs of the Risiera with those of the foibe (remembered in Basovizza) during a commemoration organised at the Risiera; a decision indirectly implying an equivalence between Nazi and Yugoslav violence (Gruber 2002; Purvis and Atkinson 2009). These past and more recent controversies did not prevent Dipiazza from both being re-elected many times over the past two decades and being included among the public decision-makers associated with the European and global integration of the cross-border Northern Adriatic region.

We cannot understand the ambivalences of Dipiazza in the two relational spaces (the Italian state-bordered territorial space of representative democracy and the international cross-border topological space of para-diplomacy) without paying attention to three parameters instrumental in fixing contexts and discourses. First, the multiplicity of "power geometries" (Massey 1993; 1999). Second, the political hegemonies around which these power relations are organized (Mouffe 2013). Third, the role of places (here, Trieste) as locations where these power geometries and hegemonies are experienced and made material, notably through commemorative events. Dipiazza was not a dominant political leader compared with the Italian and Slovenian presidents (Mattarella and Pahor, respectively) or the Italian national populist right leaders — Berlusconi (still alive at the time), Salvini, and Meloni. He thus structured a chameleonic discourse on a commemorated history, based on what was expected from him in different relational spaces. In these spaces, power geometries were controlled by more dominant stakeholders orientating an interpretation of past events connected to a major hegemony: fascism. Dipiazza neither supported nor openly condemned the past Italian frontier fascist hegemony during the place-based commemorations. However he cautioned and sent ambivalent signals securing the stability of his advantageous positioning in each relational space within and across the nation-state border. Trieste was the exemplifying city, where multiple senses of place were reproduced through commemorations and co-present power-geometries for which fascism is a hegemony

with a different meaning: a heritage to be re-elaborated positively due to a strengthened post-fascist Fratelli d'Italia, or a heritage to be mitigated, cancelled or rejected due to the demand of trans-national co-operation in an integrated and democratic Europe.

The current case study shows that for RRWP stakeholders and their allies, the nation-state border is a physical, as well as symbolic limit that can be discursively hardened, made flexible, or softened, depending on the national and international goals associated with commemorations of a difficult past. It reveals that the chameleonic dimension of the RRWP often mentioned in literature (Taggart, 2017) includes a substantial capacity to rescale the meaningful relational space and to adapt discourse to it, with a view to securing power at home and abroad. Comparative studies will be needed to define a categorization of strategic and ambivalent political attitudes developed by European borderlands political leaders associated with RRWP parties and having to commemorate past events included in the heritage of these parties. This will help to explore the role of culture and public history in helping the normalization of RRWP in border regions (Krzyżanowski et al. 2023). This is all the more important in Central European borderlands, where this localized normalization can lead to many conflictual situations due to shifts of state borders, past ethnic cleansing, the exile of populations, and the multiplication of *Heimaten* during the twentieth century.

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