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# Between violent and non-violent action strategies: A study on extreme-right organizations in Italy and Spain

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Founded in 1963 by two prominent Austrians living in exile – the sociologist Paul F. Lazarsfeld and the economist Oskar Morgenstern – with the financial support from the Ford Foundation, the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, and the City of Vienna, the Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS) is the first institution for postgraduate education and research in economics and the social sciences in Austria. The **Political Science Series** presents research done at the Department of Political Science and aims to share “work in progress” before formal publication. It includes papers by the Department’s teaching and research staff, visiting professors, graduate students, visiting fellows, and invited participants in seminars, workshops, and conferences. As usual, authors bear full responsibility for the content of their contributions.

Das Institut für Höhere Studien (IHS) wurde im Jahr 1963 von zwei prominenten Exilösterreichern – dem Soziologen Paul F. Lazarsfeld und dem Ökonomen Oskar Morgenstern – mit Hilfe der Ford-Stiftung, des Österreichischen Bundesministeriums für Unterricht und der Stadt Wien gegründet und ist somit die erste nachuniversitäre Lehr- und Forschungsstätte für die Sozial- und Wirtschaftswissenschaften in Österreich. Die **Reihe Politikwissenschaft** bietet Einblick in die Forschungsarbeit der Abteilung für Politikwissenschaft und verfolgt das Ziel, abteilungsinterne Diskussionsbeiträge einer breiteren fachinternen Öffentlichkeit zugänglich zu machen. Die inhaltliche Verantwortung für die veröffentlichten Beiträge liegt bei den Autoren und Autorinnen. Gastbeiträge werden als solche gekennzeichnet.

## **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the different forms of action adopted by extreme right organizations (both political parties and non-party groups) in Italy and Spain during their recent mobilization and links them to the environmental conditions and internal organizational factors which might affect them. With particular attention paid to the actors' perceptions of reality, the macro-level factors (such as the favourable or unfavourable political opportunities of the context, the availability of allies in power, the degree of repression by authorities, etc.) as well as the meso-level factors (such as the internal characteristics of extreme right groups and their dynamics) will be explored in order to understand the action strategies of extreme right organizations and their recourse to violence. This paper, drawing on a combination of qualitative and quantitative research techniques, will be based on 20 semi-structured interviews with extreme right representatives of the main right wing organizations in Italy and Spain as well as a protest event analysis of newspapers dating from 2005 to 2009.

## **Keywords**

Extreme right, political parties, social movements, action strategies, Italy, Spain

**General note on content**

The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and not necessarily those of the IHS.



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## I. Introduction

Collective actors can rely on a broad range of tactics, aimed at expressing their claims and influencing decision-makers or public opinion. Such action strategies (conventional and unconventional) can differ greatly either in the logic that drives them and/or in the degree of radicalism they imply (della Porta, Diani 2006, p. 165).

Since the mid-1990s many Western European democracies have seen a resurgence of right wing extremism: waves of protest and political campaigns initiated by extreme right parties, extra parliamentary organizations, and single activists. Immigration policies, the adhesion to the Euro, unemployment and social and economic policies, all came under sharp criticism from the right spectrum of political forces (see Mudde, 2007). Italy and Spain are not exceptions. Extreme right mobilization is, however, not limited to the institutional political arena but, as reported with growing concern by government investigations<sup>1</sup>, it can take different forms, including violence.

Despite the recently growing scientific interest in (and social relevance of) the extreme right, empirical studies on the strategic action choices of these groups are still scarce. On the one hand, research on right wing extremism has mainly developed within electoral studies and focused on extreme right political parties and electoral behavior (e.g. Carter, 2005; Norris, 2005), with little consideration of non-party organizations (della Porta 2012). On the other hand, when focusing on right wing political violence, analyses tended to follow 'breakdown' theories, detecting macro historical trends towards declining/arising violent forms (as irrational responses in times of system's crisis); while social movement approaches, more attentive to actor's intentionality in action choices, have been used to analyze mainly left-wing radicalism (della Porta, 2008) (for exceptions, Koopmans et al. 2005; Caiani et al. 2012). In addition, despite the large volume of research (e.g. in terrorism studies) analyzing 'when' and 'why' collective actors use violence (for a review, Borum, 2004), the attention to right-wing extremism is rarer.

In this article, focusing on different types of extreme right organizations in Italy and Spain (political parties, political movements and subcultural youth groups)<sup>2</sup> and using a

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance the Europol's TE-SAT Report 2010: (<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/TE-SAT%202010.pdf>) or the annual country monitoring reports by the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance of the Council of Europe ([http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/activities/countrybycountry\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/activities/countrybycountry_en.asp))

<sup>2</sup> In the literature, Mudde has found 26 different ways of defining the extreme right. Some scholars (e.g. Carter, 2005) define right-wing extremism using two criteria: anti-constitutionalism and anti-democratic values (this is the reason it is called extremist), and a rejection of the principle of fundamental human equality (this is the reason it is called right wing). Others (e.g. Norris, 2005) prefer the label radical right in order to describe those political parties and non-party organizations that are located toward one pole on the standard ideological left-right scale. Despite the still open debate on conceptual definition and terminology (which is beyond the scope of this article to address in detail), we use, interchangeably, the term extreme/radical right to refer to those groups that exhibit in their common ideological cores the characteristics of nationalism, xenophobia (ethno-nationalist xenophobia), antiestablishment critiques and socio-cultural authoritarianism (law and order, family values) (Mudde 2007).

combination of quantitative and qualitative data, we will investigate the strategies of action by these organizations and the factors which might affect them. We are indeed interested in 'what produces a shift towards more brutal forms of action, namely the escalation of conflict strategies' (della Porta 2005, p. 4), conceived as 'increases in severity of coercive inducement used and increases in the scope of participants within a conflict' (ibid.). From a theoretical point of view, we build on (and try to combine) hypotheses developed in social movement and political violence & terrorism research, two fields having scarce communication with each other (della Porta, 2008). On the one hand, social movement scholars suggest studying the development of radical strategies by looking at the broader 'repertoire of action' used by collective actors, which can vary according to open/closed contextual (political and cultural) circumstances and 'protest cycles' (Tarrow, 1989). On the other hand, the literature on extremism and political violence has highlighted specific macro and micro/meso-level factors which can favour it, although a common agreement on the main causes is still lacking. There are those which emphasize, at an individual level, the role of psychological characteristics of extremists and their values and motivations (e.g. Richardson, 2006; Horgan, 2005); those who focus, at a systemic level, on the environmental conditions and on the social and political contexts that influence actors' strategic choices (e.g. Gurr, 2005 and Paz, 2004); and finally, those explanations, at a meso-level, insisting on organizations as entrepreneurs of violence and organizational dynamics (e.g. Goodwin, 2006; della Porta, 1995). With specific reference to right wing extremism, economic and social crises are mentioned (Prowe, 2004), as well as political instability, allies in power (Koopmans 2005), the legacy of an authoritarian past (Chirumbolo, 1996), youth sub-cultures and hooliganism (Bjorgo, 1995) and the diffusion of xenophobic values within the society (Rydgren, 2005); whereas it is controversial whether social support for radical groups decreases or incentivizes violence (Sageman, 2004). These factors are generally analyzed in isolation and there are few attempts to integrate them in a comprehensive and dynamic interpretation of political radicalism, taking into account the context of both external and internal (group) factors (for exceptions, della Porta, 1995, Crenshaw, 1995). This is what we will try to do in this article.

Drawing on data from semi-structured interviews with representatives of Italian and Spanish extreme right organizations and on a protest event analysis of their recent mobilization (2005-2009), we shall look at the strategic action choices of the extreme right, linking them to a multi-level theoretical framework considering both the organizational characteristics and circumstances. In particular, regarding the macro-level factors, we will refer to the favourable or vice versa unfavourable 'political opportunities'<sup>3</sup> available for the extreme right in the two countries (in terms of legal constraints and authorities' repression, degree of political legitimation and social support, etc.), which, according to social movement literature, can greatly influence the mobilization and the forms it takes (Tarrow, 1989; Mc Adam et. al.

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<sup>3</sup> According to Kitschelt (1986, p. 58) 'political opportunity structures are comprised of specific configuration of resources, institutional arrangements and historical precedents for social mobilization, which facilitate the development of protest movements in some instances and constrain them in others'.

2001). More specifically, with regard to violence, the importance of the so-called 'policing of protest'— i.e. the way authorities manage collective action (della Porta, 1995, p. 55) — will be underlined. Indeed, rigid legal constraints and state coercion are considered key factors for the contenders' escalation into violence (della Porta, 1995; della Porta and Reiter, 1998). However, in our study, in line with the recent 'cultural turn' in sociology, which criticizes the instrumental and interest-based biases of resource mobilization and political opportunity approaches (Goodwin et al 2001, 2004; Jasper 2004), we emphasize the actors' symbolic construction of reality, giving particular attention to the perception that extreme right groups have of the context of external opportunities and (internal) resources in which they mobilize.

We indeed assume that action choices are not necessarily tied to utilitarian calculations, but instead are affected by emotions and other cognitive and normative aspects (Goodwin and Jasper, 1999, p. 29; della Porta, 2011, pp. 7-12) related to the collective actors' internal and external reality. Accordingly, in this article, we shall expect that extreme right organizations tend to mobilize more radically when they deal with a (perceived) closed context (i.e. stricter legal constraints and repression by the authorities, lack of institutional recognition etc.). Conversely, we hypothesize that more moderate action strategies will be found where groups perceive an opener context of political opportunities.

As for meso-level factors, taking into account the role played by the resources which collective actors can mobilize (McCarthy and Zald, 1977), we will look at some organizational characteristics of the right wing groups (i.e. the degree of internal pluralism, the barriers to group' access, the rigidity of internal discipline, etc.) that we consider to influence, either directly or indirectly, their mobilization and action strategies. We indeed assume that organizational and contextual factors are mutually related and that organizational characteristics might influence the way reality is interpreted, therefore affecting the actors' assessment of opportunity and constraints and, in turn, their action forms (Meyer et al., 2002, pp.126-136). Therefore, we expect that organizations 'more closed' toward the outside (i.e. characterized by low internal pluralism and high levels of selectivity), as well as ruled by a rigid discipline, are more likely to adopt a more radical behaviour, since the 'in-group thinking' favours violent radicalization (della Porta, 1995, p. 84). To the contrary, we expect that organizations that are more internally diversified, flexible and democratic, will tend to recur less frequently to violence<sup>4</sup>. Beyond this, however, we also expect to find some differences in the strategic choices of different types of extreme right organizations. In particular, more institutionalized organizations (such as political parties) keen to use conventional actions along with less formal groups (such as youth sub-cultural organizations and political movements) are more likely to resort to violence.

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<sup>4</sup> More specifically, a strict(er) internal discipline might favour the adoption of a more radical behaviour by allowing for an higher degree of control of the organizations over their members and by heightening the so-called 'need for group bonding and belonging', a key element of violent radicalization (Pressman, 2009, p. 21).

## II. Methods and Sources

Our analysis is based on 20 semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives (i.e. leaders, spokespersons) of different types of extreme right organizations (political parties, political movements and sub-cultural youth and skinhead groups) in Spain and Italy<sup>5</sup>. Our sampling strategy, is based on sources of different kinds (academic literature, electoral data, reports from democratic observatories) and we have identified about 3-4 of the most important organizations for each category per country. For the Italian case, regarding political parties, we selected three organizations that are commonly associated with the far right<sup>6</sup>: the Movimento Sociale Fiamma Tricolore (direct heir of the post-fascist party MSI, created in 1995 by the most radical members refusing to converge into the new and more moderate Alleanza Nazionale), La Destra di Storace (born in 2007 by the split of the right-wing Alleanza Nazionale, considered by the party as too 'centrist' and moderate) and the Fronte Sociale Nazionale ('Lepenist' formation, faithful to the doctrine of fascist corporatism and socialization). As for political movements, we included some groups active between the institutional and societal arenas: Area Destra, Nuova Destra Sociale and the Movimento Nazionale Popolare (all part of the so-called 'social right', inspired by the fascist doctrine of the 'third way' between capitalism and communism) and the movement Fascismo e Libertà, close to historical fascism. With regard to sub-cultural groups, we selected the youth group Patria Nostra (a neo-fascist formation), the more moderate Gioventù Italiana, Casapound (set up in 2003 as a 'squatted' right-wing social center), Lotta Studentesca (a student movement close to the radical party Forza Nuova) and the Veneto Fronte Skinhead (the most relevant and violent skinhead organization in Italy, EUMC 2004)

In the Spanish case, regarding political parties, we selected the current most relevant organizations related to the nostalgic phalangist area (Falange Española, Falange Auténtica and Falange de las JONS), plus more recent formations, such as the 'ultra-rightist' España 2000 (born in 2002) and Frente Nacional Español (born in 2006), both belonging to the populist 'new right' (Romero 2007). With respect to Spanish political movements and subcultural groups we selected some important nostalgic phalangist organizations such as the association Hermandad de la Vieja Guardia, Foro Social Manuel Mateo, and the student association Sindicato Universitario Español.

The semi-structured questionnaire<sup>7</sup> focused on several aspects related to extreme right mobilization: the strategies of action, the internal organizational characteristics (e.g. size, leadership style, internal discipline), and the relationship between the group and its social

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<sup>5</sup> The interviews were held between October 2010 and February 2011, and conducted face to face. The length of the interviews varied between fifty minutes to one hour and a half. Despite initial difficulties in establishing the first preliminary contacts, the response rate was about 30% in both countries.

<sup>6</sup> As for the Italian case, we have intentionally excluded two political parties, the Northern League (LN) and National Alliance (AN), whose belonging to the extreme right party family is still under scholarly debate (see Mudde 2007: 56)

<sup>7</sup> Available from the authors upon request.

and political environment (i.e. friends' and 'foes'), including its norms and orientations toward the society and the political system (e.g. on political elites, democracy, immigration).

Interview data are integrated, by means of a common research design, with a protest event analysis of the recent mobilization of these and other extreme right groups in Italy and Spain (from 2005 to 2009), based on press articles (two quality national newspapers have been selected: *La Repubblica* for Italy and *El Pais* for Spain)<sup>8</sup>. We have coded all collective events initiated by an identified extreme right organization as well as events attributed to extreme right sympathizers<sup>9</sup>. In regard to the definitional criteria, two aspects are important. The first concerns the range of forms of extreme right actions: since we are interested in all forms of mobilization by the extreme right, the spectrum of the 'events' coded goes from heavy forms of (physical) violence (against property or people, such as bombings, arson and shooting), to forms of verbal violence (such as nazi/racial graffiti or verbal abuse), as well as to forms of legal and non-violent actions (such as demonstrations and press conferences). The only actions we did not take into account were those taking place within the parliamentary arena. Secondly, as to the thematic focus of the covered events: our data include all acts performed by the extreme right, related to any type of issue field (from immigration, to political life, to economics) and any type of target group (such as political adversaries, homosexuals and homeless people, the extreme right itself, etc.). The protest event analysis (for details see Koopmans and Rucht, 2002), allowed us to detect and quantify several properties of each mobilization event initiated by extreme right actors, such as its frequency, timing, duration, location, claims, size, carriers and targets, as well as action form. In total 485 events were identified and coded.

Adopting a comparative approach, we focus on the extreme right in Spain and Italy, two countries that, in spite of the common authoritarian fascist past, show some differences in the political and cultural opportunities potentially relevant for the mobilization of extreme right organizations. In contrast to other European countries (e.g. France), the extreme right parties in both Italy and Spain, recorded only modest electoral results in the last years (Norris, 2005), obtaining therefore few channels of institutional access to the political system<sup>10</sup>. However, as for 'allies' in power, during the period of our studies, the Italian extreme right could have benefited from the presence of two center-right governments

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<sup>8</sup> It is commonly shared that multiplying the sources of the protest event analysis (e.g., relying on both media and judiciary sources, more newspapers of different political orientations for each country, etc.) is preferable in order to reduce the possible bias. However considerations of costs and time have determined our methodological choices. For instance, several studies have shown that taking two newspapers instead of one in general duplicate the coding time, without however increasing 'the amount of events obtained by adding a second source'. The combination of two newspapers for example (e.g. of different ideological orientation) offer only one fourth of events more than each source individually (Koopmans and Rucht, 2002, 238).

<sup>9</sup> In order to be coded actions/events must be 'collective', in the sense that they relate to collective social problems and solutions to them, and not to purely individual strategies of coping with problems.

<sup>10</sup> Given their scarce electoral performances (always beyond the 3% of total vote), between 2000 and 2009, no extreme right formation could obtain any seats in the national parliaments in Italy or in Spain (data of the Italian a Spanish Ministries of Interiors, [www.interno.it](http://www.interno.it) and [www.mir.es](http://www.mir.es)).

(Government 'Berlusconi III', from April 2005 to May 2006 and 'Berlusconi IV, from May 2008 to November 2011). To the contrary, in Spain, where the extreme right has always received scarce support from the mainstream center-right parties (Casals, 2001), a hostile center-Left ruled uninterruptedly. Moreover, from a cultural and social point of view, according to many observers, the more recent (and more lasting) experience of the authoritarian fascist regime in Spain has provoked a stigmatization (or even 'repulsion', Ellwood, 1992, p. 381) of the extreme right; whereas in Italy during the last 10-15 years, the extreme right has 'gradually become "normal" (...), more tolerated than before' (Padovani 2008, 754). In addition, a cultural backwardness is observed in the Spanish extreme right, which has not been able to renew itself through the acquisition of the so-called New Right values and has ended up fragmented and completely detached from society (Rodríguez 2006). Nevertheless, the two countries are similar in terms of (scarce and rarely rigid) laws against extreme right groups<sup>11</sup> (Wetzel, 2009, pp. 265-67) and a diffused mistrust in representative institutions (Raxen 2009<sup>12</sup> on Spain; EUMC, 2004, p. 17 on Italy), factors that can be exploited by the extreme right mobilization.

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<sup>11</sup> In Italy, the 'Scelba Law' (Law 645/1952) condemns the reorganization of the dissolved Fascist party and the apology of fascism; Moreover, the Italian 'Mancino Law' (Law 205/2993) and the Spanish Criminal Code (art. 22-4) condemn discriminatory behaviour on the basis of ideology, religion, ethnicity, race and nationality as well as incitement to hatred and violence.

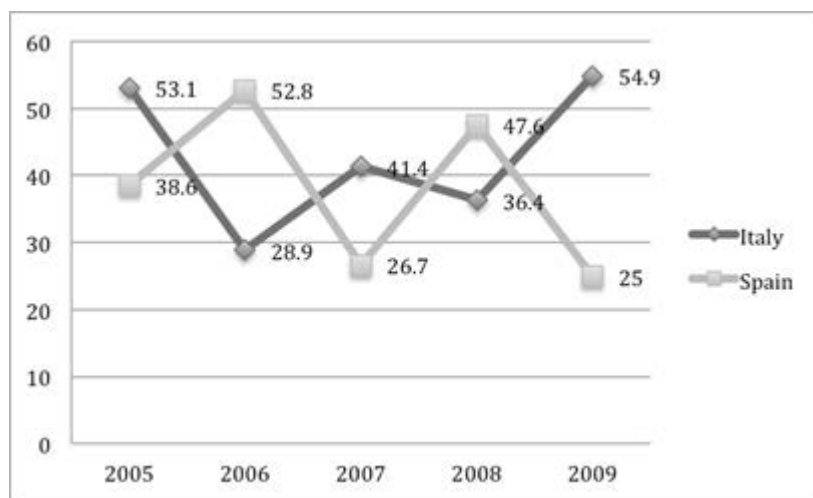
<sup>12</sup> Informe Raxen 2009, 'Violencia Neonazi y Crimines de Odio': [www.movimientocontralaintolerancia.com](http://www.movimientocontralaintolerancia.com)



### III. Violent or moderated? How the action strategies of the extreme right change in time and space

What is the action repertoire that characterizes the political mobilization of the extreme right in Italy and Spain? How are the cycles between violence and more moderated action forms related to specific time(s) and contexts? Our data from the protest event analysis indicate that, in both countries, the level of violence fluctuated significantly in the last five years and does not present any linear trend (Fig.1).

**Figure 1:** Violent actions by extreme right organizations in Italy and Spain (2005-2009) (%).



Source: our data from protest events

Examining the intensity of radicalism (i.e. the percentage of violent actions on the total of actions registered) of right wing mobilization in Italy and Spain between 2005 and 2009, of the 485 total actions initiated by these groups (respectively, 338 in Italy and 147 in Spain), almost half of them were violent (41.9%). These actions range from acts of 'light' violence against people or things (such as insults, threats to social, religious or ethnic minorities<sup>13</sup>, graffiti or slogans in praise of fascism and Nazism<sup>14</sup> and desecration of Jewish cemeteries<sup>15</sup>) to acts of 'heavy' violence, such as assaults against left-wing activists, homosexuals and immigrants<sup>16</sup>, even including bomb attacks against political opponents (e.g. offices of trade

<sup>13</sup> E.g. racist slogans and Celtic crosses drawn on the walls of the Chinese quarter in Milano (La Repubblica, 15 April 2007).

<sup>14</sup> E.g. in Italy, street rallies of extreme right groups chanting slogans in favour of the 'Duce' or Nazi mottos (La Repubblica, 1 May 2006).

<sup>15</sup> E.g. Swastikas, Celtic crosses and Nazi slogans painted in the Jewish quarter in Rome (La Repubblica, 12 July 2006).

<sup>16</sup> E.g. Violent attacks by Nazi groups against young antifascists in Spain (El Pais, 9 January 2009) and against representatives of left-wing parties and antifascist militants in Italy (La Repubblica 14 and 27 January 2007, 6 February 2007); threats, intimidations and assaults against homosexuals (La Repubblica, 01 and 25 February 2007).

unions, squatted social centres, left-wing parties or leftist newspapers)<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, in a comparison between the two countries, the cycles of violence and moderate actions seem to culminate in more recent years (2008-2009) with a de-escalation in the action repertoire of extreme right groups in Spain and in an escalation of violence in Italy.

These findings are also in line with those resulting from the interviews. In order to detect the degree of radicalism of the extreme right, we asked the representatives of the organizations to indicate (on a list of 27 forms of action) what types of actions the group resorts to and how frequently (if 'regularly' or 'occasionally'). We classified the strategies of actions which emerged in 5 broader categories according to their degree of radicalism, namely: conventional, demonstrative, expressive, confrontational, and violent (Tarrow, 1989; Gentile, 1999)<sup>18</sup>. The indexes, built for each of the five strategies, take into account both the scope of the repertoire of action used (by counting the number of activities used by the actor) and its intensity (by weighing regular activities twice as much as occasional ones)<sup>19</sup>. Finally, assigning increasing weights to each of the five indexes (1, 2, 3, 4, 5) a single additive index of 'degree of radicalism' of action was computed, ranging from 0 (minimum level of radicalism) to 15 (the maximum level).

Looking at the action strategies of the extreme right according to the words of the protagonists (Fig. 2), we see that overall the degree of radicalism is lower in Spain than in Italy (with a value of 5.90 vs. 8.03). Indeed, as the figures show, Spanish extreme right organizations rely less frequently on the most radical forms of action (either confrontational or violent), mostly mobilizing using demonstrative and expressive actions (such as commemorative and honouring marches). In this regard, the representative of España 2000 denies any violent behaviour in general on the part of his organization ('in any event'), stressing that his party 'tries not to do anything that might be illegal' (Int. 17). Likewise, the representative of Frente Nacional Español is keen to make clear that 'if clashes (e.g. violent clashes) occur they are always in self-defence (...) against 'the aggressions by the extreme-left'. When asked about the occurrence of violent confrontations with the police, he assesses that his party is not usually involved in these kind of clashes, as the party provides its own

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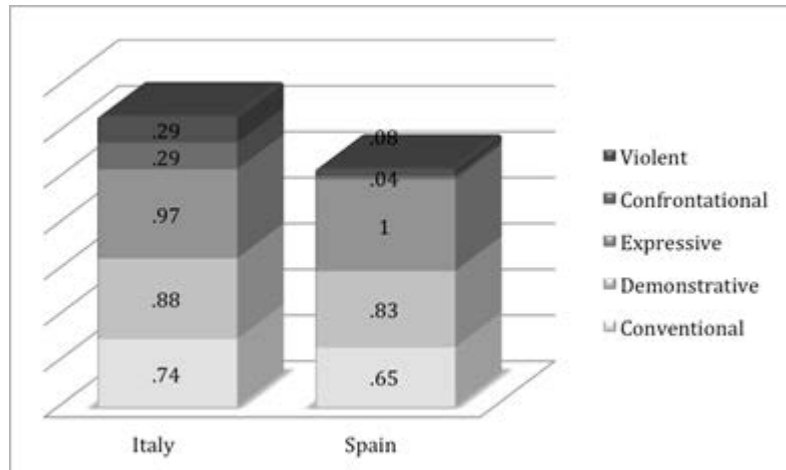
<sup>17</sup> E.g. In Italy, the attacks with Molotov bombs against a squatted centre in Rimini (La Repubblica, 01 March 2006), and against the communist party headquarter in Taranto (01 January 2006); in Spain, the bomb attack against the socialist headquarter in Madrid (El País, 7 April 2006).

<sup>18</sup> The category 'conventional actions' includes those political actions associated with conventional politics (e.g. distributing press releases, organizing electoral campaigns, etc.). The category 'demonstrative' includes actions aiming to mobilize large numbers of people (e.g. petitions, street demonstrations). The category 'expressive' includes actions mainly directed (internally) towards the members of the group, in order to reinforce the in-group cohesion and identity (e.g. commemorations, cultural events, etc.). The category 'confrontational' includes actions which are nonviolent, but usually illegal, whose aim is disrupting official policies or institutions (e.g. blockades, occupations etc.). The category 'violent actions' includes those events which imply some form of physical violence (e.g. violent clashes with political adversaries or the police etc.).

<sup>19</sup> Each index was standardized to the 0 to 1 range by dividing the resulting score by the maximum possible value. For example a value of 'zero' (e.g. on the 'violent actions' category) means that the given organization does not utilize any of the action forms which are included in the specific repertoire of action; a value of '1' means that the organization uses the entire range of actions which belong to the given action strategy and it does that 'regularly'.

security for political events 'which ensures that if there are internal provocateurs (...), they are immediately expelled' (Int. 15).

**Figure 2:** Action forms of extreme right organizations in Italy and Spain (mean values).



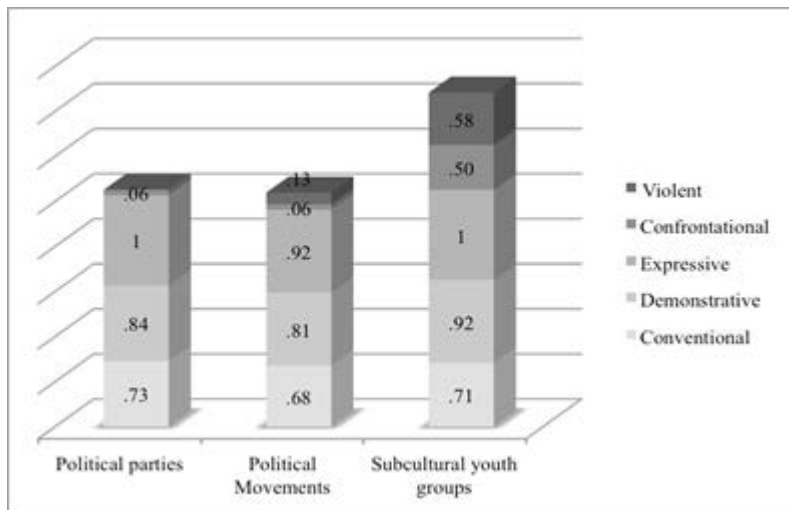
Source: our data from interviews

Moreover, the level of radicalism varies according to the type of extreme right group at stake. Both the interviews and the protest event<sup>20</sup> data stress that, similarly in Italy and Spain, the most moderated groups are political parties and movements, whereas sub-cultural youth and neo-Nazi groups emerge as the most violent<sup>21</sup> in their mobilization. In particular, as Figure 3 shows, even according to the viewpoint of the protagonists, the organizations that recur more frequently to the most radical forms of action (namely confrontational and violent) are subcultural youth groups, whereas political movements and political parties less frequently use violent forms of action. This is in line with our hypothesis, suggesting that a higher degree of institutionalization of the group can discourage the use of violence.

<sup>20</sup> According the protest event data, the relationship between the type of organization and the degree of radicalism (% of violent actions on the total events coded) appears to be strong and significant (Cramer  $V$  0.50\*\*\* Italy; .60\*\*\* Spain).

<sup>21</sup> Accounting for a score on the index of radicalism of 10.5 vs. 5.7 for political parties and movements respectively.

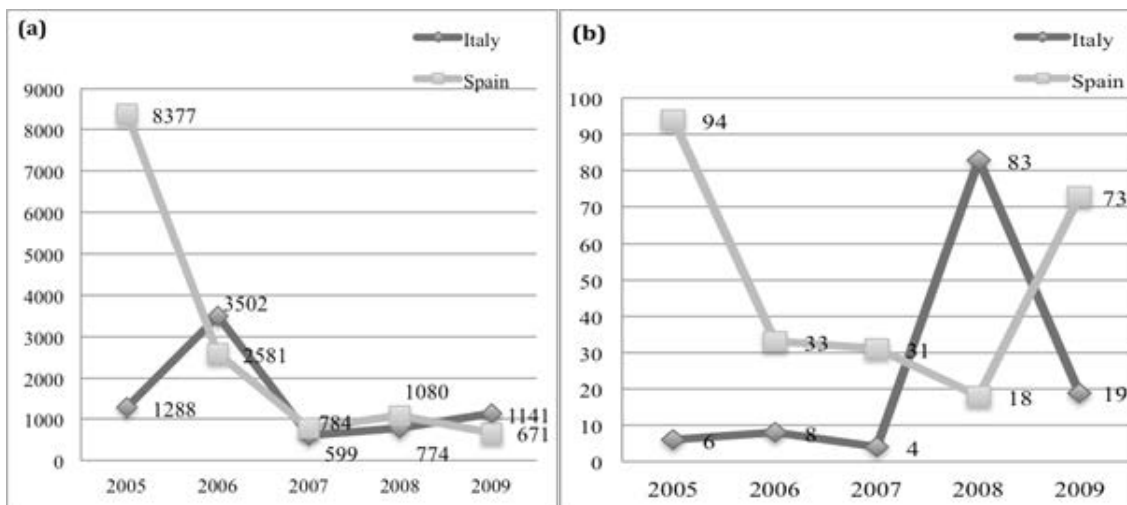
**Figure 3:** Action forms of extreme right organizations by type of organization (mean values).



Source: our data from interviews

Besides the number of violent actions, an additional indicator of the degree of radicalism is the number of participants (as well as the number of injured, arrested, stopped or denounced) in extreme right mobilization events. According to our data, the size of the events organized by the extreme right in Italy and Spain varies considerably (Fig. 4a), from thousands of participants to only a few activists. However, in both countries about one third of the events involved a limited (or very limited) number of participants (not more than 5-6 on average), confirming that most extreme right supporters engage in violent actions individually and not on behalf of any specific organization (TESAT, 2009).

**Figure 4:** (a) Number of participants and (b) arrested/denounced/stopped people in extreme right mobilization events in Italy and Spain (2005-09) (absolute values).



Source: our data from newspaper articles

Even the number of injured people in events organized by the extreme right is quite high, confirming an increase over time of radicalism in Italy (over 12 wounded in 2005 to about 21-22, on average, in subsequent years) and a decrease in Spain (from 17 injuries in 2005 to 14 in 2006 to about 5-8 in the following years). A rather different picture emerges when looking at the number of persons arrested, stopped or denounced during the events of the far right: 120 instances in Italy and more than double that (249) in Spain (Fig. 4b).

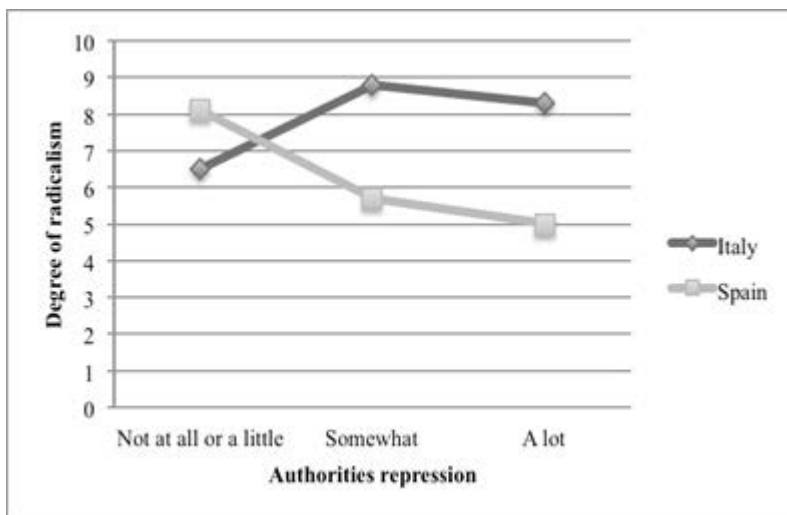
Considering these cycles between radical and moderate actions, what is the impact of the organizational and contextual factors on the strategic choices of the right wing groups? This is the question which we will attempt to answer in the next section.

#### IV. Extreme right and violence: between contextual opportunities and organizational factors

As mentioned in the introduction, social-movement scholars argue that the size, forms and content of extreme right action are influenced by the political-institutional and cultural-discursive opportunities, being more radical when they are closed (Koopmans et al., 2005). However, from a constructivist perspective, the impact of these factors strictly depends on 'the cultural interpretation, regardless of objective opportunities' (Goodwin and Jasper, 1999, p. 33). Indeed, 'there may be no such thing as objective political opportunities before or beneath interpretation – or at least none that matter; they are all interpreted through cultural filters' (Ibid.). Accordingly, one question must be posed: how are the opportunities (and constraints) offered to the extreme right mobilization, in both the Italian and Spanish contexts, perceived by these actors? And how does this influence their strategic action choices?

We asked the interviewees to evaluate the level of authorities' repression toward their groups in their respective countries as well as to express a judgment on the strictness of the legal provisions against the extreme right<sup>22</sup>.

**Figure 5:** Authorities repression and degree of radicalism of the extreme right in Italy and Spain (mean values, index of radicalism).



Source: our data from interviews

Our data show that the relationship between political opportunities and action forms (also) of extreme right organizations follow the expectations, with however, some specifications in the

<sup>22</sup> For both the indicators, the answers (measured on a 0-10 scale, where 0 indicates low strictness of the legal constraints and repression by the authorities) were summarized in three categories according to the following: 'not strict at all or a little' (0-4), 'somewhat' (5-7), 'very much' (8-10).

two countries. In particular, in Spain, when the repressive strategies by authorities are perceived as hard, extreme right organizations tend to opt for moderate forms of action. In Italy, the opposite is true and the groups react by adopting more radical strategies. We can interpret these results by referring to the fact that, as underlined by social movement research, the relationship between 'protest policing' and radicalism of collective action is complex and might be 'curvilinear', leading for example to a de-radicalization of the most moderate fringes of the movements, but, at the same time, fuelling the most radical ones (della Porta, 1995). Indeed, according to our data we also see that a (perceived) extremely high level of repression seems to be more conducive to moderate action forms (Fig. 5). The same trend can be observed with respect to the strictness of legal constraints<sup>23</sup>. In this regard for example, the representative of the Italian Fronte Nazionale depicts the 'Mancino law' as a 'sword of Damocles' (Int. 10). Similarly, the speaker of the subcultural group *Patria Nostra* complains that the legal constraints in the country are too strict, and institutions react to every action of his group 'immediately referring to the Scelba and Mancino laws [...]', so that they are 'forced' to act anyway 'without caring about authorizations' (Int. 3).

Moreover, the impact of repression by the authorities on the action choices of right-wing groups seems to combine with the specificities of the organizational context within which such actions are developed (della Porta, 2005, p. 3). According to our data (data not showed), subcultural youth groups especially tend to react with the adoption of more violent action forms (+5.7 on the index of radicalism)<sup>24</sup> vis-à-vis a hardening of state repression (from 'not at all or a little' to 'somewhat').

In addition to the 'protest policing', we have also looked at other specific factors that can be considered part of the political opportunity structure of right-wing groups and which can influence their action strategies: (i) the degree of legitimacy of the extreme right as political actors in a country and (ii) the sense of political efficacy of the extreme right<sup>25</sup>. It might be expected indeed that when extreme right organizations perceive themselves as excluded from the political system or have a sense of ineffectiveness and stigmatization, this might foster the adoption of radical action strategies (Klandermans and Mayer, 2006).

According to our data, in both countries, at an aggregate level, none of these factors seem to have an impact on the strategic choices of extreme right organizations. However, when

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<sup>23</sup> In the Italian case, the action forms of the extreme right tend to be more violent when legal constraints are perceived as stricter (from 'not at all or a little', to 'somewhat'), while they appear more moderated in the presence of very restrictive legal provisions ('a lot'). The values on the index of radicalism are respectively, 6.9, 8.7, 7.8. In the Spanish case, stricter legal constraints (from 'somewhat' to 'a lot') result in organizations reacting with more moderate action strategies (from 6.6 to 5.6).

<sup>24</sup> In the case of political movements and political parties the increase of action radicalism is, respectively, +1.9 and +5.

<sup>25</sup> In order to investigate these factors, we asked our interviewees 'whether the lack of recognition by the institutional actors is a problem for their organization' and 'whether they feel that they have opportunities to be heard by politicians'. Both indicators were measured on a scale 1-5, where 1 = 'not at all' and 5 = 'a lot'. The answers were re-coded in 3 categories: 'not at all or a little' (values 1-2), 'somewhat' (3), 'a lot' (4-5).

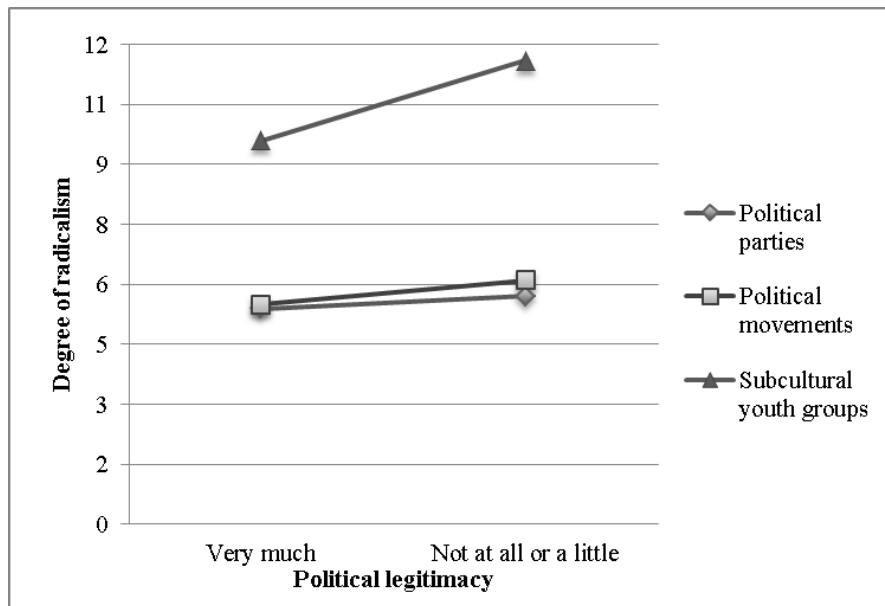
looking at this relationship per type of organization, some specificities do emerge. Especially in the case of subcultural youth organizations, a scarce (sense of) political efficacy and recognition as legitimate political actor in the system is strictly tied to the use of more radical actions. The same closed opportunities to the contrary produce a much smaller reaction (variation in the degree of radicalism) in the action strategies of political movements and political parties (the latter ones not influenced at all by these variables)<sup>26</sup> (Fig. 6). Indeed, as pointed out by the representative of the *Sindicato Español Universitario* ‘the fact of working in the university’ (thus, within an institutional setting) seems to foster the perception of political efficacy of the group by conferring ‘greater possibilities (...) to be heard by politicians’ (Int. 14). Likewise, the representative of the Italian political movement *Area Destra* explains the good relationship with the political institutions by stressing that his movement is extraneous from ‘the culture of extremism’, opting instead for a full ‘political integration’ (Int. 1). Evidently, the organizational characteristics of a group (as in this case the degree of institutionalization) play a role in the relationship between the context and (their) action choices. As underlined for the discourses (i.e. frames) of social movements, that are constrained both by the context and the organizations’ own culture in the range of potentially useful arguments (Snow et al. 1986), it seems that the organizational structure also (e.g. formal vs. informal) poses some limits to the use of different actions. Indeed, the choice of action forms that are too radical might put the survival of the organization (e.g. one political party) under risk. At the same time, it might discourage those members who, having chosen to join more ‘conventional’, institutionalized organizations, might condemn too radical tactics. Conversely, those actors, such as subcultural youth and skinhead groups, that act outside institutional boundaries, dispose of the choice of a broader repertoire of action ranging from the most conventional and moderate forms of action to the most radical, even violent, forms.

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<sup>26</sup> When the institutional recognition is decreasing (from ‘not problematic at all’ to ‘very problematic’) the degree of radicalism increases from 9.6 to 11.6 in the case of subcultural groups; from 5.5 to 6.1 in the case of political movements and from 5.4 to 5.7 in the case of political parties. Moreover, when the level of political efficacy shrinks, the degree of radicalism increases from 8.3 to 11.6 for subcultural groups and from 5.5 to 6.2 for political movements.



**Figure 6:** Political legitimacy and degree of radicalism of the extreme right in Italy and Spain, all countries (mean values, index of radicalism)



Source: our data from interviews

Beyond the political context, social opportunities can also have an influence on the action repertoire. In our research we asked the extreme right organizations to assess the degree of social support they feel they have from society in their respective country<sup>27</sup>. Our data show that, in general, social support appears to affect the degree of radicalism of extreme right groups, with however again some specificities in the two countries. In the Italian case, a perceived low level of social support coincides with a more radical mobilization; conversely, in Spain, social distrust seems to push extreme right movements towards more moderate action strategies. Specifically, when the level of social support diminishes, the mean values on the index of radicalism are respectively: 7.1, 8.6, 9.2 in Italy and 8.1, 5.6, 5.2 in Spain. In this respect, the representative of the Spanish party Falange Autentica explains that the lack of support for their party is mainly due to the system, namely to the 'boycott of the "regime", the media, the courts' being against them (Int. 16). Accordingly, within such an unfavourable context, the adoption of a moderate behaviour and the attempt to align with mainstream politics seems to be the only way to gain more social consensus. In sum, if in some cases, harsh repression and more stringent legal constraints lead to more moderate forms of collective action, in others they may create a widespread sense of injustice (Gamson, Fireman and Rytina, 1982), which encourages more radical practices (Goldstein 1983, p. 340).

<sup>27</sup> The question was: 'What are the main problems for your organization?'. One of the options was 'distrust, diffidence by the people'. The answers were measured on a scale 1-5 where 1 = 'not at all' and 5 = 'very much a problem'. They were then recoded as follows: 1= 'not at all or a little' (values 1-2); 'somewhat' (3) and 'a 'very much' (4-5).

## V. Organizational factors and extreme right violence

Moving from the political and cultural context to organizational factors, which are increasingly considered by research on violence and extremism as significant causes of radicalization (Sageman, 2004, Crenshaw, 2001), we have focused on three aspects particularly relevant for right wing organizations: (i) the degree of the group's internal discipline (measured through an additive index derived from questions relating to members respect of organizational norms and leader decisions)<sup>28</sup>; (ii) the level of selectivity of the group (measured by looking at the selection criteria of the organization for new members)<sup>29</sup>, and, finally, (iii) the degree of pluralism of the organization (measured through a question concerning the 'constituency' addressed by the group)<sup>30</sup>.

Our data show that, in general, the strategic action choices of extreme right organizations are influenced by the degree of internal discipline of the group, whereas the level of the group's selectivity has an impact only in the Italian case. Furthermore, in both countries and in line with our expectations, when the internal discipline of a group is more rigid (from 'somewhat' to 'a lot'), its strategies of action tend to be more radical (passing from 7.9 to 8.1 on the index of radicalism in the Italian case and from 5 to 6.3 in the Spanish case). Moreover, in Italy, those organizations which have more selective criteria for admission in the group (from 'not at all or a little' to 'somewhat' to 'very selective'), are more likely to adopt radical forms of actions (passing from 6.4 to 8.6 to 11.5 on the index). This is also confirmed by the representative of the Italian Nuova Destra Sociale, who defines his party as peaceful and 'very open toward the outside', explaining that their organization does not have 'any particular target in mind', but instead has 'a very soft approach in the selection of new members' (Int. 4). A completely different opinion is demonstrated by the speaker of the subcultural Italian group, Veneto Fronte Skinheads, who emphasizes the importance of 'having highly selected and motivated members' and stresses that his group is 'more interested in passing on a message than having 2000 members' (Int. 12). Contrary to our

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<sup>28</sup> This battery of questions, taken from a study by Stellmacher and Petzel (2005), aims at detecting the degree of conformity to internal norms within a group. Interviewees were asked for an opinion regarding conformity to internal rules, the role of internal dissent etc. (e.g. 'The decisions and directives of the leader - or other directive body - should be respected under all circumstances.'). The answer options were 'true' and 'false'. A value of 1 was assigned to those answers indicating a high degree of internal discipline requested by the organization to its members and a value of 0 to those answers indicating a low degree. Then, an index was computed combining the different answers. It ranged from 1 to 3, indicating a 'low' (value 1), 'medium' (2) and high (3) level of 'internal discipline' required from the organizations' members.

<sup>29</sup> The organizations' representatives were asked about the rules for becoming a member of the organization (open question). Organizations were classified as 'not at all/a little selective' (value 1), when no selection criteria are present; as 'somewhat selective' (2) when some specific criteria are indicated (e.g. exclusion of multiple memberships); and as 'very selective' (value 3) when very restrictive criteria (e.g. the previous screening of each member, probationary period, etc.) are applied.

<sup>30</sup> Interviewees were asked about which social categories their organization addresses (open answer). The answers were recoded as follows: 'high internal pluralism' (value 1), in the case of absence of a specific target group; 'medium' (value 2), when the targets are general categories of people (e.g. 'all those people who do not trust politics'); and 'low pluralism' (value 3) when specific target are indicated (e.g. 'the working class').

expectations, however, those organizations showing low levels of internal pluralism are the least prone to recur to violence<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> The degree of radicalism decreases from 8.6, to 8.2, to 7.2 in the Italian case and from 6.5, to 5.4, to 5.2 in the Spanish case at progressively lower degrees of internal pluralism (from high, to medium, to low degree of pluralism).

## VI. Conclusion

In this article the main differences and similarities in the strategic tactics (including violence) among different types of extreme right organizations in Italy and Spain have been illustrated and linked to their organizational characteristics and political opportunities in the respective contexts.

Despite the limits of the interview sample (i.e. low N) brought about by the difficulties in interviewing 'hidden communities' (Blee 2009), and despite our focus on only one type of extremism, our analysis of the Italian and Spanish extreme right offers some interesting insights which can be considered a small empirical contribution to both social movement studies and research on political violence and extremism. First of all, our results highlight that, as it has been stressed for left-wing social movements (della Porta and Diani, 2006), extreme right organizations are also characterised by multifaceted action strategies and recur to a broad repertoire of action in their mobilization: from conventional actions related to the institutional arena to expressive and demonstrative actions (the 'logic of bearing witness' and 'the logic of numbers' as della Porta and Diani say), aimed at reinforcing the collective identity of the group and at showing its strength to the outside. Violence in particular is a strategy frequently used by these groups in Italy and Spain, as we have seen from the protest event data, however this has not been increasing (hopefully) in recent years. Nevertheless the organizational context in which the mobilization takes place seems to influence the preferred strategies of extreme right organizations, with subcultural youth groups in both countries more prone to use confrontational and violent actions. To the contrary, political parties and movements appeared mainly oriented toward expressive, conventional and demonstrative strategies – confirming that the repertoires of action cannot be regarded as mere instruments for the attainment of a goal (della Porta and Diani, 2006, p. 181).

Secondly, our study has also highlighted that right wing strategic choices do not emerge in a vacuum, but are instead related to specific contextual and organizational factors, which can sometimes interact with each other (as shown by the different effects of the macro level factors according to the various types of organizations). As for macro level factors, according to our interview data, the political opportunities (in particular the strictness of legal constraints and authorities' repression, and the degree of support from society) influence the strategic choices (moderated vs. violent) of extreme right actors, however, with some national specificities. More specifically, in the Italian case, in line with expectations, more open (perceived) political opportunities (namely: fewer legal constraints, lower repression, higher degree of social support) seem to favour the adoption of more moderate forms of action by extreme right organizations. Conversely, the same factors appear to encourage right wing violence in Spain. Moreover, in both countries, contrary to our expectations, other political contextual factors, often related to the emergence of violence by collective actors,

such as the perceived exclusion from the political system in terms of recognition and possibility of being heard by politicians, do not appear to affect (or only slightly affect) the strategic choices of the organizations.

Our focus on the group's assessment of opportunities and threats can help us to better understand the link between the macro and meso level factors. As stressed by Meyer et al. (2002, p. 130), 'different structures within movement communities can also be linked to the perception of political opportunity that can mobilize action'. Therefore, we can try to explain the divergent impact of the context on right wing mobilization by referring to more specific (relational, situational) dimensions of the political opportunities offered to these groups, as well as to the tradition of interaction between challengers and elites (della Porta e Diani, 2006, p. 184). Taking into account that the forms of action of a movement might stem from considerations related more to the 'realized outcomes' than to the 'expected utility' (Koopmans, 2005, p. 25), we could therefore consider that, despite similar perceptions of the hardness of state repression, the strategic choices of these organizations might have been led by 'backward-rational' considerations (Ibid.) related to the actual risks of collective action. On the one hand, as shown by our data, the centre-left government in Spain during the period under analysis leads to a sharp increase (especially in 2008-09) in the arrests, detentions and denounces related to actions of the extreme right. On the other hand, Italy's centre-right government ('Berlusconi IV') reduced the repressive activities (with a drop in the number of arrests, detentions and denounces during extreme right events in the first year of government), and opened itself to some extent to the far-right (e.g. with the inclusion in the Berlusconi's coalition of extreme right formations). This result confirms the complexity of the relationship between the context and the action choices of collective actors (Goodwin and Jasper, 1999; Koopmans, 2005).

Finally, our analysis pointed out that, beyond (and in interaction with) political opportunities, the internal organizational characteristics of extreme right groups also affect their action strategies. According to our data, in the period under investigation, the use of violence by extreme right groups seems to be linked either to the size of the group (with many violent events initiated by individual or very few activists), or to a rigid internal discipline and (especially in Italy) a high degree of selectivity. This seems to suggest that the choice of one specific organizational form over another is a clear message that the organization gives to its members (Kitschelt, 1988) and also involves different reactions to the occurrence of specific situations. Also this confirms, as shown by studies of other types of extremism, that contextual factors are not alone sufficient conditions to explain the emergence of violence, but are instead intertwined with meso level organizational characteristics and dynamics of radical groups (Crenshaw, 2001).

Additional comparative empirical studies, both on more countries and on different types of extremisms, are desirable for the future in order to investigate, on a larger scale, the impact of contextual and organizational factors on the strategic choices of collective actors. This

could increase our understanding if the same mechanisms between contextual opportunities and organizational action choices (toward moderation vs. violence) are at stake in different (radical) groups and different countries.

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## VIII. Appendix

### Quoted interviews

#### A. Italy:

- ID. 1 Political movement 'Area Destra'. Rome, 23 September 2010.
- ID. 2 Political movement 'Movimento Nazionale Popolare'. Rome, 21 September 2010.
- ID. 3 Sub-cultural youth group 'Patria Nostra'. Rome, 22 September 2010.
- ID. 4 Political movement 'Nuova Destra Sociale'. Florence, 6 October 2010
- ID. 5 Political movement 'Fascismo e Libertà'. Telephone interview, 3 November 2010.
- ID. 6 Sub-cultural youth group 'Casapound'. Rome, 19 November 2010.
- ID. 7 Sub-cultural youth group 'Gioventù Italiana'. Rome, 3 December 2010
- ID. 8 Political party 'Movimento Sociale Fiamma Tricolore'. Rome, 18 November 2010.
- ID. 9 Political party 'La Destra'. Rome, 16 December 2010
- ID. 10 Political party 'Fronte Sociale Nazionale'. Rome, 16 December 2010
- ID. 11 Sub-cultural youth group 'Lotta Studentesca'. Rome, 17 December 2010
- ID. 12 Sub-cultural youth group 'Veneto Fronte Skinhead'. Rome, 27 December 2010

#### B. Spain:

- ID. 13 Political party 'Falange Española'. Madrid, 14 February 2011
- ID. 14 Sub-cultural youth group 'Sindicato Universitario Español'. Madrid, 14 February 2011
- ID. 15 Political party 'Frente Nacional Español'. 21 February 2011
- ID. 16 Political party 'Falange Autentica'. Madrid, 15 February 2011
- ID. 17 Political party 'España 2000'. Alcalà de Henares, 17 February 2011
- ID. 18 Political party 'Falange de las JONS'. Madrid, 18 February 2011
- ID. 19 Political movement 'Hermandad de la Vieja Guardia'. Madrid, 28 May 2011
- ID. 20 Political movement: Foro Social Manuel Mateo. Madrid, 27 May 2011

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