

Italy's Far-Right Leaders Are Pushing Debunked Coronavirus Conspiracy Theories To Millions Of Followers

BuzzFeed (<https://www.buzzfeed.com/albertonardelli/coronavirus-matteo-salvini-giorgia-meloni-conspiracy>) · by Nature Medicine



Photo by Simona Granati - Corbis / Getty Images

Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini

Opposition parties are going to oppose. Populists will be populists. But in the middle of a global pandemic

(<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/collection/coronavirus>), misinformation can spread panic and even cost lives.

As the coronavirus swept through Italy

(<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/peteraldhous/coronavirus-deaths-by-country>), infecting tens of thousands of people and killing more than anywhere else in the world so far, the country's nationalist and far-right parties have struggled for attention.

Last month, as Italy was gradually shutting down, Matteo Salvini, former deputy prime minister and leader of the nationalist Lega party, and Giorgia Meloni, leader of the far-right Brothers of Italy, urged people to go on holiday

(<https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/posts/10157435188583155>). In a video posted on Facebook, Meloni told her followers, in English, to not believe what they were seeing on television. As proof, she pointed to a crowded Rome.

(<https://www.facebook.com/video.php?v=208631343835510>)

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(<https://www.facebook.com/video.php?v=208631343835510>)

Facebook: video.php (<https://www.facebook.com/video.php?v=208631343835510>)

At the time, many politicians across the political spectrum, including on the left (<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/albertonardelli/coronavirus-milan-lockdown-italy-schools-bars-cafes>), were pushing similar messages, encouraging residents to go for aperitivos.

Then came the lockdown. Salvini pivoted. His new attack line: the lockdowns don't go far enough. #chiuderetutto — shut everything down — his social media headers read.

Inevitably, as lifelong eurosceptics, Salvini and Meloni began attacking the EU's response to the crisis, even arguing

(<https://www.facebook.com/giorgiameloni.paginaufficiale/videos/523052521962839/>), without evidence, that some member states wanted to exploit the pandemic to their benefit.

But with attention still running thin, the attacks have become relentless — and the content posted by Salvini and Meloni increasingly extreme.

On Wednesday, the two leaders took a conspiracy theory doing the rounds in some WhatsApp groups (<https://www.open.online/2020/03/25/il-video-di-tgr-leonardo-del-2015-e-il-coronavirus-ingegnerizzato-in-laboratorio-non-e-il-sars-cov-2/>) and pushed it to their millions of followers on Facebook and Twitter. The discredited and unsubstantiated theory claims that a news programme aired in 2015 about a Chinese lab's experiments and research on other coronaviruses was proof that the novel virus had originated in that same lab.

"INCREDIBLE!!!" Salvini tweeted

(<https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1242866887932948481>), in all caps, "2015, the Chinese created a supercoronavirus with bats and mice!!!"

"WE WANT THE TRUTH!" Meloni said

(<https://twitter.com/GiorgiaMeloni/status/1242875894387138563>) on the social networking platform.

Both leaders called for the government to answer questions in parliament.

The conspiracy theory has been debunked by Italian fact-checkers

(<https://www.open.online/2020/03/25/il-video-di-tgr-leonardo-del-2015-e-il-coronavirus-ingegnerizzato-in-laboratorio-non-e-il-sars-cov-2/>) and several news outlets, including Il Post (<https://www.ilpost.it/2020/03/25/tgr-leonardo-2015-coronavirus/>) and La Repubblica (https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/03/25/news/coronavirus_tg_leonardo_esperimento_cinese_pipistrelli-252312426/). In short, the 2015 research had nothing to do with COVID-19.

A director at the Italian National Research Council (CNR) told La Repubblica:

"The current virus does not originate from the first version of Sars, and not least did it come from mice. Therefore it [COVID-19] absolutely cannot be the virus

created in the Chinese lab that is discussed in the [2015] programme."

The magazine Nature, which published the 2015 study on which the TV programme was based, has also said that the novel coronavirus did not originate in a lab.



@NatureMedicine (<https://twitter.com/NatureMedicine>)

"Our analyses clearly show that SARS-CoV-2 is not a laboratory construct or a purposefully manipulated virus." -> read now:

<https://t.co/a5khxW8NJf> #covid19 @K_G_Andersen

05:31 PM - 17 Mar 2020

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"We are aware that this story is being used as the basis for unverified theories that the novel coronavirus causing COVID-19 was engineered. There is no evidence that this is true; scientists believe that an animal is the most likely source of the coronavirus," an editors' note in the magazine says (<https://www.nature.com/news/engineered-bat-virus-stirs-debate-over-risky-research-1.18787>).

Numerous other (<https://www.valigiablu.it/tgr-leonardo-coronavirus/>) experts (<https://twitter.com/RobertoBurioni/status/1242856806789066752>) have spoken out against the conspiracy theory, some pointing out (https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/03/25/news/coronavirus_tg_leonardo_esperimento_cinese_pipistrelli-252312426/) that the experiments and research conducted in 2015 is how viruses are studied. Asked why the 2015 experiment was conducted, Fausto Baldanti, a virologist at Pavia university told (https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/03/25/news/coronavirus_tg_leonar

do_esperimento_cinese_pipistrelli-252312426/) La Repubblica: "To fight the enemy, you need to know it." Commenting on the conspiracy theory, Roberto Burioni, a highly respected virology professor in Milan, tweeted (<https://twitter.com/RobertoBurioni/status/1243138291232387073>) that "the spread of false information is a dangerous virus".

But despite all the overwhelming evidence, the videos shared by Salvini and Meloni rapidly racked up millions of views across social media.

It recorded over 2 million views on Salvini's official Facebook and Twitter pages within 18 hours of being uploaded on Wednesday evening, and was further boosted by other big pages affiliated to Salvini and his party.

Matteo Salvini has over 5 million followers across Facebook and Twitter.

Since Italy's first coronavirus case on Jan. 31 (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-health-italy/italy-cabinet-to-discuss-declaring-coronavirus-emergency-after-first-two-cases-confirmed-idUSKBN1ZU14J>), the videos on Salvini's official Facebook page have had 144 million views, according to the social media monitoring platform Crowdtangle.

The conspiracy theory video also got over half a million views on Meloni's profiles.

After Salvini's post, the video was also shared by some pages which are not explicitly political, including a page with 240,000 followers (<https://www.facebook.com/1728173864108020/videos/2861176383950288/>) which usually shares jokes and animal memes. Some right-wing newspapers also shared (<https://www.facebook.com/323950777458/posts/10158270308107459/>) the video and Salvini's call for a parliamentary inquiry.

As the video was uploaded separately by a number of other (<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=627452504770404>) Facebook pages (<https://www.facebook.com/1728173864108020/posts/253024766390063>

2) rather than shared, the overall viewing figure is likely to be significantly higher than 2.5 million.

Facebook and Twitter have been approached for comment.



Tiziana Fabi / Getty Images

Matteo Salvini. and Giorgia Meloni at an anti-government rally in Rome last October.

On Wednesday evening, Italy's foreign minister, Luigi Di Maio, wrote (<https://www.facebook.com/LuigiDiMaio/posts/2896405860395941>) a long post on Facebook condemning his former coalition partner Salvini and Meloni.

"I would like us to stop a second to reflect on the gravity of what has happened," said Di Maio. "While the state counts the dead and is working round the clock to help medics, they seem to enjoy finding any piece of news that generates panic, to find a culprit, to get a few more Likes, even if it nurtures rage, fear and a feeling of loss," he added. "They don't care at all about the country because the truth is that it's convenient for them to terrorise."

(<https://www.facebook.com/LuigiDiMaio/posts/2896405860395941>)

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(<https://www.facebook.com/LuigiDiMaio/posts/2896405860395941>)

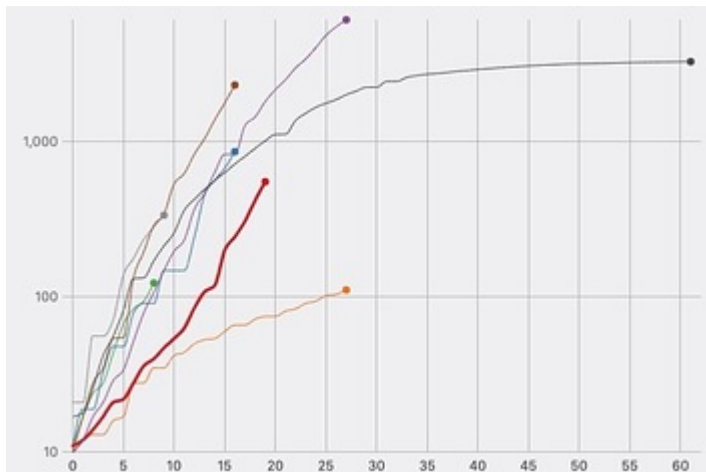
Facebook: LuigiDiMaio

(<https://www.facebook.com/LuigiDiMaio/posts/2896405860395941>)

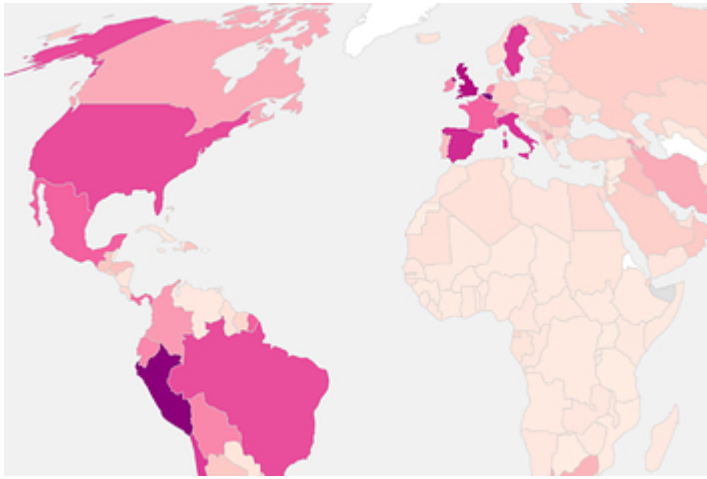
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