

Digital Sovereignism: A Comparative Analysis of Italian Parties' Positioning on Transnational Data Governance

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Abstract

This article examines the positioning of political parties on the issue of transnational data governance, with a special focus on sovereignist parties, through the case study of Italy. With digital policy being increasingly high on Italy's political agenda, the country finds itself in a delicate balancing act between guarding itself from external interference, and opening up to global key players in data governance, including international corporate actors. While the literature on Italy's domestic data governance is relatively well developed, party-specific stances on its external dimension are understudied. Given their sovereignist ideology, it is expected that populist radical right parties prioritise sovereignty-focused stances, with concerns around data security and state control over digital policy. However, the populist radical right government's flirtation with radical right tech entrepreneur Elon Musk poses a significant research puzzle. Through a qualitative analysis of Italy's parliamentary debates covering the 12 months prior to the approval of the Space Law in June 2025, this article investigates how the incumbent sovereignist populist radical right positioned itself on digital sovereignty in the context of cross-border data governance, compared to opposition parties occupying different dimensions on the political spectrum. This case study will especially focus on the most prominent topic in current parliamentary debates on external data governance: Italy's proposed deal with Musk's SpaceX for the acquisition of Starlink technology.

Keywords

data governance; digital sovereignty; party politics; populist radical right

1. Introduction

On 7 November 2024, Italy's populist radical right Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni announced she had spoken to tech tycoon and former Donald Trump supporter Elon Musk about Italy potentially acquiring Starlink technology for telecommunications. On that occasion, Meloni praised Musk for his “commitment and vision [that] can be an important asset to...Italy” (“Meloni sente Musk,” 2024). Meloni's announcement should not be dismissed as an occasional interaction between a PM and a tech titan, who, at that time, exerted enormous influence on President Trump. In fact, the publicised economic and political relationship between Meloni and Musk sparked acrimonious political debate over the threat to digital sovereignty and national security that Musk's services could pose. Significantly, Musk, who is the former co-founder of PayPal, and now executive of aerospace company SpaceX, the social network X, and automotive company Tesla, holds ideas close to the radical right MAGA movement. Before their bitter fallout in May 2025, Musk had been appointed by President Trump to lead the newly formed Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). Regardless of his unstable relationship with Trump, Musk's economic and political sway is massive and carries important implications for the political actors he engages with.

Meloni's negotiations with Musk over Starlink have triggered opposition backlash, which has intensified during debates on the Space bill (that became law in June 2025; Senato della Repubblica, 2025). Despite Defence Minister Guido Crosetto's March 2025 declaration that talks with Musk had stalled (“Italy's talks with Musk's Starlink,” 2025), the topic is poised to remain politically relevant, especially given the recent approval of the Space Law. The latter does not explicitly mention Starlink, but Article 25 allows non-Italian operators (like SpaceX) to provide strategic satellite services (like Starlink; Senato della Repubblica, 2025). Party debates over the proposed Starlink deal occur within broader political discussions about the external dimension of data governance, central to Italy's digital policy since Italy's 2021 digitalisation campaign under the EU-funded National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) worth EUR 194.4 billion. Since then, digitalisation has become a government priority devised to boost an ailing economy after the Covid-19 pandemic and to address economic, infrastructural, environmental, and equality-related challenges (Italia Domani, 2025).

While the NRRP digitalisation pillar has a predominantly domestic focus, discussions of the external dimension of digital policy cannot be overlooked, given their importance to Italy's increasing involvement in transnational data governance. In this realm, Italy strategically engages with digital powers, encompassing states, supranational organisations, and non-state actors, such as private companies. Importantly, Italy's geopolitical strategy needs to be embedded in the EU regulatory framework on the external dimension of digital policy, including the EU Coordinated Plan (European Commission, 2018) and Strategy for Data (European Commission, 2020), which advocate for increasing monitoring over European data.

At the national level, external digital policy is highly politicised by different political parties. While literature on Italy's digitalisation efforts is relatively well developed, little attention is paid to party-specific stances on this issue. We thus respond to this scholarly gap by examining how political parties from across the political spectrum position themselves on the external dimension of digital policy. In particular, this article studies the specific case of the Starlink negotiations, which hold utmost prominence in parliamentary debates. This perspective allows us to capture party dynamics articulated on two axes: (a) government vs. opposition; and (b) populist radical right vs. parties differently located on the ideological spectrum.

We are particularly interested in the populist radical right's positioning, due to their sovereignist ideology (Basile & Mazzoleni, 2020). Digital sovereignism consists of "political ideas characterized by the primacy of the national-level politics over the international one" (Pizzul & Veneziano, 2024, p. 1009). Hence, we expect these parties to prioritise the protection of digital sovereignty, connected to national security, to protect "decision-making authority of the nation-states and people's empowerment against the elites" (Basile & Borri, 2022, p. 366). Indeed, we also expect these parties to express scepticism towards corporate actors and foreign states' interference in national digital governance. Corporate actors are especially interesting, given their expanding political ambitions, making them global power brokers (Ibled, 2025). As Bellanova et al. (2022, p. 340) suggest, European digital sovereignty attempts "may be hampered by the actual, and ever increasing, role of private actors and IT companies, in particular Big Tech."

In the Italian context, populist radical right parties Fratelli d'Italia (Fdi) and Lega (now in a coalition government) are anticipated to express sovereignist concerns around data security cooperation with third countries and non-state actors outside the EU, in line with their trademark ideological sovereignism. Evidence of Musk's closeness with Meloni (Fdi's leader), though, suggests a potential change in the populist radical right's sovereignism regarding cross-border data governance. To tackle this puzzle, this article uses a qualitative analysis of parliamentary debates in the Chamber of Deputies (henceforth, the Chamber) and in the Senate, covering the year prior to the Space Law approval. The aim is to investigate whether sovereignist populist radical right parties in government have enacted a shift on digital sovereignty and security compared to opposition parties when dealing with ideologically aligned tech actors.

Italy provides an interesting case study to develop new insights on whether the populist radical right embraces digital sovereignty, in the context of the ongoing interlocations between Meloni and Musk. Italy is the first Western European EU member state to have a coalition government entirely led by the populist radical right, which typically adopts sovereignty-centred stances (Basile & Mazzoleni, 2020). Meloni's coalition government, sworn in in October 2022, brings together Fdi, Lega (populist radical right), and Forza Italia (FI; populist right-wing without radical elements). Additionally, Meloni's government has been particularly close to Musk, known for his patently radical right beliefs, which, in most of the period analysed, were also markedly pro-Trump (Ibled, 2025).

Therefore, the argument advanced by this article unfolds against the background of the populist radical right's dealings with Musk, who shares ideological alignment and personal friendship with Italy's PM Meloni. Importantly, from this case study, broader lessons can be learnt about how populist radical right parties position themselves on transnational data governance at a time when these parties are gaining influence and consolidating connections with tech tycoons.

The article is organised as follows. After establishing the theoretical framework centred on transnational data governance and digital sovereignty, the article will review the relevant literature on the populist radical right's sovereignism. Indeed, this party family is expected to significantly vocalise concerns for digital sovereignty compared to competing parties. The contextualisation of the case study is followed by methodological notes on the analysis of parliamentary debates. Subsequently, the analysis of parties' positioning on the external dimension of data governance is articulated around two main themes: digital security and digital sovereignty. Finally, the article offers concluding thoughts.

2. The Framework of Transnational Data Governance and Sovereignty

To examine how incumbent populist radical right parties, when engaging with ideologically aligned tech actors, position themselves on digital sovereignty and security compared to the opposition, we combine insights from comparative politics and international relations. First, this article draws on the normative understanding of transnational data governance in international relations as the set of legislation regulating the relationships between different stakeholders involved in the collection, processing, storing, access, control, sharing, and use of data (Micheli et al., 2020).

Extensive literature has studied transnational data governance in the fields of IT, legal regimes, geopolitics (Farrand & Carrapico, 2022; Gao & Chen, 2022), power inequalities, and citizens' governmentality (Bigo et al., 2019; Juverdeanu, 2024). Comparatively less extensive is the literature on the relationship between political parties and the digital. Within this emerging strand of literature, König and Wenzelburger (2018) draw attention to the increasing salience of the issue of digitisation in party manifestos in eight Western European countries. In a similar vein, König's (2019) comparative analysis of party policy on digital technologies finds that the growing relevance of digital policies pressures parties to shape their own policy preferences, making digital policy a terrain for party competition. Guglielmo (2024) provides an innovative typology of how parties' stances on digital economy and digital politics are moulded by ideology.

Transnational data governance, implying compromises between international actors, hinges upon states' willingness to negotiate national sovereignty, and to loosen policies on data access, processing, and use, which may affect national security. Indeed, national security and sovereignty drive geopolitical competition between the major digital powers. This geopolitical competition sees two main approaches to transnational data governance (included in the broader category of cyber governance): (a) Beijing's approach, driven by Chinese telecommunication and e-commerce companies that provide services across the globe, prizing the Chinese government's involvement in cyber governance; and (b) the Western-centric approach, embraced by Washington and Brussels, dominated by multi-stakeholderism, openness, and the commitment to democracy, human rights, and the free exchange of ideas (DeNardis, 2014; Gao, 2022).

As Gao and Chen (2022) notice, though, these two approaches are not dichotomous blocks. For instance, the EU combines multi-stakeholderism with increasing involvement in transnational data governance. This becomes apparent in the European Strategy for Data (European Commission, 2020), where the European Commission warns that "the way in which the data are collected and used must place the interests of the individual first, in accordance with European values, fundamental rights and rules," and it is essential that personal data sharing in the EU complies with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Through the establishment of strict data protection rules, the EU attempts to become "a global regulatory hegemon unmatched by its geopolitical rivals" (Christakis, 2020, p. i). In doing so, the EU bolsters digital sovereignty and defensive measures against the US-American and Chinese technological behemoths, while endeavouring to contest US supremacy in the West (Chen & Yang, 2022). Indeed, the European Strategy for Data (European Commission, 2020) vocally affirms that "if the EU is to acquire a leading role in the data economy, it has to act now and tackle, in a concerted manner, issues ranging from connectivity to processing and storage of data, computing power and cybersecurity." In the attempt to assert itself as an increasingly important data governance player without relinquishing digital sovereignty claims, in the 2020 *Digital*

Sovereignty for Europe report, the EU codified digital sovereignty as “Europe’s ability to act independently in the digital world” through protective mechanisms to foster digital innovation (including in cooperation with non-EU companies; European Parliament, 2020, as cited in Gao, 2022).

The desire to set the standard for digital innovation and to ensure independence from non-EU tech companies underpin the EU strategic goal of strengthening its digital sovereignty (Floridi, 2021). As Velliet (2023, p. 6) suggests, “[Digital sovereignty] justifies a large number of ‘protective’ and ‘offensive’ policies...protecting the data of Europeans, securing communication infrastructures, stimulating technological innovation.” Notably, Italy’s Starlink negotiations may conflict with the EU regulatory framework, since they would induce dependence on a non-European corporate actor. In fact, Italian MEPs submitted a parliamentary question expressing reservations about the potential Starlink deal and asking whether it would not be wiser if member states relied on European satellite projects such as IRIS² (European Parliament, 2025).

Broadly speaking, digital sovereignty is situated at the nexus of bordering practices, data management, and securitisation (Thumfart, 2025). In EU member states, the concept of digital sovereignty gained circulation in the 2000s when France and Germany vocalised concerns about the US’s access to and processing of personal data (Bellanger, 2014). For instance, France warned against the risk that the EU would turn into a “colony of the digital world” (Morin-Desailly, 2013), and Germany underlined the priority of concentrating, through the EU, on national security, economic strategy, and digital sovereignty (Steiger et al., 2017). Germany also voiced security concerns around the protection of national IT infrastructure from external interference (Pohle & Thiel, 2020). Between 2019 and 2022, under the Von der Leyen Commission, digital sovereignty concerns became high on the EU agenda (Bellanova et al., 2022) and were understood as a way to further deepen European integration (European Commission, 2020) and reduce dependence on other states. As Farrand and Carrapico (2022) argue, through digital sovereignty the EU aims to achieve technological independence and the protection of its digital borders from international competition.

3. Populist Radical Right Parties and the External Dimension of Digital Policy

Due to the primacy of sovereignty on the populist radical right’s agenda, this article focuses its attention on how these parties compete against their opponents on transnational data governance. Among the broad range of definitional attempts, here we adopt Mudde’s seminal characterisation of populist radical right parties as advocating strict law and order, pitting themselves as the “pure” people against multifarious elites, and embracing nativism (i.e., the nationalist and xenophobic belief that the nation should be inhabited only by natives; Mudde, 2007).

Because of this domestic anti-elitism, the foreign policy of populist parties (not necessarily located on the right end of the political spectrum) may be confrontational towards international elites, i.e., international political actors including states and international institutions (Chrysogelos, 2017). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that often populist leaders become part of the political establishment elite.

The populist radical right adds a sovereignist dimension to the international anti-elitism manifested by populism at large, through a nationalist emphasis on national sovereignty (Basile & Borri, 2022; Meijen, 2024) vis-à-vis international actors. Sovereignty, understood as “mutually exclusive territories” (Basile &

Borri, 2022, p. 367), faces challenges from a multiplicity of stakeholders, such as transnational movements, corporate actors, and civil society, to name a few. The solution proposed by sovereignist parties is to solidify state borders both physically and figuratively to firmly ground authority in the state (Bickerton et al., 2022). Notably, recent scholarship shows a tension between the populist radical right's flirtations with the "tech oligarchs" elite, such as Musk, and its typical anti-elitism and sovereignism (Farkas & Mondon, 2025).

4. Methodology

In order to examine parties' stances on the external dimension of data governance, this article draws on a thematic analysis of 98 parliamentary debates delivered in the Chamber and in the Senate in the 12 months prior to the 11 June 2025 approval of the so-called Space Law. The latter represents a critical point in Italy's policy-making on transnational data governance, and was preceded by the increasing salience in political debates of Musk's Starlink provision of encrypted telecommunication services for the Italian government and the management of sensitive diplomatic and military data. Concurrently, Musk has been progressively politicising his persona, aligning with Trump for most of the period under consideration through shared hostility against immigration, the so-called "deep state," and "woke ideology" (Galasso, 2024). However, their relationship became strained due to a recent disagreement over tariffs and the "Big Beautiful Bill," and culminated with Musk's announcing the formation of his own America Party in July 2025 (Clun & Sommerlad, 2025; Price, 2025).

The selected debates were retrieved from the digital archives of the two parliamentary houses. A pilot keyword search was performed using the Italian translation of the stem word "digital*," and the words "data," "informatics," and "cyber." Given the overwhelming salience of "Starlink" and "(Elon) Musk" in the results of the pilot search, the data collection then proceeded based on these two terms. The analysis proceeded through the deductive coding of the individual speeches, by drawing on the established themes in the literature on the external dimensions of digital policy, comprising transnational data governance, and on sovereignism. This qualitative text analysis approach has the merit of capturing both the nuances and the complexity of the data.

A potential drawback of the study is that its focus is circumscribed to the debate on digital policy centred on Starlink and Musk. However, this limited focus is justified by the fact that Starlink and Musk emerged as the absolutely predominant themes in parliamentary speeches on the transnational dimension of digital policy.

5. The External Dimension of the Digital: The Case of Starlink

The analysis of parliamentary debates reveals that digitalisation is frequently mentioned within the context of the NRRP. This is relevant, since it entails that political parties tend to focus on the domestic dimension of digital policy, related to the "digital transition" that is one of the priorities of the NRRP, established by the EU during the Covid-19 pandemic to stimulate economic recovery in different EU member states (Italia Domani, 2025). In 2021, Italy became the beneficiary of EUR 194.4 billion to be disbursed in 10 tranches by 2026, conditional upon the implementation of reforms on the digital and green transitions. The appeal of digitalisation spans across Italian major parties hailing from different ideologies, such as the populist catch-all party Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S), the populist radical right Fdl and Lega, and the centre-left Partito Democratico (PD; Senate 2024/ 216). However, as common wisdom would suggest, the PD, playing

the role of the opposition in parliamentary debates, used the acceleration of the green and digital transitions to attack the alleged underperformance of the government (Senate 2024/229).

Digitalisation efforts go beyond the domestic sphere and inevitably invoke the discussion of Italy's rumoured deal with Musk for the installation of Starlink to boost connectivity across the peninsula ("Financial Times: «Musk cerca Mattarella," 2025). The populist radical right immediately emerges as favourable to the deal, by championing the use of Musk's innovative tools of data governance. This may be partly explained by the previous findings by Guglielmo (2024), which show that Fdl and Lega put a premium on innovation as a driver of national economic competitiveness. Instead, the M5S rebuked the Fdl-led government for "gifting Elon Musk an exceptionally advantageous deal through the purchase of the satellite network Starlink" (Conte, in Chamber 2024/402). Also Francesco Boccia (from the centre-left PD) berated the government for "shamefully" gifting private companies, like Musk's, the incredibly profitable development of broadband infrastructure as part of the NRRP (Senate 2024/258). This throws into sharp relief the coalescing of the opposition against the Starlink deal, with the centre-left PD attacking the negotiations in a not dissimilar way from how the catch-all populist M5S does.

The analysis of the parliamentary debates shows how the Starlink deal, i.e., the acquisition of Starlink telecommunications security technological infrastructure, and its extortionate price, doubtlessly overshadow other themes related to the external dimension of the digital in the period under consideration. As we will see in the next two sections of the analysis, the meddling of Musk in Italy's data governance polarises political parties in two main respects: security and sovereignty. The parties that are traditionally ideologically sovereignist have been relenting on digital sovereignty in the context of Musk's ventures. This apparent paradox is not trivial, and illuminates the tensions between ideological sovereignty and pragmatic openness to international corporate partnerships on digital infrastructures.

5.1. Security and the Digital

In debates over the external dimension of transnational data governance, reflections on security occupy a paramount and polarising role when parties discuss Italy's proposed purchase of Musk's Starlink infrastructure for telecommunications security.

Predictably, security preoccupations play a salient role in parties' stances across the political spectrum. Particular emphasis on the matter is expected to come from the populist radical right. Based on the literature on the populist radical right unpacked earlier, we anticipate that their priorities, dictated by nationalism, will be: (a) the primacy of national security; and (b) guardedness vis-à-vis potential foreign involvement in transnational data governance that could interfere with national security. In our specific case study, foreign actors are embodied by international corporate entities linked to foreign states, such as Musk as the leader of his aerospace company SpaceX and as former President Trump's aide.

Our first expectation is met: The populist radical right promotes national economic and security interests, through the development of the digital sphere. The Brussels data governance model discussed previously prizes a multilateral approach, while putting cybersecurity high on the agenda (Gao & Chen, 2022). Adolfo Urso, Fdl Minister of Industry and Made in Italy, emphasised the importance of the development and consolidation of digital resources, in which government investments have been concentrated (Senate

2025/260). Nicola Calandrini, Fdl representative, praised Italy's 2024 budget for its focus on green and digital transitions, which enables Italy and the EU to pursue their strategic interests (Senate 2024/229). In a similar fashion, Fdl former Ambassador and former Minister of Foreign Affairs Giulio Terzi di Sant'Agata pressed for digital innovation and the increase in digital connections between Italy and Europe (Senate 2024/229) as a way to promote national interests.

Our second expectation, instead, is not met: In our case study, while populist radical right parties are typically sovereignist, their incumbent status and ideological alignment with tech actors appear to override digital sovereignty concerns. These specific dynamics, with resistance to foreign involvement in transnational data governance coming from the opposition rather than the sovereignist populist radical right, should be interpreted in the light of the close relationship between Meloni and the tech mogul Musk. Indeed, it would be politically damaging for incumbent parties not to support the government-led Starlink negotiations, whereas it would be predictable that resistance comes from the parties in opposition. Moreover, the ideological leanings of the tech entrepreneur, close to the radical right galaxy, may explain the populist radical right's tension between ideological sovereignism and pragmatism.

Diving into the specifics of the criticism levelled by political opponents, Andrea Casu, from centre-left PD, demanded from PM Meloni clarity over the contentious question of her negotiations with tech tycoon and Trump's buddy Musk, which would imply a "waste of 1.5 billion EUR" for strategic services (Chamber 2025/404). Casu continued: "We are risking handing over the reins of our security and defence to an external power" (Chamber 2025/404). "External power" in this quotation refers to the private company SpaceX, embodied by Musk with his enormous economic and political power, and firm radical right leanings.

Worries about security threats from this external power led to a group of PD MPs presenting on 8 January 2025 a formal written question to the minister of defence on the potential agreement between Italy's government and SpaceX on telecommunication security. The written question defined the existence of a negotiation between Italy's government and Musk as "disquieting," since it would entail entrusting military security data to a private company owned by one of the wealthiest men on earth and, simultaneously, then close adviser of President Trump, and still a supporter of the radical right in Europe (Chamber 2025/Allegato A [08/01/2025]). The main concern voiced in this written question is the security menace that an agreement with Musk stipulating the adoption of Starlink would pose to Italy. Such a threat would blatantly conflict with the NRRP strategic goal of embedding national development in the EU milieu (Chamber 2025/Allegato A [08/01/2025]). Among the opposition, we identify rampant suspicions that the government overlooks national security in favour of technological innovation led by radical right tech tycoons. The political affinity between Musk and the radical right may be an explanatory factor of the opposition's politicisation of the issue of digital innovation and of the strong feelings elicited about the perceived surrendering of national security to Musk through the adoption of Starlink.

Distrustful positions preoccupied with national security emerge also from the left-wing party Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra (AVS), which sits on the left of the centre-left PD, and from the catch-all populist M5S. Riccardo Ricciardi (M5S) and Chiara Braga (PD) fretted about the unlawful handing over of sensitive data security to Musk and summoned Meloni to appear in parliament to justify her dealings with Musk (Chamber 2025/405). Moreover, Giuseppe Conte (M5S; Chamber 2025/450), Francesca Ghirra (AVS; Chamber 2025/440), and Filiberto Zaratti (AVS; Chamber 2025/404) attacked the governing parties for contracting out national

security, citizens' privacy, and Italy's defence, despite their self-projection as patriots and protectors of national autonomy. The perception of digital technologies as potential risks to privacy is not new. As König (2019) noticed in the context of party competition in Germany and Ireland on the issue of digital policy, parties grapple with a trade-off between harnessing the economic value of digital technology and concerns with the granular and extensive collection of personal data. According to Zaratti (AVS), "It seems that this meeting [between Meloni and Musk] is based more on the subservient relationship Italy has with the US, than on the protection of our national interests" (Chamber 2025/404). In this case, Musk has become the personification of the US (under the second term of President Trump). The fallout between Trump and Musk did not allay the fears of the opposition: While discussing the Space Law, M5S MP Gisella Naturale denounced the risks to national interest and security posed by Starlink, and cited the breakup between Musk and Trump as evidence that the US realised the national security issue caused by entrusting transnational data governance to an individual holding a monopoly over satellite telecommunications (Chamber 2025/314).

Overall, the opposition shares a critical stance towards the potential security threat posed by the installation of Musk's Starlink telecommunications infrastructure to manage diplomatic and military data. By contrast, the populist radical right relaxes its typical guardedness vis-à-vis foreign interference in security affairs when it deals with corporate actors close to radical right views. Indeed, Musk's close relationship with Italian PM Meloni has gone from strength to strength, after being propelled by Musk's participation at Fdl's national Atreju Convention in December 2023. Consequently, on the party competition chessboard, the parties in opposition perform their assigned role and push back the government's proposals.

5.2. Sovereignty and the Digital

Musk's Starlink is perceived not just as a security threat to Italy, but, more prominently, as an infringement of sovereignty. Meloni's visit to then-US president-elect Trump in early January 2025 prompted strong reactions from the opposition due to rumours about a reported agreement between Meloni and Musk for the installation of Starlink platforms in Italy. On 6 January 2025, *Bloomberg* (Mancini, 2025) announced that Meloni met Musk at Trump's residence in Mar-a-Lago, where they progressed on negotiations for Italy's purchase of Musk's telecommunications security system. Meloni immediately denied signing any agreement, without disproving the existence of negotiations. On this occasion, worries over national security became intertwined with worries over Italy's digital sovereignty, arguably threatened by Musk's interference.

As with party positioning on the issue of Starlink's implications for national security, stances on its potential geopolitical threats to national (digital) sovereignty also follow the government-opposition dividing line. This is unsurprising, since the populist radical right in government has entertained dense diplomatic relations with Musk. Hence, it would be contradictory to show guardedness vis-à-vis foreign actors. According to the party competition playbook, the opposition instead frames Musk as the archenemy of Italy's (digital) sovereignty, fearing possible repercussions in several aspects of national economy and politics. Nevertheless, these observed dynamics, where opposition parties rather than the populist radical right express concerns about Musk's Starlink infrastructure threatening digital sovereignty, do not invalidate the prevailing argument in the literature. The foreign policy of populist parties in the digital sphere remains primarily driven by sovereignty concerns, but being in government versus being in opposition appears to influence the degree to which these concerns manifest. Indeed, it is logical that the incumbent status of

populist radical right parties may unsettle their traditional sovereignism when they discuss a deal proposed and supported by the US-American radical right tycoon Musk. Yet, the aforementioned dynamics call for the problematisation of the populist radical right's stance on the external dimension of digital policy, showing how being in power and ideological affinity with corporate actors may twist expectations on parties' adherence to digital sovereignty.

Taking a step back in time, we notice that concerns over Musk's penetration in Italy's sovereignty as a foreign corporate power were already circulating before his controversial encounter with Meloni in January 2025. Remarkably, on 14 November 2024, PD MP Casu reproached Transport Minister Matteo Salvini, leader of Fdl's coalition partner Lega, for "opening up the doors of our country to Elon Musk" and ignoring national sovereignty as well as the existence of a EU satellite strategy (Chamber 2024/383). The latter represents a crucial node in the debates, where the opposition repeatedly and vocally called for the adoption of the EU satellite project IRIS².

Anxiety about Musk's potential threat to digital sovereignty did not subside. On 11 December 2024, the opposition attacked Meloni for her talks with Musk, citing Starlink's potential infiltration in Italy's data governance. Senator Antonio Nicita (from the centre-left PD), implicitly accusing Starlink, emphasised the importance that "big digital platforms do not cause conflicts of interest in the domain of services for connectivity, [and] data governance" (Senate 2024/252). Furthermore, considering that NRRP funds had previously been allocated to two Italian companies involved in digital innovation, Nicita harshly denounced as unlawful the diversion of these funds (distributed by the EU) into Italy's investment in Starlink (Senate 2024/252). Apprehensions over Musk's incursion into Italy's digital sovereignty peaked during the discussion of the Space Law. Elena Pavanelli (M5S) and Elly Schlein (PD) resented the rejection of the amendments proposed by the opposition to block foreign access to Italian data, in order to sustain national data governance enterprises (Chamber 2025/438; Chamber 2025/440; Chamber 2025/450). In a similar fashion, Luigi Manca (PD) deprecated the handover of sovereignty to Musk, with the related national security implications (Senate 2025/285).

Interestingly, the parties invoking sovereignism do not belong to the populist radical right, which has traditionally been distinguished by sovereignism (Taggart & Pirro, 2021). This paradox is obvious in Nicita's further criticism of the government's inconsistency: On one hand, in the past, the populist radical right had opposed the use of foreign-owned clouds to host Italians' data on grounds of sovereignty protection; on the other hand, today they have betrayed their digital sovereignty under the spell cast by Musk (Senate 2024/252). In this regard, Nicita stated emphatically: "Where did the government's sovereignism go?" thus provoking the governing parties and hinting at their trademark sovereignist ideology (Senate 2024/252).

Criticism of the government's potential engagement with Musk through his provision of Starlink is spread across the opposition. Centre-left Italia Viva's (IV) Enrico Borghi urged the parliament to keep up with digital evolutions without surrendering sovereignty to big techs: "AI and, more broadly, the digital, do not mean surrendering a grazing ground [i.e., authority over resources] to Musk or anyone like him" (Senate 2024/257). On a more critical note, IV MP Silvia Fregolent provoked the government by taunting the populist radical right's typical slogan "Italians first," and suggesting, instead, that the populist radical right now prioritises Musk to Italians (Senate 2024/257). Hesitation over Musk's provision of data services is grounded in apprehensions about the economic and political influence the tech tycoon may exert, particularly his galvanising influence

over European radical right parties (Robertson, 2025). External influence in data governance, therefore, is feared to spill over into the domestic economic and political domains.

Zaratti, from AVS (firmly located on the left-hand side of the political spectrum), shared pressing concerns about the news (later revealed to be unfounded) that Meloni had discussed with Musk about a EUR 1.5 billion contract between Italy and Starlink. Such concerns are due to the alarms over the impact that Musk could have on telecommunications in the military, the government, and emergency satellite services (Chamber 2025/404), which are crucial to Italy's national interest. By extension, Zaratti (AVS) labelled the (falsely) reported contract between Italy's government and Musk as yet another instance of Italy's externalisation of border control (Chamber 2025/404).

The opposition's accusations also pertain to the realm of the protection of democracy, in response to Musk's meddling with Italian institutions. In reaction to the Italian court's decision to block, on the grounds of lack of legitimacy, the deal devised by Meloni on Italy's externalisation of migration to Albania, Musk publicly expressed his outrage at the ruling (Winfield, 2024). This prompted the Italian head of state Sergio Mattarella to rebuke, indirectly but resolutely, Musk for interfering with Italy's sovereignty (Winfield, 2024). MP Simona Bonafé (PD; Chamber 2024/386), Andrea Casu (PD; Chamber 2024/380), and Angelo Bonelli (AVS; Chamber 2024/380) concurred in resenting Musk's boldness in attacking the Italian judges. More broadly, PD's Nicita questioned the influence that "tycoons of digital and global capitalism" may have on public debates and on the public sphere, posing a serious risk to democracy through non-transparent data management and the manipulation of public opinion (Senate 2024/252). Sarcastically, Nicita quipped, "We have transitioned from national-sovereignism to an extreme provincialism, where we just need a billionaire tycoon to sell out our country" (Senate 2024/252). This scepticism was also echoed by MP Federico Giannassi from the centre-left IV (Chamber 2025/408).

Therefore, extensive emphasis on concerns around digital sovereignty spans multiple opposition parties, while the incumbent populist radical right remains open to foreign corporate actors' involvement in Italy's external dimension of data governance. Across the sample, the incumbent populist radical right ministers and MPs very rarely intervened in the Musk's Starlink debate, and only in response to written questions coming from the opposition (see Table 1). For instance, FdI Minister of Industry and Made in Italy Urso appeared in the Chamber to defensively state that the government is working on a national satellite system to offer a competitive alternative to Starlink (Chamber 2025/431). Minister of Relationships with Parliament Edmondo Cirianni (FdI) similarly appeared in the Senate to respond to a written question and reiterated what had already been declared by Minister of Defence Guido Crosetto (FdI; Chamber 2025/405), i.e., the government had not signed any agreement for Starlink and was mindful of the protection of national security and national sovereignty (Senate 2025/285).

Hence, FdI ministers intervened in parliamentary debates in order to support the government's stance on Musk, which had been clarified by PM Meloni in her 2025 new-year press conference. On that occasion, Meloni reassured that the Starlink question was being explored by involving the relevant institutional branches, thus hinting at the fact that no deal had been signed up to then (Meloni, 2025). Meloni also underlined that both national security and digital innovation would underpin any consideration about Starlink, thus attempting to prove unfounded the concerns of the opposition (Meloni, 2025). Incidentally, it is noteworthy that Lega and FI, despite being government coalition partners, only rarely intervened and retained a purely supportive role for FdI.

Table 1. Summary of interventions in the Musk's Starlink debate cited according to party, party status (incumbent/opposition), and intervention type.

Party	Total number of MPs'/ministers' interventions in the cited sample	Status	Response to written question?
PD (Partito Democratico)	12	Opposition	No
M5S (Movimento Cinque Stelle)	5	Opposition	No
AVS (Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra)	3	Opposition	No
IV (Italia Viva)	3	Opposition	No
Fdl (Fratelli d'Italia)	3	Incumbent	Yes

Therefore, the Italian populist radical right appears to be shaping a digital foreign policy leaning towards the pragmatic use of foreign provision of satellite services and the consequent loosening of its traditional sovereignty. Pragmatism in populist foreign policy is not new (Giurlando, 2021) and allows these parties to flexibly pursue their own interests without being bent to their ideological sovereignty. In our case study, pragmatism is attributable to two main reasons. First, the government needs to meet the EU digital challenges and act as a credible actor in the EU. In fact, status-seeking has been recognised as a goal of populist foreign policy, which outweighs the risks inherent to trade-offs between sovereignty and economic opportunities in the international sphere (Destradi et al., 2021). Second, the government needs to maintain and intensify the relationship with tech billionaire Musk because of ideological proximity and the economic and political support that Musk could provide. The ideological affinity between Meloni and Musk strengthens their links on transnational data governance, but is not dictated by the sovereignty that usually characterises the radical right's ideology.

As a concluding note, it is interesting to observe that the parliamentary debates analysed scarcely mention AI, which would have been useful to examine, in order to gain a broad and profound understanding of party positioning in the context of transnational data governance. In fact, calls for AI regulation are usually a major manifestation of digital sovereignty related to AI. The scarce attention to AI matters is striking if one considers the EU's insistence on regulating AI according to international competitiveness and EU values (Roberts et al., 2022). The near absence of this topic in the debates speaks volumes to the primacy given to the proposed Starlink deal between Meloni and Musk, which eclipses other related topics.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, this article offers a currently pertinent examination of the evolving dynamics of party positioning on the external dimension of data governance during increasing involvement of foreign corporate actors. Indeed, this article has analysed the critical case study of Italy, to investigate how political parties situate themselves on the external dimension of digital policy, with a specific focus on the positioning of the incumbent populist radical right in Italy vis-à-vis the opposition. In this context, parliamentary debates were dominated by the proposed deal between Meloni and Musk on Italy's acquisition of Starlink for connectivity and telecommunication purposes. This trending theme inevitably invokes the examination of whether the populist radical right, now in government and led by PM Meloni, maintains its typical sovereignty when it comes to digital sovereignty, compared to opposition parties.

Extensive literature has unpacked populist and populist radical right foreign policy on one hand, and, on the other hand, the issue of digital sovereignty within the ambit of transnational data governance. Instead, the intersection of these two themes, precisely how political parties across the political spectrum position themselves regarding transnational data governance, is still underexamined. This article aims to fill this gap, while also responding to the call for a multidisciplinary approach to the global challenge of digital data governance (Löffmann, 2022; Savona, 2024). Hence, this article bridges comparative politics approaches to the study of party politics, with the international relations conceptual toolkit on digital sovereignty.

Qualitative discourse analysis of parliamentary debates reveals that party ideological positioning does not significantly shape party stances about digital sovereignty. Instead, being in power versus being in opposition preponderantly influences party positioning vis-à-vis the specific question of the proposed deal between Italy and Musk related to transnational data governance. Overall, pragmatism predominates over ideological sovereignty: The Italian government, ruled by the populist radical right, aims at achieving digital innovation, being reputable at the EU level, and leveraging Musk's immense economic and political sway in radical right circles.

This finding is not unexpected, since it is logical that governing parties leading negotiations with Musk would not frame the prospective deal as threatening national sovereignty. At the same time, this finding is interesting, because it indicates that populist radical right parties defy expectations over their ideological sovereignty, by supporting foreign involvement, especially Musk's, in transnational data governance. Instead, opposition parties belonging to the centre-left PD and IV, the left AVS, and the catch-all populist M5S express scepticism or utter hostility about the Starlink negotiations on the grounds of security and sovereignty-related preoccupations.

These findings have important implications for our understanding of domestic digital policy in an EU member state ruled by the populist radical right, indicating potential for further research on how political parties rise to the challenge of transnational data governance, mapped against the backdrop of the rising influence of radical right tech barons. While attempting to fill the gap in the literature and enrich the underexplored scholarship on party positioning on transnational data governance, this article does not offer a full account of the plethora of aspects composing the external dimension of Italy's digital policy and of the entire spectrum of stakeholders. Instead, this research, based on the analysis of parliamentary debates, focuses on a timely but understudied topic currently animating political debate in the Italian parliament.

Additionally, this article hopes to stimulate a new research agenda, focusing on the pressing issues dictated by corporate actors' infiltration of states' digital sovereignty. This agenda presents further opportunities to research this ever-evolving topic by extending the geographical, temporal, and thematic reach of the article through a comparison of different parties across a range of countries and time periods, and through consideration of additional topics related to transnational data governance, such as policies on 5G technology, cloud storage, and AI. This exemplar case study leaves some interesting questions unanswered: How does the Italian populist radical right government reconcile compliance with EU digital policies on one side, and the politicised attraction to US tech entrepreneurs on the other side? Particularly, is Italy aligning itself with tech entrepreneurs linked to the radical right?

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Research data are available online in the parliamentary archives of the Italian Senate (<https://www.senato.it/ric/generale/nuovaricerca.do?params.legislatura=19>) and Chamber of Deputies (https://banchedati.camera.it/tiap_19/ctrStartPage.asp).

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