

The Political Dimension of Facebook and Firearms

Judith Harris (April 25, 2019)



Facebook in Italy is as much a political power tool as anywhere else. Now meet the informatics genius who lurks behind the country's most popular politician Matteo Salvini.

The Easter holiday is normally a time to speak of peace, but not at the Roman party we attended. [Matteo Salvini](#) [2], who is Italy's Interior Minister, Deputy Premier and the head of the rightist [Lega party](#) [3], had just appeared in a Facebook photo embracing a machine gun, and few spoke of anything else. "He's right," enthused (now former friend) Maria over dessert. As the rest of us looked on blankly over strawberries and cream, she smiled. "When I was a little girl we didn't need anything similar, but times have changed. Today having a gun is a necessity."

As this indicates, Facebook in Italy is as much a political power tool as anywhere else. What struck many was that Salvini himself did not post the photo, though some reports claimed he did. It seems that it was his clever spin doctor, Luca Morisi, 46, who is described as the "man behind Salvini's social network." When Salvini was criticized for clutching the gun, Morisi responded that the critics "are doing everything they can to cast mud" on the Lega. "We are approaching the European elections, and they are inventing all they can to stop the Captain [Salvini]. But we are armed and



wearing helmets!" wrote Morisi in his own Facebook site.

Morisi is considered by many to be the brains behind Salvini's victory at the elections. Until four years ago Morisi taught courses at the University of Verona in such subjects as "The Web Sites of Philosophy" and the "Philosophy Laboratory of Informatics." Born in Mantua, he edited a regular weekly page on informatics for its local daily "La Voce di Mantova". Morisi had been a Lega Nord provincial counselor from 1993 to 1997. He says that his relationship with Salvini came about because of Facebook: "I had a kind of falling in love," he told Milan journalist Matteo Pucciarelli, "due to my realizing his enormous capacity to manage a talk show. I recall that Salvini was the first ever seen with an iPad on [the TV show of] [Bruno Vespa](#) [4], and this made me curious since I am passionately interested in communication." Salvini, Morisi went on to say, "mixes the dimension of the private and of amusement with the political, that is his anti-political strength. He pays no heed to palazzo ritual."

Joining Salvini's staff, Morisi set out to use social media to promote the man he dubbed "Il Capitano." His Facebook postings for Salvini included a competition to see how many "mi piace" (likes) the Captain's supporters could churn up. From 2 million prior to the national general elections last year Morisi almost doubled the post-election likes, which soared up to 3.5 million. Offered as the prize for the supporters who invoked the largest number of "likes" was the chance to enjoy "private phone conversations and meetings" and even photos with Salvini, that would naturally be posted on Facebook. Facebook shots of Salvini with admirers in cheering selfie crushes are routine. Morisi himself now has over 13,000 Twitter followers and 24,000 on Facebook, according to the financial daily [Il Sole-24 Ore](#) [5].

Promoting easier gun laws has a long history. Founder of the Northern League, the local party that Salvini transformed into the nationwide Lega, which is now Italy's largest single political organization, was the largely disgraced Umberto Bossi. A decade ago Bossi called for "300,000 armed people in the valleys of Bergamo." Until recently, however, Italians save for hunters were not usually armed for self-protection. But as CBS News reported March 16, "Analysts say a growing sense of insecurity... are bringing a shift in Italy's gun laws." In fact, last September new and less restrictive legislation was passed, making gun purchases easier. Gun owners can now possess up to 10 long firearms (double the previous five) and in the clip 29 short firearms bullets. Ownership of a gun license requires only reporting it directly to Carabinieri or police by certified email.

In summer 2018 Salvini publicly supported the Italian gun lobby, already backed by fellow European gun lobbies. Albeit far less powerful than the NRA in the U.S., one of the most prominent of the European gun lobbies is [FACE \(European Federation of Associations for Hunting and Conservation\)](#) [6], with 11 full-time lobbyists and a \$1.2 million annual budget, according to the EU transparency registry. Meantime the EU is attempting to make gun laws, including over semi-automatic firearms, more restrictive in Europe.

Terror attacks as in Belgium and France are not the sole reason behind EU proposals for tougher gun laws, said an EU Commission spokesperson. "We cannot ignore that legal firearms have been used in other tragic events where children were killed in a school or young people massacred in a holiday camp. This directive is not about terrorism, but about firearms and public security." But FACE is battling this.



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