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Populist Political Communication on Instagram in the 2024 European Elections

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Abstract

With the rapid rise of social media usage and its integration into daily life, platforms like X (formerly known as Twitter) and Instagram have emerged as essential tools for political communication. Political actors use these platforms to attract voters, exercise opposition to governmental policies, polarize public opinion, and comment on political agendas. This article focuses on the analysis of populist political communication on Instagram by three far-right political leaders—Italian Prime Minister and President of Fratelli d'Italia Giorgia Meloni (European Conservatives and Reformists), President of Elliniki Lysi and Member of Parliament Kyriakos Velopoulos (European Conservatives and Reformists), and the leader of Groupe Rassemblement National and Member of Parliament Marine Le Pen (Patriots for Europe)—during the 2024 European Parliament elections. The analysis centers on three main aspects of Instagram posts: linguistic strategies, thematic content, and audience engagement. Initially, the study examines the linguistic strategies of these politicians, such as the use of simple, comprehensible phrases combined with emotionally charged images. Their posts primarily emphasize nationalist values, cultural identity, and concerns about economic and social stability. Furthermore, the comparative analysis reveals diverse uses of emotionally charged posts, especially during the 2024 pre-election period, with strategies adapting to each nation's political reality, thus imparting unique characteristics to each campaign. The findings underscore Instagram's power in shaping political discourse and electoral behavior, highlighting the need for further study of digital communication in modern democracies.

Keywords

emotions; European Parliament elections; Instagram; Le Pen; Meloni; political communication; populism; social media; Velopoulos

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1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the century, social media platforms have evolved into what once was conceived as advanced "agoras" of dialogue, becoming a dynamic public sphere where political communication is co-constructed through user interactions (Garzón-Velandia et al., 2024). Images and videos have transcended their roles as mere expressive tools; they have become catalysts for emotional resonance or dissent, shaping political discourse, sparking discussions, and activating mechanisms of social interaction. On the other hand, political communicators attempt to harness the dialogic and "democratic" aspect of social media, converting them to an appropriate medium for promoting their messages, following corporate strategies developed so far (Borchers, 2025; Casero-Ripollés, 2021). Not to mention that, in the social media ecosystem, political communication is coupled with misinformation and fake news, which Jürgen Habermas (2023) described as distorting citizens' perception of the public sphere and leading to its fragmentation. In several cases, such misinformation is orchestrated not only by political parties or interest groups, but also by the state itself (Echeverría et al., 2025).

In recent years, Europe has faced a series of crises that have profoundly affected not only the economy but also politics, society, and the way citizens perceive and interact with the institutions of the EU. The Eurozone economic crisis, spanning from 2008 to 2015 (and in Greece to 2018), incited intense political upheavals, weakening major traditional parties and bolstering smaller ones, so far extra-parliamentarian, as well as emerging political forces and "comet" parties that vanished in subsequent elections. Many of these parties used a populist and Eurosceptic rhetoric. The repercussions of this crisis highlighted deep social inequalities (e.g., Algan et al., 2017; Bijsmans, 2021; Conti et al., 2024; Hobolt & de Vries, 2016; Roch, 2024; Rump, 2022; Teperoglou & Belchior, 2024; Vasilopoulou, 2018). It should be noted that such upheavals were mirrored in the way political parties represented their constituencies: they became less cooperative with the societal groups usually represented by them, and less conflictual with the groups they were usually against (Weschle, 2019).

The migration crisis that peaked in 2015 intensified public discourse on identity, security, and open borders. The large number of asylum seekers' arrivals became a focal point for far-right parties, which seemed to have capitalized on fear and uncertainty to strengthen their positions, portraying the EU as incapable of protecting its borders. This crisis influenced not only the EU's policy decisions but also the rhetoric of political leaders, leading to the reshaping of the political agenda of many European parties (Junuzi, 2019; McDowell, 2023; Rheindorf & Wodak, 2018; Tazzioli, 2019).

Five years later, the Covid-19 pandemic radically altered the way politics is communicated. With containment measures, political communication shifted almost entirely to the digital realm. Social media became the primary platform for disseminating information, propaganda, and political dialogue. Simultaneously, this brought to the forefront new currents of misinformation and conspiracy theories. Various political factions exploited those trends to bolster their position (Hawkins & Chinn, 2024; Skarpelos et al., 2024).

As Europe began to recover from the pandemic, new geopolitical tensions emerged. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which began in 2014, has escalated since February 2022. The war and the subsequent energy crisis prompted significant shifts in the priorities of European citizens, with issues such as security, EU autonomy, and energy dependence dominating political discussions. The turn towards more nationalistic and

protectionist policies seems to reflect these crises, as is also evident in recent electoral trends (Anghel & Jones, 2023; Costa & Barbé, 2023; Fagerholm, 2025).

Within this framework of successive crises, the European elections of June 2024 were not merely a process of electing representatives to the European Parliament but may also have reflected ongoing social and political transformations. Citizens' vote in the European elections was both an expression of political preference and a reaction to the crises affecting their daily lives. Therefore, the analysis of political strategies, communication tactics, and propaganda used in these elections is crucial.

In political communication, election campaigns are no longer confined to traditional media such as television advertisements, public speeches, and printed materials. New tools are being used, enabling politicians to tailor their messages based on data-driven insights and the evolving dynamics of social networks. Platforms like X, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have become central arenas for political discourse, allowing for a real-time analysis of electoral trends. Findings from such analyses highlight that voters do not form opinions in isolation but are significantly influenced by their interactions on social media, though not in the linear way of echo-chambers or bubbles (e.g., Barberá, 2014; Barberá et al., 2015). Political rhetoric is not a static construct but a dynamic process, continuously evolving in response to online discourse trends and public reactions. Indeed, Barberá and Zeitzoff (2018) have found that political unrest, as well as higher levels of democratization, correlate to the adoption of social media presence for political leaders.

A notable case study is the 2024 European Parliament elections, where political parties and candidates leveraged big data and targeted advertising algorithms to reach specific voter groups with personalized political messages. Social media platforms enabled a form of individualized political communication, allowing each candidate to present tailored campaign messages to different audiences based on their specific concerns and interests. Personalization and tailored messages are not confined to just delivering diverse content according to personal characteristics. They include sentimental and emotional overtones, aiming to establish a deeper bond between the politician or the party and the recipient, as well as to activate the desired voting behavior. Therefore, in Section 2 we will discuss the importance of sentiment analysis in evaluating the posts of politicians in social media platforms, before turning to their impact upon political communication regarding disinformation and propaganda, along with a discussion of the impact of algorithms upon the posts delivered in a user's timeline. Then, we focus on the recent European elections as our case study, describe the methodology followed, and present the findings regarding the sentimental and emotional tone in the posts of three political leaders of far-right parties, i.e., the President of Elliniki Lysi (EL) and Member of Parliament Kyriakos Velopoulos (European Conservatives and Reformists [ECR]), the Italian Prime Minister and President of Fratelli d'Italia (FI) Giorgia Meloni (ECR), and the leader of Groupe Rassemblement National (RN; Patriots for Europe) and Member of Parliament Marine Le Pen. The findings are further elaborated in a comparative manner in Section 7.

The research questions we are trying to answer are:

> RQ1: What were the main emotions and the overall sentimental tone in the posts of the three leaders?

> RQ2: What differences exist, if any, between the three leaders and how are they explained?

RQ3: What is the role of the position held by a party in the national party hierarchy in strategically selecting emotional and sentimental tone?

RQ4: To what extent did the leaders' posts differ during the election period and regular times (i.e., before and after the election period)?

Our hypotheses are:

H1: The position held by a party in the national party hierarchy, and therefore the partisanship or mainstream position of a party, will be the moderating factor of the emotional tone, with the former promoting negative emotions such as fear and disgust.

H2: During election periods, the expression of emotions will be more intense than in regular times.

2. Sentiment Analysis

The concept of sentiment analysis is not particularly new. Its origins can be traced back, among other instances, to studies analyzing sentiment in newspaper texts at the onset of World War II (Twohey, 1941).

Sentiment can be defined, according to Fredrickson (2001, p. 218), as a "complex reactive tendency (to specific stimuli) that manifests for a short duration." For sentiment to emerge, an initial event must occur, triggering a stimulus in an individual. This stimulus is then processed, either consciously or unconsciously, leading the individual to attribute their own subjective interpretation to it. This process, in turn, initiates a chain reaction that affects both cognitive and physiological states. Therefore, sentiment can be understood as a psychological response to a given stimulus (Fredrickson, 2001).

Sentiment is distinct from the concept of affect. According to Fredrickson (2001), affect refers to conscious sensations but extends beyond this definition to include other emotional expressions, such as mood, bodily sensations, and affective traits—the latter refers to enduring emotional characteristics of personality.

The key distinction between these two concepts lies in their origin and duration:

- Sentiment arises directly from a stimulus, generating a reaction as a response.
- Sentiment is typically short-lived and manifests through various physiological, biological, and cognitive processes, including facial expressions.
- In contrast, the effects of affect tend to be longer-lasting but less intense in their immediate manifestation.
- Furthermore, sentiments can be classified into distinct categories, whereas affect is typically measured along a bipolar spectrum, ranging from positive to negative emotional states.

The development of sentiment analysis, at least from a bibliographic perspective, can be traced to the early 21st century, coinciding with the application of computational methods in textual analysis in digital humanities. According to Pang and Lee (2008), this sudden "explosion" of interest in sentiment analysis was largely driven by the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies, which enabled the widespread expression of opinions and evaluations of products, services, and experiences.

Within digital humanities, a widely adopted technique in sentiment analysis is the use of sentiment lexicons, which associate specific words with positive, negative, or neutral emotions (Balakrishnan et al., 2019; Mathur et al., 2020; Skarpelos et al., 2024; Wang & Zhang, 2024). This approach involves comparing every word in a text to words in a predefined sentiment lexicon and applying the statistical method of term frequency-inverse document frequency. The positive, negative, and neutral polarity estimation of words is typically evaluated by human annotators, and their judgments are weighted and adjusted based on inter-rater agreement. This method ensures a more accurate classification of emotional expressions, allowing for a more nuanced quantification of sentiment within digital discourse.

Among the theories that go beyond the binary polarity of positive and negative sentiment, searching for underlying emotions are those developed by Ekman and Plutchik. In this article we apply Plutchik's theory (Plutchik, 1997, 2001; Plutchick & Kellerman, 1980, 1989) which adopts an evolutionary perspective and defines emotion as "a complex chain of loosely connected events that is triggered by a stimulus and includes feelings, physiological changes, an impulse for action, and goal-oriented behaviors" (Plutchik, 2001, pp. 345–346). Plutchik argues that fundamental emotions, such as fear and anxiety, are universal across all living organisms. Moreover, he proposes that dyads and opposites—which arise from combinations of primary emotions—result in complex emotional states, which are particularly relevant to human nature. This approach establishes a comprehensive framework that allows for a deeper exploration of the emotional richness embedded in the expressions found within a corpus.

During the last decade, research has focused on emotions expressed by politicians in social media. Bene (2017) found that negative emotions facilitated the virality of politicians' posts on Facebook, further supported by memes, videos, and calls to action. Peng's (2021, p. 158) research on the use of Instagram by US politicians has shown that it is "self-personalization strategies in visual media, for example, images featuring politicians in private, nonpolitical settings, showing faces, and displaying emotions, [that] generally increase audience engagement." Bossetta and Schmøkel (2024, p. 48) compared candidates' photos published on Instagram and Facebook, and found that Instagram users reward emotionality from politicians, posts exhibiting anger are less likely to overperform on both Facebook and Instagram, while "differing audience responses to emotions may reveal a generation polarization." Peeters et al. (2023) found that both positive and negative emotional posts by politicians on Facebook garnered more interaction than those with less emotionality.

3. The Transformative Political Landscape

The emergence of social media has placed critical issues at the forefront of academic inquiry into political communication, especially regarding disinformation and propaganda in the electoral processes. In an era where information spreads instantaneously and reaches vast audiences, social media platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have evolved into pivotal instruments of political influence. More than communication channels, these platforms have become battlegrounds for the control of public opinion (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Bond et al., 2012; Grinberg et al., 2019; Messini, 2024).

Within this digitally mediated political environment, campaigns no longer adhere to traditional paradigms but instead operate through targeted political campaigns, manipulative strategies, and agenda-setting (cf. Jungherr, 2023; Koc-Michalska & Lilleker, 2017). Despite the amount of human and economic resources devoted to such attempts, the outcome may be minimal, if any (Guess et al., 2023).

Far-right movements rely on emotionally charged rhetoric as a primary tool for shaping public opinion and mobilizing the electorate. Fear, anger, and distrust have been fundamental elements of this strategy, creating a sense of imminent threat that demands urgent political action (Cartes-Barroso et al., 2025; Ekman, 2022; Ekström, 2023; Gazarek & Uhrecký, 2023; Mudde, 2007; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Vasilopoulos et al., 2019). Through this approach, far-right leaders portray themselves as the sole defenders of the "people" against a "corrupt elite" or external threats. In this context, the connection between propaganda and hate speech is evident in the structure of political narratives employed by far-right actors (Marcks & Pawelz, 2022; Siapera & Papadopoulou, 2021). These narratives capitalize on social anxieties, national identity, and widespread discontent, becoming structural components of far-right strategies. Understanding the political exploitation of fear and polarization enables the development of countermeasures against extremist narratives, ultimately contributing to the preservation of pluralistic and tolerant public discourse.

While this holds for far-right parties and movements at large, there is a new far-right discourse developed during the last one and a half decades, i.e., during the multiple crisis eras in Europe. This new discourse, as exemplified by Marine Le Pen, while referring to the same issues as traditional far-right discourse, "relies more on a constructive/rational stance, by focusing on facts and figures as well as on solutions, while moving away from the strong and negative emotions" (Baider & Constantinou, 2017, p. 113). This is achieved with the "shift from biological racism to cultural difference" (Baider & Constantinou, 2017, p. 116), focusing on the problem rather than on people (to "immigration" instead of "migrants"), adopting a humanistic façade towards those suffering and channeling anger towards the elites and their political opponents. This leads to a typically neutral discourse, or even a positive discourse appraising the national self, leaving aside the expression of strong negative emotions, although the members of the party clearly decode the proper meaning behind the façade.

4. The 2024 European Elections and the Digital Shift in Political Behavior

The 2024 European Parliament election was held in the EU between 6 and 9 June 2024. Cas Mudde (2024, p. 61) noticed that "as in the previous two European elections, all eyes will be on the far right, which is expected to be the big winner," as "far-right parties are topping the polls in many European countries, including Austria, Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands and Poland." He reminded, though, that after two elections in the rise leaves less space for growth. He points out that in fact "the European elections are essentially 27 separate national elections, with very different *national* campaigns, parties and even electoral rules" Mudde (2024, p. 61). Therefore, it is important to focus on national far-right parties and examine their campaign strategies under a comparative light.

In several aspects, the 2024 elections introduced novelties: they were the first after the finalization of Brexit, as well as after "several 'crises,' which have fundamentally affected politics in the EU and its member states, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the (second) Russian invasion of Ukraine and the most recent conflict in Gaza" (Mudde, 2024, p. 62).

As predicted in several polls prior to the elections, the far-right parties across several European countries increased their share "in Austria, France, Hungary, and Italy. Therefore, the ultra-vote has made this political spectrum the second preferred choice after the European People's Party, with one in four parliamentarians belonging to the radical right" (Cartes-Barroso et al., 2025, p. 2). In France, Marine Le Pen's RN (Patriots for Europe) party won the first place with 31.37% of the votes, a victory that led to snap legislative elections

(Fieschi, 2024). In Italy, the ruling party FI (ECR) of Georgia Meloni increased its turnaround by 22.4% compared to the previous European elections to finish first with 28.8% of the Italian vote (Emanuele & Garzia, 2025). In Greece, three far-right parties, Kyriakos Velopoulos' EL (ECR), Dimitris Natsios' Niki (Non-attached), and Afriditi Latinopoulou's Foni Logikis (Patriots for Europe), along with smaller parties, received 18.74% of the Greek vote. In fact, Niki and Foni Logikis participated in European elections for the first time. EL increased its turnaround from 4.18% to 9.30%.

The success of far-right parties cannot be interpreted solely as a consequence of political or economic shifts. Rather, it is closely linked to the deliberate exploitation of voter emotions through targeted digital communication strategies (Cartes-Barroso et al., 2025; Velasco Molpeceres et al., 2025). It is in this light that we examine the emotions expressed in the posts of three far-right leaders, Giorgia Meloni, Marine Le Pen, and Kyriakos Velopoulos, on Instagram. We use computational methods to extract sentiment and emotions from posts for the five-month period from January 2024 till the date of the elections, attempting to reconstruct the emotional tone as well as to compare with the periods before and after the elections to find whether significant strategic changes in the emotional tone may have occurred.

5. Methodology

Our analysis draws on posts collected from the official Instagram accounts of the leaders of EL in Greece, led by Kyriakos Velopoulos, FI in Italy, led by Giorgia Meloni, and RN in France, led by Marine Le Pen. For data collection, we used 4K Stogram, a software that legally accesses Instagram's API and enables bulk downloading of images, videos, and stories from public accounts or posts associated with specific hashtags. In fact, Velopoulos doesn't have a personal account on Instagram, and his activity was posted on the official account of EL. The account was created in mid-February 2024 to promote the party for the forthcoming European elections. On the contrary, Giorgia Meloni's account was created in November 2012, and Marine Le Pen's in March 2015. The composition of the dataset is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Posts per period on Instagram by Marine Le Pen, Giorgia Meloni, and Kyriakos Velopoulos.

Period	Marine Le Pen	Giorgia Meloni	Kyriakos Velopoulos
7–12/2023	126	579	0
1/1–9/6/2024	123	254	340
10/6–10/2024	100	192	126
All time	1,977	9,816	466

To analyze the emotions expressed in the posts, we used computational analysis, based on the NRC Word-Emotion Association Lexicon (Mohammad & Turney, 2010) which provides a list of emotion-related words in English and machine translated in over 100 languages. The emotion annotation was achieved via crowdsourcing based on the wheel of emotions proposed by Plutchik. We wrote a program in Python for pre-processing the text of the posts and then compared each word with the lexicon to compute its emotional value, and using the term frequency-inverse document frequency statistical method, which is widely used in natural language processing, we calculated the emotional and sentimental tone of each post.

6. Findings

6.1. Kyriakos Velopoulos

The analysis of the EL's Instagram posts reveals a clearly structured communication strategy, heavily reliant on negativity, conflict, and emotional mobilization. Most posts are characterized by strong negative emotions, with anger, disgust, and fear being dominant (Figure 1). The high scores of anger and disgust suggest that the posts cultivate indignation and disapproval toward specific political opponents or institutions. The strong presence of fear indicates that it is likely used as a tool for political mobilization, fostering a sense of threat. The reinforcement of these emotions may be intended to make supporters more receptive to the perceived need for immediate political action and change. Negativity overwhelmingly prevails in the posts of EL and Velopoulos, as most posts are characterized by denunciatory and aggressive rhetoric rather than a unifying or optimistic political discourse. A strategic emphasis is placed upon fueling indignation among supporters rather than presenting a constructive political agenda.

Anticipation, fourth in importance emotion, suggests that the communication strategy fosters a sense of imminent political developments, creating an image of a continuous turning point in the political landscape. It is also related to the references to conspiracies either of the national and international (such as the EU) elites or of enemy countries.

One of the key findings of the analysis is the systematic targeting of political opponents, particularly the government and the prime minister. Phrases such as "Mitsotakis' Regime," "Bomb-revelation," and "Mitsotakis the Traitor" illustrate a consistent attack-oriented rhetoric, which demonizes political adversaries and aims to instill a sense of threat or betrayal among voters. The high levels of disgust and fear reinforce
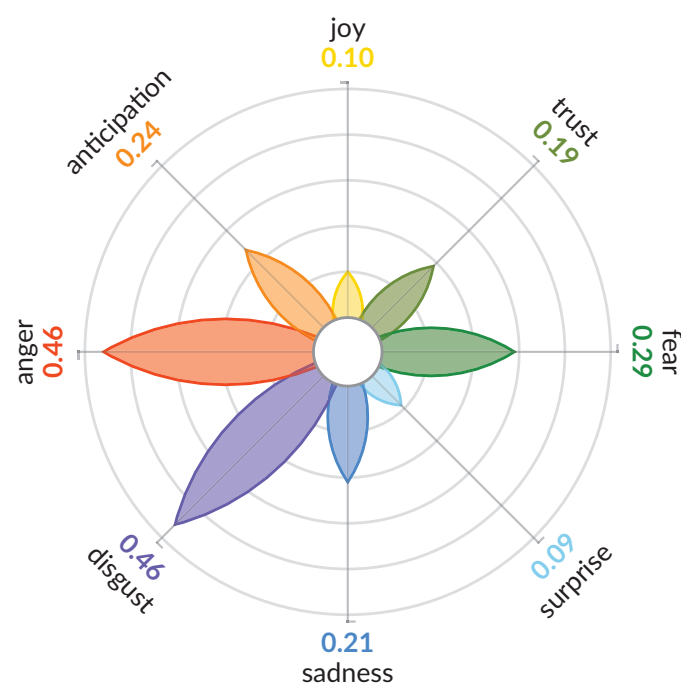
Figure 1. The emotions in Velopoulos' posts during the pre-election period (January 1–June 9, 2024)

this approach, evoking dissatisfaction and anxiety, making supporters feel that they are under constant threat from the political system.

Furthermore, the minimal presence of positive emotions, such as joy and trust, suggests that the posts do not focus on optimistic messages or detailed political proposals. Instead, the communication strategy revolves around criticism and denunciation. The lack of positive framing underscores a protest-oriented strategy rather than an approach designed to inspire confidence or hope among voters.

Another mechanism in the party's communication strategy is the strategic use of surprise, linked to clickbait headlines designed to maintain the audience's attention through scandal-driven narratives. This technique helps in cultivating a persistent sense of crisis and destabilization, reinforcing the urgency for immediate political action. The posts revolve primarily around scandal allegations, attacks on the government, and national issues (e.g., migrants, national security, etc.). This structure indicates a strategically organized communication approach aimed at directing voter sentiment and shaping specific political perceptions.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that the political communication of Velopoulos and EL is primarily based on cultivating negative emotions, with a particular emphasis on anger, fear, and disgust. In contrast, positive and hopeful messages are absent, highlighting a strategy of political protest rather than a programmatic political agenda. This communication strategy appears to be designed to polarize the electorate, reinforcing a sense of disillusionment and crisis while shaping a strong anti-systemic identity that mobilizes supporters.

On the other hand, the emotions found in Velopoulos' posts during the period leading to the European Parliament elections did not alter their hierarchy and scores in the months that followed (Figure 2).
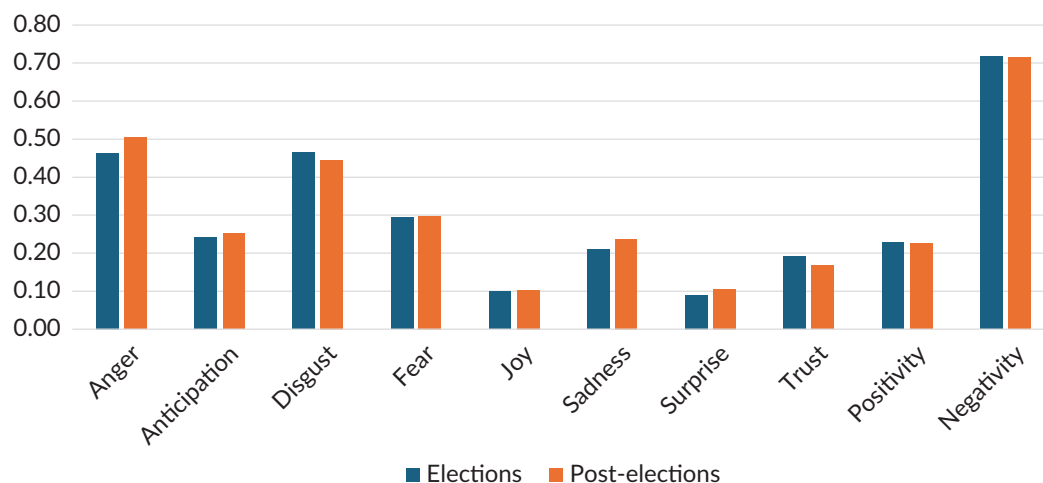
Figure 2. Comparison of the emotions in Velopoulos' posts before and after the European Parliament elections.

6.2. Giorgia Meloni

The analysis of the content of Giorgia Meloni's Instagram posts is indicative of a completely different communication strategy. Instead of relying on emotional polarization, fear, and aggression, Meloni's political communication focuses on optimism, national pride, and the reinforcement of trust in her leadership

(Figure 3). The preponderance of positive emotions in Meloni's posts is probably related to being prime minister since October 2022.

One of the most significant findings is the very low presence of negative emotions in her posts. Anger, fear, and disgust are almost silenced, as are sadness and surprise. Meloni's rhetoric aims to mobilize the electorate through positive and unifying emotions. Furthermore, the overall negativity in her posts is substantially lower compared to that of EL, indicating that her political strategy is not based on aggressive attacks against opponents but rather on cultivating an image of stability and hope. A strong emphasis on positive emotions is observed, with trust registering a notably high score followed by joy and anticipation. This suggests that Meloni's communication promotes a narrative of optimism and political stability, avoiding extreme polarization tactics and aiming to establish an image of political stability and leadership competence. Unlike far-right leaders who employ panic and destabilization to mobilize voters, Meloni's posts aim to convince the electorate that her political proposal is a reliable and responsible choice. Her audience is approached through the presentation of a positive political vision for the future. Her strategy focuses on building trust toward both her leadership and her political positions.

Another aspect revealed in the analysis is her frequent references to historical and political events. For instance, phrases like *"70 anni fa Trieste tornava all'Italia"* ("70 years ago, Trieste returned to Italy") highlight a patriotic approach, utilizing historical narratives as tools for fostering national pride and cohesion. This strengthens national sentiment without, however, adopting an extreme or aggressive tone. Instead, her posts follow a celebratory and positive discourse, reinforcing the narrative of a strong and independent Italy.
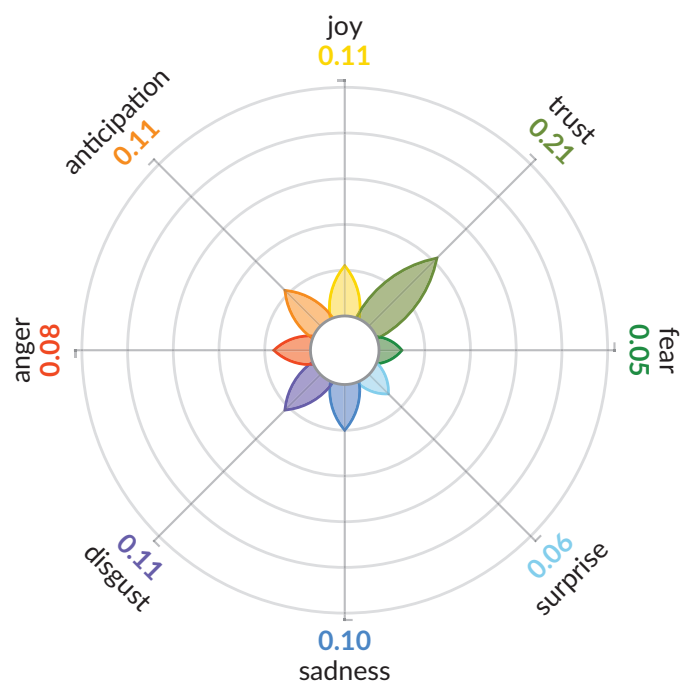
Figure 3. The emotions in Meloni's posts during the pre-election period (January 1–June 9, 2024).

On the other hand, the emotions found in Meloni's posts during the period leading to the European Parliament elections did not alter their hierarchy and scores in the second part of 2023 or the months after the election (Figure 4). There were slight differences in the scores in comparison to the months before

January 2024. Most emotions became less pronounced as if sentimental and emotional neutrality became dominant, with positivity fed by trust, joy, and anticipation, making her victory less worrying for voters who were not completely convinced to vote for her and her party.
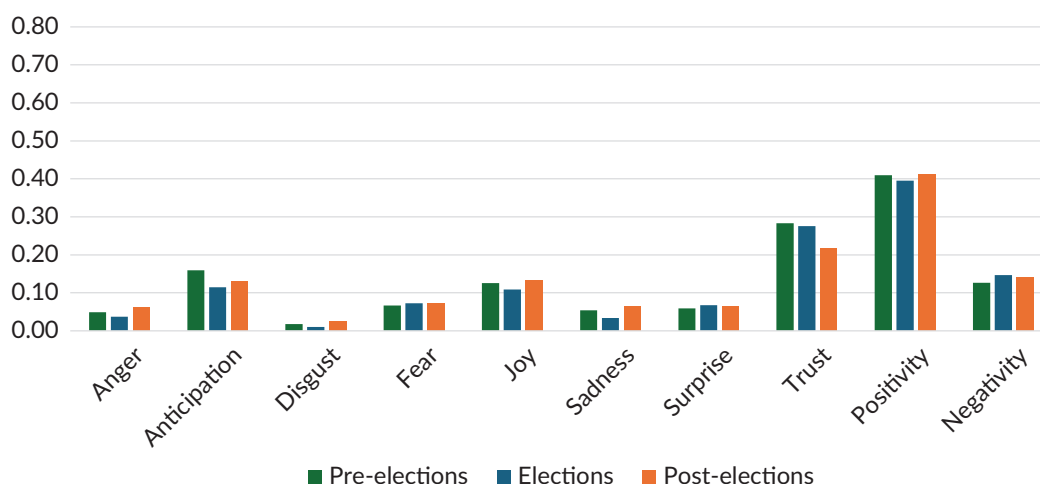
Figure 4. Comparison of the emotions in Meloni's posts in late 2023, before, and after the European Parliament elections.

6.3. Marine Le Pen

The analysis of the emotional content in Marine Le Pen's posts reveals a communication strategy balancing negative criticism with positive patriotic rhetoric. In contrast to the communication approach adopted by EL which heavily relies on negativity, Le Pen adopts a more nuanced discourse where political protest coexists with positive narratives (Figure 5). Through this tactic, she shapes a more moderate and credible political profile, "offering hope for a better future in order to build a favorable political momentum" (Baider & Constantinou, 2017, p. 131).

One of the key characteristics of her posts is the combination of negative and positive emotions. While emotions such as anger and negativity in general are present in her rhetoric, they remain low, showing that she uses critical language towards her political opponents, avoiding the exclusive emphasis on the politics of fear or hatred. At the same time, disgust remains moderate, suggesting a critical stance without excessive aggressiveness.

On the other hand, her posts exhibit high levels of trust, reflecting a rhetoric focused on credibility and stability rather than destabilization or extreme polarization. Positivity reinforces the impression that Le Pen seeks to construct a patriotic narrative in which France is depicted as a strong and independent nation that must regain control of its political trajectory, vis-à-vis the EU bureaucracy. Moreover, the analysis highlights the presence of joy and (to a lesser degree) surprise, which are primarily expressed in posts related to political success or significant moments for her party, such as electoral victories and major political rallies. The evocation of these emotions indicates a strategy aimed at strengthening the political loyalty of her supporters by creating moments of celebration and empowerment.

It is also noteworthy that fear is almost silenced. Le Pen seems to avoid alarmism. Rather than fostering an atmosphere of panic, she leans towards a communication strategy that relies more on political critique and reinforcing public trust. After all, this is the distinctive characteristic of her discourse compared to that of her father and predecessor in the leadership of FN: She reframed the discourse of fear and danger with "a constructive/rational stance, by focusing on facts and figures as well as on solutions, while moving away from the strong and negative emotions" (Baider & Constantinou, 2017, p. 113). The latter, constantly present in the discourse of her father as well as in the discourse of far-right movements, are provocative and, though coiling a militant audience, are keeping moderate voters out of the fence: "She tries to build an emotional rapport with the audience (enhancing the emotion of empathy) and strives to appear coherent (referring to moral arguments and logic) (Baider & Constantinou, 2017, p. 121).
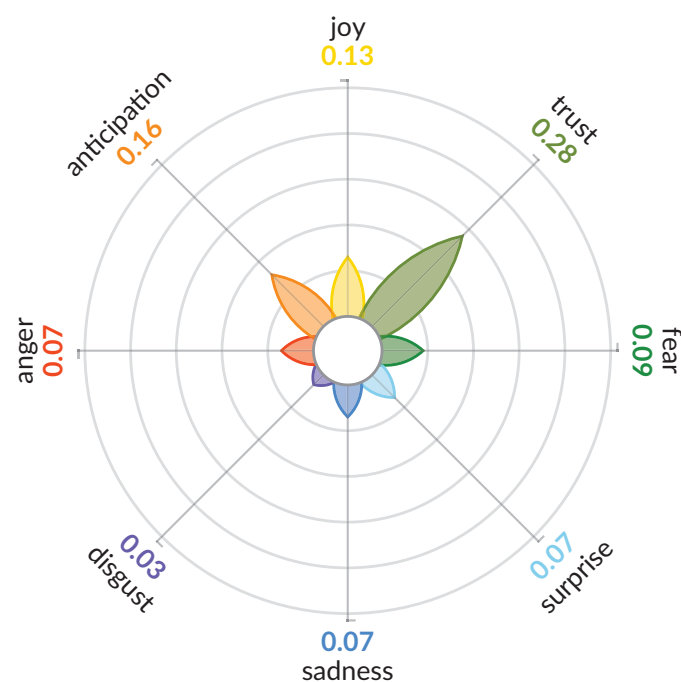
Figure 5. The emotions in Le Pen's posts during the pre-election period (January 1–June 9, 2024).

When turning to the period before January 2024 and the months after the European elections, significant changes are evident in the scores and hierarchy of emotions found in Le Pen's posts (Figure 6). Compared to the six-month period before January 2024, the emotional content of her posts became more pronounced. The victorious outcome of the European elections that led to snap legislative elections, as well as the outcome of those elections, led to a further increase in the expression of joy and positivity.
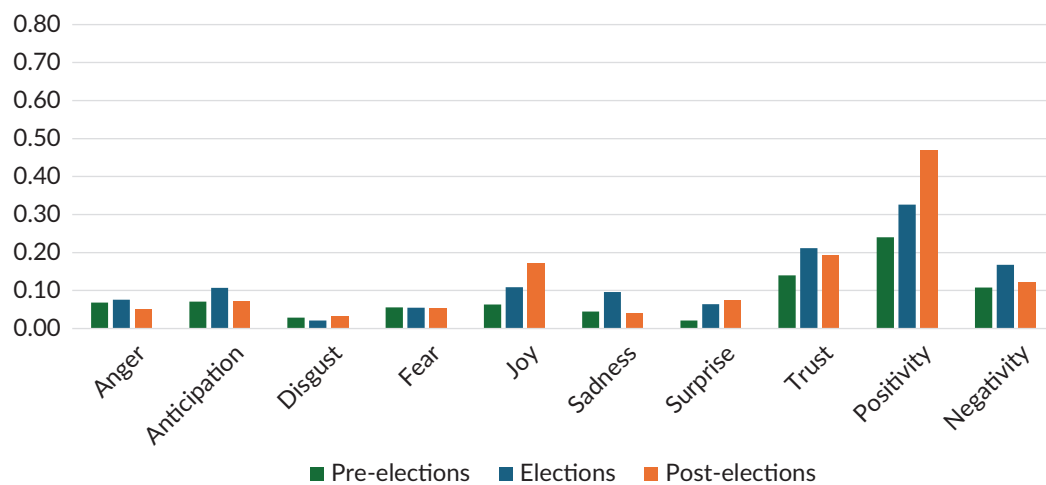
Figure 6. Comparison of the emotions in Le Pen's posts in late 2023, before, and after the European Parliament elections.

7. Discussion

The examination of the communication strategies employed by Kyriakos Velopoulos, Giorgia Meloni, and Marine Le Pen highlights three distinct approaches within the realm of far-right political rhetoric in Europe. While these leaders share a common ideology and characteristics, such as nationalist discourse and opposition to EU policies, the way they shape their political campaigns and the emotions they seek to evoke in their audiences differ significantly (Figure 7).
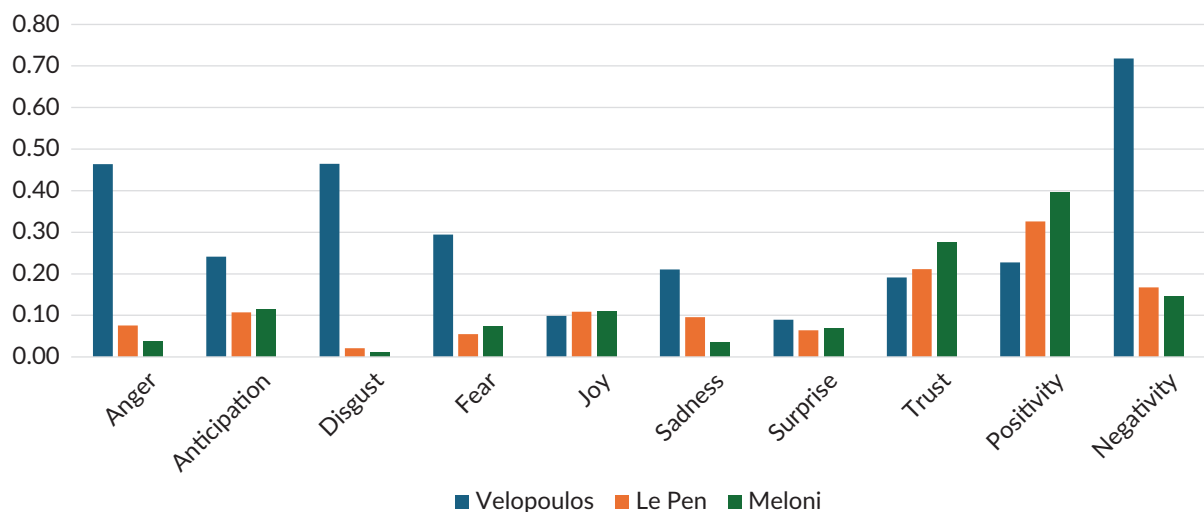
Figure 7. Emotions expressed in the three political leaders' posts during January 1–June 9, 2024.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of political leader identity (Giorgia Meloni, Marine Le Pen, Kyriakos Velopoulos) on the emotional content of Instagram posts across four key negative emotional dimensions: disgust, anger, fear, and negativity. The results were statistically significant for all four dimensions ($p < 0.001$). Post-hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD test showed that (a) Velopoulos differs significantly ($p < 0.001$) from both Meloni and Le Pen across all four dimensions; and (b) no statistically significant differences were found between Meloni and Le Pen in any of the four variables (all $p > 0.05$).

7.1. Kyriakos Velopoulos: Fear and Hostility as Tools of Political Mobilization

Kyriakos Velopoulos' political campaign was heavily reliant on intensely negative emotions, portraying Greece as a nation constantly under threat—whether economically, culturally, or nationally. His public statements and social media posts employ emotional tactics centered on fear and indignation, primarily targeting mainstream political opponents, EU policies, and immigration.

His rhetoric is characterized by high levels of disgust and anger, reinforcing the perception that the political system is corrupt, posing a danger to national interests. This strategy is directly linked to extreme nationalist narratives, often accompanied by conspiracy theories and historical references that foster resentment and insecurity among his audience.

His communication approach is highly confrontational and denunciatory, lacking a coherent and positive vision for the future. This political communication model is particularly effective among voter bases that feel marginalized and disillusioned with the political system. This is consistent with the niche party hypothesis, according to which:

> Niche parties' elites, along with niche parties' activists and rank-and-file supporters, place greater emphasis on policy debates than do the elites and supporters from mainstream parties, who frequently emphasize their party elites' leadership abilities and superior competence to govern the country. (Adams et al., 2012, p. 1275)

Indeed, this strategy has limited appeal to centrist and more moderate voters who tend to reject extreme polarization and crisis-driven rhetoric. In fact, EL is one of the protest parties within the opposition and operates on the fringes of the political spectrum using a discourse that seeks to instrumentalize various socio-political and economic issues.

7.2. Giorgia Meloni: Trust and Stability for Strengthening National Identity

Giorgia Meloni's communication strategy was characterized by a more optimistic and unifying approach. Instead of relying on fear and anger, her public discourse focused on strengthening national pride and trust in the Italian government where she was the prime minister.

Meloni projects a vision of a strong and sovereign Italy, presenting herself as a responsible leader capable of managing challenges with stability and decisiveness. This positive narrative is particularly appealing to conservative voters who prefer political stability over divisive and confrontational politics.

Her communication strategy is rooted in trust and positivity, which enables her to expand her electoral appeal, reaching a broader audience beyond the traditional far-right electorate. Unlike other far-right leaders, Meloni's rhetoric downplays confrontation by focusing on the construction of an attractive patriotic narrative where Italy is portrayed as a strong and independent nation. It is important, though, to mention that her position as prime minister has an impact on her communication strategy and the emotions evoked in her posts.

7.3. Marine Le Pen: Balancing Criticism and Optimism

Marine Le Pen adopts an intermediary strategy, balancing political criticism with a vision of hope and national renewal. Although she is highly critical of the EU and immigration policies, she does not adopt an extreme and personalized denunciatory rhetoric like that of Velopoulos. Her communication strategy incorporates the populist "us versus the elites" narrative, but she blends it with a more moderate and realistic political agenda. Her public statements emphasize the need for national sovereignty and political change, yet they are not reliant on fear and polarization.

This balanced strategy allows Le Pen to maintain a broad electoral appeal, including both radical and moderate right-wing voters. Her political positions are presented as pragmatic and implementable, which enhances her political credibility compared to other more extreme far-right leaders.

While her communication approach does contain elements of criticism and negativity, it does not amplify the sense of existential threat to the extent that Velopoulos does. Instead, she seeks to balance political denunciation with the projection of a stable and nationally proud future for France. This strategy explains her long-term political endurance as she manages to adapt her rhetoric to the needs of a broader electorate, combining nationalism with a more moderate political discourse. Such a strategy is probably due to her ultimate objective, namely to contend for the French presidency in 2027.

Looking back at our research questions, regarding RQ1, the comparative analysis of these three leaders' communication strategies demonstrates the variety of approaches that can be adopted within the far-right political spectrum. While Velopoulos' strategy focuses on polarization and protest, Meloni seeks to capitalize on far-right identity through a positive narrative. Le Pen, in contrast, aims to strike a balance between political criticism and trust-building, avoiding both extreme divisive rhetoric and overly optimistic messaging. To some degree, the findings seem to support the findings of other researchers, that female-led parties "are seen as more moderate/less extreme than their male-led counterparts" (O'Brien, 2019, p. 466).

Regarding RQ2, the three parties share a common ideology but are in different phases of development: EL was established in 2016. Its leader, Kyriakos Velopoulos, was a member of Parliament of the New Democracy and the Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS) from 2012 to 2015 and between 2004 and 2012, respectively. At the same time, he was a TV presenter, developing conspiracy theories with religious overtones. As a successor to previous far-right parties and attempting to absorb the less devoted members of the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn, he kept a discourse rather oriented towards political mobilization which leads to gradual mainstreaming.

On the other hand, RN has a long presence spanning half a century, as Front National since 1972. It was founded by Jean-Marie Le Pen, who was consistent in a traditional far-right ideology and discourse. Members of the Greek far-right movements and parties followed his example and adopted his discourse, while participating in the rallies organized by Front National. In 2011, his daughter Marine Le Pen took over the leadership of the party. Her discourse was radically different from that of her father (who was suspended and later expelled from the party in 2015), though her ideology and political orientation remained stable. It was this change that made Front National a mainstream party in France. In 2018, the party was renamed as RN to signal a change towards a moderate right-wing populist and nationalist orientation.

FI, the party led by Giorgia Meloni, was founded in 2012, but its members also had a legacy of participation in far-right parties and movements leading back to the mid-1990s. Giorgia Meloni and other leading members present FI as a mainstream conservative party. It became one of the two major political parties in Italy in 2020 and became the government in 2022.

Therefore, the three parties, sharing ideologies and attributes as well as agendas reliant on xenophobia, anti-immigration and anti-immigrant positions, and being hostile to the EU, are also different in their evolution, roots, and developmental phase. While FI is already in government and Giorgia Meloni is prime minister, RN and Marine Le Pen are becoming the first party in France, though temporary coalitions of the Left manage to prevent her from becoming president. EL and Kyriakos Velopoulos are still far from such a perspective. So far, Velopoulos is promoting his traditional far-right discourse, figuring as the most "mainstream" far-right party in the national scene, though still on the way to becoming mainstream.

Regarding RQ3, it is possible that the position achieved in the national party hierarchy plays an important role in the emotional and sentimental tone of each leader. Those already governing (Meloni) or at the top of the popular vote, though still kept off government (Le Pen), invest in trust and positivity, being moderate in the expression of anger, fear, and sadness. On the other hand, Velopoulos, whose EL was the fifth party in 2019 with 3.70% and sixth with 4.44% in 2023 national elections, rose to the fourth place and 9.30% in the European elections absorbing the vote of the far-right party of Spartans (covert legacy of a part of Golden Dawn), as well as a part of the ruling center-right New Democracy. In the fluid political environment in Greece, after the split of SYRIZA and among political scandals, EL holds in the fourth place with percentages close to 10%.

Overall, emotions and sentimental tone seem to play an important role in political discourse, even when examining the posts in Instagram accounts of political leaders. The political dynamics of each party and its placement within the political landscape of each country seem to be important factors determining the tone of its rhetoric. They guide the party and political leaders' tone to become either confrontational and denunciatory, militant and challenging the status quo, or more balanced between criticism and hope, or even celebrating the nation to promote trust and stability when a far-right party becomes government.

8. Conclusion

Within the framework described in the first sections of this article, we focused on the sentimental and emotional tone of the posts of three far-right political leaders on Instagram. Emotions expressed in their posts are closely related to the content of their rhetoric both in social media and beyond. While there is a commonsensical idea that far-right politicians tend to appeal to negative sentiments such as fear, we found that the gender of the politicians, the dynamics of each party, the party's position within the national political landscape, or the aspirations of their leaders differentiate the communication strategies and modify the emotions expressed. Far-right parties that are governing or in major opposition adopt rather mainstream emotions to sound solemn and realistic, avoid negativity, and promote trust. Parties with characteristics of a social movement turn to intense emotions to call their voters to militancy.

Limitations to this research are related to the highly selective sample which includes only three of the successful far-right leaders in the EU. A longitudinal survey including more leaders from throughout EU might provide further support to our findings or explore deeper the dynamics involved when parties are

moving from the fringe to the mainstream. Multi-platform research would also add information about the uses of the diverse affordances available to each platform. On the other hand, we focused on the textual content of posts. Most social media platforms allow for the interplay between text and images, both still and video. A multimodal analysis would bring to the fore the ironic tensions between verbal and visual content. Such explorations are needed to gain a deeper grasp of the dynamics, affordances, and limitations of political communication in social media.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data is available from the author on request.

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