

European Elections in Times of (Poly)Crises: Populism, Polarization, Emotions, and the Deliberative Disintegration

Adriana Ștefănel ¹  and Maria Romana Allegri ²

¹ University of Bucharest, Romania

² Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

Correspondence: Adriana Ștefănel (adriana.stefanel@fjsc.ro)

Submitted: 3 September 2025 **Published:** 2 October 2025

Issue: This editorial is part of the issue “Electoral Communication: European Elections in Times of (Poly)Crises” edited by Adriana Ștefănel (University of Bucharest) and Maria Romana Allegri (Sapienza University of Rome), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i497>

Abstract

This thematic issue of *Media and Communication* examines how the 2024 European Parliament elections reflect broader transformations of political communication in the digital age. Contributions show how infrastructures of manipulation, emotional and visual repertoires, and algorithmic logics amplify populism, disinformation, and polarization, while weakening deliberation. Analyses of youth orientations, electoral arenas, and media systems reveal how negativity and symbolic performance increasingly outweigh substantive dialogue. Comparative perspectives highlight the global scope of these dynamics. Collectively, the studies point toward a process of “deliberative disintegration,” signaling democratic vulnerabilities and the urgent need to foster resilience.

Keywords

affective polarization; electoral communication; European elections; deliberative disintegration; digital populism; polarization; political communication; populism; social media

1. Introduction

The 2024 European Parliament elections unfolded in a climate that Ulrich Beck (1992) would describe as a reflexive modernity shaped by polycrisis; in such an environment, digital platforms have become decisive arenas of political communication. They reward virality and engagement, amplify populist rhetoric, and privilege emotional appeals over deliberation. Populist actors thrive by reducing complexity to binary oppositions—“the people” versus “the elites,” “us” versus “them”—and by transforming collective anxieties into mobilizing narratives.

Disinformation is central to this dynamic. Misleading narratives, conspiracy theories, and emotionally charged frames reinforce grievances and deepen distrust. As Allegri (2024) shows, tools such as microtargeting, deepfakes, and automated campaigns not only fuel populist storytelling but also weaken trust in democratic institutions. Disinformation has thus become a systemic threat to the EU's democracy, stability, integrity, and security, one that digital platforms (very large online platforms in particular) are called upon to mitigate under the Digital Services Act. Evidence from Romania confirms this pattern: Oprea (2023) documented inauthentic accounts artificially amplifying political messages during the presidential election. Such complementary research underscores the background against which this thematic issue of *Media and Communication* situates its contributions, focusing on the intersections of populism, polarization, and electoral communication in the digital age.

2. Infrastructures of Manipulation

Several articles in this thematic issue address the infrastructures that distort online communication, offering a structural lens through which the other contributions can be better understood. Manipulation is not only a matter of content but also of the technical architectures that determine what circulates, what gains visibility, and what becomes politically salient. Horváth et al. (2025) examine Hungary's Megafon network, a government-supported platform designed to disseminate partisan narratives, while Oprea et al. (2025) show that in Romania, a significant share of interactions originated from hyperactive or inauthentic accounts.

These findings echo earlier research by Oprea (2021) which stressed the importance of media literacy as one of the few civic counterweights to manipulation. Considered jointly, these contributions remind us that disinformation and polarization do not spread in a vacuum but are amplified by invisible architectures that reward artificial engagement.

3. Emotions and Visual Repertoires

If infrastructures define what circulates, emotions determine how messages resonate. Several contributions in this issue explore these dynamics. Alcántara-Plá (2025) demonstrates how Díaz-Ayuso strategically associates negative emotions with her opponents and positive ones with her own governance, cultivating polarization through affective contrast. Novelli et al. (2025) reveal how Italian politicians deploy self-portraits, webcards, and AI-generated images to stage symbolic oppositions and project emotional intensity.

In the same vein, Messini (2025) offers a comparative perspective on how far-right leaders such as Giorgia Meloni, Kyriakos Velopoulos, and Marine Le Pen strategically mobilized emotions on Instagram during the 2024 European elections. The analysis shows that while Velopoulos relied heavily on fear, anger, and hostility, Meloni foregrounded trust and optimism, and Le Pen balanced critique with patriotic hope. This underscores how visual repertoires and affective cues become central to populist storytelling across different national contexts.

Collectively, these findings highlight the performative dimension of electoral communication in the digital age, where emotional cues are condensed into easily shareable formats. They also resonate with the research conducted by Casas-Mas et al. (2024), who identified broader emotivism trends in digital political communication, showing that emotionally charged content systematically undermines deliberative norms.

The thematic contributions thus situate the European experience within a wider global pattern: An electoral environment where emotions and visuals do not merely accompany politics but increasingly define it.

4. Youth and Political Orientations

Several contributions in this issue examine how digital dynamics shape youth political orientations. Ștefănel (2025a) shows that nearly three-quarters of young Romanians support the idea of a strong leader unconstrained by democratic institutions—a preference tied to eroding trust and reliance on social media for political information. Her article further demonstrates how algorithmic amplification and affective resonance encourage symbolic affirmation and identity performance, while discouraging deliberative engagement.

Bomba's (2025) case study from Italy reinforces this pattern: While young voters on TikTok prioritize issues such as the economy or the environment, political elites focus on migration and security. This mismatch illustrates how platform logics reward expressive participation but fail to sustain substantive dialogue.

Both perspectives reveal the vulnerabilities and the potentials of social media for shaping youth political agency.

5. Electoral Arenas and the Populist Edge of Negativity

Negativity is not merely a campaign tactic—it fuels populism. Research demonstrates that negative messaging on social media amplifies affective polarization. Sarsfield and Abucandab (2024), using observational data from Mexico, show that populist storytelling significantly increases negative emotional polarization online, illustrating how elite narratives shape mass attitudes. Building on this, Haßler et al. (2025) show that across 13 EU member states, populist parties systematically relied on wedge issues such as migration, climate change, and the war in Ukraine, combining them with both populist communication and illiberal rhetoric. Their cross-national analysis of 8,748 Facebook posts demonstrates how these issues function as powerful vehicles for exclusionary narratives, reinforcing polarization and undermining deliberative debate in times of polycrisis.

Within this broader frame, the article by Macková et al. (2025) in this thematic issue demonstrates that in the European Parliament elections—perceived as “second-order”—anti-EU negativity failed to mobilize audiences and, paradoxically, even reduced engagement. This is in sharp contrast to complementary research by Balaban et al. (2024) which shows that, in national campaigns, negativity continues to be a powerful mobilizing force.

Taken together, these perspectives reaffirm the second-order thesis (Reif & Schmitt, 1980), consistent with Boicu et al.'s (2017) earlier observation of the “invisibility” of European Parliament campaigns in Central and South-Eastern Europe. Importantly, second-order dynamics are not only about reduced salience but also about the dominance of platform logics. Amuza et al. (2025) show that in the 2019 European Parliament elections, sheer digital visibility—measured by the volume of Facebook posts—was a stronger predictor of electoral success than message coherence or ideological clarity. Their findings reveal that in low-salience contests, quantity often trumps substance, further weakening the mobilizing capacity of negativity.

6. Media Systems and Polarization

Media systems play an equally decisive role in shaping electoral communication. Rather than serving only as neutral channels of information, they can amplify populist frames or, conversely, attempt to contain them. Recent scholarship shows that partisan ecosystems tend to foster polarization by privileging sensationalism and conflict-oriented coverage, while structural vulnerabilities such as political dependence or economic precarity exacerbate these risks.

Contributions in this thematic issue illustrate how these dynamics manifest across different national contexts. Mitrović et al. (2025) demonstrate that Serbian online portals covered the European Parliament elections superficially and with a predominantly negative tone, excluding citizens from the debate. Bouza-García et al. (2025) point to the structural fragility of Spanish journalism. Complementing this perspective, Casas-Mas et al. (2025) show that in Spain, VOX uniquely articulated a populist and anti-European discourse during the 2024 European elections, while other parties exhibited minimal populist markers. Their study illustrates how the platform X facilitated the amplification of Eurosceptic narratives, reinforcing distrust in both national and European elites.

At the same time, research on Romania and Bulgaria reveals a different logic. Ștefănel et al. (2023) found that mainstream outlets downplayed Euroscepticism during the Schengen crisis, arguably to prevent escalation. Yet such selective silence does not neutralize polarization; it can instead shift contestation to social media where discourse tends to be more populist and radical. When mainstream media fail to engage, online echo chambers quickly fill the void with emotionally charged narratives. Viewed collectively, these insights suggest that media systems do not simply filter political communication but actively shape whether populist polarization is amplified or moderated.

7. Comparative and Global Perspectives

The European patterns documented in this issue resonate with developments across the globe and show that social media decisively boosted the electoral success of far-right parties across the EU-27. Domínguez-García et al. (2025) demonstrates how VOX in Spain and Chega in Portugal mobilized voters through emotionally charged digital repertoires. These findings are consistent with comparative research showing that algorithmic logics privilege polarizing content across cultural contexts. Tucker et al. (2018) found that social media facilitates both populist mobilization and the spread of disinformation worldwide. This mirrors the European experience, where mainstream silence or superficial coverage provides fertile ground for emotionally driven narratives to dominate online.

At the same time, authors such as Grancea and Țuțui (2025) point to possible alternatives. Their proposal of a listening incentives score for AI-powered deliberation offers a normative framework to imagine how digital platforms might be re-engineered to encourage receptivity and responsiveness rather than antagonism. Placing the European evidence in a comparative and global perspective thus confirms both the structural nature of the problem and the urgent need for creative solutions to counter deliberative disintegration.

8. Conclusions

The contributions to this thematic issue converge on a shared insight: Electoral communication in the digital age cannot be understood without considering the infrastructures that sustain it, the emotional repertoires that drive it, the generational shifts that shape it, and the media systems that mediate it.

Infrastructures of manipulation reveal that polarization does not spread in a vacuum but is amplified by architectures that reward inauthentic amplification. Emotional and visual repertoires illustrate how populist actors condense complex political choices into affective and symbolic cues, privileging resonance over argumentation. Analyses of youth orientations show how algorithmic amplification encourages expressive identity performance at the expense of deliberation. Studies of electoral arenas highlight that negativity fuels populism in national campaigns but fails to mobilize in European contests where second-order dynamics and platform logics privilege quantity over quality. Research on media systems reminds us that traditional outlets can either amplify polarization or attempt to contain it—yet their silence often leaves room for populist narratives to flourish online. Finally, comparative and global perspectives demonstrate that these are not isolated phenomena but part of a worldwide reconfiguration of democracy in the digital age.

These findings point to a structural transformation: a “deliberative disintegration” (Ștefănel, 2025b) of political communication. Digital platforms amplify negativity, polarization, and symbolic performance while eroding the very conditions for rational dialogue. This disintegration is not a uniform process; it manifests differently across electoral arenas, media systems, and generational cohorts. Yet its direction is unmistakable: the erosion of deliberative norms in favor of affective mobilization and algorithmic visibility. By identifying and analyzing this process, the contributions gathered here provide not only empirical evidence but also a conceptual lens for one of the most pressing democratic challenges of our time.

Acknowledgments

This project was partially supported by the University of Bucharest, a member of CIVIS—Europe’s Civic University Alliance, reflecting the commitment of universities to address contemporary societal challenges.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

LLMs Disclosure

ChatGPT was used to refine the grammar and as language polishing assistance.

References

- Alcántara-Plá, M. (2025). Political discourse, emotions, and polarization: A case study of the president of the Madrid region. *Media and Communication*, 13, Article 10717. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10717>
- Allegri, M. R. (2024). The impact of disinformation on the functioning of the rule of law and democratic processes in the EU. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research and Development*, 11(S1), Article 98. <https://doi.org/10.56345/ijrdv11n1s116>
- Amuza, A., Fox, B., & Marinescu, V. (2025). Social media strategies in second-order elections: Insights from the 2019 European election campaign. *Media and Communication*, 13, Article 10729. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10729>

- Balaban, D., Macková, A., Burai, K., Grechanaya, T., & Gërguri, D. (2024). The Relationship Between Topics, Negativity, and User Engagement in Election Campaigns on Facebook. *Politics and Governance*, 12, Article 8098. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.8098>
- Beck, U. (1992). *Risk society: Towards a new modernity*. Sage.
- Boicu, R., Branea, S., & Ștefănel, A. (Eds.). (2017). *Political communication and European parliamentary elections in times of crisis: Perspectives from Central and South-Eastern Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan
- Bomba, S. (2025). The long-distance relationship between youth and Italian politics on TikTok: Insights from the 2024 EU election. *Media and Communication*, 13, Article 10677. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10677>
- Bouza-García, L., Sánchez-del-Vas, R., & Tuñón-Navarro, J. (2025). Defining journalistic autonomy in the wake of disinformation in Spain. *Media and Communication*, 13, Article 10651. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10651>
- Casas-Mas, B., Fernández-Marcellán, M., Robles, J. M., & Vélez, D. (2024). Emotivism trends in digital political communication: The influence on the results of the US presidential elections. *Social Sciences*, 13(2), Article 80.
- Casas-Mas, B., Rodríguez-Sáez, A., Gutiérrez, I., Benavides, G. J., & Robles, J. M. (2025). Voices of discontent: Unpacking populist rhetoric in Spain and the rise of anti-European sentiment. *Media and Communication*, 13, Article 10688. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10688>
- Domínguez-García, R., Baptista, J. P., Pérez-Curiel, C., & da Fonseca, D. E. M. (2025). (2025). From emotion to virality: The use of social media in the populism of Chega and VOX. *Social Sciences*, 14(5), Article 255. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14050255>
- Grancea, A., & Țuțui, G. (2025). Scaling up good listening: An assessment framework for AI-powered mass deliberation models. *Media and Communication*, 13, Article 9961. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.9961>
- Haßler, J., Magin, M., Russmann, U., Wurst, A.-K., Balaban, D. C., Baranowski, P., Jensen, J. L., Kruschinski, S., Lappas, G., Machado, S., Novotná, M., Marcos-García, S., Petridis, I., Rožukalne, A., Sebestyén, A., & von Nostitz, F.-C. (2025). Weaponizing wedge issues: Strategies of populism and illiberalism in European election campaigning on Facebook. *Media and Communication*, 13, Article 10718. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10718>
- Horváth, B., Polyák, G., & Urbán, Á. (2025). Outsourced political campaign: Role of pro-government political influencers in spreading hostile narratives in Hungary. *Media and Communication*, 13, Article 10671. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10671>
- Macková, A. P., Čejková, L., Novotná, M., Burai, K., Baranowski, P., & Garaj, M. (2025). When populism targets Europe: Anti-EU rhetoric and user engagement in the Visegrád countries. *Media and Communication*, 13, Article 10613. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10613>
- Messini, S. (2025). Populist political communication on Instagram in the 2024 European elections. *Media and Communication*, 13, Article 10614. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10614>
- Mitrović, M., Vujović, M., & Stamenković, I. (2025). Coverage of the European parliament elections by media portals in Serbia. *Media and Communication*, 13, Article 10633. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10633>
- Novelli, E., Ruggiero, C., & Solaroli, M. (2025). Visual political communication of competing leadership: Italy's 2024 European election campaign on social media. *Media and Communication*, 13, Article 10751. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10751>
- Oprea, B. (2021). Dezinformarea în era digitală. Concepte și abordări. *Sociologie Românească*, 19(1), 70–86.
- Oprea, B. (2023). Use of Facebook accounts with inauthentic behavior in elections: The Romanian presidential election case. *Revista Română de Comunicare și Relații Publice*, 25(3), 53–72.
- Oprea, B., Pașnicu, P., Niculae, A.-N., Bonciu, C.-C., & Tudorașcu-Dobre, D. (2025). Behind the screen: The use

- of Facebook accounts with inauthentic behavior during European elections. *Media and Communication*, 13, Article 10733. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10733>
- Reif, K., & Schmitt, H. (1980). Nine second-order national elections: A conceptual framework for the analysis of European election results. *European Journal of Political Research*, 8(1), 3–44.
- Sarsfield, R., & Abucandab, Z. (2024). Populist storytelling and negative affective polarization: Social media evidence from Mexico. *Latin American Politics and Society*, 66(2), 54–77.
- Ștefănel, A. (2025a). Authoritarian drift and social media's impact on Romanian youth during the 2024 European elections. *Media and Communication*, 13, Article 10617. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10617>
- Ștefănel, A. (2025b). Social media and the deliberative disintegration of political communication: Citizen-candidate dynamics on Facebook during electoral campaigns. *Applied Media Studies Journal*, 6(1), 7–27.
- Ștefănel, A., Momoc, A., & Surugiu, R. (2023). Downplaying euroscepticism in mainstream media: The Schengen accession of Romania and Bulgaria. *Media and Communication*, 11(3), 101–111. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i4.7131>
- Tucker, J. A., Guess, A., Barberá, P., Vaccari, C., Siegel, A., Sanovich, S., Stukal, D., & Nyhan, B. (2018). *Social media, political polarization, and political disinformation: A review of the scientific literature*. SSRN. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3144139>

About the Authors



Adriana Ștefănel is an associate professor of communication studies and head of the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Communication at the University of Bucharest. She holds a PhD in sociology and is interested in political communication, populism, and discourse analysis.



Maria Romana Allegri is an associate professor in public law at the Department of Communication and Social Research, Sapienza University of Rome. She conducted research on algorithmic transparency, right to access the internet, and regulation of social media, with particular reference to political propaganda and disinformation.