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## Table of Contents

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

Adriana Ștefănel and Maria Romana Allegri

### **When Populism Targets Europe: Anti-EU Rhetoric and User Engagement in the Visegrád Countries**

Alena Pospíšil Macková, Lucie Čejková, Martina Novotná, Krisztina Burai, Paweł Baranowski, and Michal Garaj

### **Populist Political Communication on Instagram in the 2024 European Elections**

Sophia Messini

### **Authoritarian Drift and Social Media's Impact on Romanian Youth During the 2024 European Elections**

Adriana Ștefănel

### **Coverage of the European Parliament Elections by Media Portals in Serbia**

Marta Mitrović, Marija Vujović, and Ivana Stamenković

### **Defining Journalistic Autonomy in the Wake of Disinformation in Spain**

Luis Bouza-García, Rocío Sánchez-del-Vas, and Jorge Tuñón-Navarro

### **Outsourced Political Campaign: Role of Pro-Government Political Influencers in Spreading Hostile Narratives in Hungary**

Kata Horváth, Gábor Polyák, and Ágnes Urbán

### **The Long-Distance Relationship Between Youth and Italian Politics on TikTok: Insights From the 2024 EU Election**

Mauro Bomba

### **Voices of Discontent: Unpacking Populist Rhetoric in Spain and the Rise of Anti-European Sentiment**

Belén Casas-Mas, Arturo Rodríguez-Sáez, Inmaculada Gutiérrez, Gerardo Javier Benavides, and José Manuel Robles

### **Political Discourse, Emotions, and Polarization: A Case Study of the President of the Madrid Region**

Manuel Alcántara-Plá

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## Table of Contents

### **Weaponizing Wedge Issues: Strategies of Populism and Illiberalism in European Election Campaigning on Facebook**

Jörg Haßler, Melanie Magin, Uta Russmann, Anna-Katharina Wurst, Delia Cristina Balaban, Paweł Baranowski, Jakob Linaa Jensen, Simon Kruschinski, Georgios Lappas, Sara Machado, Martina Novotná, Silvia Marcos-García, Ioannis Petridis, Anda Rožukalne, Annamária Sebestyén, and Felix-Christopher von Nostitz

### **Social Media Strategies in Second-Order Elections: Insights From the 2019 European Election Campaign**

Antonio Amuza, Bianca Fox, and Valentina Marinescu

### **Behind the Screen: The Use of Facebook Accounts With Inauthentic Behavior During European Elections**

Bogdan Oprea, Paula Paşnicu, Alexandru-Ninel Niculae, Constantin-Cozmin Bonciu, and Dragoş Tudoraşcu-Dobre

### **Visual Political Communication of Competing Leadership: Italy's 2024 European Election Campaign on Social Media**

Edoardo Novelli, Christian Ruggiero, and Marco Solaroli

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

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## 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.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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# When Populism Targets Europe: Anti-EU Rhetoric and User Engagement in the Visegrád Countries

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## Abstract

Criticism of the EU has become a common feature of political communication in Central and Eastern Europe and it is often tied to broader concerns about democratic erosion and distrust in institutions. This study investigates how anti-EU rhetoric was employed on Facebook by political actors in the Visegrád countries (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) during the 2024 European Parliament elections and how it relates to the populist style of communication. Drawing on a comparative content analysis of more than 6,000 posts, the study examines how messages that negatively target the EU incorporate elements of populist rhetoric and emotional tools, such as fear speech and patriotic symbols. The findings show that populist actors were the most frequent users of anti-EU messaging, with anti-elitist framing as the strongest and most consistent rhetorical strategy, often accompanied by other emotional tools. Despite political differences, anti-EU campaigning showed consistent regional patterns. This article contributes to research on political communication by offering a regional comparison, incorporating visual analysis, and challenging the idea that negative messaging is a reliable strategy for mobilising audiences online.

## Keywords

anti-EU rhetoric; European Parliament elections; fear speech; negative campaigning; patriotic visuals; populism; social media; user engagement; Visegrád countries

## 1. Introduction

In the context of rising political instability and democratic erosion across Europe, criticism of the EU has become a common feature of political discourse. In Central and Eastern Europe, anti-EU rhetoric is often used to challenge institutional authority and mobilise disillusioned voters. Such rhetoric has been linked to increasing political distrust, polarisation, and the revival of nationalist sentiment (Brosius et al., 2018; Kiratli, 2023).

Social media allows political actors to directly deliver emotionally charged, visually striking, and conflict-oriented content to audiences (Charvát et al., 2022; Engesser et al., 2017). These affordances are particularly well-suited to negative and populist campaigning (Engesser et al., 2017). Moreover, emotionally resonant and visually impactful content may help mobilise support and generate user engagement, even in elections that typically suffer from lower visibility and voter engagement. The 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections, which placed the EU at the center of the debate, thus provide a timely opportunity to examine how political actors across different countries strategically deployed anti-EU messages on social media.

This study focuses on the Visegrád countries (V4; Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia), where EU-critical narratives have become central to political communication and populist actors have gained prominence. Examining the Visegrád region provides insights into Facebook-based political campaigns within post-communist contexts that were marked by shared accession to the EU in 2004 and recurring criticism of EU institutions (Végh, 2018). Despite these similarities, communication strategies differ across countries because they are shaped by local political dynamics and electoral competitiveness. This diversity enables a comparative perspective that can reveal shared and divergent patterns.

While previous research has explored the link between populism and anti-EU rhetoric (Kneuer, 2019; Pirro & Taggart, 2018; Rooduijn & van Kessel, 2019), this study introduces new contributions. First, it provides a cross-national comparison from Central and Eastern Europe, a region still underrepresented in communication studies. Second, it incorporates the visual and emotional repertoire of online campaigning, specifically patriotic symbolism and fear-based appeals, which are often overlooked in studies that focus solely on textual content. Third, it evaluates whether these rhetorical strategies increase user engagement during elections that typically lack strong mobilising power.

Grounded in theories and research on issues that include negative campaigning, anti-EU rhetoric (Maier et al., 2025; Nai et al., 2022), populist communication (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), visual framing (Schill, 2012), and the role of emotional appeals (Jost et al., 2020; Tønnesen et al., 2025), the study empirically tests the use and effectiveness of these strategies in a context where populist actors are prominent and the EU is a frequent target. Combining comparative quantitative content analysis with engagement metrics on Facebook challenges the assumption that negative or emotionally charged content automatically translates into higher interaction. In doing so, the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how anti-EU discourse functions online, particularly during second-order elections like those to the EP.

## 2. Theory

### 2.1. *Negative Campaigning Against the EU*

Facebook has long been a key tool in election campaigns to primarily disseminate political content (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). Its centrality to campaign communication has grown, especially during elections, where parties rely on it to reach and activate supporters. In the V4 region, Facebook remains the most widely used platform among the population. It is heavily employed for political communication, even though its importance as a news source is declining and other platforms, such as TikTok, are gaining popularity (Newman et al., 2024). At the same time, the platform's affordances make it suitable for more aggressive forms of messaging, including attacks on political opponents and institutions.

Negative campaigning refers to communication that criticises or attacks political opponents rather than emphasises one's strengths (Surlin & Gordon, 1977). Politicians who employ negative campaigns typically use aggressive language, strategic framing, or disinformation to differentiate themselves from opponents (Nai, 2021). Although such tactics can help voters distinguish among candidates (Mattes & Redlawsk, 2014; Papp & Patkós, 2019), research shows they negatively impact society and reduce trust (Ansolabehere et al., 1994).

These risks are severe when the target is not a competing candidate or party, but the EU itself. Frequent anti-EU messages reinforce the mistrust of EU institutions (Brosius et al., 2018; Kiratli, 2023). In the context of EP elections, this strategy takes on specific relevance. These elections are often seen as lower-stakes and less visible, which gives parties (particularly radical ones and those in opposition) more space to use confrontational language. Recent research shows that the EP setting can encourage stronger attacks on the EU itself, because parties face fewer political costs and they can use the campaign to challenge the legitimacy of supranational institutions (Maier et al., 2025).

It is important to distinguish negative campaigning toward the EU as a rhetorical practice from broader Euroscepticism. Whereas Euroscepticism represents a long-term critical stance toward EU integration or policies (Rooduijn & van Kessel, 2019; Ruzza et al., 2021), anti-EU campaigning refers to rhetorical efforts to undermine the image, credibility, or authority of the EU during campaigns. While Eurosceptic politicians frequently use negative campaigning, not all negative campaigning necessarily reflects deeper Eurosceptic beliefs. This makes it a flexible and potentially opportunistic tactic that is employed across diverse ideological contexts. This distinction is important when analysing online campaigning, where strategic negativity may not reflect long-term ideological commitments. Anti-EU rhetoric itself also varies: it can take an exclusionary form, focused on sovereignty and identity (typical for the radical right), or an inclusive form, which emphasises the democratic or social deficits of the EU—which are more common on the left (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2020).

The V4 offer valuable insights into this phenomenon due to their shared history and distinct differences in anti-EU rhetoric and attitudes. In Czechia, traditional EU criticism is often mixed with conspiracy theories and sovereignty-focused narratives, despite recognition of the economic benefits of EU membership (Havlík, 2011). Slovakia has recently seen intensified rhetoric that combines anti-EU and anti-NATO sentiments with pan-Slavic nostalgia and conspiracy theories (Dubóczy & Ružičková, 2023). Poland's ruling party, Prawo i

Sprawiedliwość, maintains a moderate institutional criticism, though more radical actors voice stronger anti-EU positions (Nai et al., 2022). Hungary, under Viktor Orbán and his party Fidesz, presents the most illustrative case of systematic anti-EU messaging, combining state-sponsored narratives with strategic communication against EU institutions (Klingová, 2020). However, the 2024 EP elections in Hungary were held alongside municipal elections, which likely shifted campaign priorities toward domestic issues. Additionally, Fidesz's recent communication has increasingly focused on the war in Ukraine, while some of its more confrontational messages have been outsourced to affiliated media and influencer networks (Bene & Juhász, 2025).

These national differences shape the intensity and nature of anti-EU messaging on social media and motivate our central research question:

RQ1: How does the occurrence of negative campaigning against the EU on Facebook differ across V4?

## **2.2. Campaigning Against the EU and Populism**

Building on the growing prevalence of negative campaigning that targets the EU (Holtz-Bacha & Johansson, 2022), this section explores how such communication is embedded within populist narratives. Populist communication typically frames politics as a struggle between “ordinary people” and a distant, self-serving elite. In this study, we follow a widely used definition of populist communication that includes three key elements: anti-elitism; appeals to the people as a unified and morally superior group; and portrayals of threatening “others,” such as immigrants, feminists, or international institutions, who are seen as endangering national identity or values (Bos, 2024; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Jost et al., 2020). These rhetorical elements form a flexible toolkit that can be adapted to different ideological positions and environments.

Populism has been conceptualised in three main ways: as a “thin-centered” ideology (Mudde, 2004), as a political strategy, and as a communicative style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Each perspective offers insights into how and why populist actors embrace EU critique. The first perspective views populism as a thin ideology that must attach itself to more substantial host ideologies or issues. The EU is a convenient host issue because it is often depicted as remote and technocratic, showing elite governance as disconnected from citizens in individual countries. It makes the EU an ideal target for actors who portray themselves as defenders of “the people” against a distant power. The EU plays a key role in populist narratives because it embodies the right kind of elite that populism opposes. Pirro and Taggart (2018) argue that the EU's technocratic character, lack of transparency, and weak links to citizens make it especially vulnerable to populist criticism.

Importantly, the relationship between populism and EU criticism works both ways. Populist actors often adopt anti-EU messages to support their broader narratives of elite betrayal and rapid national decline (Styczyńska & Meijer, 2024). Conversely, political actors who criticise the EU frequently employ a populist communication style. This overlap is especially pronounced among radical right parties, but it is not exclusive to them. Populist and Eurosceptic narratives frequently coincide, though not automatically (Havlík & Kaniok, 2016; Pirro & Taggart, 2018; Rooduijn & van Kessel, 2019).



The “tandem” of populism and EU criticism (Kneuer, 2019) is particularly pronounced in Central and Eastern Europe, where right-wing populist parties have portrayed the EU not only as technocratic but also as morally corrupt and culturally threatening (Csehi & Zgut, 2021). This framing aligns with sovereignty-based nationalism and signals a shift from soft to hard Euroscepticism (Szczepiak & Taggart, 2024).

However, this pattern is not uniformly applicable across the V4 region. In Czechia, the link between populism and EU criticism is less straightforward. As Havlík and Kaniok (2016) argue, populist attitudes do not necessarily translate into Euroscepticism. ANO, a dominant centrist-populist party, avoids systemic EU critique. Its style, described as technocratic populism, combines anti-elitist rhetoric with managerial pragmatism (Bušíková & Guasti, 2018). While avoiding systemic EU criticism, the party has recently shifted toward soft Euroscepticism, stressing national sovereignty and attacking “European elites.” However, unlike Svoboda a přímá demokracie, the radical-right party that pushes hard Eurosceptic rhetoric and even EU withdrawal, ANO’s stance remains mild (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2024). This distinction echoes broader trends in the region. Centrist and radical right populists diverge in their EU-related discourse. While radical right actors often rely on framing to portray the EU as a threat to national identity (Styczyńska & Meijer, 2024), centrist populists tend to adopt a more pragmatic and depoliticised communication style (Petrović et al., 2023).

These dynamics were reflected in the campaigns for the 2024 EP elections, where several prominent populist parties from the region played a central role. In Czechia, centrist ANO, led by Andrej Babiš, won the elections with a focus on domestic issues and selected policy critiques rather than overt anti-EU messaging. In contrast, the far-right Svoboda a přímá demokracie ran a distinctly Eurosceptic campaign, emphasising national sovereignty and opposing EU migration and climate policies (Charvát et al., 2022; Havlík & Kluknavská, 2024). Fidesz maintained its dominant position in Hungary with its long-standing portrayal of the EU as threatening national values. In Slovakia, SMER–sociálna demokracia, under Robert Fico, emphasised strong anti-EU and nationalist rhetoric and emerged as the leading party. In Poland, Prawo i Sprawiedliwość remained one of the strongest parties by continuing to combine cultural conservatism with criticism of EU institutions. These parties participated in the elections and set the tone through the consistent use of anti-elitist and, in several cases, strong anti-EU rhetoric.

In summary, populist framing offers both a symbolic and strategic advantage in anti-EU communication, though its manifestation varies across political and national contexts. Based on this reasoning and previous research, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1a: Posts on Facebook that employ negative campaigning against the EU are more likely to include populist communication styles.

H1b: Populist parties and candidates use negative campaigns against the EU on Facebook more than non-populist parties and candidates.

### **2.3. Visual Nationalism and Fear Speech in Communication**

Negative rhetoric against the EU often includes more than just critical language. Eurosceptic and populist actors also use strong visuals and emotional cues to make their messages more powerful. We focus on two

prominent strategies: patriotic imagery, which highlights national identity; and fear-based language, which presents the EU as a threat. Though different in form, both approaches help intensify the emotional tone and persuasive influence of anti-EU communication.

Patriotic symbols can be used to strengthen anti-EU narratives. These visuals counter the threat posed by European integration, appealing to the voters' sense of identity and national pride. References to flags, maps, national traditions, and historical events help construct a collective image of "the people" and contribute to boundaries between "us" and "them" (Schertzer & Woods, 2021).

These patterns reflect how patriotic imagery works as a symbolic push back against European integration, as explained by theories of visual framing and banal nationalism. The visual framing theory (Schill, 2012) posits that images act as "implied arguments," without explicit statements. Such imagery gains persuasive force in highly visual environments, especially when it appeals to identity or evokes threat-related emotions. These emotionally charged cues are also more likely to amplify engagement based on algorithms (Huang, 2024). At the same time, these visuals gain power from what Billig (1995) calls banal nationalism, which is the everyday use of national symbols to build a sense of belonging. In online settings, this kind of symbolic reinforcement becomes part of what Huang (2024) calls the "digital fabric of nationalism," where social media keeps reminding users of national identity. These visuals act as emotional symbols of national belonging, often contrasting with the EU's more abstract image.

In V4, national identity plays a crucial symbolic role in political communication. Across country-related contexts, patriotic visuals are often used to portray the EU as a distant, bureaucratic threat to sovereignty (Charvát et al., 2022; Charvátová & Filipec, 2022; Dubóczy & Ružicková, 2023; Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022). Farkas et al. (2022) show that while emotional and symbolic visuals are common across populist and non-populist parties, national imagery is particularly prominent in populist and anti-EU discourse. This visual emphasis on national identity often contrasts with how the EU is portrayed—distant and technocratic. In the context of the EP elections, where national and supranational identities come into direct tension, such contrasts may intensify emotional responses. In this way, patriotic visuals not only express opposition to the EU but also lay the groundwork for fear-based narratives to mobilise support (Marchal et al., 2021).

Fear-based appeals often build on the contrast established by national symbolism. While patriotic imagery visually asserts the value of national identity, fear-inducing rhetoric emphasises the dangers posed by external force—the EU. Fear in political communication is typically strategic, aiming to provoke strong emotional responses and to enhance message impact. This is particularly effective when audiences are already engaged, such as followers of political parties on social media (Horowitz, 1969). According to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) appraisal theory, individuals evaluate the perceived threats and this process can intensify emotions, like fear, especially when threats seem uncontrollable. Populist and radical actors often use such messaging to portray the EU as dangerous to national sovereignty, culture, and security (Scheller, 2019).

This framing is evident in Central and Eastern Europe. While overall negativity levels in EP elections are comparable to national elections (Maier et al., 2025), extreme parties tend to adopt a more confrontational tone. They intensify fear-based messaging, incivility, and criticism of the EU while reducing positive or enthusiasm-based appeals (Nai & Maier, 2021). In the V4, where Euroscepticism has long shaped political

discourse, parties such as Fidesz in Hungary and Kotleba's Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko in Slovakia consistently employ the harshest rhetoric and depict the EU as a threat (Scheller, 2019). Hloušek et al. (2024) show that leaders like Tomio Okamura (Czechia), Milan Uhrík (Slovakia), and László Toroczkai (Hungary) use emotionally charged language (i.e., fear and angry appeals) on social media to portray international crises as domestic threats, targeting the EU and migrants.

In EP elections, the supranational character of these elections can further intensify the contrast between national identity and European integration, reinforcing the appeal of patriotic and fear-based messaging. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H2: Negative campaigning against the EU on Facebook will likely include patriotic symbols.

H3: Negative campaigning against the EU on Facebook is associated with a higher prevalence of fear speech.

## **2.4. Campaigning Against the EU and User Engagement**

Several studies indicate that negativity significantly boosts user engagement on social media because such content attracts attention, stimulates deeper cognitive processing, and triggers emotional reactions. Negative posts that involve attacks or blame-shifting, emotionally charged rhetoric (such as anger or fear), and anti-elitist messages consistently achieve higher engagement rates, including more comments, shares, and "anger" reactions (Balaban et al., 2024; Bene et al., 2022; Humprecht et al., 2024; Jost et al., 2020). Although foreign policy topics typically receive less attention on social media, EU-related negativity appears to be an exception. Posts that portray the EU as an elitist and distant institution can strongly resonate with populist anti-elitist sentiments, amplifying user engagement (Bene et al., 2022; Heidenreich et al., 2022).

However, EP elections, often viewed as lower-priority, second-order contests, introduce a dynamic that differs from national elections. The parties face fewer risks and have more freedom to use confrontational rhetoric (Maier et al., 2025). As shown by Daniel and Obholzer (2025), candidates from Eurosceptic parties post more frequently during EP campaigns and their content generates higher levels of user engagement. Comparative research about the 2019 EP elections by Baranowski et al. (2022) found that negative campaigning was among the most widely shared content, particularly when directed against the EU. This highlights the viral potential of anti-EU messaging in the context of EP campaigns. While Bene et al. (2022), on the same EP election, confirm the engagement-boosting effect of general negativity and populist appeals, they do not distinguish anti-EU content as a separate category. These findings support the view that the EP context can amplify the emotional and viral potential of negative messaging, especially when combined with populist, patriotic, or fear-based appeals.

User engagement is conceptualised as a measure of interaction with content (Russmann et al., 2024). While earlier studies primarily focused on metrics such as likes, comments, and shares, recent research also includes emotional reactions like anger, love, wow, haha, and sad, which capture affective responses more precisely (Bene et al., 2022; Bil-Jaruzelska & Monzer, 2022; Humprecht et al., 2024; Tønnesen et al., 2025). Research shows that positive emotional responses often drive forms of engagement that require less effort (e.g., likes, emojis). In contrast, negative emotions more strongly predict more profound forms of

engagement, such as comments and shares, especially when linked to anti-elitist or threat-based messages (Jost et al., 2020; Martella & Bracciale, 2022; Tønnesen et al., 2025).

Building on this evidence, we examine how anti-EU posts that employ populist rhetoric, fear appeals, and patriotic symbols affect user engagement. Given their emotional and mobilising potential in the low-scrutiny environment of EP elections, such rhetorical strategies may affect how users react to political content online. We hypothesize:

H4: Posts with negative messages about the EU on Facebook generate higher user engagement than those without.

Last but not least, considering the specific interplay of diverse elements of populist rhetoric, fear appeals, and patriotic symbols in anti-EU messaging, we pose a question:

RQ2: How do including populist rhetoric, fear appeals, and patriotic symbols in anti-EU posts interact to influence user engagement on Facebook in the Visegrád region?

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Data and Procedure

This study employs standardised quantitative content analysis to examine Facebook posts from political parties and politicians during the 2024 EP campaign. This research is part of a larger scientific collaboration network, CamforS, that involves scientists from most EU countries; we focus here on four countries. Data collection was centralised to ensure maximum comparability across national contexts and the coding process was standardised. Data was collected from public pages with Crowdtangle, spanning the four weeks leading up to the elections (May 11, 2024, to June 9, 2024). Following the project rules, the sample includes national parties that received at least 5% of the 2024 EP election vote (Table 1). In cases where individual politicians and/or party coalitions with dedicated Facebook pages played a significant role in the campaign, the public pages of these politicians/coalitions were also included (see Table 1; a detailed list of political actors with their ideological affiliation is provided in Table A of the Supplementary File).

While automated methods are becoming more common (e.g., Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011), manual coding remains important, especially for posts that combine text, images, and video. These elements often work together to shape meaning in ways that are hard to capture automatically. In this case, manual coding allows us to better interpret strategies and visual symbolism that are central to how actors communicate. Coding in each country was thus performed by three coders, following an international codebook (in English) with clearly defined categories developed by the leaders of the CamforS network. To ensure consistency and international comparability, coders participated in national training sessions. All coders participated in two intercoder reliability tests. The international test, conducted in English, used a set of 100 posts from various European parties and served as the primary benchmark for comparability across countries. Based on 100 posts from each country's dataset, national tests complemented this process by addressing context-specific challenges. We report results from the international tests conducted among all coders. Intercoder reliability was assessed using Brennan and Prediger's kappa and Holsti's coefficient (Quarfoot &

**Table 1.** Sample.

| Country  | Number of parties, coalitions, and politicians | Number of all posts in the period | Number of posts in the sample | N (% of the sample) of negative posts against the EU |
|----------|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| Czechia  | 8 parties<br>2 coalitions<br>7 politicians     | 2,242                             | 2,242                         | 169 (7.5%)                                           |
| Hungary  | 5 parties<br>1 coalition<br>3 politicians      | 1,885                             | 1,203                         | 22 (1.8%)                                            |
| Poland   | 10 parties<br>14 politicians                   | 1,855                             | 1,855                         | 141 (7.6%)                                           |
| Slovakia | 5 parties<br>3 politicians                     | 859                               | 859                           | 75 (8.7%)                                            |

Levine, 2016). All categories showed good reliability with the only exception being “people-centrism” which scored 0.59 in kappa (i.e., moderate agreement), but 0.90 in Holsti, indicating high raw agreement (see Supplementary File). Coding was implemented consistently with the SoSci Survey platform, and all data were centrally cleaned. In Czechia, Poland, and Slovakia, we coded all available posts. Hungary used a standardised sampling strategy (described in the Supplementary File), following procedures established within the research network. While we acknowledge that this may affect the descriptive comparability (Table 1), it should not significantly bias the analytical results because our models control for country-level variation and actor-specific effects.

### 3.2. Variables and Measures

For the variable “negative campaigning toward the EU,” we coded whether EU institutions were the target of such campaigning, defined as statements, images, or expressions conveying rejection, hostility, dislike, or hatred.

The category “populist communication” captures populist rhetoric in posts to analyse textual and visual content. Based on the conceptual definition (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), which is mentioned in Section 2.2, we distinguish three main elements associated with populist communication. “Anti-elitism” is the post that blames or discredits the elite (e.g., politicians, media) for societal problems, questions their legitimacy, or calls for resistance. “People-centrism” appeals to “the people” as a unified community, portraying them as the true sovereign against the elite. And, posts including “references to the dangerous others” present specific groups as threats to the nation’s future or values. “Ethnic danger” refers to ethnic or cultural “others,” while “political danger” applies to political “others” who are portrayed as holding allegedly dangerous opinions.

“Fear speech” was identified if the post explicitly conveyed fear-inducing content by emphasising threats, risks, or insecurity through detailed elaboration, brief alarmist statements, or broad threat narratives.

We captured the presence of “patriotic symbols,” such as a national flag or coat of arms (see Farkas et al., 2022), in the first image or video of a post. For images, only the first visual element is coded. In videos, only

the first minute (excluding subtitles) is considered. The definition of patriotic symbols may vary depending on the national context and whether it has been discussed in national teams. A detailed codebook is available in Table B of the Supplementary File.

“User engagement” refers to how users interact with political content on Facebook, reflecting different levels of involvement, sentiment, and willingness to spread the message. Following the approach to user engagement by Balaban et al. (2024), we adopted a broader definition that includes all available reactions under the post on Facebook. Engagement on Facebook is measured through three main types of interactions: reactions, which go beyond the basic “like” to include love, haha, wow, sad, angry, and care; commenting, which involves adding text responses to the post; and sharing, which, together with commenting, indicates a higher level of active engagement.

### 3.3. Analysis

We utilised the generalised linear mixed-effects models module of IBM SPSS Statistics v30. Given the hierarchical structure of our dataset, where posts were nested within political actors’ Facebook profiles, we specified the random effect block for actors. This approach allowed us to control for actor-specific variability.

For RQ1, three models were tested. First, we fitted the null model. Next, we built Model 1 (H1–H3) to examine the binary outcome variable for negative campaigning toward the EU. To capture cross-national differences, we included the country of origin of the posting actor as a fixed effect. The unbalanced nature of the data (i.e., differences in posts’ numbers across countries) was addressed by applying the Satterthwaite approximation for degrees of freedom and employing robust estimation procedures. Model 2 (H4) extended the initial model by incorporating fixed effects for engagement.

For RQ2, we used models with the same random effect structure and country-level fixed effects. This set of models predicted reactions, comments, and shares. First, we produced the base null model, assessed only the main effects (Model 1), and finally included two-way interactions between negativity toward the EU, populist rhetoric, fear speech, and patriotic symbols (Model 2). The Satterthwaite approximation and robust estimation techniques were applied to correct for possible non-linearity issues and differences in the number of posts across countries.

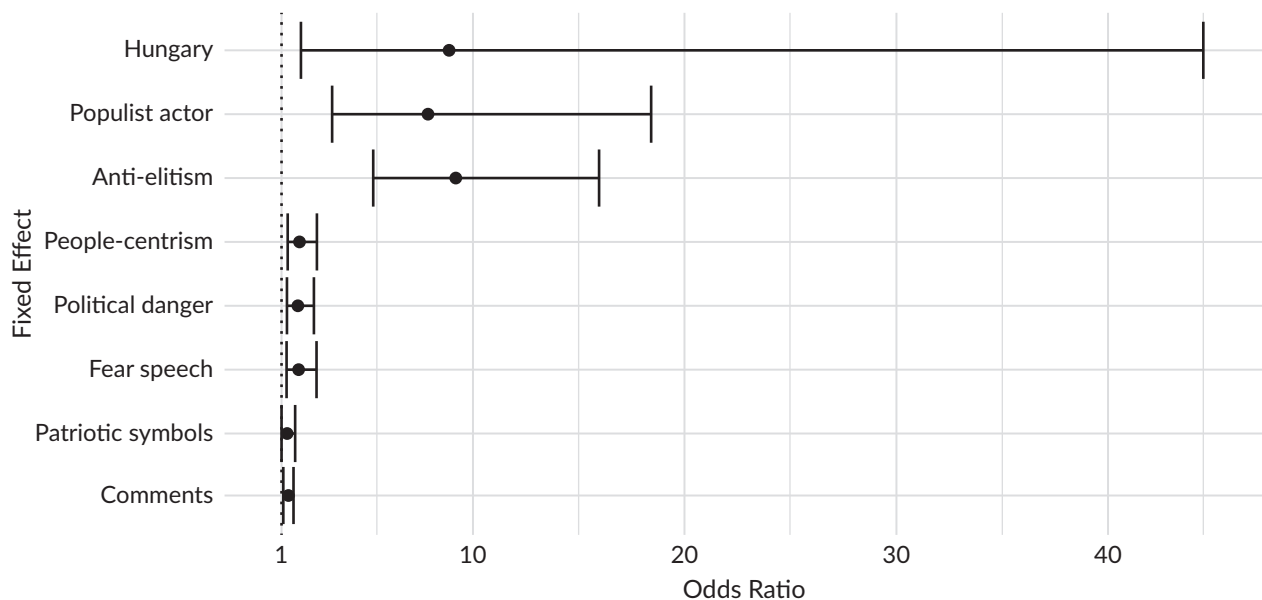
We used Grammarly and ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-4) to refine language and consult selected aspects of the statistical analysis.

## 4. Results

The first part of the analysis focused on factors related to the negativity against the EU (RQ1). We compared the null model with Model 1 (i.e., without engagement) and three versions of Model 2 (i.e., with engagement measures such as count, log-transformed, and square root-transformed) to obtain the best results. All model information criteria results are reported in Table C in the Supplementary File. Only Model 2, with log-transformed engagement values and binomial distribution with a logit link function, performed better than the null model. While this model omits posts with zero shares ( $n = 687$ , 11.2%) and comments ( $n = 225$ ,



3.7%) due to log transformation, it is the only statistically reliable model from all of the models tested for RQ1. We thus interpret this model, highlighting its key findings in Figure 1 and reporting full results in Table D in the Supplementary File.



**Figure 1.** Odds ratios (with 95% CI) of significant fixed effects of negativity toward the EU.

Results show that, compared to Slovakia (i.e., the reference category), Hungarian actors were more likely to post negatively about the EU ( $OR = 8.917$ ,  $p = .009$ ). However, we found no significant differences for actors from Czechia or Poland.

Building on these country-level patterns, we examined how anti-EU rhetoric relates to the populist communication style (H1a). The analysis shows that anti-elitist framing is by far the strongest predictor of EU-critical messaging ( $OR = 9.207$ ,  $p < .001$ ), which is consistent with the notion that the EU often functions as a symbolic elite in populist discourse (Bos, 2024; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Other elements, such as people-centrism ( $OR = 1.841$ ,  $p = .001$ ) and references to politically dangerous others ( $OR = 1.772$ ,  $p = .001$ ), also increased the likelihood of negative EU content though to a lesser extent.

In addition, posts published by populist actors were more likely to include anti-EU rhetoric ( $OR = 7.898$ ,  $p < .001$ ), supporting the idea that Eurosceptic messaging is closely intertwined with populist party communication (H1b; Mudde, 2004; Rooduijn & van Kessel, 2019). Beyond populism, two other rhetorical strategies were also linked to a higher likelihood of EU-critical content: fear-based language ( $OR = 1.809$ ,  $p = .002$ ) and the use of patriotic symbols ( $OR = 1.282$ ,  $p = .044$ ), pointing to the emotional and symbolic dimension of anti-EU appeals (H2 and H3). Lastly, posts that targeted the EU generated more comments ( $OR = 1.282$ ,  $p = .007$ ) though they did not significantly increase the number of reactions or shares.

The second part of the analysis examined how rhetorical strategies within anti-EU posts influenced user engagement (Table 2; RQ2, H4). Due to the skewness of the dependent variables, each type of engagement was estimated in three versions of the models to choose the best model for our data: first with original count values (i.e., negative binomial distribution, log link); second with log-transformed values of engagement

**Table 2.** Results for reactions, comments, and shares.

|                             | Reactions |           |          |          |           |          | Comments |           |          |          |           |          | Shares   |           |          |          |           |          |
|-----------------------------|-----------|-----------|----------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|-----------|----------|
|                             | Model 1   |           |          | Model 2  |           |          | Model 1  |           |          | Model 2  |           |          | Model 1  |           |          | Model 2  |           |          |
|                             | <i>b</i>  | <i>SE</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>b</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>b</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>b</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>b</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>b</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>p</i> |
| Intercept                   | 6.684     | .6041     | <.001    | 6.526    | .6065     | <.001    | 4.362    | .6293     | <.001    | 4.043    | .6168     | <.001    | 4.527    | .6702     | .011     | 4.03     | .6932     | .009     |
| Czechia                     | −1.296    | .6077     | .067     | −1.292   | .6083     | .07      | −.438    | .6568     | .516     | −.432    | .6575     | .522     | −1.461   | .6669     | .100     | −1.454   | .6668     | .104     |
| Hungary                     | −.318     | .7933     | .712     | −.317    | .793      | .714     | −.39     | .912      | .690     | −.387    | .9117     | .692     | .076     | .7915     | .928     | .075     | .7914     | .928     |
| Poland                      | −.542     | .6019     | .386     | −.538    | .6022     | .389     | .185     | .6699     | .783     | .19      | .6702     | .778     | −.453    | .6418     | .533     | −.445    | .642      | .542     |
| Neg. EU                     | .065      | .0954     | .499     | .314     | .2572     | .241     | .12      | .0838     | .158     | .618     | .308      | .062     | .05      | .1323     | .707     | .901     | .2492     | <.001    |
| Anti-elitism                | −.065     | .0658     | .332     | .06      | .1494     | .705     | −.134    | .0711     | .085     | −.16     | .1058     | .139     | −.332    | .0899     | .002     | −.087    | .1669     | .605     |
| People-centrism             | −.047     | .0461     | .323     | −.119    | .1314     | .382     | .005     | .0508     | .922     | .008     | .1339     | .952     | −.093    | .0598     | .131     | −.064    | .0813     | .430     |
| Ethnic danger               | −.206     | .1456     | .159     | −.2      | .2462     | .419     | −.315    | .1693     | .067     | −.344    | .2713     | .211     | −.334    | .1863     | .084     | −.262    | .2828     | .357     |
| Political danger            | −.126     | .0596     | .035     | −.113    | .1475     | .447     | −.175    | .0637     | .010     | .029     | .1278     | .823     | −.28     | .0784     | <.001    | −.067    | .1588     | .672     |
| Fear speech                 | .001      | .0785     | .985     | .203     | .0982     | .041     | −.101    | .0829     | .229     | .256     | .1415     | .089     | −0.118   | 0.0915    | .212     | .167     | .133      | .216     |
| Patriotic symbols           | .012      | .0567     | .841     | .105     | .1864     | .583     | .034     | .0627     | .593     | .128     | .2026     | .532     | −0.013   | 0.0523    | .805     | .104     | .1909     | .588     |
| Neg. EU × Anti-elitism      |           |           |          | −0.144   | 0.1436    | .364     |          |           |          | .036     | .1021     | .729     |          |           |          | −.286    | .1606     | .109     |
| Neg. EU × People-centrism   |           |           |          | 0.081    | 0.1458    | .588     |          |           |          | −.012    | .149      | .936     |          |           |          | −.065    | .1071     | .550     |
| Neg. EU × Ethnic danger     |           |           |          | −0.057   | 0.2535    | .830     |          |           |          | −.069    | .3696     | .854     |          |           |          | −.288    | .2347     | .228     |
| Neg. EU × Political danger  |           |           |          | −0.008   | 0.1609    | .959     |          |           |          | −.232    | .1327     | .082     |          |           |          | −.242    | .1778     | .176     |
| Neg. EU × Fear speech       |           |           |          | −0.239   | 0.1142    | .042     |          |           |          | −.416    | .1586     | .016     |          |           |          | −.33     | .1389     | .020     |
| Neg. EU × Patriotic symbols |           |           |          | −0.099   | 0.183     | .592     |          |           |          | −.103    | .1919     | .594     |          |           |          | −.126    | .1869     | .504     |

**Table 2.** (Cont.) Results for reactions, comments, and shares.

|                                   | Reactions |            |          |          |            |          | Comments |            |          |          |            |          | Shares   |            |          |          |            |          |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|------------|----------|----------|------------|----------|----------|------------|----------|----------|------------|----------|----------|------------|----------|----------|------------|----------|
|                                   | Model 1   |            |          | Model 2  |            |          | Model 1  |            |          | Model 2  |            |          | Model 1  |            |          | Model 2  |            |          |
|                                   | <i>b</i>  | SE         | <i>p</i> | <i>b</i> | SE         | <i>p</i> | <i>b</i> | SE         | <i>p</i> | <i>b</i> | SE         | <i>p</i> | <i>b</i> | SE         | <i>p</i> | <i>b</i> | SE         | <i>p</i> |
| <i>N</i>                          |           | 6,159      |          |          | 6,159      |          |          | 5,934      |          |          | 5,934      |          |          | 5,472      |          |          | 5,472      |          |
| <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> marginal    |           | .081       |          |          | .082       |          |          | .022       |          |          | .023       |          |          | .134       |          |          | .137       |          |
| <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> conditional |           | .655       |          |          | .655       |          |          | .637       |          |          | .638       |          |          | .602       |          |          | .603       |          |
| Adj. ICC                          |           | .624       |          |          | .624       |          |          | .629       |          |          | .629       |          |          | .540       |          |          | .540       |          |
| –2LL                              |           | 17,971.720 |          |          | 17,976.685 |          |          | 19,459.228 |          |          | 19,454.769 |          |          | 17,433.501 |          |          | 17,420.763 |          |
| AIC                               |           | 17,975.722 |          |          | 17,980.687 |          |          | 19,463.230 |          |          | 19,458.771 |          |          | 17,437.503 |          |          | 17,424.765 |          |
| BIC                               |           | 17,989.168 |          |          | 17,994.131 |          |          | 19,476.601 |          |          | 19,472.140 |          |          | 17,450.711 |          |          | 17,437.971 |          |

**Notes:** Reference category for countries–Slovakia; Values of reactions, comments, and shares are based on their log-transformed values, with random intercept controls for the level of actors.

(i.e., normal distribution, identity link); and third with square root-transformed values of engagement (i.e., normal distribution, identity link). After fitting these three sets of models, we compared the information criteria of all alternative models with their respective null models. Table E in the Supplementary File summarises this process. Again, the alternative models with log-transformed engagement values best fit all three types of engagement.

When looking at how different populist elements relate to user engagement, political danger framing was the only element consistently associated with lower levels of engagement (Model 1 only; reactions:  $b = -.126$ ,  $p = .035$ ; comments:  $b = -.175$ ,  $p = .010$ ; shares:  $b = -.280$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In other words, posts that refrained from highlighting political danger were more engaging; however, the effects were no longer significant in Model 2 when interactions were included, which indicates that the effect may disappear in combinations of rhetorical strategies. Similarly, anti-elitist posts had fewer shares ( $b = -0.332$ ,  $p = .002$ ), but only in Model 1.

Furthermore, fear speech had a positive main effect on reactions in Model 2 only ( $b = .203$ ,  $p = .041$ ), meaning that posts including fear speech induced more reactions. Model 2 also revealed that anti-EU posts generated more shares ( $b = .901$ ,  $p < .001$ ). No other variables had significant main effects.

In Model 2, we tested whether rhetorical strategies generated engagement when presented with negativity toward the EU. Significant interaction effects were observed between fear speech and anti-EU messaging across all types of engagement. The interaction was negative, indicating that combining fear speech with negativity toward the EU reduced the amount of reactions ( $b = -.239$ ,  $p = .042$ ), user comments ( $b = -.416$ ,  $p = .016$ ), and shares ( $b = -.330$ ,  $p = .020$ ).

Other interactions were non-significant across all models. Additionally, there were no differences in engagement between countries.

## 5. Conclusion

Drawing on insights specifically from studies of negative campaigning (Nai, 2021; Reiter & Matthes, 2022; Surlin & Gordon, 1977) and populist communication (Bos, 2024; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Jost et al., 2020), this study explored how anti-EU rhetoric was deployed during the 2024 EP elections in the Visegrád region. By focusing not only on verbal but also on emotional and symbolic strategies, we provide a more comprehensive understanding of online campaigning in low-salience, second-order elections.

Our research demonstrates that anti-EU rhetoric in the Visegrád region's EP campaigns is far less country-specific than expected. Only Hungary, which is typical for strong Euroscepticism, showed stronger negativity toward the EU once we controlled for actors and the populist party's effects. This means that Hungarian political actors were more likely to engage in anti-EU campaigning. However, Hungarian posts contained fewer negative references to the EU, overall, likely due to overlapping municipal elections and the method of systematic random sampling. This suggests that the EU critique in Hungary is not confined to fringe or populist actors but it is more deeply rooted in the broader political landscape, where different political actors express various forms of EU criticism. Moreover, critical messaging is likely amplified by parallel channels, such as affiliated influencers or media networks like Megafon which fall outside the scope of our data (Bene & Juhász, 2025).

Despite notable differences in party landscapes, levels of Euroscepticism, and political actors across the V4, our findings reveal several shared trends. These resonate with earlier work and suggest that populist discourse, mainly targeting EU institutions as elitist and detached from people, transcends national contexts (Holtz-Bacha & Johansson, 2022; Styczyńska & Meijer, 2024). Anti-elitist framing emerged as the most consistent predictor of anti-EU rhetoric, reaffirming the role of the EU as a symbolic elite within populist discourse (Kneuer, 2019; Mudde, 2004; Rooduijn & van Kessel, 2019). People-centric appeals and portrayals of political opponents as dangerous also played a role, whereas references to ethnic or cultural “others” did not. This marks a mild departure from earlier findings that emphasised xenophobic or ethnically framed threat narratives in anti-EU rhetoric (Styczyńska & Meijer, 2024).

Furthermore, across the region, anti-EU posts employed emotionally laden patriotic visuals (Farkas et al., 2022) and fear-based language (Nai et al., 2022), reflecting a broader populist strategy that leverages emotional appeals and national pride (Bos, 2024). These elements are also commonly associated with higher engagement on social media alongside negativity and elements of populist communication (Balaban et al., 2024; Bene et al., 2022; Tønnesen et al., 2025). However, our findings challenge this assumption and previous research, even in the context of the EP election (Baranowski et al., 2022; Bene et al., 2022). While posts that feature fear speech alone elicited a slight increase in reactions, their combination with anti-EU messaging reduced engagement. Importantly, other rhetorical strategies (including anti-elitism, people-centric framing, and patriotic symbolism) did not show positive effects on engagement either. In the case of political danger framing, they were even associated with lower interaction. An exception was general anti-EU messaging, which was associated with a slight increase in user comments, suggesting that such content (without additional emotional elements) may trigger deliberative responses. Overall, this contradicts the prevailing findings in populist communication and negative campaigning research, which often link emotional appeals to increased interaction (Jost et al., 2020; Nai et al., 2022).

The likely explanation may lie in EP elections (Heidenreich et al., 2022), where political interest and involvement tend to be low. In such settings, emotionally intense or complex content may not spark user engagement but lead to avoidance (Ansolabehere et al., 1994). Research on EP elections shows that Eurosceptic parties can benefit from more online activity and engagement (Baranowski et al., 2022; Daniel & Obholzer, 2025), primarily through negative and populist messaging. However, our findings suggest that such rhetorical strategies are not reliably effective in boosting engagement, particularly when fear and negativity are combined. This highlights how even emotionally charged rhetoric may lose its impact when audiences are less attentive or more selective, as is often the case in second-order elections.

These insights prompt a reevaluation of the presumed mobilising power of negative content. They suggest that in the EP context, negativity or emotion does not guarantee broader audience mobilisation and, consequently, increased reach. This suggests emotional intensity may be ineffective in low-engagement settings.

These patterns should be understood in the context of a broader digital landscape. While Facebook remains a key platform in V4, others, like TikTok, are gaining prominence (Newman et al., 2024). Platform choice is strategic: Recent research shows that moderate candidates diversify across platforms, while radical actors dominate specific ones (Daniel & Obholzer, 2025). For instance, Czech politician Filip Turek, an openly anti-EU, right-wing politician, avoided Facebook and mobilised young male voters via TikTok and Instagram. His coalition's success (10% of the vote) shows that such messages can bypass Facebook and still gain

traction. These cases highlight the need for multi-platform research to capture varied communication strategies and platform-specific dynamics.

Besides this, our study has several limitations. First, since we only captured the pre-election period, future comparative research in the region should also examine how campaigning evolves in different periods. Second, engagement metrics provide only a partial view of audience response. They do not capture the nuance of attitudes, interpretations, or offline behavior, and they are shaped by algorithmic filtering. In addition, the possibility of artificial amplification through bots, coordinated sharing, or paid promotion complicates the assessments of what constitutes genuine user interaction.

From a methodological perspective, our analysis highlights social media data's complexities. Although our sample included over 6,000 posts, key rhetorical features were rare or unevenly distributed. Engagement metrics were skewed, with few posts receiving the most attention. Furthermore, excluding zero-engagement posts may have introduced a particular selection bias, particularly if certain types of content such as anti-EU messages, are generally less likely to elicit interaction. We recognise this as a limitation for interpreting overall engagement. At the same time, only posts with engagement revealed interpretable patterns across V4 countries which may indicate that even minimal user response helps distinguish communicatively relevant messages from other electoral content. Finally, while some rhetorical strategies showed significant effects, the patterns were inconsistent across countries. They sometimes emerged in very low counts in certain clusters of countries and actors, making it challenging to identify cross-national trends.

Even with these constraints, our study brings valuable insights into negative campaigning and populist rhetoric in European politics, highlighting how anti-elitist anti-EU messages resonate in the region. It also challenges assumptions about the effectiveness of negative and emotionally intense content in mobilising audiences, particularly in the context of the EP election. As debates over Europe's future continue, it is crucial not only to track how often populist or anti-EU messages appear but also to assess their impact on public attitudes and behavior.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### LLMs Disclosure

The authors used the professional version of ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-4, team subscription) and Grammarly for language refinement, style edits, and to consult aspects of statistical interpretation. The authors critically assessed all outputs.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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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

## 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; Bijmans, 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; Plutchik & 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 Giorgia 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.

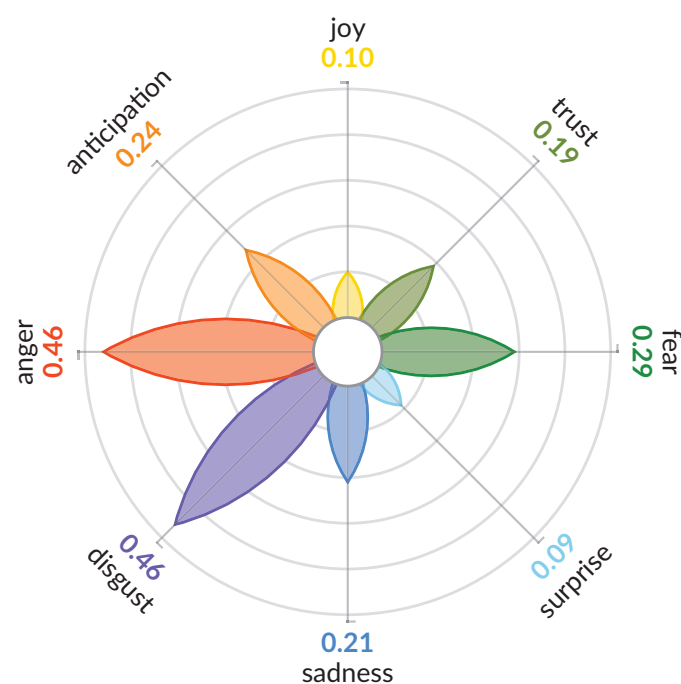
## 6. Findings

### 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)

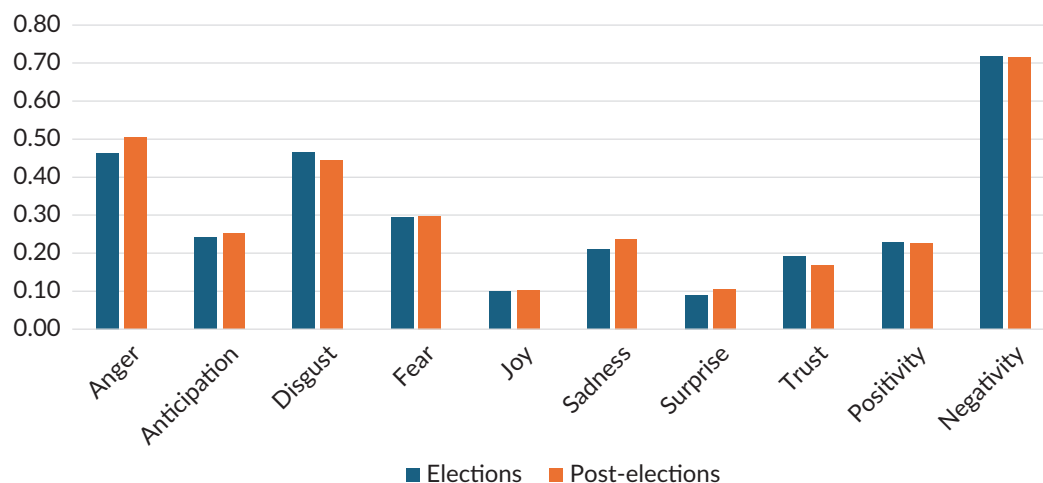
this approach, evoking dissatisfaction and anxiety, making supporters feel that they are under constant threat from the political system.

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.

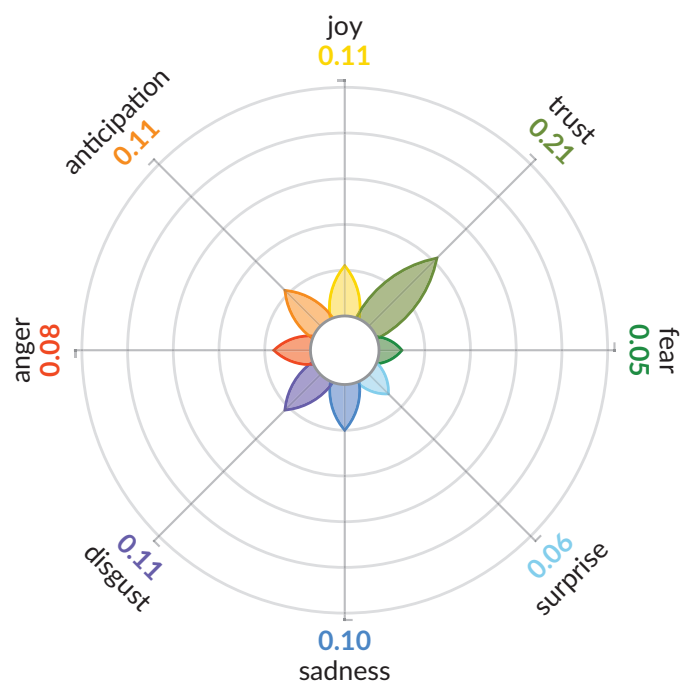
## 6.2. Giorgia Meloni

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.

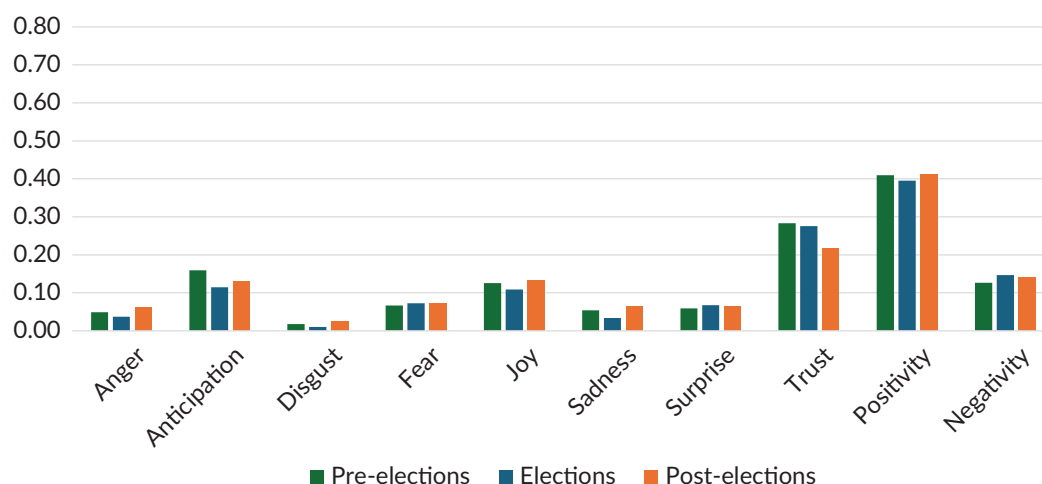


**Figure 3.** The emotions in Meloni's posts during the pre-election period (January 1–June 9, 2024).

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.

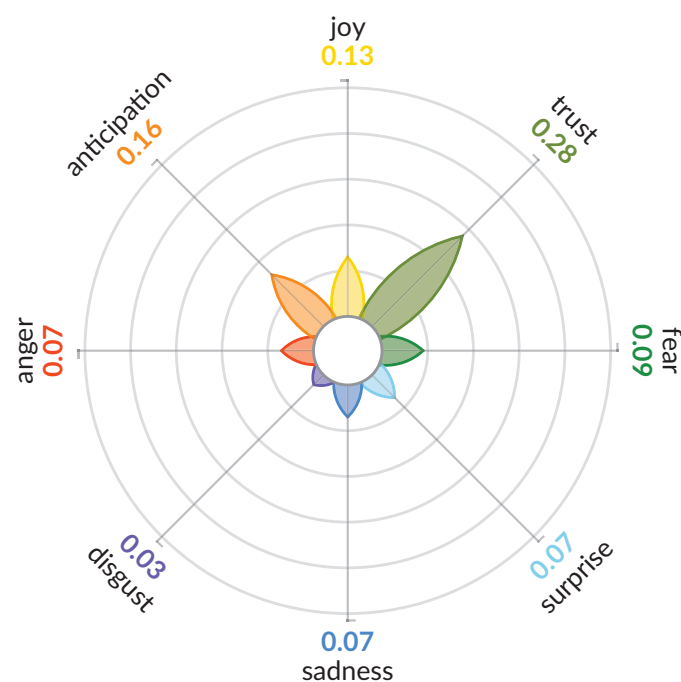
### 6.3. Marine Le Pen

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.

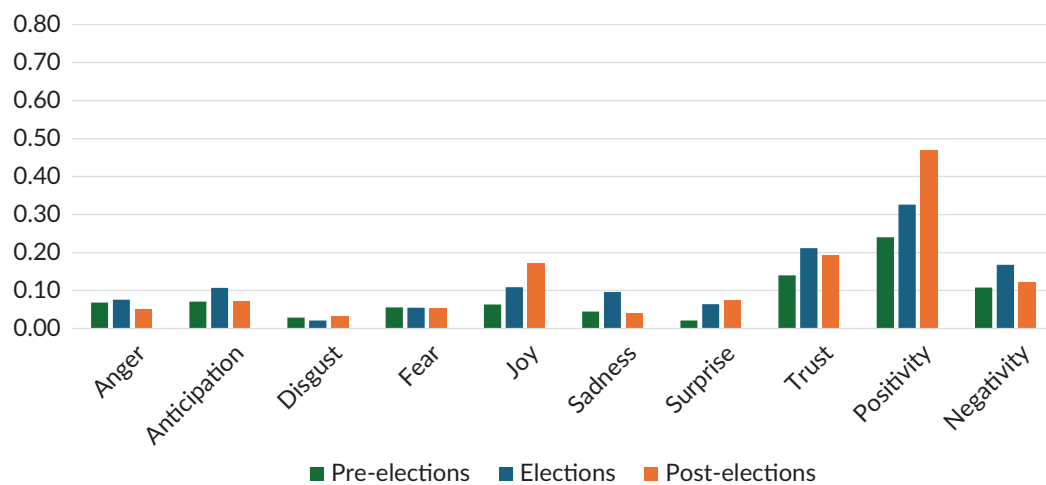
On the other hand, her posts exhibit high levels of trust, reflecting a rhetoric focused on credibility and stability rather than destabilization or extreme polarization. Positivity reinforces the impression that Le Pen seeks to construct a patriotic narrative in which France is depicted as a strong 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).

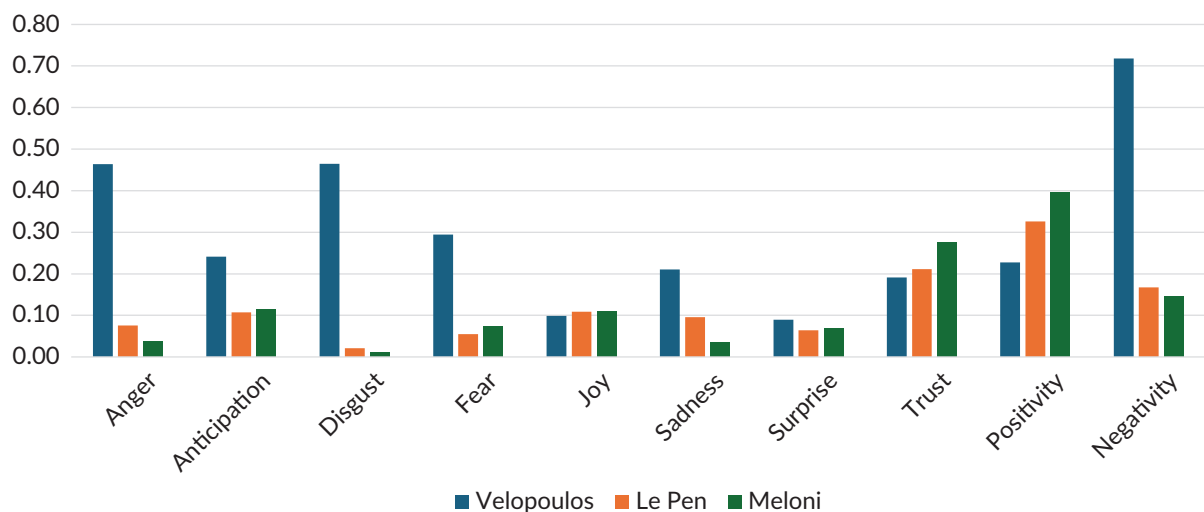
When turning to the period before January 2024 and the months after the European elections, significant changes are evident in the scores and hierarchy of emotions found in Le Pen's posts (Figure 6). Compared to the six-month period before January 2024, the emotional content of her posts became more 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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# Authoritarian Drift and Social Media's Impact on Romanian Youth During the 2024 European Elections

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## Abstract

This article examines the growing susceptibility of young Romanians to authoritarian leadership models in the aftermath of the 2024 European elections. While youth are often seen as champions of democratic renewal, recent data point to a significant erosion of democratic commitment, shaped by institutional distrust and emotionally charged media environments. This concern is heightened by Romania's political developments in 2024, which saw the doubling of extremist representation in the European Parliament and the annulment of the first round of presidential elections due to alleged irregularities and social media interference. Drawing on a media-centered theoretical framework and original survey data, the study finds that 74% of respondents support the idea of a strong leader unconcerned with parliamentary procedures. Socio-demographic factors, such as gender, education, income, and urban–rural residence, significantly influence these attitudes, with lower education and income levels correlating with stronger authoritarian support. Media consumption patterns also emerge as critical determinants: reliance on social media and traditional media (TV and radio) is associated with heightened authoritarian inclinations, while online press consumption fosters greater democratic resilience. Platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp appear to amplify affective and symbolic political expression, even among those who primarily rely on traditional media sources. Furthermore, institutional trust proves to be domain-specific; lower trust in security, religious, and educational institutions predicts higher support for authoritarian leadership. Rather than reflecting mere apathy, youth disengagement reveals complex interactions between media ecosystems, emotional political communication, and institutional skepticism. This study contributes to existing research by focusing on an understudied demographic (Romanian youth) during a volatile electoral moment. It combines nationally representative survey data with a media-centered analytical lens to examine how platform-specific information environments shape authoritarian attitudes.

## Keywords

authoritarian drift; democratic resilience; European elections; institutional trust; media consumption; political disengagement; Romania; social media influence; youth electoral behavior

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## 1. Democratic Disillusionment and Post-Authoritarian Vulnerability

In recent years, a growing body of research has highlighted a paradox at the heart of democratic life: although young people are more connected, informed, and digitally engaged than ever before, their commitment to democratic norms appears increasingly tenuous. Early studies (e.g., Boulianne, 2009; Kahne et al., 2015; Shirky, 2011) suggested that digital technologies could foster civic engagement and democratic participation by facilitating access to information, encouraging deliberation, and amplifying marginalized voices. Research by Loader et al. (2014) emphasized the rise of a “networked young citizen,” shaped by participatory digital cultures that potentially strengthen democratic involvement. Optimistic views of digital media as catalysts for democratic revitalization have been further articulated in the concept of “disintermediation” brought by Web 2.0 technologies. According to Robles-Morales and Córdoba-Hernandes (2019), the emergence of new digital environments allowed ordinary users to bypass traditional gatekeepers in political communication, enabling more direct, participatory, and horizontal interactions between citizens and institutions.

However, more recent analyses paint a more complex and ambivalent picture. Scholars such as Inglehart and Norris (2016) have interpreted the shifting attitudes of younger generations as part of a broader cultural backlash, rooted in perceptions of institutional inefficiency, economic insecurity, and a widening disconnection between democratic ideals and lived realities. This growing ambivalence is further evidenced by global surveys. The Open Society Barometer (Open Society Foundations, 2023), for instance, shows that only 57% of individuals aged 18–35 believe democracy is preferable to any other form of government, compared to 71% of those over 56. Even more strikingly, 35% of younger respondents express support for a strong leader who bypasses democratic institutions, while 42% are sympathetic to the idea of military rule. These findings, echoed in the work of Foa et al. (2020), suggest not an outright rejection of democracy, but rather a deepening disillusionment with its perceived ability to ensure justice, stability, and responsiveness. The evolving perception of democracy among youth also intersects with the ongoing academic debate on populism’s role within democratic regimes. Building on the foundational work of Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012) and summarizing key strands in the scholarly literature, Ștefănel (2016) argues that, under certain conditions, populism should not be viewed solely as a threat to democracy, but also as a potential corrective to liberal democratic practices, particularly when it channels popular discontent into demands for greater accountability and reconfigures institutional legitimacy. In this view, populism may emerge not necessarily in opposition to democracy, but as a response to its unfulfilled promises, especially in contexts marked by political alienation and systemic distrust. While growing disillusionment with democracy is evident across many consolidated democracies, it appears particularly acute in post-authoritarian societies such as those in Central and Eastern Europe. In these contexts, democratic norms are still relatively recent, and institutional trust remains persistently low (Ekiert & Hanson, 2003; Hutcheson & Korosteleva, 2005). The transition following the fall of communism, though initially marked by institutional reforms and aspirations toward European integration, has often been slow, uneven, and contradictory. Structural vulnerabilities—such as a fragile rule of law, endemic clientelism, low civic participation, and widespread



distrust in public institutions—have persisted into the present. These conditions have created fertile ground for the weakening of democratic commitment and the reemergence of authoritarian predispositions, particularly among those disillusioned with the promises of post-communist reform.

More recently, this disaffection has been capitalized on by populist and illiberal actors, who offer emotionally charged, simplified narratives that speak to the frustrations of disillusioned citizens, particularly among younger generations (Filipova, 2024; Hanley & Vachudova, 2018; Jakli, 2024). As Foa et al. (2020) note, young people in post-communist countries have, until recently, expressed greater satisfaction with democratic governance than earlier generations. However, the durability of this trend remains uncertain. As newer generations come of age—those born after the transitional euphoria of the 1990s and raised in households shaped by economic instability and democratic disillusionment—their outlook may diverge significantly. No longer anchored in personal or familial memory of communism, these young people evaluate democracy less through historical contrast and more through present-day frustrations. In this shifting context, a delayed but potentially significant erosion of democratic support may begin to mirror trends observed in more established democracies.

This study uses a single-item measure of authoritarian preferences: the agreement with the statement that “Romania needs a strong leader who does not bother with parliament or elections.” Although multidimensional indices are often recommended to capture the psychological roots of authoritarianism (e.g., Feldman, 2003; Hetherington & Suhay, 2011), this item reflects an increasingly prevalent form of pragmatic authoritarianism: a readiness to suspend institutional procedures in favor of a centralized and efficient decision-making. In post-communist societies marked by political volatility and institutional distrust, such formulations resonate strongly with public perceptions. As Vráblíková (2021) and Ruth-Lovell and Grahm (2023) suggest, this type of preference is not merely a cognitive shortcut but an expression of political disillusionment that correlates with populist attitudes and affective polarization. For the purposes of this article, which focuses on observable political orientations in a volatile electoral context, this direct measure offers a high level of face validity, empirical comparability, and analytical clarity.

## 2. Media and Populist Narratives in Romania

Romania fits within this broader regional pattern, while reflecting specific national dynamics. Although democratic institutions have been in place since the 1990s, persistent issues, such as political corruption, weak rule of law, and volatile party systems, have contributed to a widespread sense of distrust. Survey data from the Open Society Barometer (Open Society Foundations, 2023) indicate that Romanian youth show lower levels of trust in elected officials and political parties than older generations and are more inclined to believe that a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament or elections might be beneficial. The Romanian media system itself has become a structural contributor to democratic backsliding. As Negrea-Busuioc et al. (2019) argue, the politicization of editorial content and the strategic use of media platforms by political elites have weakened public discourse and democratic accountability.

These tendencies are intensified by the rise of populist actors such as George Simion, whose digital presence exemplifies a shift toward spectacularized populist performances. As shown by Grapă and Mogoș (2023), Simion leverages polarisation, celebrity populism, and religious-nationalist symbolism to construct a charismatic persona that appeals especially to diaspora voters and younger audiences. His mediatized



performance is grounded in emotionally charged imagery, Orthodox iconography, and anti-EU rhetoric—all elements that resonate within a media ecosystem predisposed to polarizing content. This phenomenon reflects broader theoretical concerns about the nature of populism itself. Populism cannot be understood as inherently anti-democratic or uniformly threatening; rather, its relationship with democracy is profoundly ambivalent. Depending on the institutional context, populism may either erode or invigorate democratic processes by emphasizing popular sovereignty, bypassing intermediary institutions, and reshaping public discourse. In the Romanian case, such ambivalence is reflected in the dual dynamics of radical contestation and charismatic appeal observable in figures like Simion.

Paradoxically, while radical right actors openly instrumentalize public discontent to challenge European integration, mainstream political and media actors in Romania have employed strategies of discursive moderation. As Ștefănel et al. (2023) demonstrate, during the Schengen accession crisis, the dominant public discourse minimized Eurosceptic framings, opting instead for a rhetoric of institutional disappointment and procedural injustice. While such narratives may defuse overt backlash, they also risk cultivating a climate of ambiguity, particularly for younger audiences whose attitudes toward the EU are increasingly shaped by current frustrations rather than historical aspirations.

### 3. Reframing Disengagement Through a Media-Centered Lens

A media-centered approach to democratic disengagement seeks to understand how mediated experiences of politics shape youth perceptions of institutions and leadership. Unlike conventional accounts that emphasize structural or generational variables, this perspective draws attention to how the content, format, and emotional tone of political communication influence the civic dispositions of young people. In recent years, political communication scholars have increasingly acknowledged the role of affective media environments in shaping democratic imaginaries, especially among digital-native cohorts (Papacharissi, 2015; Waisbord, 2018).

Traditional models of democratic participation assume a relatively stable distinction between institutional politics and mediated discourse. However, as van Dijck et al. (2018) argue, the platformization of public communication has disrupted this dichotomy. Social media platforms, while enabling unprecedented access to political information, also promote formats that favor visibility, emotional expressiveness, and virality over rational argumentation. In this ecosystem, political messages compete for attention not on the basis of content quality, but on their capacity to trigger affective responses (Tufekci, 2015).

For young people whose political socialization occurs predominantly online, these dynamics have significant consequences. Research has shown that youth interpret and recontextualize political information within peer-driven, culturally coded environments such as meme cultures, influencer commentary, and visual storytelling (Highfield, 2016; Jenkins et al., 2016). Rather than engaging in deliberation in the Habermasian sense, they often participate through expressive and symbolic practices, such as liking, sharing, and remixing, that signal identity rather than policy preferences (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Moffitt, 2016).

This form of participation, though frequent, may not necessarily reinforce democratic norms. On the contrary, the dominance of spectacle and identity performance risks reinforcing a conception of politics as entertainment or confrontation, where legitimacy stems from authenticity, charisma, or symbolic defiance

rather than institutional accountability (Corner & Pels, 2003; Enli, 2017). These trends are especially salient in populist communication strategies, where political figures adopt media-savvy personas and cultivate parasocial relations with followers, often bypassing traditional deliberative institutions (Krämer, 2014; Laclau, 2005).

Recent research by Casas-Mas et al. (2024) reinforces this argument by empirically analyzing over two million tweets from the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections. Their findings reveal that the vast majority of political expressions on platforms like X (previously Twitter) lack argumentation and are primarily affective in nature—what the authors term “participation based on Boos and Hurrahs” (Casas-Mas et al., 2024, p. 2). This emotivist mode of digital engagement, characterized by emotionally charged statements of support or rejection, aligns with the theoretical concerns raised by Papacharissi (2015) and Waisbord (2018). It suggests a communicative environment where political expression is driven less by reasoned deliberation and more by affective alignment, sentiment reinforcement, and symbolic positioning.

In the Romanian context, these dynamics are exemplified by actors such as Simion, whose mediatized performances—combining nationalist, religious, and anti-establishment themes—resonate with youth disillusioned by elite politics. As Grapă and Mogoș (2023) argue, Simion’s success on platforms like Facebook and TikTok is not merely a matter of outreach but of stylistic adaptation: he aligns his message with the expectations of digital culture, privileging immediacy, affect, and symbolic disruption.

Furthermore, the epistemological authority of institutions is undermined when political information circulates primarily in emotionally charged and epistemically unstable environments. When truth claims become subordinate to narrative coherence or emotional resonance, trust in democratic procedures may erode, even if engagement appears to increase (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). In such a context, what Papacharissi (2015) calls “affective publics” emerge: communities not bound by shared rational deliberation, but by collective sentiment, often organized around outrage, irony, or resentment.

While some scholars see expressive engagement as a form of democratic innovation (Theocharis et al., 2015), others warn that it may contribute to polarization, fragmentation, and disengagement from formal politics (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021). The ambiguity lies in the nature of participation itself: practices like commenting, sharing, or reacting may signal political interest but can also mask a deeper cynicism or alienation from the democratic process. This ambivalence is particularly relevant in the Romanian case, where youth report high levels of social media use for political information but simultaneously exhibit low trust in political institutions (Open Society Foundations, 2023).

The media-centered framework proposed here thus avoids moralistic readings of youth disengagement, as either apathy or immaturity, and instead emphasizes the complex interplay between media environments, political meaning-making, and democratic orientation. It invites scholars and practitioners alike to examine not only how much youth engage with politics, but also how they interpret, experience, and emotionally process democratic content. As Couldry and Hepp (2017) suggest, the very texture of democracy is being reshaped by communicative infrastructures, requiring a rethinking of both civic education and institutional responsiveness.

These dynamics align with existing research that conceptualizes social media as catalyzing a process of deliberative disintegration, whereby algorithmic amplification and affective resonance replace reasoned

debate with symbolic affirmation and antagonistic performance (Ștefănel, 2025). While this mechanism has been explored in the context of elite–citizen dynamics during the 2024 local elections in Bucharest (see Ștefănel, 2025), the present study extends this line of inquiry by examining how similar dynamics manifest in youth political orientations. The patterns observed—marked by expressive intensity, symbolic affirmation, and limited argumentative depth—suggest that the challenge is not disengagement per se, but a transformation in how young citizens experience and enact political communication. Engagement remains frequent and emotionally charged, yet it often bypasses deliberative norms, privileging identity performance over argumentative substance. These tendencies are particularly salient on social media platforms, where algorithmic visibility amplifies resonance rather than rationality, thereby reshaping the contours of youth political agency in the digital public sphere.

These findings echo and extend existing concerns in the literature. Papacharissi’s (2015) concept of affective publics captures the emotional structuring of engagement, while Sunstein’s (2017) warnings about fragmented informational spheres remain relevant. However, what this study suggests is not only that deliberation is absent, but that the very communicative logics of contemporary media ecosystems actively erode deliberative capacity. Deliberative disintegration, as it emerges from the Romanian context analyzed here, describes a cumulative breakdown in the cultural and cognitive prerequisites for democratic dialogue—one that is not imposed from above, but performed and reproduced from within everyday media practices.

#### 4. Methodology: Investigating Youth Attitudes in the Romanian Context

To empirically explore the processes outlined in this article’s media-centered framework, the present study adopts a quantitative research design grounded in survey data. The goal is to test the proposition that the erosion of democratic commitment among young people is shaped not only by structural institutional mistrust, but also by their mediated experiences of political life—in particular, how they consume political information and frame legitimacy in relation to digital media content. This aligns with the broader theoretical framework articulated in the article, which posits that young people’s attitudes toward democracy are shaped not only by economic or institutional factors, but also by media framing and affect-driven information environments (Papacharissi, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018).

The theoretical sections of the article argue that young people’s disengagement is not reducible to apathy or misinformation, but emerges at the intersection of structural distrust and emotionalized media representations of politics. These dynamics are linked to broader patterns of political cynicism, support for non-democratic alternatives, and a shift in the perception of what constitutes legitimate leadership. The methodology thus seeks to empirically assess how these processes are reflected in the actual political attitudes and behaviors of Romanian youth.

For this purpose, the empirical analysis relies exclusively on the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy (IRES) survey, *Tineretul român în anul electoral 2024*, which provides a representative snapshot of the Romanian youth population (ages 18–29). The dataset includes key indicators on trust in democratic institutions, preferences for authoritarian leadership models, political disaffection, and media consumption habits. The study was based on a simple random sample of 800 respondents aged 18–35, with a maximum margin of error of  $\pm 3.5\%$ . Data were collected between March 9 and 14, 2024, using computer-assisted

telephone interviewing. The research was conducted pro bono for the Tinerii Votează initiative under IRES's social responsibility program.

The central research question guiding this analysis is: What are the patterns of association between media consumption, institutional trust, and authoritarian preferences among Romanian youth? Rather than estimating causal effects, the study explores these relationships descriptively, identifying key associations in the context of the 2024 European elections. Based on this research question, two testable hypotheses are formulated:

H1: Romanian youth who rely predominantly on social media as a source of political information are more likely to express support for non-deliberative, centralized leadership models.

H2: Lower trust in democratic institutions among Romanian youth is associated with higher levels of support for authoritarian leadership.

To operationalize these hypotheses the following variables from the IRES dataset were used:

- Institutional trust was measured through Likert scale items assessing trust in parliament, government, judiciary, and the EU.
- Preference for authoritarian leadership was captured through agreement with the statement “Romania needs a strong leader who does not bother with Parliament or elections” (Variable III7\_6). While this item has a deliberately blunt formulation, it has been widely used in empirical research as a proxy for anti-democratic attitudes or authoritarian predispositions—precisely because of its resonance with illiberal political imaginaries. Similar items have been employed in large-scale international surveys such as the World Values Survey (e.g., Welzel & Inglehart, 2009), the European Social Survey (e.g., Norris & Inglehart, 2019), and the Global Satisfaction with Democracy study (Foa et al., 2020). The item captures support for a style of leadership that bypasses representative institutions—an essential feature of authoritarian preference—while allowing for comparative analysis across cases and contexts.
- Media consumption habits were assessed through self-reported primary sources of political information, including television, social media, online press, and interpersonal communication.

This operationalization allows for a descriptive analysis of how institutional trust and media environments relate to authoritarian attitudes among Romanian youth. By focusing on specific institutions rather than generalized political trust, the study aims to more precisely identify the domains of institutional skepticism that may be associated with democratic disillusionment.

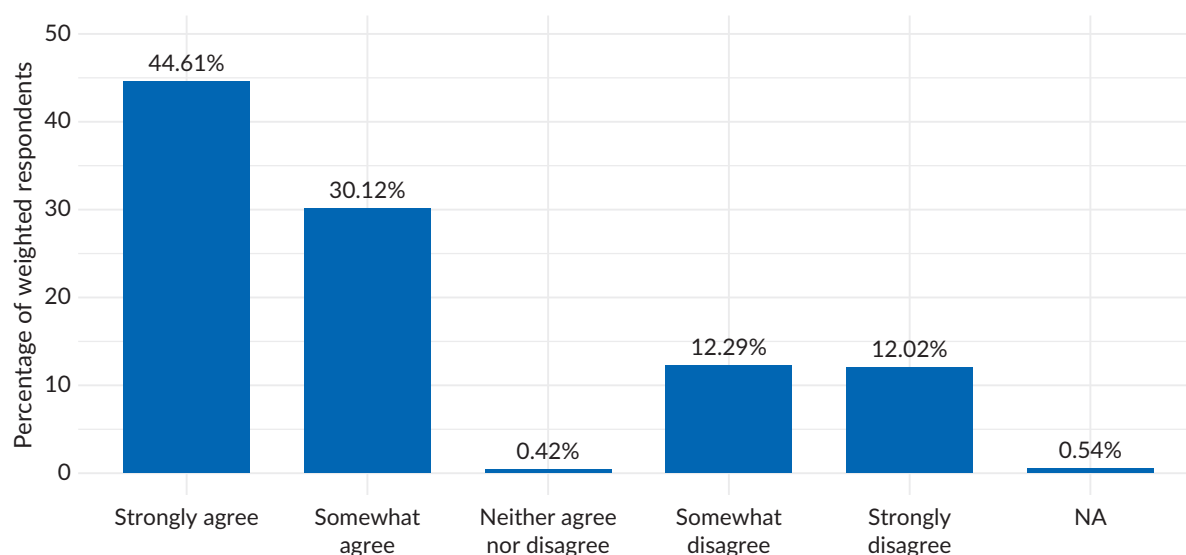
While key socio-demographic variables such as gender, education, income level, and urban/rural residence are examined descriptively, the study does not employ multivariate models. The analysis focuses on bivariate associations—such as group comparisons and rank-order correlations—to explore patterns linking institutional trust, media consumption, and authoritarian preferences.

All analyses were conducted using *R*, employing packages such as *tidyverse*, *car*, and *ggplot2*. Preprocessing steps included the normalization of response scales, categorical recoding, and verification of missing data.

Given the exploratory and descriptive nature of this research, findings are interpreted as indicative associations rather than as evidence of causal relationships.

## 5. Findings: Patterns of Authoritarian Support and Media Influence Among Romanian Youth

Although young people are often perceived as committed to democratic values, Figure 1 reveals a striking openness to authoritarian alternatives. A total of 74.37% of Romanian youth agree (either strongly or somewhat) with the statement that the country needs a strong leader unconcerned with Parliament or elections, while only 4.12% express strong disagreement. These findings reflect broader patterns identified in recent theoretical accounts, including Inglehart and Norris's (2016) analysis and research reports such as Foa et al.'s (2020) on declining democratic support.



**Figure 1.** Attitudes toward authoritarian leadership: To what extent do you agree with the statement “Romania needs a strong leader who does not bother with Parliament or elections.” Source: IRES (2024).

To better understand the socio-demographic determinants of support for authoritarian leadership among youth, I conducted a series of chi-squared analyses across gender, residential environment, educational attainment, and income level. The analysis reveals that these socio-demographics shape young people's support for authoritarian leadership in Romania. Across all the tests, statistically significant differences emerge.

Gender differences are evident in the extent of support for authoritarian alternatives. Women are more likely than men to strongly agree with the need for a strong leader unconcerned with democratic constraints (52.37% vs. 38.75%), while men show a higher tendency to strongly disagree (15.15% vs. 8.63%). These patterns suggest that female respondents are somewhat more susceptible to authoritarian appeals, whereas male respondents display a slightly higher propensity to reject authoritarianism outright.

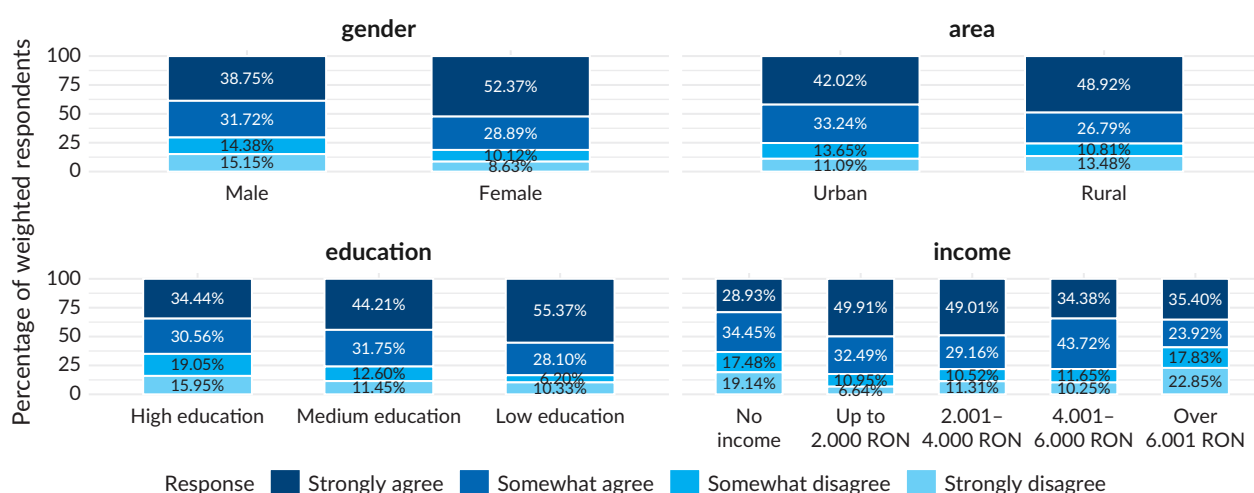
Residential context also plays a role in shaping these attitudes. Rural youth exhibit higher levels of strong agreement with authoritarian leadership (48.92%) compared to their urban counterparts (42.02%), while

urban youth are more likely to somewhat agree (33.24% vs. 26.79%). Although opposition is relatively balanced across the two groups, urban respondents who disagree tend to express stronger forms of dissent. The statistically significant differences observed ( $\chi^2 = 10.82$ ,  $p = 0.013$ ) point to variations in intensity rather than direction: urban youth exhibit more moderate support but stronger opposition, whereas rural youth express stronger support and more moderate dissent.

Educational attainment emerges as a particularly powerful factor. Strong agreement is highest among youth with low education (55.37%), declining among medium-educated (44.21%) and highly educated (35.81%) respondents. Opposition to authoritarian leadership increases with education, with 18.51% of highly educated respondents somewhat disagreeing and 15.22% strongly disagreeing with the statement. The binary chi-squared test further confirms these differences ( $\chi^2 = 14.08$ ,  $p = 0.00088$ ), underscoring that higher education fosters more critical and democratic attitudes among young people.

Income level similarly differentiates support for authoritarianism. Strong agreement is more common among lower-income youth, particularly those earning up to 4,000 RON monthly (49.91% and 49.01%, respectively), compared to 34.38% among those earning between 4,001 and 6,000 RON and 35.40% among those earning over 6,001 RON. Higher-income youth are also more likely to oppose authoritarian leadership: 17.83% somewhat disagree and 22.85% strongly disagree among respondents earning over 6,001 RON. The statistically significant differences ( $\chi^2 = 18.33$ ,  $p = 0.0026$ ) highlight that greater economic resources are associated with more critical political orientations.

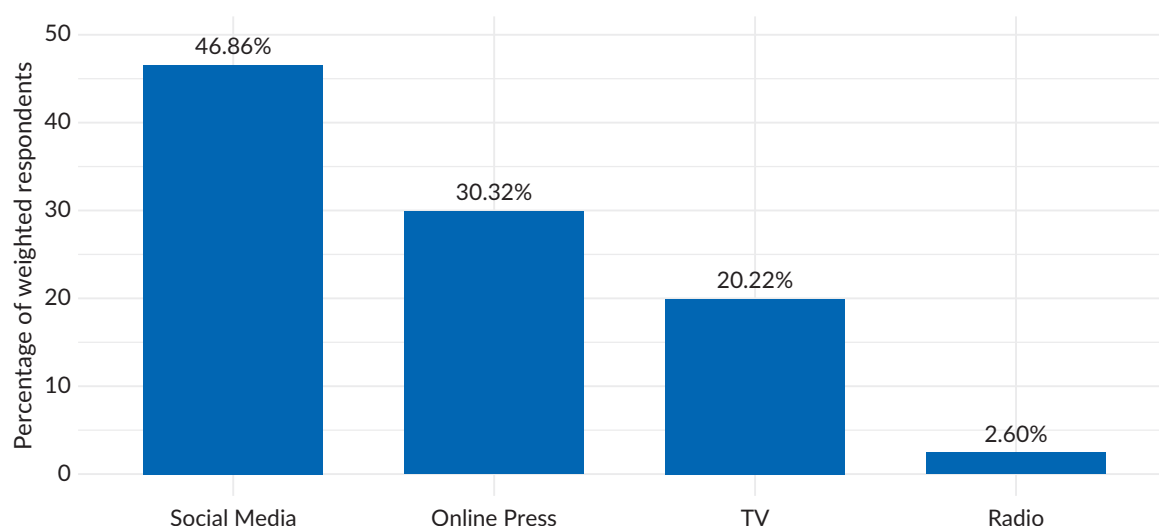
In contrast to these socio-demographic factors, age does not appear to meaningfully differentiate levels of authoritarian support within the youth cohort. A Spearman correlation between respondents' age (in completed years) and agreement with the authoritarian leadership statement (Variable III7\_6) reveals a very weak and statistically non-significant association ( $\rho = -0.023$ ,  $p = 0.518$ ). While there is a slight tendency for younger respondents to express stronger agreement, the effect size is negligible. This finding suggests that among individuals aged 18 to 35, authoritarian predispositions are not systematically shaped by age differences per se, but rather by other structural and perceptual factors such as gender, education, residence, and income, as illustrated in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Support for authoritarian leadership by socio-demographic values: Stacked distribution of responses for “Romania needs a strong leader who does not bother with Parliament or elections.” Source: IRES (2024).

Overall, these findings reveal that support for authoritarian leadership among Romanian youth is not uniform but varies systematically across gender, residential environment, education, and income. Higher education and income levels appear to be associated with greater democratic resilience, while lower education and income levels correlate with stronger endorsement of authoritarian alternatives. These socio-demographic patterns highlight critical vulnerabilities in the democratic engagement of younger generations in Romania.

Building on these initial findings, we sought to further explore the informational environments shaping political attitudes among youth. Specifically, we examined their primary sources of political information in order to test H1, which posits that a predominant reliance on social media is associated with greater support for strong, centralized leadership. Figure 3 shows that social media has become the dominant source of political information among Romanian youth, with 46.86% identifying it as their primary channel. Online press follows at 30.32%, while traditional media such as television (20.22%) and radio (2.60%) are used far less frequently. These findings illustrate a clear generational shift toward digital platforms, where political information is accessed in more personalized, immediate, and peer-driven environments, underscoring the transformative impact of social media on political communication habits among Romanian youth.



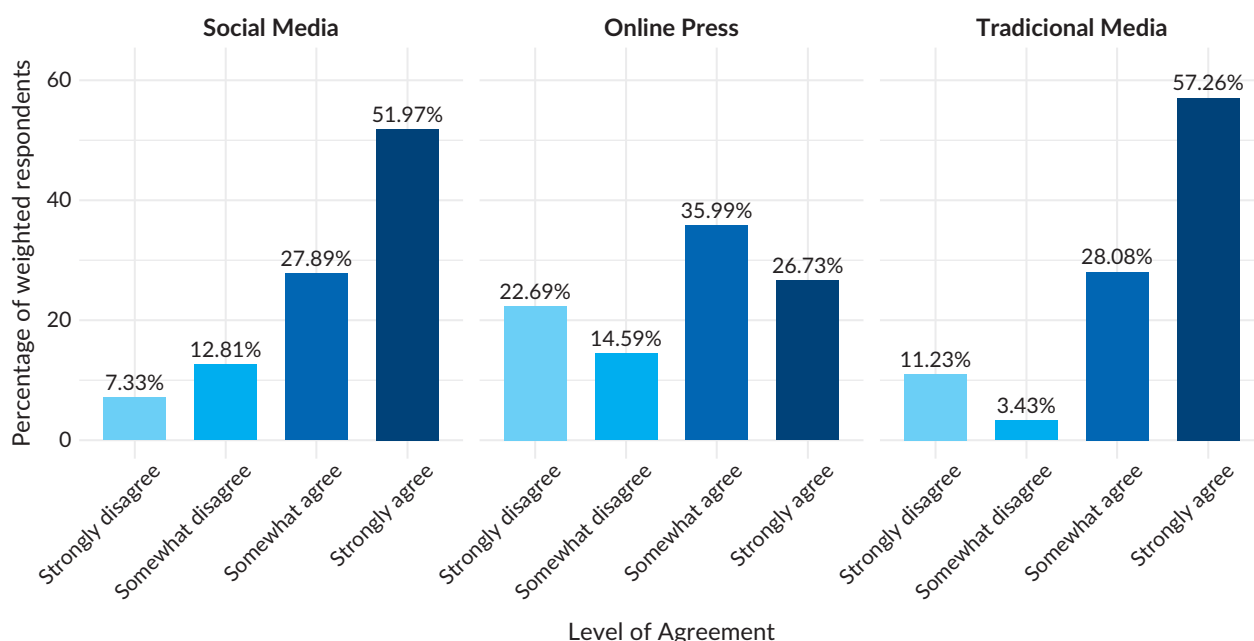
**Figure 3.** Primary sources of political information among Romanian youth. Source: IRES (2024).

Figure 4 examines how Romanian youth's support for authoritarian leadership varies according to their primary source of political information. For analytical clarity, media sources were grouped into three categories: social media, online press, and traditional media, the latter comprising television and radio. Importantly, the number of respondents relying on traditional media is substantially lower compared to those using social media or online press, reflecting broader generational shifts away from traditional information channels.

The chi-squared test confirms that differences between groups are statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 44.53$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating a strong association between media consumption patterns and political attitudes.

Among youth who primarily rely on social media for political information, 51.97% strongly agree with the statement that Romania needs a strong leader unconcerned with democratic institutions, and an additional 27.89% somewhat agree. Thus, nearly 80% of social media consumers express some level of support for authoritarian leadership. Opposition within this group remains modest: only 7.33% strongly disagree, while 12.81% somewhat disagree.





**Figure 4.** Differences in support for authoritarian leadership by primary media source. Source: IRES (2024).

By comparison, respondents who favor online press display a more balanced distribution of attitudes. Only 26.73% strongly agree with the authoritarian statement, while 35.99% somewhat agree. Notably, opposition is stronger among online press users compared to social media users: 22.69% strongly disagree and 14.59% somewhat disagree. These figures suggest that those who consume political information through professional online news outlets are comparatively more critical of authoritarian alternatives.

Youth who rely on traditional media (TV and radio) show the highest level of strong agreement with authoritarian leadership, at 57.26%, exceeding even the social media group. However, this subgroup is much smaller in size, reflecting the diminished role of traditional media among younger generations. Only 11.23% of traditional media consumers strongly disagree with the need for a strong leader, and 3.43% somewhat disagree, indicating both stronger authoritarian inclinations and weaker opposition within this group.

Overall, the findings reveal a complex pattern: although reliance on traditional media is associated with the strongest support for authoritarian leadership, the largest cohorts—those consuming information via social media and online press—display more heterogeneous attitudes. The data suggest that political information environments shape not only the direction but also the intensity of political attitudes among Romanian youth, highlighting the transformative influence of media ecosystems on democratic engagement.

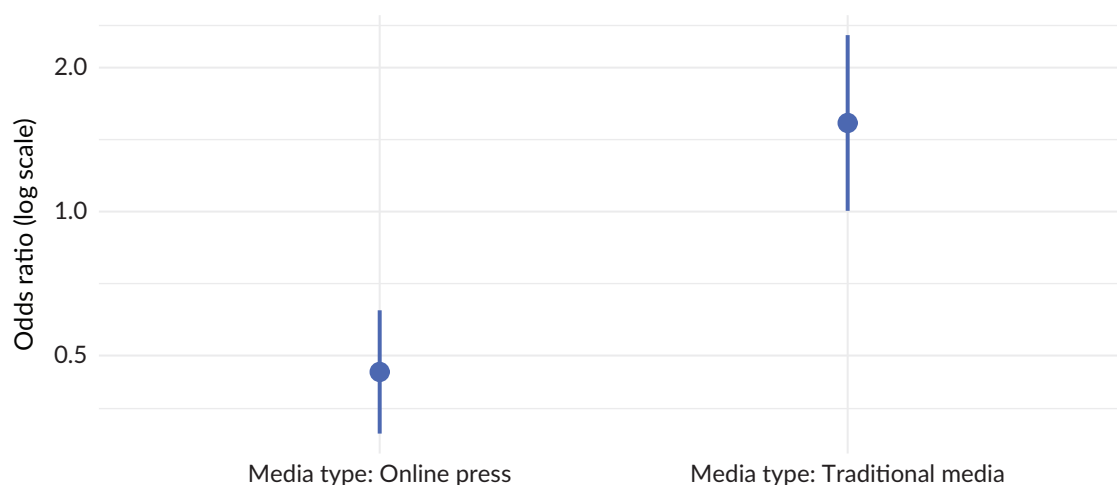
As an exploratory addition, an ordinal regression was estimated to complement the bivariate comparisons. The results align with the descriptive findings: respondents who obtain political information primarily from the online press appear significantly less likely to express strong support for centralized, non-democratic leadership than those relying on social media (coefficient =  $-0.772$ , odds ratio =  $0.462$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). While not intended as a causal model, this result suggests that professional journalistic environments may be associated with more democratic orientations among young people.

Similarly, the regression model indicates that respondents who rely on traditional media (television and radio) exhibit a higher likelihood of supporting authoritarian leadership compared to social media users (coefficient = 0.427, odds ratio = 1.53,  $p = 0.048$ ). Although this group is relatively small within the sample, the result reflects a tendency toward stronger endorsement of centralized leadership. While no causal claims can be made, the finding may point to the role of conventional broadcasting formats in sustaining hierarchical and less deliberative political preferences.

This tendency may be partially shaped by demographic characteristics, such as age, educational attainment, or habitual media use, but it also resonates with insights from recent media studies. Studies on media hybridization and platformization (Chadwick, 2013; van Dijck et al., 2018) suggest that traditional broadcasters increasingly adopt stylistic elements typical of digital platforms, including emotionally charged, personality-driven, and conflict-oriented formats. Such convergence may contribute to reinforcing affective and hierarchical political attitudes, even among audiences with lower digital exposure. While these interpretations remain tentative, they offer a possible lens through which to understand the alignment between traditional media use and support for authoritarian models observed in the data.

Taken together, these observations provide additional context for interpreting the model's structure and outcomes, particularly the gradations of agreement captured across the response categories. The cut-points (thresholds) of the model further validate the ordinal structure of the response variable. Significant separations between categories—particularly between *strongly disagree* and *somewhat disagree* (coefficient =  $-2.12$ , odds ratio = 0.12, 95% CI: [0.09, 0.16],  $p < 0.001$ )—confirm that attitudes toward authoritarianism are meaningfully distributed across the response scale, with clear gradations of agreement and disagreement.

Figure 5 offers a visual summary of the estimated odds ratios, distinguishing between the media types and the model's internal thresholds. Consistent with the statistical outputs, the figure illustrates that respondents who rely on online press are less likely to express strong support for authoritarian leadership, while those relying on traditional media show a moderate increase in such preferences. These visual patterns reinforce the descriptive associations discussed earlier, without implying direct causality.



**Figure 5.** Odds ratios for support for authoritarian leadership by media type (reference group: social media users). Source: IRES (2024).

Beyond aggregated media categories, a closer examination of platform-specific patterns offers additional insight into how different social media environments may shape political attitudes among youth.

Overall, these findings, considered as a whole, suggest that the informational environment is meaningfully associated with variations in political attitudes among Romanian youth. Respondents who primarily consume political news via professional online press exhibit comparatively lower levels of support for authoritarian leadership, while those relying on traditional media show a higher tendency to endorse such preferences. Although both traditional and social media are linked to increased support for strong, centralized leadership, the underlying dynamics appear distinct. Traditional media may reinforce hierarchical conceptions of authority through centralized, top-down formats, whereas social media environments facilitate affect-driven and symbolic engagement that often bypasses deliberative norms, privileging emotional resonance and identity signaling over institutional accountability.

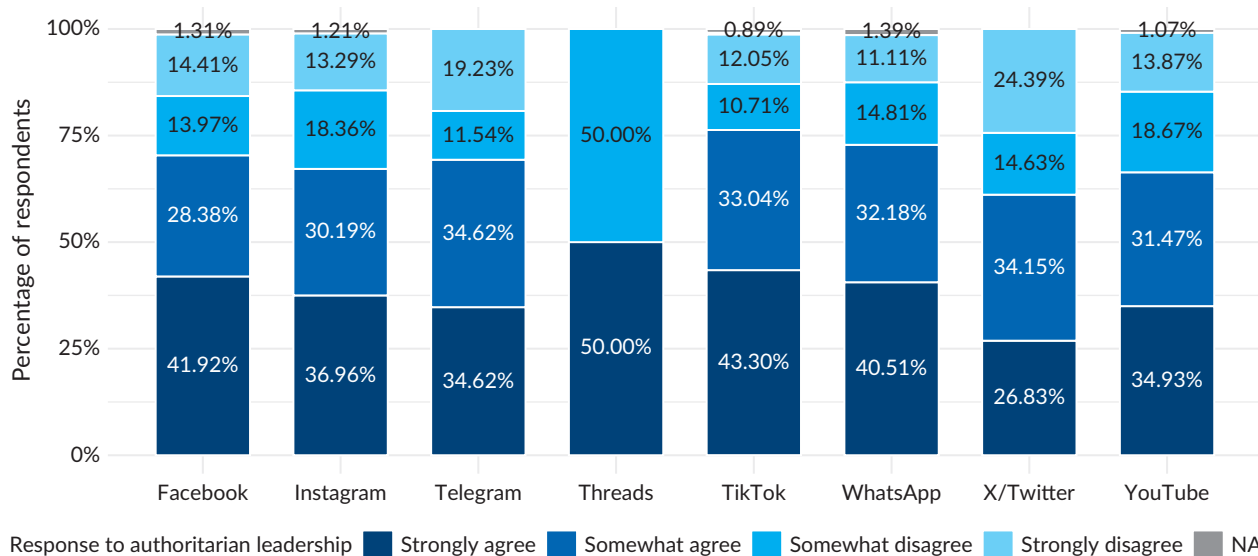
While these patterns do not imply causation, they are consistent with H1: Romanian youth who rely predominantly on social media as a source of political information are more likely to express support for non-deliberative, centralized leadership models.

A more granular look at platform-specific patterns of social media use reveals important nuances in the informational behavior of Romanian youth. Facebook and Instagram emerge as the most commonly used platforms across all groups, regardless of respondents' primary political information source. Among those who primarily rely on online press, 19.24% also report using Facebook, and 21.01% use Instagram. Within the group of social media-first users, Facebook accounts for 25.49% and Instagram for 21.70% of usage, underscoring their centrality in youth political communication ecosystems.

Notably, even among respondents whose primary source of political information is traditional media (TV and radio), social media remains widely used: 32.08% report using Facebook, 16.60% use Instagram, and 20.75% use WhatsApp. These figures suggest that social platforms function as complementary rather than exclusive sources, cutting across media repertoires.

When disaggregating attitudes toward authoritarian leadership by platform, certain differences become visible (Figure 6). Higher proportions of strong agreement with the authoritarian statement are observed among users of TikTok (43.30%), Facebook (41.92%), and WhatsApp (40.51%). YouTube, Instagram, and Telegram users display slightly lower, but still notable, levels of strong agreement. By contrast, X users report the lowest rate of strong agreement (26.83%), indicating a comparatively more critical orientation within this user group. While these differences should be interpreted cautiously, they point to the potential influence of platform cultures and content dynamics on political predispositions.

Overall, the findings suggest that the relationship between social media use and political attitudes among Romanian youth extends beyond the designation of a primary news source. Even respondents who report relying chiefly on traditional media appear deeply embedded in digital ecosystems, where platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp remain influential. This underscores the need to assess not only where political information is accessed, but also how different platforms shape the affective and symbolic character of that engagement.



**Figure 6.** Support for authoritarian leadership by social media platforms. Source: IRES (2024).

Platform-specific patterns reveal a potential shift in the nature of youth political involvement—from deliberative engagement toward emotionally charged and symbolic forms of expression. In particular, environments such as TikTok, Facebook, and WhatsApp appear to privilege expressive intensity over argumentative depth, with political visibility often substituting for dialogic exchange. These tendencies resonate with the broader concept of deliberative disintegration, where platform logics may erode the cognitive and normative foundations of democratic deliberation.

To explore how institutional trust relates to support for authoritarian leadership, and to examine Hypothesis H2, which posits that lower trust in democratic institutions is associated with stronger authoritarian preferences, a composite operationalization of institutional trust was developed using the IRES dataset. The survey included 14 items (II1\_1 to II1\_14) measuring trust in various institutions, which were grouped into six conceptually distinct categories based on functional and societal roles.

Domestic political institutions comprise the parliament, government, presidency, and political parties, reflecting key structures of national governance. Security institutions include the secret services, the army, and the police, responsible for national defense and public order. The civil society and media category captures the press and NGOs, actors central to civic participation and informational transparency.

Religious and educational institutions—represented by the Church and the University environment—form another group, associated with value formation and cultural reproduction. Trust in economic institutions is measured via perceptions of large commercial companies, while international institutions encompass the EU and NATO as markers of integration and external security.

For each group, a composite index was computed by averaging inverted trust scores, such that higher values reflect greater trust. This approach enables a differentiated and conceptually grounded exploration of how specific trust domains relate to authoritarian attitudes.

The results offer partial support for H2. Statistically significant but modest negative associations were found between support for authoritarian leadership and trust in both security institutions and religious/educational institutions. These weak correlations are consistent with the complexity of political attitudes and suggest that low trust in particular sectors may coincide with greater openness to centralized, non-deliberative leadership. Other trust domains, such as economic and international institutions, showed weak or non-significant relationships, pointing toward a more nuanced constellation of influences.

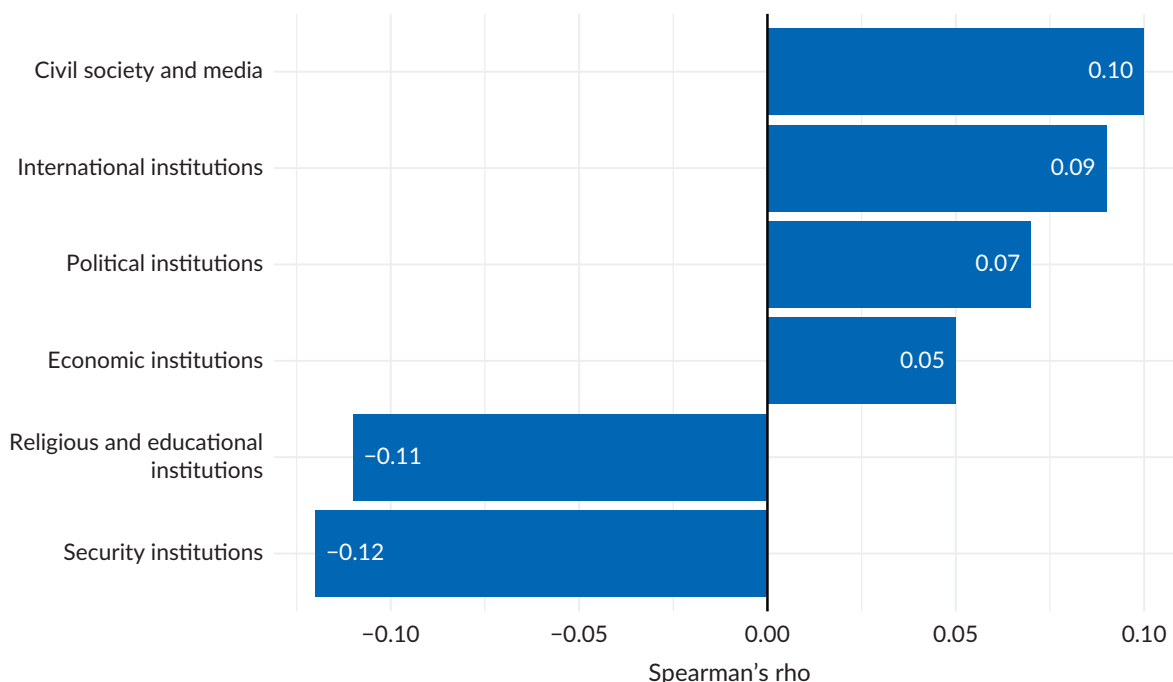
Table 1 summarizes the results of the Spearman's correlation analysis conducted in relation to H2, which explores associations between levels of institutional trust and support for authoritarian leadership among Romanian youth. The analysis indicates that lower trust in security institutions, as well as in religious and educational institutions, is associated with a greater likelihood of endorsing centralized, non-democratic leadership. While these associations are statistically significant, their strength is relatively weak—an outcome consistent with the complexity and multidimensionality of political attitudes. In contrast, trust in political institutions, civil society, and international organizations shows very weak positive associations with democratic orientations, while trust in economic institutions does not display a statistically significant relationship.

**Table 1.** Correlational analysis of institutional trust and authoritarian leadership support among Romanian youth (Spearman's rho).

| Indicator                                       | $\rho$ (Spearman's rho) | p-value | Interpretation                                            |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|---------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Trust in political institutions                 | 0.07                    | 0.0413  | Positive, very weak, and statistically significant        |
| Trust in security institutions                  | −0.12                   | 0.0005  | Negative, weak, and statistically significant             |
| Trust in civil society and media                | 0.10                    | 0.0033  | Positive, very weak, and statistically significant        |
| Trust in religious and educational institutions | −0.11                   | 0.0016  | Negative, weak, and statistically significant             |
| Trust in economic institutions                  | 0.05                    | 0.1844  | Positive and not statistically significant ( $p > 0.05$ ) |
| Trust in international institutions             | 0.09                    | 0.0108  | Positive, very weak, and statistically significant        |

Figure 7 provides a visual representation of Spearman's correlations between various domains of institutional trust and support for authoritarian leadership among Romanian youth. The strongest associations—though still weak in magnitude—are observed concerning trust in security institutions and in religious and educational institutions, where lower levels of trust correspond to higher support for authoritarian models of governance. These results offer additional support for H2. Positive but very weak correlations are also found for trust in political, civil society, and international institutions, while trust in economic institutions does not exhibit a statistically significant relationship. The overall pattern reflects the complexity of political attitudes and the differentiated role that various institutions play in shaping youth perceptions.

To explore how authoritarian preferences vary across political orientations, a Kruskal–Wallis test was conducted, followed by Dunn post hoc comparisons with Bonferroni correction. The results indicate



**Figure 7.** Spearman's correlations of institutional trust for the question: To what extent do you trust the following institutions? Source: IRES (2024).

statistically significant differences in responses to item III7\_6 based on declared vote intention in the 2024 European elections ( $\chi^2 = 22.89$ ,  $df = 5$ ,  $p = 0.00035$ ).

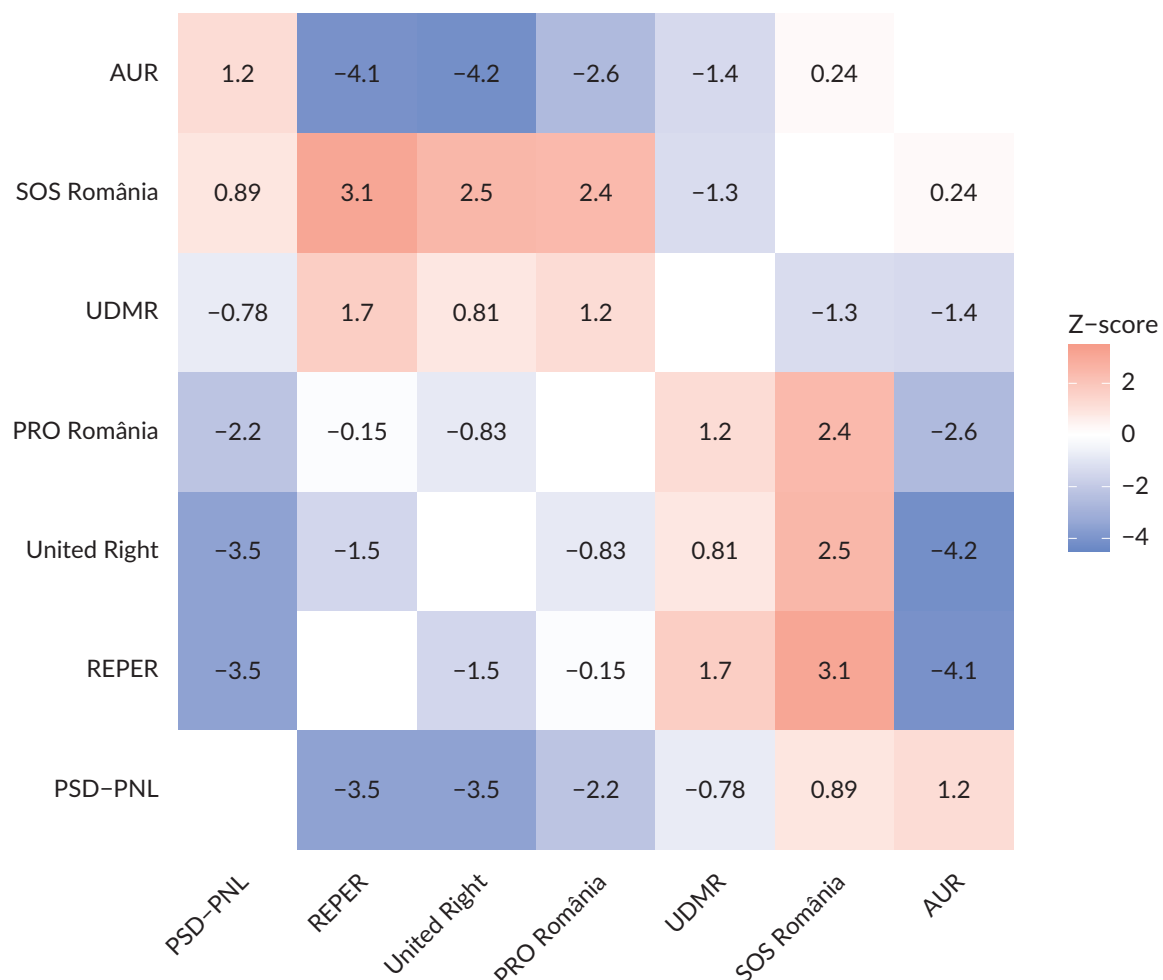
One notable observation is that respondents who support the governing Social-Democrat Party and National Liberal Party (PSD-PNL) alliance do not differ significantly in authoritarian attitudes from those intending to vote for Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) or SOS România—parties commonly characterized as populist, radical right, or anti-system. This finding challenges conventional assumptions about a clear divide between mainstream and extremist electorates, suggesting that support for centralized, non-deliberative leadership may cut across ideological lines.

Although the PSD-PNL alliance occupies a central position in institutional politics—alongside Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR), the ethnic-conservative party representing Romania's Hungarian minority—its electorate shows similarities in authoritarian orientation with those of populist or radical contenders. By contrast, clearer differences are observed when PSD-PNL is compared with voters who support parties aligned with civic liberalism or moderate conservatism. For example, comparisons with Renewing Romania's European Project Party (REPER;  $z = -3.54$ ,  $p.adj = 0.0083$ ) and United Right (DU;  $z = -3.49$ ,  $p.adj = 0.0099$ ) point to a lower inclination toward authoritarian preferences among the latter groups. The difference with PRO România is marginal and statistically non-significant ( $z = -2.17$ ,  $p.adj = 0.6263$ ), potentially reflecting ideological ambiguity or shared populist cues. No significant difference is observed between PSD-PNL and UDMR ( $z = -0.78$ ,  $p.adj = 1.0000$ ), which may be consistent with their political proximity and overlapping conservative leanings.

Among radical parties, expected contrasts with more democratic formations are evident. Both AUR and SOS România differ significantly from REPER and United Right ( $p.adj < 0.001$ ), confirming a broader ideological

distance. However, comparisons with PRO România and UDMR yield non-significant results, suggesting a potential convergence of authoritarian predispositions among electorates that span the far-right, soft populist, and ethnically conservative spectrum.

In the case of SOS România, the comparison with REPER reveals a statistically significant difference ( $p_{\text{adj}} = 0.036$ ), whereas no significant difference is found in relation to Dreapta Unită ( $p_{\text{adj}} = 0.231$ ), PRO România, or UDMR. These patterns may reflect a broader reservoir of authoritarian sentiment among electorates that are more distant from liberal democratic norms, regardless of their position on the traditional ideological axis (Figure 8).



**Figure 8.** Post-hoc comparisons of authoritarian attitudes (Z scores).

Taken together, these findings indicate that authoritarian attitudes among Romanian youth are not limited to supporters of radical or anti-system parties, but are also present among voters aligned with mainstream governing formations. This pattern suggests that preferences for strong, centralized leadership may transcend conventional ideological boundaries, complicating the distinction between centrist democratic affiliation and populist dissatisfaction. In the context of post-communist societies—where institutional distrust, weak partisan attachments, and pragmatic electoral behavior are common—such overlaps may reflect broader patterns of democratic ambivalence rather than clear-cut ideological divisions.



## 6. Limitations

This study offers a descriptive account of the associations between media consumption, institutional trust, and support for authoritarian leadership among Romanian youth in the immediate pre-election period of the 2024 European Parliament elections—a moment of heightened political attention and narrative polarization. Rather than a limitation, this context represents a central analytical focus, allowing for the observation of how democratic disillusionment and authoritarian predispositions take shape under electoral pressure. Nonetheless, several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design restricts causal inference and cannot determine temporal directionality between media use, trust, and attitudes. The use of self-reported data may introduce biases such as social desirability or recall inaccuracies. Additionally, while composite indices improved conceptual clarity, they may have obscured important differences between individual institutions within each category. Future research could address these limitations through longitudinal or mixed-method approaches, combining survey data with content analysis or digital trace evidence to better understand the evolving relationship between media ecosystems, institutional legitimacy, and youth political orientations.

## 7. Discussion

Despite its methodological limitations, this study provides meaningful insights into the relationship between mediated political environments, institutional trust, and authoritarian predispositions among Romanian youth. The findings underscore the importance of examining the affective and symbolic dimensions of political communication, particularly in contexts shaped by emotional resonance, algorithmic amplification, and disinformation. Rather than signaling disengagement, youth preferences for strong, non-deliberative leadership appear linked to deeper transformations in how political agency is expressed and understood.

These dynamics must be interpreted within the specific context of Romania's 2024 electoral cycle. Conducted in the immediate pre-election period, the study captures a moment of intensified political attention, heightened narrative contestation, and institutional uncertainty. The doubling of extremist representation in the European Parliament and the annulment of the first round of the Romanian presidential election—amid documented irregularities and politicized use of digital platforms—have brought renewed public concern over democratic resilience.

These developments unfolded within a broader digital media environment that is reshaping the logic of political communication. While digital platforms offer new opportunities for civic engagement, they also facilitate the spread of populist rhetoric, grievance narratives, and polarizing content. By circumventing traditional gatekeeping structures, they enable direct, emotionally charged appeals that weaken deliberative norms and fragment the public sphere.

Although these tendencies reflect broader global trends, the Romanian case illustrates how post-communist legacies—centralized governance, unmet expectations of democratic reform, and persistent structural inequalities—can converge to amplify institutional mistrust. For many young citizens socialized in such a climate, the appeal of decisive, unmediated leadership may feel more concrete than the proceduralism of liberal democracy.

Similar dynamics have been observed internationally. In the 2024 US presidential election, for example, populist discourse—amplified through alternative platforms like Truth Social—mobilized frustration and deepened skepticism toward institutional legitimacy. Within this wider perspective, Romania mirrors a broader European and global pattern in which the convergence of digital media logics and populist mobilization challenges not only democratic practices, but also the very foundations of a shared deliberative public sphere.

Although this article focuses on the run-up to the 2024 European Parliament elections, the dynamics it identifies—particularly among Romanian youth—are unlikely to be confined to a single electoral episode. The algorithmically segmented and affect-driven nature of digital engagement continues to shape how young people relate to political institutions and democratic norms. These concerns were further accentuated during the November 2024 presidential election, when chaotic information flows and contested legitimacy brought renewed attention to the risks of digital polarization. While a detailed examination of that electoral event exceeds the scope of this article, it points to a valuable direction for future research.

To advance this inquiry, future studies could adopt a triangulated methodological approach that links attitudinal survey data with content analysis of platform-specific political discourse and engagement dynamics. Such an approach would offer a more comprehensive understanding of how digital infrastructures mediate the relationship between symbolic communication and democratic commitment.

Finally, these challenges underscore the urgent need to invest in media literacy and civic education tailored to the realities of digital political life. Equipping young citizens with the tools to critically navigate emotionally saturated and selectively curated information flows is essential to counteract the normalization of authoritarian preferences. Initiatives that promote deliberation, pluralism, and institutional trust may serve as necessary counterweights to the affective and fragmented communication environments increasingly shaping youth political experience.

## 8. Conclusions

The findings of this study suggest that democratic disillusionment among Romanian youth is not merely the result of apathy or disengagement, but reflects deeper structural and communicative transformations. Institutional skepticism, emotionally charged media environments, and the symbolic logic of digital political communication have contributed to a redefinition of how young people relate to democratic norms. Rather than rejecting democracy outright, many appear drawn to non-deliberative models of leadership that promise clarity, efficiency, and directness—often at the expense of institutional accountability.

This shift must be understood within the broader process of deliberative disintegration (Ștefănel, 2025), in which the conditions for reasoned public dialogue erode under the pressure of affective, fragmented, and performance-driven media ecosystems. As digital platforms amplify emotional content and reward visibility over substance, traditional spaces for democratic deliberation are increasingly replaced by confrontational, identity-based forms of expression. These dynamics do not eliminate political engagement among youth but reconfigure it in ways that may weaken democratic resilience.

Responding to this challenge requires a multifaceted approach. Critical media literacy and civic education must be adapted to reflect the realities of platform-based political communication. Institutions, educators, and civil society actors need to create spaces for constructive engagement that move beyond spectacle and polarization. Transparent, accountable, and dialogic political communication is essential if young citizens are to be reconnected with democratic values in a meaningful way.

As Europe confronts the consequences of rising nationalism, populism, and societal polarization, understanding how youth attitudes are shaped by evolving media infrastructures becomes not just a matter of academic inquiry but a democratic imperative. The resilience of democratic institutions will increasingly depend on the ability to engage younger generations in political processes that are both inclusive and responsive to the communicative logics of the digital age.

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### Conflict of Interests

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ChatGPT was used to refine the grammar and enhance existing R scripts for statistical analysis and data visualization.

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# Coverage of the European Parliament Elections by Media Portals in Serbia

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## Abstract

The media plays a vital role in shaping public opinion about the European Union (EU), but a lack of effective communication and cooperation between the EU and the media results in inadequate coverage, fueling distrust and skepticism among citizens. In Serbia, which is a candidate for EU membership, there is an increasing trend of distrust towards EU institutions. According to the research conducted by the Ministry of European Integration in 2022, less than half of Serbian citizens would support joining the EU in a referendum. The media is expected to play a key role in clarifying topics that are unfamiliar to the public, such as European integration and the functioning of EU institutions in general. However, earlier studies on media portrayal of EU institutions in Serbia reveal a predominantly factual approach, with limited in-depth analysis, an elite-focused depiction of Europeanization, and frequent reliance on national officials as sources, with minimal inclusion of EU representatives or experts. Building on the findings of earlier research conducted in Serbia, this study seeks to answer the research question: “How did online media portals in Serbia report on the 2024 European Parliament elections?” This exclusive focus on online media aims to provide insights into the digital news landscape and its role in shaping public discourse around the elections. The analysis focuses on the key topics highlighted, the main actors featured, and the tone of the discourse. A textual analysis was carried out on 1,044 articles published across 44 Serbian media portals between June 1 and June 14, 2024, covering the period immediately before and after the European Parliament elections.

## Keywords

European Parliament elections; European Union; media coverage; Serbia

## 1. Introduction

The communication components of the European Union (EU) and its institutions constitute a crucial segment in ensuring public support and securing legitimacy for EU policies. De Vreese (2007) conceptualizes the EU as a shared communication space, or public sphere, comprising various communicators, with communication primarily mediated by mass media. In this context, the role of the media is not to foster affection for the EU, but rather to inform citizens and enable them to make independent and critical political decisions. According to Souliotis (2022), the marginalization of EU-related topics in the media, the prevalence of negative reporting, and the dominant framing of EU issues through conflict and drama contribute to what is known as the EU's communication deficit. This deficit can have significant consequences, including diminishing public trust in the EU, undermining the legitimacy of its institutions, and ultimately reinforcing Euroscepticism. Conversely, through alternative narratives and agendas, mainstream media can play an important role in reducing Euroscepticism within their respective nation-states (Ștefănel et al., 2023).

This is particularly significant in the context of transitional societies that are not on par economically with leading EU member states. In such contexts, concerns related to economic security and national identity remain highly influential. Post-materialist values—such as self-expression, environmental awareness, and multiculturalism—which Inglehart identifies as central to supranational integration via shared non-material values (Inglehart, 1977, 1997, 2008), are still at an early stage of development in these countries. This specific socio-political context contributes to the persistence of Euroscepticism among citizens, with mass media playing a potentially decisive role in shaping this dynamic. The media can act either as a catalyst or a barrier to the adoption of these values, and accordingly, may portray the EU either as an opportunity for connection and prosperity, or as a threat to national identity (Hooghe & Marks, 2005). In this context, De Vreese (2007) does not perceive the role of the media as limited to merely selecting and framing information about the EU. Rather, he argues that the media actively contribute to constructing the EU as a public communicative space. In doing so, the media indirectly influence patterns of political participation among citizens, as well as the formation of their attitudes toward the European integration process. This influence is particularly pronounced when citizens are consistently exposed to news about the EU. Moreover, there is a clear correlation between the positive tone of media coverage and public support for European integration (e.g., Brosius et al., 2019; Daminov, 2024; De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006).

It is also worth emphasizing that conventional political trust differs significantly from citizens' trust in the EU and its policies, given that the latter pertains to a supranational institution. National political trust can be cultivated through everyday socio-political engagement by individuals, although this, too, is largely influenced by media reporting. In contrast, trust in the EU and its institutions is more distant from the everyday lives of ordinary people. This is especially true for those living in non-member states. Only a small number of individuals have direct, personal experiences with EU policymaking, and most topics related to the EU's competences rarely become subjects of public discussion—unless such conversations are initiated by the media (De Vreese, 2007). In this context, it may be assumed that media representation plays a crucial role in shaping public perception and, ultimately, citizens' attitudes toward the EU. As Boomgaarden et al. argue, "EU news affects public knowledge about, attitudes towards, and support for European integration, enlargement or specific policies" (2010, p. 506).



Moreover, media effects tend to be the strongest when the audience possesses little to no prior knowledge of a given topic and, consequently, has not yet formed well-established opinions on the issue at hand (Klapper, 1960). Within the context of this study, this aspect is particularly relevant, as Serbian citizens have undergone profound transitional changes over the past decades. New and unfamiliar challenges have emerged—ones that were largely absent or unknown under the socialist system. Specifically, Serbia officially embarked on its transition process following the political changes of October 2000. While the formal shift from a socialist to a democratic political system was almost immediate and visibly apparent, the path toward substantive democratization has been neither swift nor straightforward. One might even argue that this process is still ongoing. Jakubowicz and Sükösd (2008) comment on the crucial role of the media in the broader democratization of societies undergoing political transition. They particularly highlight that the media are not merely transmitters of reality, but educators of transitional audiences about the significance, roles, and functioning of democratic institutions. In transitional countries, the media are expected to play an active role in fostering democratic culture and civic understanding. Moreover, the development of a sense of belonging to the European cultural and political space, along with learning how democratic and European institutions operate, remains an ongoing process—one marked by numerous challenges and fluctuations—even after more than two decades. Soon after, while the democratization process was still incomplete, Serbia entered a new socio-political phase by being granted candidate status for EU membership in 2012. A society still in the process of learning about democratic values and procedures at that time entered a new phase—dealing with the complex questions surrounding EU membership candidacy. It is therefore logical that the media, as in the above-mentioned broader democratization of transitional societies, played a crucial role in this context as well. The manner in which the media portrayed the accession process and EU institutions to their audiences likely had a significant influence on how Serbian citizens would come to perceive and relate to European institutions and integration. Although this article does not examine the direct impact of media coverage on public attitudes toward the EU, the findings of recent research (Ministarstvo za evropske integracije, 2022) indicate that support for Serbia's European path is at an all-time low. If a referendum on EU membership were held tomorrow, fewer than 50% of Serbian citizens would vote in favor. This decline in support can be indirectly linked to the way the EU and its institutions have been represented in the media.

The Serbian media landscape is marked by political polarization, systemic pressures, and a decline in press freedom. According to Reporters Without Borders (2024), Serbia's position on the World Press Freedom Index reached a historic low in 2024, despite a slight improvement in 2025. Freedom House has also recorded a steady decline in democratic standards, with Serbia classified as "Partly Free" since 2018 and scoring 56/100 in 2025. Although the legal framework is formally aligned with EU standards, implementation remains weak due to political influence over editorial policy, legal threats against journalists, and widespread self-censorship (Mitrović & Milojević, 2025). The media sector's economic fragility, particularly among local outlets, as well as non-transparent funding further contribute to limited media independence. Ownership structures often obscure political affiliations, making the landscape appear pluralistic, but, in practice, independent journalism faces increasing constraints (Jaraković, 2019).

Over the past few decades, there has been extensive research focused on analyzing media coverage of the EU and its institutions in Serbia. These analysis revealed that media outlets generally reported in a factual manner, without providing deeper analysis of the subject, while the most common sources cited in the articles were international and domestic politicians. Meanwhile, the opinions of citizens are completely marginalized—thus,

the process of Europeanization is elitized and disconnected from the daily lives of ordinary people (Milinkov et al., 2013; Pralica & Janjić, 2016). Also, the reporting on EU-related issues—while partly influenced by the editorial policies of media outlets—is shaped by the political agenda imposed by external actors, with the discourse on the EU largely shaped by the perspectives of national political figures (Krstić, 2015). A discourse analysis of articles published in the most visited online newspaper editions in Serbia in 2016 indicated a more intensely negative portrayal of the EU compared to previous years. The study also identified the presence of overt hate speech targeting the EU and its institutions, depicting the EU as a “threatening,” “destabilizing,” and “punitive force,” while Serbia was portrayed as “humiliated,” “yet proud and dignified” (Dražković et al., 2016).

In recent years, media coverage of EU integration and the role of EU representatives in Serbia’s accession process has undergone a notable transformation. EU-related issues are increasingly present in widely read tabloid outlets aligned with the ruling political structures, as well as on social media platforms. These tabloids, together with popular pro-government commercial TV channels, often resort to sensationalism, spread disinformation, and rely on unverified sources. Their reporting on EU matters frequently redirects public attention or is used to discredit particular EU officials through orchestrated smear campaigns (Krstić, 2023). As Stojiljković and Spasojević (2018) note, the relationship towards the EU in Serbia is characterized by a paradox wherein formal pro-European rhetoric coexists with skepticism and criticism within the media landscape. According to these authors, media outlets, particularly those aligned with political elites, often serve as channels for disseminating populist messages that rely on simplistic and emotional narratives rather than analytical and objective reporting on EU integration. They argue that the topic of the EU is instrumentalized politically to mobilize voters and legitimize governing authorities, while selective coverage and sensationalist headlines contribute to ambivalent and polarized public attitudes. This polarization within the media sphere, combined with a lack of critical journalism, results in public disorientation and a diminished quality of information regarding the EU accession process. Consequently, populist discourse in Serbian media simultaneously appropriates pro-European narratives and populist elements, fostering confusion and distrust towards the EU (Stojiljković & Spasojević, 2018).

Various studies show that Serbian media coverage of EU topics varies due to differences in timeframes, media types, and research focus. However, they commonly conclude that such topics are often marginalized, influenced by national politics, and rarely include citizens’ views. Building on prior research, this study aims to address the following research question: “How did online media portals in Serbia report on the 2024 European Parliament [EP] elections?” Although the focus of the analysis is narrowly defined—both thematically and temporally—concentrating solely on the period immediately before and after the EP elections, the findings of this study allow for broader interpretive insights. They reveal how the EU and its institutions are represented in the media to Serbian citizens. Furthermore, as the EP continues to expand its competences and increasingly influences decisions that affect the daily lives of EU citizens, media coverage of this institution, even outside electoral periods, remains a highly relevant subject of scholarly inquiry (Gattermann, 2013; Souliotis, 2022, pp. 7–49).

## 2. Methods

A total of 1,044 articles published on 44 media portals were analyzed, covering the period from June 1 to June 14, 2024, immediately before and after the EP elections. The articles were collected through the database naslovi.net. Naslovi.net is an online news aggregator that collects content from 156 online media outlets

in Serbia, encompassing a wide spectrum of media types, from local news providers to specialized online magazines. The aggregator operates by capturing all news articles in real time from its listed websites at the moment of publication, without selective filtering. For the purposes of this study, a search was conducted using the keyword “European Parliament,” resulting in the identification of 44 media portals that reported on topics related to the EP during the analysis period. Importantly, the selection criterion was not predetermined but emerged organically from this keyword-based search. This approach aimed to encompass all online media outlets covering the EP, irrespective of their editorial profile or reach. Since the sample includes media sources often excluded or underrepresented in similar studies, it was anticipated that the resulting media landscape would offer a more comprehensive and nuanced picture.

The database included the names and characteristics of all media outlets whose articles were analyzed, and some of those outlets are explicitly identified in the main text wherever specific media content is cited. Where relevant for interpretation, additional information on the editorial orientation and ownership structure of these outlets is provided. For full transparency and to facilitate contextual understanding, a comprehensive list of all 44 analyzed portals, including details on their type, ownership, and editorial profile, is available in the Supplementary File 1 (Appendix A).

In this study, the media article served as the unit of analysis. Each article from the database was first coded and subsequently classified according to predefined categories: (a) “the main topic of focus,” (b) “the dominant source of information in the article,” and (c) “the tone of discourse” (with respect to the EU and its institutions, particularly the EP). With the exception of the tone of discourse—where predefined categories included positive, neutral, and negative—the operationalization of the other two categories was not established a priori. Instead, subcategories were inductively developed during the analytical process. As a result, 12 subcategories were identified for the main topic of focus, and 14 subcategories were identified for the dominant source of information (these will be presented in detail in the following section).

The analysis was conducted in accordance with the principles of textual analysis, as part of a broader qualitative data analysis process, encompassing data storage in a database, and the grouping and definition of categories and subcategories. The analytical approach used was both deductive and inductive; that is, data, codes, and theory were compared simultaneously (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). The analysis was conducted manually by three researchers. All members of the coding team were involved in coding the entire sample. Prior to the analysis, the coders held calibration sessions to align their understanding of the categories and ensure consistency in application. A codebook was developed iteratively, based on initial readings of the material, and finalized through joint discussion. During the coding process, any discrepancies in categorization were resolved through group discussions. When consensus could not be reached, the final decision was made based on majority agreement among the coders. Due to the collaborative nature of the process and the relatively small coding team, an intercoder reliability coefficient (e.g., Cohen’s Kappa) was not calculated. However, a high level of agreement was achieved through ongoing communication and iterative refinement of the coding scheme. The final version of the codebook, with category definitions and examples, is included in the Supplementary File 2 (Appendix B).

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1. Which Issues Were Framed as Particularly Significant in Serbian Media Coverage During the EP Elections?

Topic categorization is a key step in analyzing media coverage of the EU and its institutions, as it reveals how these actors are most frequently framed and which narratives dominate public discourse in Serbia (Burazer et al., 2021). By emphasizing particular aspects of an issue, the media guide public attention and define what is perceived as relevant (Entman, 1993), thus shaping the framework within which EU-related debates take place. A key feature of this study is its purposive sampling and focus on a narrow time frame—immediately before and after the EP elections. While all analyzed texts addressed the EP elections, thematic subcategories emerged during coding, offering a clearer picture of how the elections were framed in Serbia. In cases of thematic overlap, the dominant issue was identified and categorized accordingly.

In the majority of the texts ( $N = 646$ ), the focus was on the “elections in the context of the EU,” and this was framed in the broadest sense (see Table 1). This category encompasses texts in which the EP elections are viewed through the lens of the EU, the impact on the political dynamics within the EU after the election, predictions about events, and/or indications of the consequences of the election results (1a, 1b):

1a: “Polling stations are open, today is the last day to vote for the EP” (“Danas poslednji dan,” 2024).

1b: “Four scenarios that will determine the next President of the European Council: Which names are in the running?” (Fortuna, 2024).

**Table 1.** Quantitative representation of texts in relation to the category “topic in focus.”

| Topic in focus                                                 | Number of texts | %       |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|---------|
| Elections in the context of the EU                             | 646             | 61.78%  |
| National elections                                             | 165             | 15.80%  |
| Elections in the context of Serbia                             | 117             | 11.21%  |
| Profile of EU politicians                                      | 43              | 4.12%   |
| Elections in the context of Russia                             | 35              | 3.35%   |
| Elections in the context of enlargement                        | 15              | 1.44%   |
| Elections in the context of the region                         | 7               | 0.67%   |
| Elections in the context of migration                          | 6               | 0.57%   |
| Elections in the context of the economy                        | 5               | 0.57%   |
| Elections in the context of the USA                            | 2               | 0.19%   |
| Elections in the context of Ukraine                            | 2               | 0.19%   |
| Elections in the context of the European Football Championship | 1               | 0.10%   |
| Grand Total                                                    | 1,044           | 100.00% |

“National elections” emerged as a significant theme during the analysis. This is evidenced by the fact that there were a total of 165 articles in which this theme was dominant. Specifically, this theme refers to media articles reporting on national elections in EU member states. In some countries, national elections were held

concurrently with the EP elections. However, the calling of early elections following poor results in the EP elections (such as in France) was a frequent topic in Serbian media during the period of analysis. An example of a headline from this category is: “Le Pen: I will be a candidate in the early parliamentary elections in France” (“Le Pen: ‘Biću,” 2024). Additionally, in the news item titled “Germany not considering new elections after poor results of the ruling coalition in the EP elections” (M., 2024), the focus is on the parliamentary elections in Germany, while the news “Corrective measures in Athens after the EP elections: Mitsotakis hinted at the possibility of a government reshuffle” (Tanjug, 2024a) discusses the elections in Greece. Such news stories about national elections in EU countries were the second most frequent category (Table 1) during the period of analysis.

Given the context in which the research was conducted, “elections in the context of Serbia” were a theme that ranked third in terms of the number of articles ( $N = 117$ ). Within this theme, the primary focus was on what the new composition of the EP could mean for Serbia, particularly regarding EU accession. The rise of the far-right was a frequent topic during the analysis period, including in the context of Serbia, examining how the strengthening of the far-right in the EP might impact the general attitude towards Serbia. For example, one of the news items from this category is: “If the far-right wins in France: Will the relationship towards Serbia and the Kosovo issue change?” (Ž., 2024). Additionally, the issue of Serbia’s EU accession was a theme within this category, and among the analyzed articles were news pieces such as: “How the new composition of the EP could influence EU enlargement and Serbia’s status?” (“Kako novi sastav,” 2024) and “What is the effect of the European elections on Serbia?” (TV Nova, 2024).

The theme of “EU politician profiles” was notably prominent ( $N = 43$ ). These articles often focused on controversial figures—such as former convicts or influencers—frequently presented in a sensationalist manner. Over half of them (22) had a negative tone, suggesting an intent to undermine the credibility of the EP. By highlighting eccentric candidates, the media portrayed the institution as frivolous and unreliable.

“Elections in the context of Russia” was a theme in which the EP elections are linked to Russia, either through comments from Russian officials about the elections or through messages from European politicians to Russia ( $N = 35$ ). The presence of this theme can be interpreted in relation to the context in which the research was conducted. In Serbia, there is often an emphasis on the polarization between pro-Russian and pro-European orientations, both among politicians and citizens, so the reporting on the EP elections in the context of Russia was expected.

Other topics include “elections in the context of enlargement” ( $N = 15$ ), a topic separate from elections in the context of Serbia, as these texts did not focus on Serbia but rather on EU enlargement in general. Then, “elections in the context of the region” (Western Balkans;  $N = 7$ ), “elections in the context of migration” ( $N = 6$ ), “elections in the context of the economy” ( $N = 5$ ), “elections in the context of the USA” ( $N = 2$ ), “elections in the context of Ukraine” ( $N = 2$ ), and “elections in the context of the European Football Championship” ( $N = 1$ ).

The rise of the right-wing in Europe was one of the dominant themes within the aforementioned categories. The majority of the analyzed media outlets pompously proclaimed the victory of right-wing options or at least a significant shift of the EU towards the right, as seen in articles such as “The Right is Coming to Brussels in Giant Steps” (Cerovina, 2024) or “Young Europeans Are Turning Right: Analysis in Five Countries Shows Who the Right Can Rely On” (Euronews Srbija et al., 2024). The strengthening of the right was often linked

to Serbia, through analyses of what such a shift could mean for Serbia's EU membership. The assessments ranged between two extremes: one that certain right-wing options would block further EU enlargement (2a), and the other suggesting that right-wing options in certain countries, such as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, could be beneficial for Serbia (2b).

2a: "All representatives of those right-wing parties that entered the EP are skeptical about the Western Balkans' accession to Europe, even though they belong to the same political group as those who hold the majority and govern in our country, as well as some opposition parties that share the same views" (Beta, 2024).

2b: "The friendly cooperation continues, which guarantees peace, stability, and prosperity for our two countries and the region" ("Vučić razgovarao sa," 2024).

The political context in Serbia—marked by a continued decline in freedoms (Freedom House, 2025) and close ties between the ruling elite and right-wing actors in countries like Russia and Hungary—helps explain why pro-regime or right-leaning media often portray the rise of the far right in the EP positively. In contrast, liberal-leaning outlets tend to voice concern over Serbia's EU prospects in light of this shift. These divergent portrayals align with production theories, which argue that media, as institutions influenced by political and economic elites, produce content that serves elite interests (Fuchs, 2010; Garnham, 1979, 1990; Mosco, 2015; Schiller, 1969; Winseck, 2024). The findings thus reflect the ideological imprint of non-media actors on how the EU is framed in Serbian media.

### 3.2. *Who Creates the Narrative?*

Information sources in the media—ranging from individuals and institutions to documents and social media—play a crucial role in shaping narratives. This is particularly relevant in the context of complex political issues, such as those related to the EP and the EU, where the selected sources significantly influence how the public understands and evaluates these topics. For this reason, "dominant information sources" were the second category analyzed in the media texts. As previously explained, this category is important because it provides insight into who shapes the narrative about the EU, specifically which sources of information create the image of the EP and the EU for the citizens of Serbia.

As shown in Table 2, the most frequent information sources were "EU politicians." In more than a third of the total number of media articles ( $N = 385$ ), statements from politicians in EU member states were dominant. The dominance of EU politicians as information sources was expected, given that media outlets largely relayed their statements from foreign sources. This practice allows for the appearance of credibility without engaging local experts to provide context or analysis. It raises the question of what Serbian citizens actually gain from such reporting.

Nearly a quarter of the texts ( $N = 288$ ) "did not name any specific sources" (Table 2). In these articles, information about the progress of the electoral process in individual countries was mostly presented without further analysis or interpretation. The large number of articles without cited sources points to a superficial reporting style, focused mainly on basic facts like polling station openings, turnout, or early results. This is consistent with the finding that 75% of the analyzed articles were informational, while only 25% offered

analytical insight into causes, implications, or future developments. An example of one of the analytical articles is: “Winners and losers of the EP elections: What do the election results in the EU tell us?” (“Pobednici i gubitnici,” 2024).

**Table 2.** A quantitative overview of the number of texts in relation to the category “dominant source of information.”

| Dominant source of information     | Number of texts | %      |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|--------|
| EU politicians                     | 385             | 36.88% |
| No source                          | 288             | 27.68% |
| Experts                            | 136             | 13.02% |
| Media                              | 95              | 9.10%  |
| National politicians (from Serbia) | 57              | 5.46%  |
| Politicians outside the EU         | 30              | 2.87%  |
| Citizens                           | 17              | 1.63%  |
| NGOs                               | 11              | 1.05%  |
| Author’s text                      | 10              | 0.96%  |
| EU institutions                    | 6               | 0.57%  |
| “Experts”: Party pundits           | 4               | 0.38%  |
| Social media                       | 3               | 0.29%  |
| PR                                 | 1               | 0.10%  |
| National institutions              | 1               | 0.10%  |
| Grand Total                        | 1,044           | 100%   |

“Expert” opinions were present in a significant number of articles, representing a shift towards a more analytical approach and a closer interpretation of certain topics related to the EP elections and the EU in general. However, the inclusion of experts is not random or uniformly distributed; instead, media outlets selectively reference experts according to their editorial preferences and the specific thematic focus of their coverage (Albæk et al., 2011). Therefore, we differentiated between independent “experts” ( $N = 136$ ) and “party pundits” ( $N = 4$ ) based on Cross’s (2010) framework. Experts were defined as individuals with recognized professional or academic expertise cited in a non-partisan manner. Political commentators affiliated with parties (party pundits) were excluded from this category to avoid conflating partisan opinions with independent analysis. Although party pundits appeared rarely (4 out of 140 cases), their exclusion helped maintain the integrity of the expert category.

References to other “media outlets” as sources were recorded in 95 articles, while “politicians from Serbia” were cited as sources in 57 texts. Although politicians from Serbia are, in effect, politicians from outside the EU, they were categorized separately due to the context of the research and further interpretation of the results. “Politicians from non-EU countries” were sources in 30 texts. “Citizens” were asked for their opinions in only 17 texts; none of the respondents were from Serbia. One of the frequent criticisms directed at the media reporting on European institutions is the absence of citizens’ opinions on issues related to EU policies. The marginalization of citizens as sources of information leads to a journalistic approach that dehumanizes the EU and its institutions, distancing them from the public. As a result, they are represented as a cumbersome collection of institutions and diplomatic rhetoric, completely detached from the everyday lives of ordinary people.



Other sources of information are presented in Table 2.

### 3.3. In What Tone Are the EP and the EU Portrayed in the Analyzed Articles?

When it comes to “the tone of discourse,” three categories were predefined: positive, neutral, and negative tone. This referred to the stance toward the EP elections and the EU in general, its institutions, and policies. The operational definitions were as follows:

Positive tone: Reporting emphasizes benefits of EU integration, praises EU actors, or presents the EU/EP in a favorable light. Terms like “support,” “improvement,” “cooperation,” “assistance,” and positive portrayal of EU policies.

Neutral tone: Factual or balanced reporting without evident bias or evaluative language regarding the EU/EP. Descriptive language, quotes from multiple sources, absence of judgmental or emotionally charged words.

Negative tone: Reporting focuses on EU failures, criticism of its policies, or portrays the EU as a threat, burden, or negative influence. Language indicating “imposition,” “failure,” “hypocrisy,” focus on “conditionality,” or elite criticism.

The majority of the texts had a neutral tone ( $N = 732$ ). However, nearly a quarter of the analyzed media texts had a negative tone, while a positive tone was observed in only 27 texts (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Number of texts in relation to the category “tone of the text.”

| Tone of the text (in relation to the EU) | Number of texts | %       |
|------------------------------------------|-----------------|---------|
| neutral                                  | 732             | 70.11%  |
| negative                                 | 285             | 27.30%  |
| positive                                 | 27              | 2.59%   |
| Grand Total                              | 1,044           | 100.00% |

In the following paragraphs, examples of negative discourse are presented within two analyzed categories: “the topic in focus” and “the dominant source of information.” More specifically, attention is given to those subcategories within these two categories that displayed the highest proportion of negatively toned discourse.

When it comes to the category “topic in focus,” the subcategory that exhibited the highest concentration of negatively framed content was “elections in the context of the region” (Balkan/Western Balkans)—71%. An example of such a text is an article quoting the President of the Republic of Srpska, Milorad Dodik, who concludes: “An expected political earthquake. They have been defeated” (Tanjung, 2024b). The next two topics, where negative tone was present in the same percentage—66% of the total number of texts in that subcategory—were “elections in the context of Russia” (3a) and “elections in the context of migration” (3b):

3a: “The EP elections took place under conditions of strict restrictions, the absence of fair competition, and the ‘cleansing’ of the information field from alternative sources of information, alongside an unrestrained anti-Russian campaign” (Trajković, 2024).

3b: “They represent a threat to the high level of security we are accustomed to in Austria,” points out our interlocutor” (Filipović, 2024).

The topic of the “EU politicians’ profile,” with 51% of negative texts, was used, as already mentioned, for subtly and sensationally tarnishing the reputation of the newly elected composition of the EP, with the newly elected MEPs portrayed as “criminals” (4a, 4b), “tycoons” (4c), “Nazis” (4d), and so on:

4a: “The footage of her being brought before the court in chains shocked the global public” (Tanjug, 2024c).

4b: “Greek politician Fredi Beleris, who was convicted of vote-buying in the mayoral election in the Albanian town of Himare, won a seat in the EP from prison in Albania” (“Iz albanskog zatvora,” 2024).

4c: “To celebrate his victory with party colleagues, he arrived at the main headquarters in a red Ferrari 296 GTS—Gran Turismo Spider, whose starting price is around 350,000 euros” (“Hrvatski evroparlamentarac u,” 2024).

4d: “They also highlighted a moment from the party’s annual convention where the aforementioned Herbert Kickl triumphantly declared himself the future Volkskanzler, or people’s chancellor—a term that was first associated with Adolf Hitler in 1933” (Čurović, 2024).

The fourth most frequent topic with a negative tone was the theme of “elections in the context of Serbia,” with as many as 44% of such texts. This is particularly significant, as nearly half of the articles analyzing Serbia’s European future express a negative stance toward European institutions and/or Serbia’s path to EU membership. This is evident in texts that associate Serbia’s “uncertain future with Priština (5a), with the “EU’s indecisiveness” (5b), or with “EU politicians who are portrayed as hating Serbia” (5c), among others:

5a: “KURTI’S TIME BOMB: Priština has placed its man in the EP. How dangerous is this for us?” (Paunović, 2024a).

5b: “Europe has no idea what to do with Serbia, with the Western Balkans. It should have addressed and changed that 30 or 25 years ago” (Komarica, 2024).

5c: “Grošelj is, incidentally, a well-known Serb-hater, a man who never misses a single opportunity to hurl the worst accusations at Vučić and our country. Not to mention that all of it is sheer nonsense, but this time Grošelj has outdone even himself (which is no easy feat)” (Paunović, 2024b).

In the category “dominant source of information,” the subcategory with the highest proportion of negatively toned discourse was “citizens.” Within the articles in which citizens were cited as the primary source of information, 70% conveyed a negative tone. Similarly, 65% of “Serbian political actors” cited as sources reflected a negative tone. Notably, 30% of “experts” also adopted a negative tone when commenting on EU/EP-related topics. To provide a more in-depth understanding, the following paragraphs elaborate on each individual category.

Twelve out of 17 “citizens” expressed a negative stance toward the EP elections and the EU in general. The negative discourse of citizens as a source mostly contained skepticism towards the EU regarding its impact on the daily lives of ordinary people (6a).

6a: “I always participate in local and parliamentary elections, but I have never voted in European elections, nor will I in these. Personally, I don’t even know who is on the lists, how many people are being elected, nor am I particularly interested in it. It all seems distant to me, so I don’t even know what it’s about, what is being discussed, and so on. I believe we should focus on improving the situation in our own country, as we are hardly consulted about what is happening or being done in the EU. We are too small for anything more serious, so these elections matter most to those who will be elected, as they will receive high salaries and various benefits, while we will continue living as we always have” (Bradarić, 2024).

When “domestic politicians” are the source, it is expected that they will provide context and examine EU policies in relation to Serbia. Ultimately, politicians from ruling parties enjoy the highest trust from citizens according to election results, making their interpretation in this context even more significant. Although a number of opposition politicians also expressed a negative tone. However, there was a noticeable “denigration of EU politicians” (7a, 7b) and a general “trend of spreading Euroscepticism” (7c; as previously mentioned, 65%):

7a: A member of the ruling party’s presidency stated: “Schieder doesn’t care about the electoral will of the citizens, neither of Serbia nor of any other country” (U., 2024).

7b: The Minister of Internal Affairs said: “Sixth-rate politicians” enjoy venting their frustrations on countries and peoples that pursue an independent and sovereign foreign policy, while presenting themselves in Serbia as important players in European politics” (Tanjug, 2024d).

7c: One opposition politician stated: “What is most important for us in Serbia is that all these parties are very skeptical not only about the further expansion of the EU but also about the very structure and function of the European integration project. This trend is understood by the average voter in Serbia, who is not against the EU but no longer has the illusion that the negotiating framework imposed on Serbia by Brussels bureaucrats can lead to our country’s inclusion in the EU” (“Mihailo Brkić: Opozicija,” 2024).

As previously mentioned, “expert opinions”—even when coming from credible professionals—can be subject to media manipulation, as outlets retain the power to select those experts whose views align with their editorial stance. In line with this assumption, we also present the finding that in nearly 30% of the articles, expert opinions had a negative tone towards the EU. These opinions frequently emphasized “the subtle glorification of Russia (8a) or “the uncertainty surrounding the EU’s future” (8b, 8c).

8a: Slobodan Zečević, director and senior scholar at the Institute of European Studies, and an expert in EU law and policy, commenting on the results of the EP elections, stated: “Europeans fear war with Russia and reject migration” (“Zečević o rezultatima,” 2024).

8b: Timothy Garton Ash, prominent British historian and expert on contemporary European history said: “It is bad, and it could get worse, while commenting on the future of the EU after the EP elections” (D., 2024)

8c: Boško Jakšić, veteran reporter and expert in international affairs, commenting on Serbia’s European future, stated: “It can’t get any better. It is more realistic that the ‘status quo’ of uncertainty will remain, just as it has for the past two decades” (Stevanović, 2024).

The percentage of articles with a positive tone of discourse was almost negligible—below 3%. One example is an article titled: “Belgrade Claims That EU Membership Remains a Strategic Goal of the Serbian Government: Funding for Science from Brussels” (Radio slobodna Evropa). It is worth noting here that a small percentage of Serbian citizens are aware that the EU has been the largest provider of non-repayable aid to Serbia since 2000. A 2022 study showed that only 28% of citizens identified the EU as the largest donor, followed by China, Russia, and Norway, whereas in reality, after the EU, the largest donors are Germany, Sweden, and Italy (Ministarstvo za evropske integracije, 2022). Moreover, according to a 2022 Demostat survey, one-third of respondents believed the EU to be the biggest source of non-repayable aid to Serbia. Nevertheless, a quarter of those surveyed still believed that Russia had provided the most assistance, while one-fifth considered China to be a major donor of such funds (Demostat, 2022). Misconceptions of this kind may be caused by various factors, including the way media report on such issues—often failing to clearly distinguish between donations and investments—as well as political messaging that emphasizes close ties with Russia and China.

### 3.4. Why Is the Author’s Byline Important?

The “author’s byline” is significant for several reasons: it contributes to transparency, supports the professional reputation of journalists and media outlets, protects against the spread of misinformation, and simultaneously increases the public’s trust (Harrison, 2020). In addition, the full byline of a journalist indicates that the article is the intellectual work of a professional who stands behind the written words on a topic they have researched, interpreted, and presented to their audience. Although this category—the author of the article—was not explicitly considered in the initial phase of the research, it emerged during the analysis as a relevant and important aspect, particularly in relation to the tone of discourse about the EP/EU and the manner in which the article’s byline is presented.

As shown in Table 4, only 256 out of the total number of analyzed texts ( $N = 1,044$ ) were signed with the full name of the author/journalist.

**Table 4.** The number of texts from the aspect of the author’s byline.

| Author      | Number of texts | %       |
|-------------|-----------------|---------|
| Agency      | 381             | 36.40%  |
| Named       | 256             | 24.62%  |
| Unnamed     | 202             | 19.35%  |
| Other media | 139             | 13.31%  |
| Initials    | 62              | 5.94%   |
| PR text     | 4               | 0.38%   |
| Grand Total | 1,044           | 100.00% |

The largest number of texts were agency news ( $N = 381$ ), followed by unsigned texts ( $N = 202$ ), news transferred from other media ( $N = 139$ ), texts signed with the author's initials ( $N = 62$ ), and four texts labeled as advertising content. This data can be broadly interpreted to indicate predominantly superficial reporting on the EP elections, which does not require the effort needed for analytical thinking and in-depth research on the topic, but rather relies on secondary sources (e.g., agencies or other media) to fill media space.

The significance of signing a newspaper article, especially when it contains criticism, is also highlighted by the fact that texts with anonymous authors, signed with initials, or where other media are listed as sources, had a negative tone towards the EU and its institutions in 49% of cases. In contrast, the percentage of negative tone in texts signed with the full name of the author was almost half as low—27%. This data confirms that the author's byline, in addition to authenticity and credibility, also carries a degree of authorship responsibility—anonymity can be abused to present unfounded criticism or misinformation, devoid of a sense of professional accountability.

#### 4. Conclusion

Let us now return to the research question: "How did online media portals in Serbia report on the 2024 EP elections?" Based on the analysis conducted shortly before and after the 2024 EP elections (June 1–14), it can be concluded that Serbian citizens primarily followed the electoral process through neutral media texts, with a narrative predominantly shaped by politicians, focusing on how the EP elections would affect EU countries. This study aligns with previous findings that identified a predominantly neutral tone and factual style in EU-related media discourse (Pralica & Janjić, 2016). However, it is also noteworthy that around one-quarter of the texts had a negative discourse towards the EU and its institutions, as indicated by some previous studies (Drašković et al., 2016). A neutral tone of discourse consists of statements that do not convey value judgments, while a negative tone includes statements that express criticism or predominantly unfavorable attitudes toward the EU and the EP. Regarding the dominant sources of information, the results of the analysis confirm previous findings in which politicians were identified as significant creators of the narrative about EU institutions (Krstić, 2015; Milinkov et al., 2013; Pralica & Janjić, 2016), which led to a negative trend of almost complete exclusion of ordinary citizens' opinions on EU-related issues. Our study contributes a new perspective by focusing on online media portals during the EP elections, a dimension that has been largely overlooked in previous research, despite the fact that online media have become the primary source of political information for many citizens (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2025, Serbia section). This approach captures the dynamics of contemporary digital political communication and allows for a more up-to-date understanding of media influence in the electoral context.

A separate study by the Ministry for European Integration (Ministarstvo za evropske integracije, 2024), which analyzed media reporting on the EU and Serbia's European integration during a partially overlapping period, shows significantly different results. According to that analysis, the attitude towards EU topics was positive in as much as 44% of media publications and negative in only 3%. The significant difference can primarily be explained by the difference in the topics that were the focus of the analysis—the EU and European integration were the main subjects of the Ministry's research, while our focus was on the EP elections. Another important difference is that the Ministry's research included both electronic and print media, while our research focused on online media portals. This presents an opportunity for further research such as analyzing the reporting differences between traditional and online media. Additionally, based on the available data from the Ministry,

it can be seen that most of the media included in the research are those we recognize as “serious and ethically sensitive” media outlets. On the other hand, our sample included all media stored in the naslovi.net database, regardless of their ethical qualities, meaning that almost half of the analyzed online media were tabloids or outlets of low credibility. Another direction for future research could be a comparison of reporting methods in relation to the quality of the media—tabloid vs. reputable media.

Given the context in which the research was conducted—post-transition countries with unstable socio-political conditions—it is expected that the results of studies concerning the relationship with the EU may show contradictory outcomes, but with a clear tendency towards Euroscepticism. Accordingly, we believe that continuous monitoring of media reporting on EU institutions in Serbia, which includes a broader range of media (by type and editorial policy), would provide more precise insights into the dependence of EU discourse on current political, economic, and social factors. Additionally, it would offer a more accurate view of whether the media in Serbia assume the role of inhibitors or catalysts regarding Serbia’s European path and European integration.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### Data Availability

The data used in this study consist of media portal articles collected via the news aggregator naslovi.net. All materials were publicly available online at the time of the analysis.

### LLMs Disclosure

ChatGPT was used during the writing process for translation into English to improve clarity. However, the English language was thoroughly reviewed by a qualified English professor before submission of the final version. All content and analysis are the author’s own, and no AI tools were used in these parts.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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# Defining Journalistic Autonomy in the Wake of Disinformation in Spain

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## Abstract

This article analyses the escalating tensions between political actors and the media in Spain, focusing on how structural weaknesses in the journalistic field facilitate the internalisation of disinformation and political polarisation. Using field theory and qualitative data from interviews with journalists, regulators, and media professionals, the study explores how Spain’s deregulated, economically precarious, and structurally fragmented media environment undermines journalistic autonomy. Recent challenges to media legitimacy illustrate declining professional standards, insufficient self-regulation, and the blurred boundaries of journalistic identity. The analysis challenges the view that the prevalence of disinformation is mainly a byproduct of political polarisation, arguing instead that low institutional autonomy has made Spanish journalism structurally vulnerable to post-truth dynamics. The article concludes that Spain’s regulatory model, while formally protecting press freedom, lacks the internal governance mechanisms needed to uphold professional ethics and ultimately professional authority. As the European Media Freedom Act promises regulatory change, the article calls for renewed public and professional debate on journalistic standards, legitimacy, and the democratic role of the press in the face of mounting epistemic and institutional crises.

## Keywords

disinformation; journalism; journalistic autonomy; journalism regulation; media independence; post-truth; Spain

## 1. Introduction

A 2023 report for the EU DisinfoLab points out that “Spain is very permeable to disinformation” and that “the Spanish disinformation landscape stands out for its acute political and media polarisation” (Romero Vicente, 2023, p. 3). The report suggests that “political and media polarisation” is an old phenomenon and that Spain’s vulnerabilities have to do with entrenched partisanship and distrust of the media. While it is true that Spain’s polarisation is entrenched in a left–right cleavage that has become more acute on the side of political actors, this article argues that it is rooted in deeper structural transformations in the journalistic field: This article explores the question of how the low autonomy of the Spanish journalistic field contributes to the internalisation of post-truth phenomena such as polarization, disinformation, and fragmentation.

Tensions between political forces and the media in Spain have intensified in recent years, revealing recurring patterns of conflict, delegitimation, and disputes over control of public narratives. As noted in the latest digital news report by the Reuters Institute, the media landscape in Spain has been shaped by political pressure, legal disputes, and ongoing controversies surrounding public broadcasting (Sierra et al., 2025). Recent elections to the European Parliament and regional assemblies have further heightened these tensions with both the government and the opposition employing accusations of disinformation as a political strategy (Sierra et al., 2025).

Within this context, various political parties have adopted increasingly confrontational approaches towards the press (Haapala & Roch, 2025) while partisan media outlets have likewise employed antagonistic strategies against political spokespersons.

In 2019, the far-right party Vox restricted access of the PRISA Group radio broadcaster Cadena SER and the newspaper *El País* to its press conferences. Shortly thereafter, Spain’s Central Electoral Board (Junta Electoral Central) ruled that the far-right party could not discriminate against, veto, or deny access to journalists from those media at events of an electoral nature (Casqueiro, 2019). Recently, there have been instances of accredited individuals in the Spanish Congress of Deputies disrupting political press conferences, such as in May 2025 during a press conference held by Verónica Barbero, spokesperson for the political party Sumar. In response to the breakdown of order and the inability to ask questions, present journalists from all other media outlets walked out of the room (Chouza & Casqueiro, 2025). As *elDiario.es* (“Patxi López responde,” 2025) reported, shortly after the incident—and when pressed—the Partido Socialista Obrero Español spokesperson in Congress addressed the so-called “agitators” with the following remark:

If you were one of the normal, reasonable journalists, asking the most uncomfortable questions you wanted, I would have no problem answering to you. The problem is that, once you leave this room, you do quite the opposite—you act as far-right activists—and I simply refuse to accept that. (“Patxi López responde,” 2025)

These incidents are not isolated but rather symptomatic of a broader process in which mutual distrust between political actors and media institutions has produced increasingly hostile dynamics.

Another, distinct yet particularly illustrative example occurred in May 2016, when the digital outlet *OK Diario* published a story about an alleged corruption scandal involving Pablo Iglesias, then Secretary General of

Podemos. The report claimed that Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro had transferred over \$270,000 to Iglesias via a bank account in the Grenadines (Mercado, 2016). This so-called exclusive was amplified across various media channels, including on national television during an interview on the programme *Al Rojo Vivo*. Iglesias appeared on the same programme to publicly refute the allegations. However, it was soon revealed by another digital news outlet, *elDiario.es*, that the information was false and that the alleged document used as evidence had been copied from YouTube (“El documento exclusivo,” 2016).

The controversy resurfaced in 2022 when further audio published by *Crónica Libre* revealed that decisions to disseminate the false report had been made despite internal doubts, prompting a new wave of criticism from political figures and renewed debate about media ethics and complicity. In the aftermath, leading figures from Podemos framed the episode not simply as a journalistic failure but as part of a broader pattern of political-media collusion aimed at the left. These claims extend beyond individual journalists to include wider critiques of mainstream media culture and the role of professional associations, such as the Madrid Press Association, which, according to Podemos’ criticisms, failed to condemn the incident or hold those involved accountable.

The significance of this case becomes particularly clear in light of prior research (Reguero-Sanz et al., 2023), which examined the “Ferrerías-gate” scandal from the perspective of social media users. Their analysis showed that the controversy gave rise to widespread calls for more truthful and objective journalism, prioritised over infotainment, alongside demands for stronger adherence to ethical standards, professional conduct, and rigorous source verification. Additionally, the incident reignited broader public concerns regarding media independence, the dissemination of misinformation, and declining professional standards in journalistic practice. This episode, among others, underscores how disputes over truth, credibility, and authority in the Spanish media sphere have become central to broader struggles for political and ideological influence. In this context, institutional responses have begun to emerge.

The Spanish government announced an Action Plan on Democracy in 2024, adopting language and introducing measures that echo initiatives developed at the EU level since 2018. Yet, while formally framed around the defence of democratic values, the plan was launched in direct response to mounting political pressure on the government by what the prime minister himself has described as “pseudo-media and far-right hoaxes,” thereby embedding himself within the very dynamics of polarisation he seeks to address. Interestingly, the attention on pseudo-media has been repeated by left-leaning online newspapers (Rivas, 2024; Sáenz de Ugarte, 2024), confirming on the one hand that political alignment applies to new media and also that the critical framing of small and easy to create outlets as part of disinformation campaigns is not limited to the political delegitimisation of critics but has become a stake in the broader journalistic field.

Thus, rather than viewing these controversies simply as cases of media misconduct, political polarisation, government delegitimization, or political manipulation, we use them as a sociological lens on the reconfiguration of political and journalistic authority under conditions of polarisation and post-truth. It allows us to trace how systemic transformations—technological, professional, and epistemological—converge to reshape the role of journalism in the Spanish public sphere. Rather than viewing these challenges as external threats to journalism, the article analyses how the weak autonomy of the field—including politicised media institutions, limited self-regulation, and fragmented professional identities—has made them constitutive features of the field itself. By situating the analysis within field theory, the article studies how Spain’s journalism both shapes and is shaped by the very crises it is presumed to resist.



This article proposes a political sociology of the ongoing tensions related to post-truth politics in the media field in Spain. It does not intend to assess the effects of polarisation and fragmentation on public attitudes to information or news consumption. Instead, it is interested in the disruptive effects of polarisation and fragmentation on a form of political mediation traditionally characterised by a degree of proximity (Casero-Ripollés & López-Rabadán, 2016): media–politics relations. The approach is based on a critical review of the state of the art regarding the evolution of the regulation of the journalistic profession and standards (a), an in-depth analysis of interviews and media articles focusing on transformations in the political and journalistic field (all literal quotes have been translated from Spanish by the authors, unless otherwise stated) (b), and a series of interviews with key actors within the said field (c).

## 2. Media Regulation and Vulnerability to Disinformation

### 2.1. *The Pluralistic Polarised Model*

Hallin and Mancini's (2004) comparative framework is pivotal for understanding how media systems influence journalistic practices and political mediation and remains highly relevant despite the test of time (Büchel et al., 2016; Labio-Bernal et al., 2024). They identify four main criteria for comparison: the development of the media market, the extent of political-party affiliation, the level of journalistic professionalisation, and the nature of state intervention.

The polarised pluralist model, typical of Southern Europe—including Spain—is characterised by a small but influential press, delayed institutionalisation of press freedom, and a slow consolidation of ethical norms (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). In this model, the state plays a prominent role as owner, regulator, or funder, resulting in strong political and corporate influence. This fosters high levels of partisan journalism and a tradition of opinion-based reporting, where coverage often mirrors ideological divisions (Patterson et al., 2016). Such partisanship hampers the growth of a professional media culture committed to democratic values (Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002; Mancini, 2000).

Financial fragility is another feature, with many outlets relying on external support, reinforcing their dependency on political and business interests (Patterson et al., 2016), only made worse by the ongoing business model crisis (Labio-Bernal et al., 2024, p. 2). Spain's media environment aligns closely with this model, where both media and political institutions are highly politicised. The tight connections between journalism and party politics create a context in which the press often acts as a platform for competing ideologies rather than adhering to professional norms (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 298). Consequently, political loyalty may override journalistic integrity, undermining the commitment to the public good.

Though direct affiliations with political parties have declined, many outlets still maintain clear ideological leanings that shape their editorial stance. These patterns, rooted in Southern Europe's relatively young democracies, have cultivated a media system where press freedom coexists with weak ethical standards. Hallin and Mancini (2004, p. 58) argue that in such systems, "the commitment to particular interests is stronger and the notion of the 'common good' weaker," reflecting the press's role in political mobilisation rather than impartial reporting. In contrast to countries like the United States or Sweden—where professional norms aim to serve the public interest—Southern European journalism remains embedded in political conflict (Patterson et al., 2016, p. 10).



Despite ongoing challenges, Patterson et al. (2016, p. 13) identify some improvements, particularly among investigative journalists and public broadcasters striving for independence. Yet, the competitive, clientelist structure of the media within the polarised pluralist model, and the economic vulnerability of journalists continue to obstruct professionalisation and democratic responsibility. The Spanish media has gradually moved towards a more market-driven approach, with pockets of growing independence. Still, the broader system remains shaped by political loyalties and ideological agendas, often at the expense of professional ethics (Patterson et al., 2016).

Although some progress is visible, the future of journalism in these democracies remains uncertain. The profession stands at a crossroads—caught between aspirations for greater independence and the enduring influence of partisan interests.

## ***2.2. Spanish Media Regulation Challenges in the Context of Southern Europe's Polarised Pluralism***

The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2025 (Sierra et al., 2025, p.108) highlights mounting concerns over press freedom in Spain, noting that political interference has become a central point of contention. Both the government and the opposition have been accused of exerting pressure on journalists and attempting to shape media narratives. The administration is reported to distinguish between established outlets, which it tends to support, and so-called “pseudo-media,” which it accuses of promoting far-right agendas. According to critics, this labelling is used to delegitimise dissenting voices, particularly those within digital platforms and segments of the traditional press that report on sensitive judicial proceedings involving the prime minister's family and close associates. The report further underscores that recent regulatory changes and government interventions have raised additional concerns, not only about press freedom but also about the independence and long-term financial viability of media organisations (Sierra et al., 2025).

In addition, the local and general elections held in 2023 further exacerbated political, media, and social polarisation, with news organisations operating in a context marked by declining public trust in the media and waning interest in politics and current affairs (Vara-Miguel et al., 2024). Within this landscape, three structural issues stand out as particularly influential in shaping Spain's media environment: (a) weak regulation and professional standards; (b) media concentration and political alignment; and (c) economic precarity and vulnerability.

In regard to weak regulation and professional standards (a), Spain lacks strong mechanisms for enforcing journalistic accountability. While the Constitution protects press freedom and source confidentiality, this has, paradoxically, led to leniency towards disinformation. Journalists rarely face consequences for disseminating falsehoods if they cite sources in good faith. There is no mandatory accreditation, and therefore the unqualified exercise of the profession is widespread.

Concerning media concentration and political alignment (b), a few major conglomerates (Prisa, Planeta, Vocento) dominate the market, fostering editorial dependence on political and economic elites and limiting pluralism. Public broadcasters, despite formal independence, are frequently subject to political control.

As for economic precarity and vulnerability (c), journalism in Spain is underpaid and precarious. Since the 2008 crisis, outlets have become increasingly dependent on public subsidies and advertising contracts, which discourages critical reporting and deepens susceptibility to political and financial pressure.

These structural weaknesses create fertile ground for post-truth practices enabled not only by algorithms and social media but also by institutionalised disinformation within the mainstream. Constitutional protections, designed to shield journalists from political persecution, exist but often make accountability difficult unless indisputable contrarian evidence (like leaked recordings). At the same time, self-regulation lacks the authority to challenge influential figures within the profession. The crisis in Spanish journalism is therefore not only ideological or technological, it is systemic. It emerges at the intersection of professional decline, political manoeuvring, and regulatory obsolescence.

Spanish constitutional jurisprudence has consistently upheld the broad protection of journalistic freedoms under Article 20 of the Constitution. The constitutional protection for journalists and their sources is a historical issue, related to the relative youth of democracy and of the Spanish Constitution, and to the extensive interpretation of press freedom by the Constitutional Court, which developed case law inclined to favour the development of the press (Interviewee 15). The Constitutional Court has ruled, for example, in STC 6/1981 (Constitutional Court of Spain, 1981), that freedom of expression and freedom of the press are foundational to democratic society and enjoy reinforced legal safeguards. In STC 171/1990 (Constitutional Court of Spain, 1990), the Court affirmed journalists' right to protect their sources, recognising professional secrecy as a necessary element for the functioning of free media.

Furthermore, in STC 159/1986 (Constitutional Court of Spain, 1986), the Court established that journalists are not required to guarantee the absolute truth of the information they publish; instead, they are held to a standard of trustworthiness (*veracidad* in Spanish), meaning that information must be truthful in context and the result of reasonable professional diligence. These rulings reinforce a model that prioritises freedom of information—even when errors occur—over other conflicting rights such as honour or reputation, especially in matters of public interest (Patterson et al., 2016). That is why there are hardly any rulings against journalists who disseminate misinformation. This also covers, in a more than notable percentage of occasions, the non-disclosure of sources by the journalists themselves. Such a system provides fertile ground for questionable professional practices and the spread of self-interested disinformation—especially in a paradoxical version of the polarised pluralist model, where partisan media dominate.

The Spanish model has been characterised by a high degree of precariousness and/or vulnerability. Media companies have become accustomed to a model of low salaries and state aid to maximise their profits. This has created a dependency with harmful consequences for the quality of news. In fact, the widespread use of clickbait strategies within Spanish digital media has contributed to the erosion of public trust, as sensationalist content frequently supersedes rigorous, evidence-based journalism (Flores-Vivar & Zaharía, 2022).

On the one hand, the clear link between public aid and the ideological bias of the media contributes to the polarisation of the media and of society itself. Indeed, according to the Standard Eurobarometer 102 (October 2024), 58% of Spanish citizens believe that national media outlets provide information that is subject to political or commercial pressures (European Commission, 2024). On the other hand, the low salaries and the low social recognition of the profession (it is one of the least reputed in the country) make professional news much more vulnerable to the successful capture by political or economic interests, further eroding journalism's role as a guardian of democratic accountability and public deliberation. Aggravating this scenario is the proliferation of pseudo-media: Platforms that replicate the aesthetics and formats of traditional news outlets to disseminate ideologically charged content while disregarding journalistic

standards of quality and professional ethics. These actors represent a central component of the information disorder currently affecting the Spanish context (Palau-Sampio & Carratalá, 2022).

### 3. Analytical Framework: A Dispute to Define What Journalism Is in Spain

The current focus on post-truth politics often implies a nostalgic contrast with a supposed golden age of rational public discourse (Velasco-Arias, 2023). Post-truth should thus not be seen as a full collapse of rationality but a transformation in the “symbolic authority of the truth” within public discourse (S. Newman, 2019, p. 93). Bennett and Pfetsch (2018) argue that today’s disruptions stem not from the volume of misinformation alone, but from a broader dislocation of institutional authority—a breakdown in the traditional systems that once determined what counts as valid knowledge. The rise of algorithmic logic, digital disintermediation, and networked forms of communication has radically altered the terrain on which political facts are produced, circulated, and contested. Therefore, journalism has become a field of contested truth mediation (Michailidou & Trenz, 2021, pp. 1341–1342): “Journalists...are rather embedded in a professional field of journalism practices that help to establish the value of information in a trusted way that becomes acceptable and convincing for the majority.”

For a long time, the Spanish media system has been characterised by its belonging to the Mediterranean or polarized pluralist model of Hallin and Mancini, with the particularity of a low regulation of journalistic practices and professions.

One of the consequences of the co-occurrence of strong polarisation and weak regulation is a weak autonomy of the field regarding its ability to regulate itself. In field theory, self-regulation is usually identified with what Fligstein and McAdam (2012, p. 205) call internal governance units: “Typically founded during moments of field settlement or resettlement, internal governance units—such as credential committees, certifying agencies, and lobbying groups—are established to help institutionalise and stabilise field practices and shared understandings.” Unlike other systems that develop clear, enforceable, and legitimate self-regulation bodies as a response to the lack of external regulation, the representation of the Spanish journalistic field is fragmented, with different organisations emphasising different models of journalism and political sympathies. The result is that there is no external definition of the profession and no collective enforcement of its standards, with self-regulation acting within media organisations rather than across them.

This article argues that the low autonomy of the Spanish journalistic field—marked by weak self-regulation, politicised institutions, and fragmented professional identities—is not just a background condition, but a structuring factor in how the journalistic profession is exposed to the post-truth related phenomena of polarisation and disinformation. Rather than treating these phenomena as external challenges journalism must respond to, the Spanish case shows how they become internal features of the field itself, shaped and amplified by its institutional weaknesses.

In field theory, autonomy refers to the distinction of the field dynamics (rules of the game, issues at stake, and relevant capitals) from other spheres in society (Bourdieu, 2005; Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). It usually manifests itself as the capacity of the field to define and enforce its own internal norms, values, and boundaries, relatively independent from external forces such as politics, the market, or the state:

In the daily practice of journalism, autonomy is a prize that honest reporters and editors seek. They do not want to be overwhelmed by pressure from government officials, on the one hand, or from economic pressures from media owners or advertisers or market competition on the other. They want to be able to proceed according to their own best lights and in the service of their own best “news judgements.” (Schudson, 2005, p. 218)

Political polarisation is usually understood as an affirmation of extreme positions on policy or political spheres together with the hollowing out of intermediary or indifferent attitudes (de Wilde et al., 2016; Klein, 2021). The political alignment of Spanish media demonstrates its weak autonomy. Journalists are often perceived (and frequently act) not as neutral mediators but as participants in political struggles. Media outlets align with parties or ideologies, and journalistic discourse is routinely interpreted through a partisan lens. As a result, Spain has reduced trust in journalism as a neutral intermediary, further polarising audiences who now consume media aligned with their own ideological positions. For instance, Spain has experienced the strongest decline in attention to the news in a comparative context (N. Newman et al., 2023, p. 21).

Another effect of the low autonomy of the field is that disinformation, understood as verifiably false information that is intentionally created for economic gain or to harm public interests (European Commission, 2018), is not treated as a deviation from collectively held epistemic standards since no unified professional body can uphold them. In this context, the Constitutional Court’s doctrine of “veracity” prevails (i.e., truthfulness understood procedurally rather than ontologically), and the dissemination of false information is evaluated against a checklist of technical-legal criteria. In this context, the field lacks the capacity to mount a collective defence against disinformation. The absence of a unified professional identity, combined with a fragmented media landscape, turns disinformation from a professional crisis of knowledge into a politicised contest over legitimacy. We deliberately refer to misinformation when the issue of intentionality is not central, but the article’s focus is on disinformation.

In this article, rather than focusing on fragmentation as a result of affective polarisation—meaning a dilution of “shared communicative space...into a multitude of semi-public forums (or echo chambers) of the like-minded” (Conrad, 2025, p. 10)—we conceive it as a result of the fragmentation of journalism itself. In the past, media organisations were relatively large and complex, therefore acting as internal enforcers of journalistic standards. During all this period, being a journalist and doing journalism were functional equivalents of being employed by one of these large organisations. The polarisation of the Spanish journalistic field was concentrated around a relatively small number of large actors.

However, economic crisis and technological change have transformed the landscape: The combination of massive layoffs of journalists during the decade following the 2008 financial crisis and the significant drop in the fixed costs of entering the market—with digital media not requiring traditional prints, distribution networks, or even office space—has resulted in a more fragmented landscape of polarisation, while the regulatory landscape has not significantly changed. Therefore, audiences no longer recognise a shared normative foundation for what journalism is or does.

What does this mean for the Spanish media field’s adaptation to post-truth? Spanish journalism is facing post-truth in a deep crisis of institutional authority. Virtually any organisation can establish a news site and benefit from the constitutional protection for journalists, while adhering only to internal rules and, of course,

external enforcement by the courts of the limited regulations. Moreover, new actors, including partisan platforms and hybrid media-politics professionals, now compete for legitimacy in an environment where journalistic identity is fluid and institutional boundaries are porous. The emergence of party-aligned media, the proliferation of low-cost outlets, and the weakened capacity for professional self-regulation all contribute to a crisis of mediation.

Therefore, the field is undergoing a struggle to redefine and establish journalistic standards as a reaction to post-truth. It can be argued that the struggle has always existed, as evidenced by the lack of agreement on self-regulation. Indeed, instability and constant “jockeying for position” are the very substance of field theory. However, it is the combination of political polarisation, economic, and technological transformation, and the emergence of new external rules in the form of the European Media Freedom Act, that are driving a more intense transformation than witnessed in almost any other period.

To explore these dynamics in detail, this article studies qualitative evidence to carry out an interpretative analysis of the perceptions and justifications of media professionals and regulators about the challenges of post-truth in the Spanish journalistic field. A combination of data collection techniques has been employed. The study combines documentary analysis—including media coverage, institutional reports, and public statements—with 20 semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with key stakeholders such as journalists, media regulators, and scholars. The questionnaire covered the origin and prevalence of disinformation in Spain, the interviewee’s organisation’s response to this phenomenon, professional implications and stakes, policy responses, and regulatory implications. This empirical material is further contextualised through extracts from a series of press articles addressing the three controversies under scrutiny, situating the findings within broader journalistic debates. For data analysis, qualitative content analysis was conducted using an inductive coding strategy to identify recurring themes across the interview transcripts and documentary sources. This triangulated methodology enhances the rigour and depth of the study.

Interview participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in institutional affiliation and ideological orientation. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and translated by the authors from Spanish, and anonymised to safeguard confidentiality.

Transcripts were analysed using NVivo 14 software. Open coding was first applied to identify emergent concepts, which were subsequently organised into broader thematic categories. Key dimensions included perceptions of journalistic authority, regulatory shortcomings, media–politics interactions, and professional responses to disinformation. This structure is used to present the results in the following section. This systematic and transparent process ensured both analytical consistency and sensitivity to individual nuance. The summary of interviews—including the interview identification number, the date on which the interview was conducted, and the sector—may be consulted in the Supplementary File, Annex 1.

#### **4. The Struggles of Spanish Journalism: Contemporary Challenges and Debates**

The interviews reveal a media field undergoing profound transformation due to technological change, weakening the value of raw information and increasing the pressure on traditional journalism. This shift occurs amid declining advertising revenue, intensified fragmentation, and growing political polarisation,

making the pursuit of quality journalism more difficult. The post-truth era presents a paradox: It reinforces the need for professional standards while simultaneously undermining journalistic credibility and unity. Journalists face a collective action dilemma between loyalty, voice, or exit. With only 5.9% of Spaniards relying on traditional media for political opinion (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2024), journalists are however still seen as powerful political actors.

In Spain, the challenge becomes particularly acute when false information originates from within the media system itself and the professional field appears ill-equipped to address it. Existing regulation, conceived to protect journalists from political prosecution, makes it relatively difficult to challenge such cases in court under normal circumstances and the existing professional self-regulation standards (field governance units, in the terms of Fligstein & McAdam, 2012, p. 205) are not sufficient to challenge actors in dominant positions.

#### ***4.1. Eroding Journalistic Authority and the Rise of Disinformation in the Digital Media Ecosystem***

The controversies outlined in the introduction of this article exemplify the way in which legacy media are being challenged in their role as trusted gatekeepers of information, as both political actors and digital platforms increasingly compete for epistemic dominance in the public sphere. Today, traditional media no longer hold exclusive authority over the selection and framing of information. In a digitalised communicative environment, any social actor can access platforms, disseminate content, and become a source of information (Casero-Ripollés & García-Gordillo, 2020). This shift has coincided with a marked decline in public trust in legacy media (N. Newman et al., 2022). In Spain, 31% of respondents now express distrust in the news (Sierra et al., 2025). This dynamic is especially visible among younger audiences: 42% of 16–30-year-olds primarily rely on social media for political and social news (European Parliament, 2025).

As newspapers compete for attention in this new ecosystem, they face dwindling advertising revenues and increased pressure to replicate platform-native dynamics such as clickbait, emotional framing, and sensationalism. These pressures have reshaped journalistic routines. Interviewee 9 argues that the rise of the internet has shifted the media paradigm, prioritising speed and the race to publish news first. At the same time, it has increased precarity in the industry, pushing even the most reputable outlets toward sensationalism and, often unconsciously, towards reflecting their audience's biases.

Although digital media have enabled a broader “democratisation of information,” they have also eroded traditional epistemic structures. The decentralisation of content creation has blurred distinctions between journalism and opinion, professional and amateur content, and truth and spin (Alonso González, 2021). This has contributed to a wider “information disorder” (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018).

As van Dijck (2009) notes, journalists now share agenda-setting power with ordinary users, while Aruguete (2017) underscores how social media actors increasingly shape public discourse. This erosion of institutional gatekeeping has enabled deeper political polarisation, further fuelling disinformation. In this regard, the “Ferreras-gate” scandal is symptomatic of broader transformations in Spanish journalism: the blurring of lines between information and opinion, the erosion of editorial independence, and the increasing entanglement of journalistic practices with political strategy.

#### 4.2. *To Be or not To Be: Who Can be a Journalist in Spain?*

These controversies must also be read in light of broader uncertainties around journalistic authority in Spain—particularly the blurred boundaries regarding what constitutes journalism and who is entitled to claim the role of journalist in a fragmented and evolving media ecosystem.

Since Ferreras' programme *Al Rojo Vivo* style and content competes directly for airtime with traditional gossip and entertainment shows, its distinctive style has contributed to the erosion of clear genre distinctions. By incorporating elements of infotainment—including dramatic background music, live-event coverage techniques drawn from sports journalism, and the thematic blending of politics, crime, and spectacle—Ferreras has helped create a hybrid format that combines entertainment and conventional news (Mercado-Sáez & Monedero-Morales, 2017). In particular, *La Sexta*—the channel on which *Al Rojo Vivo* is broadcast—is by far the Spanish channel featuring the highest volume of infotainment content, according to Berrocal Gonzalo et al. (2014).

While effective in capturing public attention, this approach contributes to a broader climate in which audiences find it increasingly difficult to distinguish between journalistic content and non-journalistic material. This blurring of boundaries is further exacerbated by the entertainment-oriented logic underpinning many broadcast formats. As Interviewee 4 puts it, television's primary role is no longer information but entertainment.

In this context, the question arises: How can citizens distinguish between formats that are purely informative and those shaped by an entertainment logic? For audiences lacking familiarity with the inner workings of the media, this distinction is often blurred, if not imperceptible. Additionally, the rise of pseudo-media and partisan outlets, often able to obtain press accreditation and attend press conferences alongside professional journalists—sometimes to disrupt journalistic work—raises a fundamental question: Who holds the authority to determine who qualifies as a journalist, or whether one is entitled to practise as such?

While membership in the Federation of Associations of Journalists of Spain requires a formal university degree in journalism or related fields (Federación de Asociaciones de Periodistas de España, 2010), this accreditation is not legally required to practise journalism in Spain. Unlike regulated professions such as medicine or law, journalism lacks mandatory professional licensing. As former *El País* editor Javier Moreno argues in an article published in *El País* (Ceberio Belaza, 2024), any attempt to formalise accreditation risks undermining freedom of expression:

What would it contribute? Who decides whether your press card should be revoked if you do not do things properly? How would such a professional body be formed? Who would elect it? How can we ensure that it would not become politicised? Any such measure runs counter to freedom of expression.

Most interviewees echo this concern and instead highlight journalism as a practice learned through experience. As Interviewee 5 explains, journalism is a method, and many people—not only professional journalists—can engage in it. However, the expert explains that the boundaries are increasingly blurred, so there are individuals who seek only to spread disinformation sharing the same space as those who carry out their work with honesty and integrity (Interviewee 5). In this sense, Interviewee 1 emphasises the



importance of distinguishing legitimate media outlets from pseudo-media and argues that they detect a serious problem with pseudo-media or actors that imitate journalism, so they have to identify and differentiate them, possibly using models from other countries.

In the view of Interviewee 2, the erosion of journalistic standards contributes to the spread of disinformation: “Many people mistake journalism with things that are not.” As Varela (2024) argues, the consequence is clear: “Since there are no rules to determine who qualifies as a journalist and who does not, there are likewise no mechanisms to sanction those who breach the ethical standards and professional codes on which journalistic practice should be based.”

In response to recent incidents during press conferences held in the Spanish Congress of Deputies, the Parliamentary Journalists’ Association issued a statement, endorsed by the Madrid Press Association, strongly condemning “the behaviour of certain accredited individuals in Congress, who continue to disrupt or obstruct the normal conduct of press conferences held by spokespersons from the various parliamentary groups, thereby undermining the right to gather and transmit accurate information” (Asociación de la Prensa de Madrid, 2025). The statement also emphasised the urgent need for the Bureaus of Congress and the Senate to expedite the processing of the proposed reform that outlines measures to prevent disruptive conduct in the practice of journalism, “without in any way limiting, restricting, or undermining the media’s right to obtain and disseminate truthful information to the public” (Asociación de la Prensa de Madrid, 2025).

#### ***4.3. Regulating What Can’t Be Regulated? Debates on Journalism, Self-Governance, and Professional Boundaries in Spain***

The “Ferrerías-gate” scandal must be understood within the broader context of Spain’s legal framework surrounding journalistic conduct, particularly in relation to the constitutional right to truthful information guaranteed under Article 20.1(d) of the Spanish Constitution. This right ensures the freedom to communicate and receive truthful information by any means of dissemination, with truthfulness (*veracidad*; Ruiz-Alonso, 2024) being crucial for constitutional protection. This constitutional protection reaches its highest level when these freedoms are exercised by professional journalists through the media (Constitutional Court of Spain, 2009, Legal Ground 4), particularly when the subject of reporting is a public figure (European Court of Human Rights, 2004).

However, although press freedom is indeed protected by law, journalism in Spain remains a self-regulated profession. Media organisations are themselves responsible for defining the frameworks of their journalistic practices through internally developed ethical codes. This absence of a unified regulatory structure has given rise to ongoing debates surrounding professional accountability, the boundaries of legitimate journalism, and the overall effectiveness of self-regulation in safeguarding the integrity and credibility of the media sector.

Ferrerías has defended his actions by claiming adherence to journalistic standards. In response to criticism over the truthfulness of his reporting, Ferrerías emphasised that:

We have nothing to hide....We have never knowingly published false information. Not that one, nor any other—about Podemos or anyone else. We are talking about audio recordings made after the report was broadcast....Of course, we thought it was strange and even crude, and we said so. The police claimed

to have that document. That is why we reported it citing the original outlet, describing the account as “alleged” and “supposed.” That is also why we contacted Iglesias immediately. (“Ferrerías cierra Al Rojo Vivo,” 2022)

This underscores his claim to have followed journalistic standards, including verifying sources and providing a clear disclaimer about the information’s authenticity.

In the absence of a clearer regulatory framework, the “Ferrerías-gate” scandal, therefore, reflects a broader dispute over the rules of journalistic practice, was widely covered by Spanish media, and has been openly challenged.

This scandal has produced different types of opposition. Firstly, between political actors and the media. Both the radical right (Vox) and the radical left (Podemos) leveraged polarising rhetoric to frame the media as complicit in elite conspiracies but with different emphases: Vox portraying the media as controlled by leftist political elites distorting the truth, and Podemos emphasising the influence of economic elites and private ownership in shaping public discourse (Haapala & Roch, 2025). Since founding the digital media Canal Red, Pablo Iglesias has criticised Ferrerías’ and *La Sexta* coverage of Podemos, accusing them of manipulation and bias. Iglesias extended this critique to journalists participating as guests on Ferrerías’ show and to successful journalists not making this a central issue in their reporting, tagging them as “state journalists” (Iglesias, 2022).

Furthermore, this has been interpreted in left-wing media commentary as an example of collusion between state and media corporate power: Whereas *La Sexta* purports to report from a left-wing angle, its corporate interests are seen as deeply connected to conservative factions within the state (Sánchez Cedillo, 2022) or the political elite (Sánchez-Cuenca, 2022), and therefore eager to damage Mr Iglesias’ party. This suggests a second and relevant professional within journalism itself, as evidenced in the reactions to the “Ferrerías-gate.” In 2022, the Federation of Journalists’ Unions (Federación de Sindicatos de Periodistas, 2022) issued a statement asserting that “disseminating information while knowingly aware that it is a ‘blatantly crude’ fabrication, with the aim of harming a political party and its leader, constitutes poor professional practice that undermines not only journalism, but democracy itself.” Likewise, Cadena SER presenter Àngels Barceló commented on the scandal, publicly expressing her opinion on the matter:

It is our duty to remain faithful to the truth, to hold power to account—regardless of its political colour—to question, to ask; it is our duty to be uncomfortable. What is not our duty—in fact, what which goes against the ethical principles of this profession—is to take part in the murky underworld, to act as mouthpieces for political forces, to seek to intervene in the course of events....Certain practices—such as knowingly publishing false information—ultimately harm democracy itself. (Barceló, 2022)

The Madrid Press Association has, however, refrained from commenting on this specific case and focused on the political attacks on journalists, including accusations of corruption by Podemos MPs, calling such remarks “intolerable” and warning that they undermine constitutional freedoms (Asociación de la Prensa de Madrid, 2024).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that, while the “Ferrerías-gate” case may be seen as symptomatic of Spain’s polarised pluralist media system, offering a lens through which to examine its internal dynamics and

the relationship between media and politics, it should not be conflated with the activities of pseudo-media, whose objectives are fundamentally different. Pseudo-media operate as a deliberately orchestrated apparatus designed specifically to generate noise and undermine the role and function of professional news organisations.

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that divisions have also emerged within journalistic organisations regarding how best to defend the profession. Interviewee 3 advocates for dual regulation: protecting journalists while ensuring the public receives truthful information. They propose a mixed regulatory body that includes professional associations, unions, state representatives, and media experts.

Nevertheless, some caution that “it is never advisable to allow politicians to define the work of journalists. They cannot be impartial and tend to have an iron fist and a glass jaw” (Sáenz de Ugarte, 2024). Interviewee 4 argues that journalism should remain unregulated, likening statutory regulation to political interference in professions such as law or medicine. The expert also dismisses self-regulation as ineffective, citing bias and precarity within journalists’ associations and the broader discrediting of the press.

For their part, Interviewee 2 agrees that media ethics must align with Article 20 but notes the lack of a unified code. They promote collective responsibility among media owners, professionals, and institutions. While they cannot enforce rules, they aim to raise awareness: “We can’t impose anything legally, but we can promote awareness among professionals and the public.”

As Varela (2024) observes in *infoLibre*:

For decades, the media have resolved this debate with a maxim characteristic of Anglo-Saxon liberalism: “The best press law is the one that does not exist.” Now, in view of the increasing manipulation of information ecosystems through digital tools governed by opaque algorithms, and the unchecked proliferation of disinformation, even the European Union has adopted its own [in reference to the European Media Freedom Act].

#### **4.4. Crossing the Line: Internal Disinformation and the Crisis of Credibility in the Spanish Media**

According to journalist and Cadena SER contributor Nieves Concostrina, speaking at an event commemorating the station’s centenary, “There are some media outlets that try to do honest journalistic work,” she noted, “and others that lie and spread falsehoods—but I don’t even think they’re worth mentioning” (Guerrero Baena, 2024).

Precisely due to the absence of formal regulation within the profession, unethical journalistic practices may also permeate both traditional and digital media outlets, ultimately undermining the credibility and public image of the media itself. Some of the interviewees have reflected on the professional journalistic context in Spain as an environment in which disinformation may emerge.

As Interviewee 5 notes, one of the greatest sources of disinformation continues to be the traditional media, further asserting that “there is not a particularly healthy ecosystem” within them. In this vein, according to Interviewee 4, digital newspapers are the primary source of disinformation emanating from Spanish media:

“They’re used to publishing whatever they want without oversight....It is as if they feed off one another. If one outlet spreads a hoax tomorrow, I already know which media will pick it up and who will sign it.” Furthermore, Interviewee 5 points to the excessive protection afforded to journalists, to the extent that one is practically covered for distorting reality simply by attempting to demonstrate that an effort was made to verify it.

For their part, Interviewee 1 highlights the complex set of debates that may emerge in those situations:

If it is proven that a practice entirely contrary to journalism has been carried out by a media outlet, it opens up another debate: Does that invalidate all the work of that outlet? Does it nullify the entire professional career of that individual? Does it cast doubt on their output? But, is it definitive? Within the range of possible scenarios, a multitude of highly interesting and complex debates could emerge.

In this vein, Interviewee 2 additionally advocates for public denunciation of disinformation cases. They argue that the media entities employing journalists should bear responsibility for taking appropriate action. They further contend that excluding someone from the journalistic profession is ultimately ineffective, given that current technology allows individuals to create a blog or social media profile and continue engaging in malpractice regardless.

Additionally, Interviewee 3 underscores the need to implement more explicit protocols to ensure adherence to a journalistic code of ethics. They assert that “there must be some form of sanction for professionals who lie.” This ethical code, they argue, should be grounded in the right to report truthfully on matters that have been sufficiently verified with respect to the sourcing of investigative material.

## 5. Conclusion

Although traditional left–right polarisation remains a central force shaping Spain’s media system, particularly on the side of political actors, this article argues that it is increasingly being eroded by deeper structural transformations. Since the early 2010s, shifts in the political and media ecosystems have introduced new tensions that polarisation alone cannot explain, challenging the legitimacy of the established model.

The controversies discussed exemplify this shift. They illustrate how the once broadly consensual definition of journalistic professionalism has fractured, both within the media industry and in the public sphere. Internally, the emergence of new practices—such as freelance journalism, fact-checking initiatives, and the growing role of alternative platforms—has contributed to a diversification of professional norms, and at times, their fragmentation. Externally, the increasing delegitimisation of journalism in a highly polarised political environment has undermined public trust and blurred the boundaries between objective reporting and political advocacy.

Moreover, the article underscores the risks posed by the strategic use of legal frameworks. Regulations originally designed to uphold press freedom can, in certain contexts, be exploited by skilled actors to disseminate misinformation under the cover of constitutionally protected journalistic speech. This highlights the urgent need to revisit and refine these legal protections to ensure they cannot be weaponised in ways that erode the integrity of democratic discourse.

The forthcoming implementation of the European Media Freedom Act is expected to significantly alter the Spanish media landscape by challenging existing oligopolistic structures and enhancing regulatory oversight through new functions assigned to the Comisión Nacional de los Mercados y la Competencia. While these developments may increase institutional scrutiny, they also present an opportunity to re-engage with long-standing debates on the professional regulation of journalism in Spain. In this context, it is imperative to open a broader public conversation with all relevant parties about the ethical and institutional foundations of the profession. Further research is needed to assess the implications of these regulatory shifts and to explore viable models for restoring both professional accountability and public trust in democratic media systems.

Finally, from a political perspective, it is important to note that despite the background of precarity and shifting power between the traditional press and other forms of reporting, all interviewees agree on: Journalistic conduct still matters a great deal for the possibility of a democratic public sphere in Spain.

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The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### Data Availability

Interview data are not available to protect the interviewee's anonymity.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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# Outsourced Political Campaign: Role of Pro-Government Political Influencers in Spreading Hostile Narratives in Hungary

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## Abstract

During the 2024 European Parliament and municipal election campaigns, the ruling Hungarian party, Fidesz, significantly increased its use of populist rhetoric and disinformation techniques through a pro-government political influencer network known as the Megafon Központ (Megafon Center). This study explores the role of this organization in disseminating hostile and manipulative narratives on social media, with a particular focus on how these narratives influence voter decisions and reinforce social polarization in the context of the European Parliament elections. The research employed qualitative content analysis to examine the 105 Megafon videos with the highest advertising costs during the campaign period, identifying the target audience, key messages, as well as the linguistic and visual tools employed. The results show that most videos rely on demonization and fearmongering, often presenting distorted information. Conducted focus group studies revealed that perceptions of Megafon content are highly polarized along political lines. Based on representative public opinion polls, Megafon influencers and the brand itself are not widely recognized by the general public, but they do have visibility among certain social groups. Meanwhile, nearly all Facebook users encounter their content. Additionally, most voters are unaware that this content is paid political advertising. Although respondents often question the credibility of Megafon videos, their persistent presence contributes to social polarization and influences political discourse. The Megafon model is easily adaptable and poses a significant risk to democratic public discourse, as it effectively distorts the information environment for voters on social media.

## Keywords

European Parliament elections; hostile narratives; Hungary; polarization; political influencers; social media

## 1. Introduction

In 2010, Hungary deviated from the path towards the establishment of a democratic and diverse media system. Several independent yet closely interrelated processes played a role in this shift.

Firstly, it is impossible to ignore the historical background that, after the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1990, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe did indeed embark on a path towards a market economy and democratic institutions, but the media systems that emerged did not resemble the Western European models. The level of political parallelism remained high, the main media owners were often linked to political power, the financing of private media was partly dependent on state resources, and public service media were unable to become truly autonomous. By the early 2000s, it had become clear that Central and Eastern Europe was following a different path of development than Western European countries (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014; Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019).

Secondly, the 2008 economic crisis proved to be an important turning point in the region's media development, resulting in a significant decline in advertising revenues and making it necessary to rethink media business models. The situation was made even more serious by the spectacular rise of digital platforms during the same period, which led to a drain on advertising revenues. Media companies were therefore faced with a sustained decline in advertising revenues and, even after the crisis, it was not possible to return to the previous business model. All this permanently reduced the profitability of media companies and Western investors began to leave Hungary, as in the rest of the region (Dragomir, 2019; Stetka, 2012).

Thirdly, and this is a uniquely Hungarian development, with the Orbán regime coming to power in 2010, the Hungarian Parliament adopted new media regulations and began to establish an illiberal media system. Noteworthy features include the concentration of media ownership, the financing of media loyal to the government through state advertising spending, the operation of public service media as a propaganda machine, the political control of the media authority, and the capture of the entire media ecosystem (Bajomi-Lázár, 2017; Griffen, 2020; Polyák, 2019; Urbán, 2024).

Nowadays, a severely distorted media system has developed, based on strong political influence, a polarized audience, and the presence of state-sponsored disinformation (Urbán et al., 2023). In recent years, Hungarian media policy has shifted from focusing solely on controlling legacy media to dominating digital platforms with political communication from the ruling parties, primarily through advertised content (Political Capital et al., 2024). This was the government's response to consumer habits that were steadily shifting to digital media, and within that, social media (Hann et al., 2023).

## 2. Political Influencers and Hostile Narratives: A Literature Review

This article examines the specific Hungarian manifestations of organized disinformation distribution networks whose communication set includes hostile narratives as a dominant element. This state-driven, centrally coordinated approach to disinformation, combined with an influencer network that uses a lot of government resources, such as Megafon, represents a unique case within the European Union. The Megafon phenomenon is dangerous because it is easy to replicate and there is a significant risk that the model will spread to other countries. The literature review looks at the literature on such organized networks and hostile narratives. The specific Hungarian situation is discussed in the next section.

## **2.1. Weaponizing Influence: The Rise of Political Influencers in Democratic Warfare**

Digital technology, in particular the internet and social media, has fundamentally transformed the possibilities for political communication and participation worldwide over the past two decades (Howard & Hussain, 2013; van Dijck & Poell, 2015; Wijermars & Lokot, 2022). At the same time, technological developments have also created new challenges: Authoritarian regimes have quickly adapted and started to use digital tools to consolidate their power, manipulate the information space, and monitor citizens (Kuznetsova, 2023; Vanderhill, 2020). Our work, therefore, focuses on how authoritarian regimes use information and communication technologies to manipulate and spread disinformation through digital platforms, further strengthening political control and weakening democratic participation.

Disinformation may affect elections (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Altay et al., 2023; Bader, 2018) and manipulate public opinion during crises (Bachmann et al., 2019; Yablokov, 2022). Social media is increasingly used to manipulate opinion with professionalized disinformation campaigns by states and political actors targeting elections, democracy, and human rights (Bradshaw et al., 2021). Populist politicians exploit social media's influence to shape public opinion (Pérez-Curiel, 2020).

Social media platforms offer effective new channels for the dissemination of automated, anonymous disinformation, or computational propaganda, abroad and domestically (Gibson, 2023). Martin et al. (2023) define influence effort in autocracies as a coordinated campaign by the state or ruling party to influence one or more specific aspects of politics at the domestic level or in another state. The authors identify more than 100 such foreign or domestic influence efforts, with a growing trend. The research shows that 65% of foreign influence efforts are linked to Russia.

There are many examples of influence effects around the world, ranging from disinformation spread by public service media (Urbán et al., 2023), social media manipulation with paid influencers (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), and troll networks working with public money (DiResta et al., 2021; Linvill & Warren, 2020).

Several researchers have tried to categorize the operation of such coordinated networks which are emerging in many countries. Private digital marketing companies, civic troll networks, and PR firms that engage in disinformation campaigns have been labelled digital mercenaries (DiResta et al., 2021; Forest, 2022). Cyber troops (Bradshaw et al., 2021; Wijayanto et al., 2024) have been defined as secretly funded, highly coordinated, mostly anonymous accounts, paid by government or political party actors to manipulate public opinion online. Particularly well-known networks include the Russian Internet Research Agency (DiResta et al., 2021; Freelon & Lokot, 2020) and the Chinese propaganda machine known as the "50 cent army" (King et al., 2017).

While international literature provides numerous examples of organized forms of political influence and disinformation, this study focuses on the unique functioning of political influencers linked to the government. Currently, there is little empirical research analyzing how a professional influencer network organized and financed by the government of a European Union member state uses hostile narratives in social media and how effective it is. Although populist movements in Europe are quick to learn from each other, there is a risk that the model will spread to other countries.

## 2.2. Hostile Narratives in the Disinformation Discourse

A new concept, “hostile narratives,” has emerged in the academic discourse on disinformation in recent years. The idea of the hostile narratives themselves is not new; it has been used in a historical context (e.g., Jencks, 1969); however, in the 2020s, it has recently become a means of broadening and reframing the discourse on disinformation.

In the literature, hostile narratives encompass all negative, offensive manifestations of political communication. It is not a theory in its own right but a concept that can be used to describe the typical elements of political communication. It covers terms such as character assassination against individuals (Viertmann, 2018) and hate speech against groups (Baider & Kopytowska, 2018).

Hostile narratives are necessarily based on the use of untrue or distorted facts. As Flore (2020, p. 13) writes, “The narration of facts counts more than the facts themselves.” This narration constructs a story that exaggerates, distorts, or reframes specific characteristics of the person or group designated as the enemy. In all cases, the story as a whole gives a false picture of the person or group concerned. Hostile narratives are systematically designed communication strategies that use selective truths as weapons to legitimize aggression against target persons or groups (Vihmand-Veebel, 2022). The Hungarian examples analyzed in the article are excellent illustrations of this interpretation.

Flore (2020) describes hostile narratives as a more sophisticated version of disinformation campaigns that appeal to emotions and exploit social vulnerabilities. Hostile narratives use negative emotions for strategic communication. Fear, anger, existential threat, vulnerability, insecurity: By amplifying these emotions, the hostile narrative creates the need for intra-group cohesion and defense. Negative emotions lead to a psychological state in which the brain responds more positively to bigoted statements and divisive rhetoric. Hostile narratives also amplify identity-based divisions, making them important drivers of social polarization. This also gives the narrative’s proponent a strong mandate to act against the designated enemy. The report also highlights the role of public figures and the media in spreading false and unsubstantiated information noting a dramatic increase in the number and type of partisan news stories.

Anning et al. (2021) build on Galtung’s theory of cultural violence to define and analyze hostile narratives. Galtung (1990) distinguishes cultural violence from direct violence, which refers to physical harm, and from structural violence, which covers social injustice. Cultural violence can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence. Anning et al. (2021) draw on Galtung’s concept of the “Self-Other gradient” to detect hostile narratives. This gradient refers to the processes of legitimizing violence by elevating the “Self” while devaluing or demeaning the “Other.” The hypothesis is that the steeper the gradient between the “Self” and the “Other,” the more legitimate violence becomes.

Empirical studies show that hostile narratives exploit neurocognitive vulnerabilities (McLaughlin, 2020). The spread of hostile narratives correlates with a measurable decline in social cohesion and institutional legitimacy. These effects are manifested in accelerated polarization, institutional delegitimization, and behavioral radicalization.



Accelerated polarization transforms latent social divisions into active political fault lines. Experimental studies have shown that persistent exposure to divisive narratives reduces intergroup empathy by 39%, as participants increasingly perceive out-groups as existential threats (Iyengar et al., 2019). This affective polarization undermines the consensus-seeking mechanisms essential for democratic governance. Moreover, in the US, surveys show that 19% of Republicans and 10% of Democrats endorsed political violence as justifiable in 2021, a doubling since 2017 (Kleinfeld, 2022).

This article presents examples from Hungarian political communication that clearly support the theoretical framework of hostile narratives. The close connection between hostile narratives and character assassination is particularly clear from the examples.

### 3. Hungarian Innovation in Boosting Political Influencers: The Megafon Centre

Megafon is a collective of political influencers. Their first appearance in Hungarian public discourse as a collective dates back to 2020. They disseminate short video clips, typically 1–2 minutes long, on various social media platforms, primarily Facebook. Their clips are always government-friendly and/or critical of the opposition, and the videos are published on the respective influencers' Facebook pages, with the name Megafon only featured as the source of funding for the ads. Hence, Megafon is not widely recognized as a distinct brand even though it plays a substantial role in shaping Hungarian public discourse. Some of the Megafon influencers were already known (as political analysts or television hosts) before joining the collective, while others had not appeared publicly prior to their engagement with the group.

There are many open questions concerning the funding of Megafon. The Megafon Digital Incubator Centre Nonprofit Ltd (hereinafter referred to as the Megafon Centre) operates as a private company which means they have no legal obligation to respond to freedom of information requests. Analyzing the data disclosed by pro-government organizations, the independent news portal Telex concluded that the Megafon Centre is financed with taxpayer money. The company filed a lawsuit against Telex in response to this report; however, the court held that the factual claims in the article were well-founded (Bozzay, 2022). According to an award-winning investigative reporter, Megafon alone received twice as much money as the total amount of public financing for the opposition during the entire 2022 election campaign (Bozzay, 2022). A query by a journalist asking where the money had come from was not answered (Nagy, 2023). Megafon is therefore the ruling party's outsourced campaign team: it operates with opaque funding and is not required to account for its resources under official election campaign regulations.

Multi-channel networks, which help influencers work together, are well-established tools in the world of social media. However, the operation of the Megafon Centre is still, in many ways, a unique phenomenon (Német, 2024a). First of all, despite claiming to be a non-profit enterprise, it spends an outsized amount, even on an international scale, on the visibility of its influencers. At the beginning of 2024, Megafon influencers spent more on Facebook ads than all political advertisers in Slovakia or Croatia combined (Teczár, 2024). Furthermore, the Megafon Centre provides everything that the influencers may need, including mentoring, production costs, and other forms of support. The influencers are selected based on political values rather than professional merit (Német, 2024b).



Beyond the unequivocally pro-government slant of the videos, there are several other indications of the close relationship between the ruling party and Megafon. For one, it has become customary for Megafon influencers to appear at events and rallies held by the governing party including the prime minister's annual State of Hungary address. Furthermore, prominent Megafon influencers were in attendance at several campaign events hosted by the ruling party in 2024. Thirdly, Megafon also hosts training events where they teach campaign techniques, political communication, and video editing. An investigative reporter identified 68 Fidesz politicians among the governing party's municipal candidates in 2024 who had participated in such a training (Német, 2024a). We can thus unequivocally assert that Megafon is a government-affiliated organization and that its posts published on social media serve the interests of government communication.

Megafon is thus a well-structured organization that operates with public funds. And even though the use of a broad variety of characters may give rise to an illusion of diversity, in reality, its messaging is centralized. As Metz and Kövesdi (2024) point out, the influencers who are trained or financially and/or technologically supported by Megafon all emphasize the same narratives differing from one another only in terms of style.

Juhász (2025) looked at the Megafon videos with a focus on the common reasoning fallacies in them and found that the videos use these to simplify politics for their viewers. A particularly typical example of these is the strawman argument and ad hominem attack, which focus on the political opponent's person and characteristics, distracting the audience from the relevant underlying policy issue.

Based on an analysis of Meta and Google databases, the Political Capital Institute has calculated that, in the first half of 2024 (up to June 15), Megafon had spent €2.2 million on social media ads. The analysis also found that 54% of all political advertising featured hostile narratives. The ruling party and its satellite organization were responsible for 98% of the total €2.5 million spent on promoting such narratives (Political Capital et al., 2024). The platforms provided by Meta and Google are popular in Hungary and users continuously encounter advertised content produced with support from Megafon. It would hence not be an exaggeration to say that Megafon has had a substantial impact on political discourse in the run-up to the concurrently held European Parliament (EP) and Hungarian local elections on 9 June 2024.

## 4. Methodology

The methodological framework of the research is based on systematic data collection and analysis processes that enable a comprehensive examination of the short videos and their impact. This research was conducted as part of the Hungarian Digital Media Observatory project. The present study undertook a qualitative analysis of the 105 videos that Megafon had spent the most on advertising between the 1st of February and 9th of June 2024. We selected the videos based on the Facebook Ad Library; the database revealed that Megafon had spent at least 204.8 million forints (ca. €500,000) on advertising the videos in question. However, we cannot determine the exact amount spent on advertising each video as the Meta Ads Library only publishes an approximate figure. As a result, we always calculated the estimated advertising spending based on the minimum threshold value. For instance, Meta has not even disclosed the maximum amount above HUF 1 million (approximately €2,450); thus, all we know about these ads is that they cost more than that. In reality, the amounts that were spent on advertising could be much higher. The objective of our study was to compile the most comprehensive picture possible of the advertised videos to reveal fake and misleading information as well as to help readers understand what instruments Megafon,

a unique propaganda tool even in international comparison, uses in its efforts to shape public discourse in Hungary.

To supplement the content analysis, we organized focus group discussions to explore the impact of influencers from the perspective of the audience and conducted a representative public opinion poll to support our findings with quantitative data.

We used online focus groups to capture the assessment of Megafon videos. There were 26 participants in total, 14 of whom were pro-government and 12 opposition voters, which roughly reflected the political landscape. The research included an equal number of men and women, and the sample was diverse in terms of educational attainment, occupation, and place of residence. The participants were recruited by the Medián Public Opinion and Market Research Institute. The four discussions took place in early May 2024 during the election campaign. Two groups were made up of government party supporters while another two consisted of opposition voters. The survey featured several topics, including the overall assessment of the Hungarian media situation, the public's trust in the media, and their news consumption patterns. We also focused specifically on Megafon's activities. We aired three Megafon videos during the sessions which were used to engender further discussions.

We also captured the public's online content consumption and familiarity with Megafon videos, as well as their relevant knowledge, using a public opinion poll of 1,000 respondents who were representative of the Hungarian public. The statistical margin of error for the poll was  $\pm 3.2$  percentage points. The poll was based on a representative sample of the Hungarian adult population in terms of gender, age, educational attainment, and the type of municipality in which they reside. The polling data was collected between 13 and 24 May 2024, during the campaign for the concurrent EP and local elections held in June.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. *Louder Than Truth: Analyzing Megafon's Fear Factory*

The examination of the content and stylistic characteristics of Megafon videos is essential for understanding how this content shapes public discourse. This section explores the structure of these videos, the narratives they convey, and the tools they use to influence audience emotions.

The videos published by the Megafon influencers track current political and public affairs events in Hungary. They react quickly to new events and hew closely to the government's narratives. The rising and increasingly popular opposition politician Péter Magyar was especially often the subject of such videos (39 out of the total 105), but other national policy issues and figures were also frequently featured.

It is very typical of Megafon that when they react to an issue, all influencers post their videos within a day or two. The logical structure and reasoning, in fact, even the images used, are the same. They designate the enemy, which includes international actors and Hungarian opposition politicians, using dramatic images and music to convey the danger and show that Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is bravely standing up to evil. Even in terms of plot, they follow a standardized content; formally speaking, the videos also feature unique aspects: they were produced by nine distinct influencers each featuring a distinct language, style of clothing, studio

background, and music. The variety of styles used included, among others, a detached expert perspective, humorous approaches, and a mocking tone. Thus, even as they disseminate the same narratives, each of the influencers strives to appear unique.

Although domestic policy issues dominated Megafon's agenda during the period examined, in large part because of the concurrent EP and municipal elections held in the spring of 2024, the way the organization structures its narratives was also manifest in its videos on two foreign policy issues. One was the war in Ukraine (22 of the 105 examined videos). These often envision a third world war, manipulatively using statements made by politicians who are labelled as "pro-war." These were predominantly Emmanuel Macron, Ursula von der Leyen, and Manfred Weber, along with other European and domestic opposition politicians whose statements were used out of context. The videos featured talk of "pro-government globalist elites," a topos that was also a recurrent element in the official government communication.

Megafon videos regularly used the technique of taking sentences from politicians' press conferences and interviews and having influencers explain them in their own words, greatly exaggerating and often changing the original meaning. They exploited the fact that the manipulated presentation of statements made in an extremely complex geopolitical situation could be used to instill fear in users. One example was Emmanuel Macron's speech on February 27, 2024, in which he said, "There is no consensus to officially back any ground troops. That said, nothing should be excluded. We will do everything that we can to make sure that Russia does not prevail" (Wintour, 2024). This appeared in several videos in the original French with Hungarian subtitles, which in itself may have reduced the reach of the original message, but influencers then interpreted the remarks in Hungarian, saying that "the French president would plunge the whole world into war in a matter of moments" (Bohár Dániel – Riporter, 2024a) and that "the French president is playing with our lives" (Bohár Dániel – Riporter, 2024b).

The other regularly recurring issue with an international dimension was that of the so-called "dollar left/dollar media" (10 of the 105 videos). These videos claimed that "dollars rolling in" were used to control the opposition and the independent media. The videos sought to discredit several independent media outlets regarding their alleged connection to George Soros, also using a narrative claiming that the "Soros empire interferes with the election."

The most prominently featured public enemies—the "globalist elite," the "international left," and George Soros—were presented in the videos as the representatives of a shadowy power that rules from behind and seeks to pressure Hungary. This pressure is centered around the topics often mentioned by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, namely "war, gender, and migration." A key feature of these videos is that they cannot be analyzed using political science terminology: Even when viewing the videos, it is often difficult to ascertain exactly what the globalist or left-wing elite entails, or who exactly is a part of these elites. Nor are the influencers, by any measure, consistent in their word choice or targets. As is typical of conspiracy theories, the depictions of enemies tend to be inconsistent even within the same video clips. The "globalist elite" and the "international left" are often represented by the same European or Democratic Party politicians and often by George Soros.

The majority of the narratives they disseminate about the alleged globalist and/or left-wing elite also appear in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war. The underlying logic of these videos is that the "globalist elite" is funding the "pro-war international left" to keep support for the war going, since they profit from it.

One of the pre-eminent features of the videos analyzed is how they construct bogeymen. Regardless of whether the underlying issue is one of domestic or international politics, the various enemies are depicted as instruments of the power behind the scenes. It is especially striking that the forces of “good” and their “allies” barely appear during the presentation of the threats presumably looming over Hungary. Megafon influencers focus on the alleged enemies while the positive aspects of their own underlying beliefs appeared only in a few of the videos we saw.

The other key feature is fearmongering. For one, this emanates from the messages themselves (war, the interventions of the shadowy powers) but the impact is massively reinforced by the images used. Explosions, war scenes, and dramatic music are often used to reinforce viewers’ visceral fears. For instance, in his video posted on June 6, Dániel Bohár, the most widely advertised influencer on Megafon, who was supposedly commenting on the Hungarian elections, depicted the president of the European Commission, the president of the European People’s Party, and the president of France marching in military uniform in front of a battle tank. Similarly, several videos showed a simulation of what would happen if the Hungarian capital were to be hit by a nuclear attack.

On the whole, therefore, Megafon is a group of political influencers who disseminate unequivocally pro-government narratives, but unlike the official governmental narratives they are much more likely to appeal to emotions. They tend to focus on perceived enemies and fostering an “us vs. them” feeling, which is clearly used to polarize public opinion. This is further reinforced by fearmongering, which suggests that the enemy is trying to push Hungary into the war and that their ultimate goal is our destruction. In light of the fact that these messages are continuously present on the most popular social media platforms, and that Megafon spent vast amounts on advertising in the first half of 2024 (the period we analyzed), the impact of these messages on the Hungarian public cannot be underestimated.

## ***5.2. Perceptions From the Polarized Public: Qualitative Research on the Perception of Megafon Videos***

In addition to content analysis, it is also important to consider how the audience evaluates and perceives these videos. In this section, the results of focus group research are presented, highlighting the differing perceptions of various political camps and the social impact of Megafon videos.

The focus group survey showed that opposition voters knew more about Megafon than pro-government participants. Several of the pro-government sympathizers only realized during the discussions, upon seeing the videos, that they had seen Megafon clips before and knew the influencers involved. The name Megafon was not recognized by all.

Among opposition viewers, Megafon videos are viewed decidedly negatively; they assess them as propaganda. As one of the participants put it, “It is readily apparent that they shamelessly lie to the public.” Opposition viewers also unequivocally assessed that Megafon was pro-government: “They no longer even bother to pretend to be independent.” Unsurprisingly, the issue of funding for the ads also came up with people saying that Megafon “uses our taxpayer money.” An interesting aspect of the interviews was that the participants clearly recognized that the content had been centrally produced and their assessment, additionally, was that the influencers had not fully succeeded in their efforts to imbue the clips with their own individual style: As one of the participants put it, “There is just no personality behind it, they just needed a face they could use to sell [the videos].”

Among pro-government voters, the assessment of Megafon is very different. These participants were likely to consider these Megafon clips as credible. As one of them noted, “I doubt they would lie or disseminate fake news.” The majority of pro-government focus group participants did not see anything objectionable about the fact that the influencers disseminate very similar content and messages. They believe that this is an effective channel of public communication and they think “it’s a smart idea to involve influencers, they are close to youths.” They are similarly pragmatic when it comes to their assessment that the content disseminated in Megafon videos does not suffer from a lack of credibility. The discussions revealed that pro-government voters feel that Megafon addresses real problems and, even if the videos’ style fails to live up to their taste, they nevertheless accept that, from a communications standpoint, they are still effective. A government party voter summarized their opinion as follows: “This is what the average rural voters want, this is what the average voter understands.” Albeit indirectly, this statement constitutes a rather clear criticism of the quality of the videos and of the voters too.

The differences in opinion discussed above persisted even after the presentation of the aforementioned three videos. Pro-government voters agreed with the claims in the videos; they did not question the veracity of the latter. Those who sympathise with the opposition, by contrast, raised two new considerations. For one, they argued, the other side “always needs someone to hate and despise; they need enemies.” Second, they said that the videos deflect from the real problems, especially economic hardships and the freezing of EU funds.

On the whole, it emerged that the participants of the focus group research were aware of Megafon. Still, several of them only recalled what it was once they had watched the videos. It was not surprising to see that the participants’ opinions were fundamentally shaped by their partisan preferences. Opposition voters were likely to see these videos as propaganda and assessed them negatively. Government party voters, by contrast, identified with the main message and, even if they had reservations in terms of taste, these were overridden by their perception that, in the context of the political competition, Megafon is viewed as an effective instrument that shapes public perceptions to be more attuned to the government party’s views.

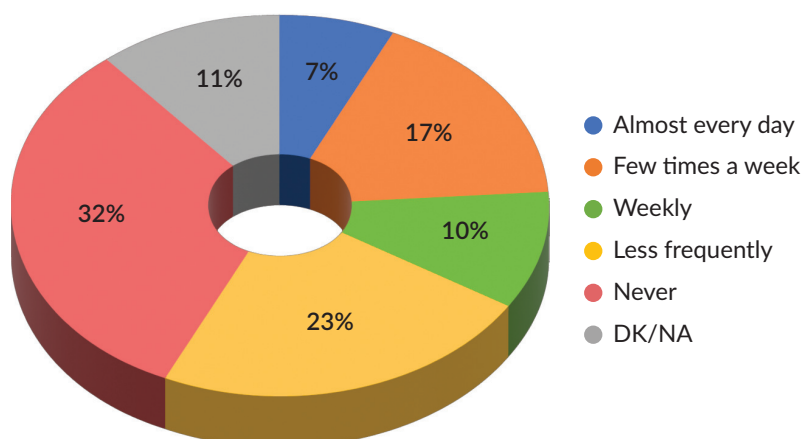
### ***5.3. Hidden in Plain Sight: Quantitative Analysis for Measuring Megafon’s Reach and Reception***

In addition to qualitative results, we also use quantitative data to support the awareness and social impact of Megafon videos. In the following, based on representative public opinion polls, we show how well-known Megafon is, who encounters its content most frequently, and how different social groups relate to it.

The political influencers that make up the Megafon group are not widely known to the public. Still, in some cases, their name recognition was striking, given that they only appear in advertised content and do nothing else of public note. Forty-three percent of respondents knew at least one of the influencers we asked them about, while the name recognition of the most prominent influencer stood at 30%. The share of respondents who recognized the name Megafon was lower at 20%, which may be explained by the fact that Megafon does not appear as a media provider or brand name attached to the content produced under its aegis; it only plays a role as a source of funding for videos.

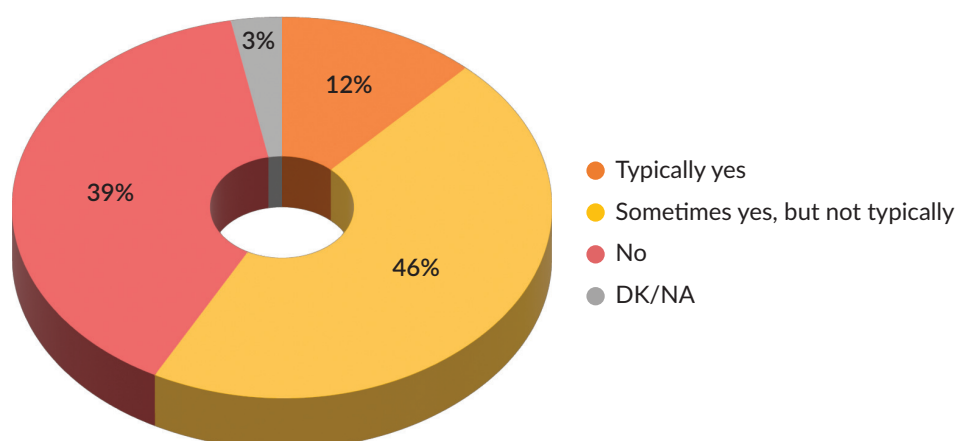
A third of the respondents (34%) who had heard of one of the influencers or the name Megafon came across videos associated with the group at least once a week. This is not a high share considering that during the campaign period the ads were continuously visible on Facebook. It seems likely that many see these videos

without knowing that Megafon is behind them. The lack of awareness is also underlined by the fact that sorting the respondents' answers by education showed that those with higher educational attainment were most likely to be aware of having come across Megafon content, while those with the lowest level of education were the least likely to have encountered it. It is also worth noting that when we look at the distribution of responses by political preference, opposition voters were more likely to encounter Megafon content than pro-government voters or voters without a party preference.



**Figure 1.** When you're on social media, how often do you come across Megafon video clips or the clips of the previously mentioned persons? Note: A share of respondents who knew at least one of the Megafon influencers or Megafon itself ( $n = 480$ ).

Similar to the previously reviewed qualitative surveys, the poll also revealed that Hungarian society is divided when it comes to the assessment of Megafon content, as it can be observed in Figure 2. Among the respondents who said that they had already seen Megafon videos, only 39% said unequivocally that they never finished watching them.



**Figure 2.** Do you tend to watch video clips published by the previously mentioned persons all the way to the end? Note: A share of respondents who had seen at least one of the influencers in question ( $n = 129$ ).

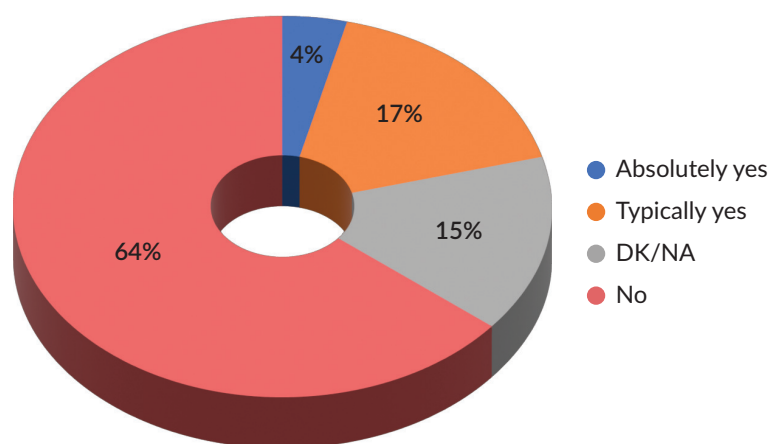
Among those who tend to encounter Megafon videos and are aware that these have been produced by the latter, only 37% claimed that these contents irritate them a lot, while a further 34% say it irks them slightly.

A mere quarter of respondents said that Megafon videos do not bother them at all. Obviously, the latter were the respondents whose political views hewed close to the ideas raised by the influencers in the Megafon videos. The data also support the proposition that the attitudes concerning the video clips are predominantly determined by partisan preferences.

The fact that Megafon has close ties to the government side is relatively widely known (76%) among those who recognised its name. Although this is a high ratio, considering that the question referred to what may be the most emblematic player in terms of the ruling party's control over public discourse, a higher result would not have been surprising either. Only a negligible proportion of respondents, a mere 2%, said that Megafon has closer ties to the opposition. However, 11% of respondents assessed that it was independent of both major political camps.

The lack of awareness about Megafon was most conspicuous in the fact that only 30% of respondents indicated that they knew that Megafon publishes paid content. This also highlights one of the major risks associated with this type of communication innovation: Many regard these clips as news of sorts, as content released by newsrooms, and they are thus much more likely to believe it than they would if they were aware that it constitutes advertising.

Despite the money spent on advertising, or maybe in part because of it, Megafon failed to attain widespread credibility: Close to two-thirds of respondents said "no" in response to the question concerning Megafon's credibility. Juxtaposed with earlier data, this also reveals that many watch these videos even though they do not regard them as credible sources of information, which raises further questions about the impact mechanism of political ads, as can be observed in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** Do you think the content disseminated by Megafon is credible? Note: A share of respondents who knew the name Megafon ( $n = 204$ ).

In response to the poll questions, few respondents claimed to know Megafon, even though the general experience is that Hungarian Facebook users can hardly avoid encountering their ubiquitous videos; this was especially true during the 2024 election campaign. The risk stemming from political advertising published on social media is precisely that, as compared to legacy media, when it comes to this form of communication, users will find it much harder to distinguish between newsroom-produced content and advertising. This is especially true when it comes to Megafon influencers since several of them are known from television news



shows and, as a result, many users tend to think of them as reporters or even experts. Our poll was only able to capture the perceptions of those respondents who knew Megafon; in other words, those we might refer to as aware users. This method does not allow us to study those who did not know what Megafon was and were also unable to name any of its influencers. The latter is the most vulnerable group and it seems very likely that political ads on Facebook are most effective in influencing this segment of the public.

## 6. Conclusion

The spread of disinformation, the coarsening of public discourse, and social polarization can be observed in many countries and, while this is not solely due to social media, there is consensus that it has contributed to these processes (Gibson, 2023; Pérez-Curiel, 2020). While these platforms have facilitated the emergence of grassroots initiatives and amplified the voices of local communities and civil society organizations, it has become clear that actors with greater resources are able to achieve greater impact on these sites. It is not surprising that politicians and parties have recognized this and are trying to dominate the public sphere through a strong social media presence to gain or maintain power.

Political influence on social media often manifests itself in the form of increased foreign interference which in Europe primarily means Russian influence. However, there are now several examples of domestic influence with autocratic leaders using state resources to become dominant players on social media sites (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Linnell & Warren, 2020; Martin et al., 2023). From the perspective of political leaders and platform owners this is a win-win situation as it helps those in power to maintain their position by restricting public access, while the platforms generate significant revenue from constant political advertising.

Hungary is an important example of this model. The ruling party dominates the public sphere (Griffen, 2020; Polyák, 2019; Urbán, 2024) and one element of this is the constant advertising content appearing on social media. The ads are not only financed by politicians or parties but also by a company specializing in this field called Megafon, which advertises content by political influencers and also provides training for other influencers and politicians. The influencers are often well-known figures, political analysts, or former television presenters, but it is mainly advertising spending that ensures their constant visibility.

The perception of the Megafon videos was measured using qualitative and quantitative methods, which revealed that many people are unaware of how Megafon works. In the focus group discussion, many only recognized Megafon after watching the videos but, by then, everyone was familiar with the influencers, which shows their wide reach. The questionnaire survey revealed that even among those who are familiar with Megafon, only 30% are aware that the videos are advertisements. This low awareness suggests that many people probably view these social media posts as news content (Hann et al., 2023; Szakács, 2025).

This study adds to the growing research on digital mercenaries and cyber troops by offering empirical evidence of how state-affiliated political influencer networks operate in practice. Our analysis of Megafon's hostile narratives during the 2024 EP elections supports recent theoretical ideas that view these as advanced disinformation tools that take advantage of media consumption habits in the social media-driven media landscape. These narratives also amplify identity-based divisions and systematically create fears by constructing enemy figures and using fearmongering tactics. The research fills an important gap in understanding how domestic influence campaigns work within European contexts, especially through the

new mechanism of government-funded influencer groups that blur the line between advertising and news content.

Building and operating a group of political influencers is relatively easy, especially if one has access to government funds. The Megafon phenomenon is dangerous because it is not specific to Hungary, it is easy to copy, and there is a real risk that the model will spread to other countries.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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The authors used DeepL for the text, which has now expanded its capabilities by integrating a next-generation LLM.

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# The Long-Distance Relationship Between Youth and Italian Politics on TikTok: Insights From the 2024 EU Election

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## Abstract

TikTok’s rapid rise in media and information consumption among young Italians has recently prompted Italian politicians to stake out this space during election campaigns to engage a younger electorate, traditionally sidelined by mainstream news and political communication. However, attempts to tailor Italian political communication to the TikTok ecosystem are still undergoing a process of adaptation and familiarization (Boccia Artieri & Donato, 2024). This may reflect the challenges of engaging with TikTok’s peculiarities: it is driven by youth-centered usage and language focused on entertainment and escapism (Cervi et al., 2023), and its predominantly algorithmic architecture shifts content circulation from relational networks to personalized recommendations. This configuration transforms the political experience on social media for both politicians and users, moving from relational interactivity toward a more aesthetic, performative dimension. In this context, our study examines how these TikTok characteristics affect the production, circulation, exposure, and evaluation of political content during the 2024 European Parliament election campaign. The analysis revolves around three main foci: How politicians used TikTok and leveraged the platform’s features; how users encountered and assessed political content; and how the topics addressed by politicians on TikTok compare with those young Italians deem most important. The second-order election setting of the European elections (Reif & Schmitt, 1980), contrasted with youth voter appeal (Consiglio Nazionale dei Giovani, 2024), adds complexity, making the alignment of political and user interests a key driver of TikTok content circulation less predictable.

## Keywords

algorithmic media logic; clustered publics; European elections; network media logic; TikTok politics; youth



## 1. Introduction

Just weeks before Italy's September 2022 elections, Italian politics discovered TikTok. Until then, only Matteo Salvini, leader of the Lega party, had a platform account; by summer 2022, all major parties and leaders had opened profiles and updated them with varying consistency ahead of election deadlines (Martella, 2024). The aim was to reach a young audience, often disenchanted with traditional politics and hard to reach via mainstream media or other social channels. In 2022, TikTok had 16.2 million Italian users—over 60% aged 18–35—with an average monthly usage of 21 hours (Statista, 2023; we are social & Meltwater, 2023). Despite extensive media coverage, the 2022 campaign on TikTok was met with sarcasm (Capone & Marino, 2022) and a general sense of unease from users, fueling perceptions of a forced approach and lack of context awareness by politicians (Battista, 2024; Boccia Artieri & Donato, 2024). Entertainment-driven campaign videos depoliticized the debate, leaving little room for campaign issues or youth priorities (Ipsos, 2022). Martella's (2024) analysis confirms this gap: The most viewed TikToks on Italy's election were political debates (40%), not entertainment (6%). This challenges the idea of TikTok as apolitical and highlights the mismatch between youth interests and how Italian politicians use TikTok in their electoral strategies. Scholars highlighted the lack of "genuine interest and understanding of what was truly happening within the platform and its logics" (Boccia Artieri & Donato, 2024, p. 97). Across any media environment, the effectiveness of political messages depends on adapting to a medium's technical and cultural affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Kreiss et al., 2018). On TikTok, this is especially crucial. Unlike other social networks, TikTok relies on personalized algorithmic recommendations that prioritize a video's ability to match user interests over social ties (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Cervi, 2021). Content appears dynamically on the "For You" page based on viewing behavior and preferences, with an interface that downplays social interaction while maximizing algorithmic profiling (Zeng et al., 2021).

In political communication, this model promises visibility far beyond one's base—but only if content is crafted to engage the algorithm both technically and creatively, a challenge Italian politics has only partially met. By 2024, with over 21 million subscribers and more than 30 hours of monthly use, TikTok had become Italy's most-used social platform (we are social & Meltwater, 2024). On the eve of the 2024 European elections, its role in political messaging has become even more central. Given TikTok's reliance on algorithmic recommendations, this study explores how these features shaped the production, circulation, exposure, and evaluation of political content during Italy's 2024 European Parliament elections. The aim is to assess how Italian politicians used TikTok and harnessed its native functionalities. Additionally, it focuses on how TikTok users consume, interact with, and evaluate political content—an area rarely examined (Greenfield et al., 2025). Finally, since content circulation algorithms intersect with user interests, the analysis compares the topics debated in political TikToks during the campaign with those that young Italians deem priorities.

## 2. From Networks to Algorithms: How Recommendation Algorithms Shape Political Content Dissemination on TikTok

Over recent years, several studies have shown how TikTok's unique architecture is reshaping social platforms' logics and the practices underpinning content production, distribution, and consumption. These changes redefine the network media logic governing platforms (Klinger & Svensson, 2014; van Dijck & Poell, 2013). On TikTok, content circulation downplays explicit relational networks—following and interactions—in favor of personal interests profiled and organized by autonomous recommendation algorithms. Klinger and

Svensson (2024), revisiting the concept a decade later, argue that the algorithmic turn (Napoli, 2014) is replacing human intermediaries and fostering new communicative modes. In this configuration, message reach and visibility hinge on performing to the platform's algorithmic criteria rather than on offline popularity or traditional social ties (Klinger & Svensson, 2024; Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

This shift gains further momentum under the banner of deep mediatization (Couldry & Hepp, 2017), whereby digital media, especially platforms, do not merely mediate communication but actively shape reality. Accordingly, platform affordances—the action possibilities embedded in technical infrastructures (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Bucher & Helmond, 2018)—configure the bounds of communicative practices and determine visibility and engagement mechanisms.

Within the context of network media logic, this means that connectivity serves as the platform's enabling structure (Klinger & Svensson, 2014; van Dijck & Poell, 2013). On social networks like Facebook, Instagram, or X (formerly Twitter), user social networks still drive content circulation. Thus, message effectiveness also depends on actors' ability to build and sustain supporter networks, mobilize them, and encourage interaction through strategic, personalized content (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021).

TikTok reshapes this architecture: Algorithmic programmability replaces user social networks as the primary distribution infrastructure, meaning content circulation depends solely on the user's ability to engage the algorithm and is oriented exclusively on individual interests (Baumann et al., 2025). Messages spread not because they are shared by known contacts but because the algorithm deems them relevant to users' preferences. While collective participation means remain, the weakening of relational features (followers/following, commenting, sharing) marks a shift from a relational, interactive logic to a performative, algorithmic logic (Hardt et al., 2022; Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

These differences also structurally shape political communication, which adopts different forms, languages, and functions depending on the platform (Shearer et al., 2024; Stier et al., 2018). On Facebook, politics builds intimacy and relationships through personal narratives and pop-culture references to humanize candidates and spark emotional engagement (Nielsen & Vaccari, 2013; Papacharissi, 2014). On X, it embeds the politician's personal voice into public debate, joining conversations with other actors (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Graham et al., 2017). Instagram emphasizes aesthetics and storytelling aligned with the politician's public persona, drawing on celebrity and everyday politics languages (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017; Lilleker & Veneti, 2023). Studies show that on TikTok, these processes not only occur but accelerate because of its algorithmic logic (Cervi & Tejedor, 2023; Medina-Serrano et al., 2020). TikTok incorporates traits enabling personalized, intimate, and performative political storytelling: The centrality and brevity of videos fuse key politainment elements such as embodied performance (Gerbaudo & Moreno, 2023), emotive personal narratives (Zamora-Medina, 2023), and lighthearted content. Features driving virality and memetic practices (music, stitch, duet) blend pop culture and encourage co-creation of significance (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Interactive tools likewise revolve around individual performance and staging (Abidin, 2020; Martella, 2024). This acceleration is primarily due to the different mechanisms of content circulation. On major social networks governed by network media logic, message visibility depends on the intersection of algorithmic logic and user intermediation.

On Facebook, for example, visibility is co-produced through user-politician interactions—likes, comments, and shares (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Nielsen & Vaccari, 2013)—in an environment that supports bidirectional,

mobilizing communication (Stier et al., 2018). X, despite its recent algorithmic evolution (Moore, 2023), retains a conversational structure, encouraging conversations among politicians, users, and other public-debate actors (Kreiss, 2014; Shearer et al., 2024). Instagram's relational dimension persists through collective creations—memes and collaborative posts—that foster message reach (Marquart et al., 2020; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). As noted, the content circulation on TikTok depends exclusively on algorithmic profiling. Still, features such as music, filters, and effects facilitate the creation of standardized, recognizable content, fueling trends and virality (Cervi et al., 2023). Duet, stitch functions, trend, and challenges (Abidin, 2020) enable direct interactions with other videos, spawning collective narratives and boosting engagement. These practices require no preexisting relations, relying instead on individual performance that effectively turns the user into content (Martella, 2024). Consequently, politicians must adapt to these conventions to avoid appearing alien to platform culture (Cervi & Tejedor, 2023). Trend participation and strategic use of viral music now serve as key “contamination” strategies for political messaging on TikTok, generating return virality among users and media (Boccia Artieri et al., 2022; Zamora-Medina, 2023).

The shift from a connectivity logic to algorithmic centrality profoundly affects two core dimensions of digital political communication that are also relevant to the aims of this work: the strategic function attributed to each platform and the topics that are addressed on them. Contemporary online politics adopts a multiplatform approach to optimize content diffusion and reach differentiated audiences, especially during election campaigns (Lukito et al., 2025; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021). Each network serves distinct goals: Facebook for mobilization and building affective proximity through personalized policy and current-affairs narratives (Stier et al., 2018); X for real-time commentary and positioning within the public debate, driven by the public-opinion agenda (Kreiss, 2014; Lukito et al., 2025); Instagram for constructing visual leadership via aesthetic codes aligned with candidate values and everyday narratives on cultural and identity topics such as environment, inclusion, and immigration (Chang et al., 2024; Marquart et al., 2020).

Also in this case, TikTok's algorithmic centrality marks a discontinuity with relational platforms. Its primary role is to connect politicians with younger electorates (Cartes-Barroso et al., 2025; Cervi et al., 2021). The platform works less as an information hub and more as a space for political socialization and cultural mobilization. Challenges, trends, and memetic practices foster identification, imitation, and participation, making TikTok a strategic channel to reach younger voters (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). TikTok thus operates as a political motivational arena: it spurs action and engagement but only when political messages conform to platform-specific codes (Vaterlaus & Chow, 2024). Symbolic and polarizing issues prevail (such as civil rights, woke culture, immigration) and are treated with emotional and sensationalist language, according to a logic of engagement rather than in-depth analysis. (Lukito et al., 2025; Pérez Rastrilla et al., 2023). In this environment, content effectiveness hinges on adherence to dominant communicative styles (Li et al., 2025) and the strategic deployment of platform formats and functions (Grantham et al., 2025).

Algorithmic recommendation centrality thus profoundly shapes how politics deploys TikTok and engages both users and the algorithm. Recent studies have analyzed politicians' strategies, revealing context-dependent approaches (Cervi et al., 2023) but a common struggle to fully leverage the platform's potential. In Europe, research in Germany, Italy, and Spain portrays political TikTok use as a “missed opportunity” (Bösch & Ricks, 2021; Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021; Zurovac, 2022), dominated by performative, promotional politainment and scant user interaction. In Latin America, however, practices lean toward self-promotion (Acosta & Acosta, 2022; Figuereo Benítez et al., 2022; Montúfar-Calle et al., 2022) and

pop-culture crossovers such as Antonio Kast's Marvel and Star Wars nods in Chile or Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro's sports-themed performances (Gerbaudo & Moreno, 2023). Personalization varies significantly: Spanish politicians rarely share private-life details (Zamora-Medina, 2023), whereas in Italy, Salvini frequently posts personal content with implicit political undertones (Cervi & Tejedor, 2023). A parallel is found in French President Emmanuel Macron's informal selfie videos (Salazar, 2023). Politicians also routinely repurpose content from other media (interview clips, press conferences, topical statements) to populate their TikTok feeds (Martella & Cepernich, 2024).

### 3. Shifting Audience on TikTok: From Networked Publics to Clustered Publics

A key aspect of TikTok's algorithmic logic is its transformation of online publics. Gerbaudo (2024) labels TikTok a second-generation social network due to its reliance on recommendation algorithms in contrast to first-generation relational platforms like Facebook, X, and Instagram. Those platforms host networked publics (boyd, 2010) built around explicit, visible social ties (friends and followers): a people-centric environment (Gerbaudo, 2024) where algorithmic selection coexists with user agency in defining audiences (Vromen et al., 2016). The articulation of audiences is transparent, visible in the interface, and linked to the network of relationships. In these environments, forms of connective participation emerge (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), oriented toward specific issues and developed in fluid, horizontal networks based on a collaborative and co-productive logic. Socialization and political participation in these environments often take the form of a peer-to-peer process, activated by peer relationships within thematic and temporary communities (Loader et al., 2014). On second-generation platforms like TikTok, however, clustered publics emerge (Gerbaudo, 2024): Audiences formed by algorithmic grouping based on implicit behavioral affinities rather than social connections. This shift from a "people-centric" to an "item-centric" model centers on content performance (Kaye et al., 2022; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). As Gerbaudo (2024, p. 2) cautions: "In transforming the social form of online publics, social interest clustering raises important ethical and political questions and, in particular, risks of depersonalisation, opacity and fragmentation." TikTok's publics are thus less identifiable, more fragmented, and unaware of the selective logic guiding their exposure, which hinges on shared objects, not relationships.

Scholars have proposed alternative concepts to describe these audiences: imitation publics, built on memetic rituals (Zulli & Zulli, 2022); affective publics, driven by emotional engagement (Hautea et al., 2021; Papacharissi, 2014); refracted publics, confined to semantic niches (Abidin, 2021); and algorithmic audiencing, emphasizing opaque automated recipient selection (Riemer & Peter, 2021). The notion of clustered publics, however, which in a sense encompasses these approaches, focuses most directly on the changed social form of online publics (Simmel, 2011) and its implications for communicative experience, making it particularly suited to capture TikTok's distinctive user characteristics.

In light of these innovations, several scholars have examined how clustered publics engage with politics on TikTok, with most focusing on socialization and political participation among Generation Z (Cervi & Tejedor, 2023; Zeng & Abidin, 2021). Hyper-personalized algorithmic selection creates a space that frames politics within personal experiences and emotional involvement, intertwined with displays of identity politics. This yields an environment where young users actively discuss political and social issues often underestimated by mainstream media (Cervi & Tejedor, 2023). Such an environment not only encourages online political behaviors but also spurs offline action (Karimi & Fox, 2023), shapes political opinion formation (Tukiainen et al., 2024)

through its growing informational use (Lim & Guerra, 2023), and contributes to political identity construction. Other studies highlight TikTok's role in youth activism—particularly around civil rights, environmental concerns, and gender issues (Hautea et al., 2021; Simpson & Semaan, 2021)—and in creative, participatory forms that can evade censorship or disrupt traditional political events, as seen in the fake Donald Trump rally registrations (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2022).

Fewer studies address how algorithmic logic affects exposure to and evaluation of political content on TikTok. On first-generation social networks, exposure is mediated by visible connections, granting users agency in content selection and operating within environments that allow user awareness and control (Marquart et al., 2020; Vromen et al., 2016). In contrast, TikTok's item-centric logic optimizes content delivery based on user preferences and behaviors and its immersive interface diminishes awareness of selection processes, fostering passive information consumption (Shearer et al., 2024; Vaterlaus & Chow, 2024). The algorithm rapidly categorizes users into opaque "algorithmic niches," often without their knowledge (Gerbaudo, 2024). These niches limit exposure to alternative viewpoints and undermine critical judgment (Cervi & Tejedor, 2023; Li et al., 2025).

Political content is present but less visible on TikTok than on other platforms. A recent Pew Research Center study found that only 45% of TikTok users encounter political content, versus 74% on X and 52% on Facebook (Shearer et al., 2024). Nevertheless, TikTok has become a major news source for young people (Lim & Guerra, 2023). Several studies warn, however, of disinformation, polarization, fragmentation, and selective exposure risks on TikTok (Gerbaudo, 2024; Weimann & Masri, 2021). While relational networks and incidental exposure on platforms like Facebook mitigate filter-bubble effects (Dubois & Blank, 2018; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021), algorithmic feeds and engagement-driven design on TikTok fragment audiences and amplify selective exposure and opinion polarization risks (Gerbaudo, 2024). Recent work shows that highly engaged users with extreme ideological views express political opinions more frequently and visibly (Li et al., 2025). In some European contexts, TikTok even appears to favor right-wing populism: neutral German users see AfD content up to six times more often than centrist material (Tjaden et al., 2024); in Finland, platform use correlates with right-wing Finns Party support—even among otherwise apolitical users (Tukiainen et al., 2024).

With regard to how young users evaluate political content, the literature identifies several potential factors, some of which are linked to the algorithmic and stylistic nature of TikTok. When young users evaluate political content, authenticity is paramount: Videos perceived as "genuine" and context-appropriate (first-person perspective, informal settings) earn greater trust and approval (Grantham et al., 2025; Greenfield et al., 2025). As on relational platforms, performative coherence matters, but it hinges on visual style and aesthetics on TikTok—editing, popular music, shot quality, and on-screen presence boost positive judgments of content creators (Munger & Li, 2025). Affective engagement—identification with content, native interactions (duets, stitches, comments), and informative entertainment—also drives favorable evaluations (Casula & Wong, 2025). Packaging and sharing methods further shape user impressions (Grantham et al., 2025; Greenfield et al., 2025). Most studies agree that alignment with platform cultural and technical codes is critical (Cervi et al., 2021; Zamora-Medina, 2023). Content seen as "out of place" or stylistically inconsistent garners less engagement and invites ironic or negative reactions. Cervi and Tejedor's (2023) analysis of comments on Matteo Salvini's videos reveals widespread rejection of content perceived as inappropriate for TikTok, with responses hinging on tone and stylistic fit more than political substance.

In sum, the literature concurs that political actors must adapt to TikTok's technical and cultural affordances and usage norms to earn positive evaluations and avoid seeming alien on the platform.

#### 4. Methodology and Research Objectives

Given the centrality of algorithmic exposure in circulating political content on TikTok and the need for political actors to reach young audiences with platform-appropriate languages, editing, and topics, this study aims to compare how Italy's main parties and leaders used TikTok during the 2024 European election campaign with how young Italians perceived and engaged with those posts. To assess content coherence—crucially for capturing audience interests via the algorithm—we compare the topics addressed by politicians on TikTok with those ranked as priorities by young users during the campaign.

The study is based on an analysis of content published by the main TikTok accounts of Italian politicians and political parties ( $n = 12$ ) between May 8 and June 9, 2024 ( $n = 275$  videos), analyzed using a multimodal content analysis sheet (Serafini & Reid, 2019); and on the results of a computer assisted web interviewing survey conducted on a representative sample of 553 young Italians (aged 18–35) with an active account on the platform.

The content analysis uses variables referring to some fundamental dimensions of the relationship between politics and TikTok: the production methods of the videos, understood as the use of at least two of the editing tools described in the previous paragraphs (music, captions, duets, stitches); the engagement and visibility generated; the function of the video (distinguished into informative, entertainment, promotional, critical, commentary, and personal); and, finally, the presence of references in the videos to European issues, derived from a study on issues important for the future of Europe according to young people, published by Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2024). All videos were viewed and independently coded by two trained coders using a content analysis sheet based on the variables presented above. Intercoder reliability was assessed using Krippendorff's alpha, which yielded a coefficient of 0.79, indicating substantial agreement. The survey on young people investigates: the frequency and modes of exposure to political content on TikTok; evaluations of those videos; and the European topics young Italians deem most urgent, using the same Eurobarometer list.

By cross-tabulating these data, this study aims to explore: the politicians' ability to leverage TikTok's stylistic and technical affordances and its impact on content effectiveness; users' exposure patterns and judgments of political videos; and overlaps between the platform's political agenda and youth priorities. Finally, we compare these dimensions by political alignment—both for the TikTok accounts and for the survey respondents.

These objectives lead to the following research questions:

RQ1: How do young people consume and evaluate political content on TikTok during the election campaign and to what extent have Italian politicians leveraged the platform's potential and tools?

RQ2: Which European issues appear most frequently on the political agenda presented on TikTok and is there a correlation with the thematic priorities expressed by young voters?



The results of the analysis offer insights into how Italian politics uses TikTok and the role of affordances in the creation of effective content—an area that has yet to be structurally investigated in the Italian context—as well as into an aspect that scientific literature is looking at with growing interest, namely how users consume and evaluate content. The context of the 2024 European elections adds a further layer of complexity: this is a contest often considered second-order (Reif & Schmitt, 1980; Roncarolo, 2010) and therefore one in which politicians invest little, but which is potentially significant for young voters (Consiglio Nazionale dei Giovani, 2024). The analysis of European issues addressed by politicians and expected by users allows us to observe the convergence or divergence of interests—a key factor in the circulation of content on TikTok—between political actors and young platform users in an atypical electoral context.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Content Production

Regarding the use of TikTok by Italian politicians, 275 pieces of content were analyzed during the election campaign period (Table 1). The account that posts the most content by far is Matteo Salvini's (66), which alone exceeds one quarter of all content published by all the monitored accounts. Next are Fratelli d'Italia (49), Carlo Calenda (27), and the Partito Democratico (26). Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni published 25 pieces of content. The accounts that publish the least are Forza Italia (2) and Movimento 5 Stelle (6). It should be noted that, although all content from the main Italian parties and leaders was analyzed, figures such as Elly Schlein, leader of the Partito Democratico, and major parties like Matteo Salvini's Lega, Carlo Calenda's Azione, and Matteo Renzi's Italia Viva are absent from the list because, at the time of monitoring, no active accounts attributable to them were found. Looking at how politicians used TikTok in their electoral communication

**Table 1.** Content analysis on TikTok politicians during the European Parliament election campaign\*.

|                       | Number of posts | Main video purpose | Use of editing tools (at least 2) (%) | Average engagement** | Average views** | Followers** |
|-----------------------|-----------------|--------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------|-------------|
| Antonio Tajani        | 12              | Promotional        | 6 (50)                                | 1,791.4              | 11,196.5        | 4,708       |
| Forza Italia***       | 2               | NA                 | NA                                    | NA                   | NA              | 3,248       |
| Giorgia Meloni        | 25              | Informative        | 0 (0)                                 | 67,983               | 50,8124.8       | 1,563,894   |
| Fratelli D'italia     | 49              | Critical           | 30 (61.2)                             | 11,562.8             | 22,765.2        | 131,996     |
| Matteo Salvini        | 66              | Critical           | 40 (60.6)                             | 30,771.7             | 83,832.1        | 1,011,976   |
| Partito Democratico   | 26              | Personal           | 19 (73.8)                             | 838.7                | 4,898.8         | 51,575      |
| Giuseppe Conte        | 19              | Critical           | 15 (78.9)                             | 39,551               | 47,238          | 780,061     |
| Movimento 5 Stelle*** | 6               | NA                 | NA                                    | NA                   | NA              | 73,445      |
| Europa Verde          | 10              | Comment            | 8 (80)                                | 4,591                | 26,737.4        | 2,658       |
| Carlo Calenda         | 27              | Entertainment      | 8 (29.6)                              | 1,750.5              | 7,419.7         | 32,281      |
| Matteo Renzi          | 11              | Commentary         | 8 (72.7)                              | 35,287.5             | 22,864.4        | 95,076      |
| Più EUROPA            | 22              | Informative        | 12 (54.5)                             | 3,614.2              | 9,473.5         | 31,804      |

Notes: \* Manual coding performed by two coders (Krippendorff's  $\alpha = 0.79$ ); \*\* Follower, views, and engagement data was collected on June 9, 2024; \*\*\* The accounts of Forza Italia and Movimento 5 Stelle were excluded from this analysis due to the limited amount of content.



and at content performance, the analysis delves into several significant dimensions: the combined use of the platform's editing tools, the videos' dominant function, and performance metrics such as followers, views, and average engagement over the period.

Regarding video functions, nearly 30% of the sample were classified as critical content, followed by commentary and informative videos at around 20% each. Entertainment-oriented videos were the least common (6.18%), a finding that partly contradicts the politainment trend identified in the literature review. Account-level distributions confirm right-wing radical actors' preference for critical and conflictual content which dominates Matteo Salvini's and Fratelli d'Italia's output as well as that of Giuseppe Conte, leader of the populist Movimento 5 Stelle. Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, likely owing to her institutional role, uses her account predominantly for informative purposes. Among other actors, the Partito Democratico stands out for its personal-style videos—driven in large part by a series of candidate-profile clips (e.g., Partito Democratico, 2024)—and Carlo Calenda for entertainment, notably through his BlaBlaCarl format, in which he drove around with a supporter discussing political and personal topics in an infotainment style (e.g., Carlo Calenda, 2024).

Moving on to TikTok's editing tools, each video was coded for the use of at least two of the following: music, captions, subtitles, filters, duet, and stitch. The table reveals considerable variation. Overall, most accounts employ these tools in at least 60% of their videos. Progressive-area accounts (Giuseppe Conte, Partito Democratico, and Europa Verde) show the most uniform and intensive use, averaging 75.8%, with similar figures also for Matteo Renzi. The most surprising finding is Prime Minister Meloni's virtually zero use of combined tools: although most of her TikToks include music or subtitles, not a single video uses more than one tool. This is intriguing given her account's top performance metrics. Salvini ranks second, followed by Conte and Renzi—both strong users of platform tools and focused on critical and commentary content. The weakest performances come from Antonio Tajani, +Europa, and especially the Partito Democratico, which averaged fewer than one thousand interactions.

This picture suggests that electoral content performance on TikTok is linked less to the use of editing affordances and more to an account's follower base and, to a lesser extent, to video function. To investigate this hypothesis, Pearson correlation analyses were conducted between average engagement and views and with combined affordance use, and follower count. The analysis reveals a non-significant correlation between engagement and views; a moderate correlation between views and affordance use ( $p = 0.68$ ); and very strong correlations both between views and follower count ( $p = 0.84$ ) and between engagement and follower count ( $p = 0.89$ ).

## 5.2. Content Exposition

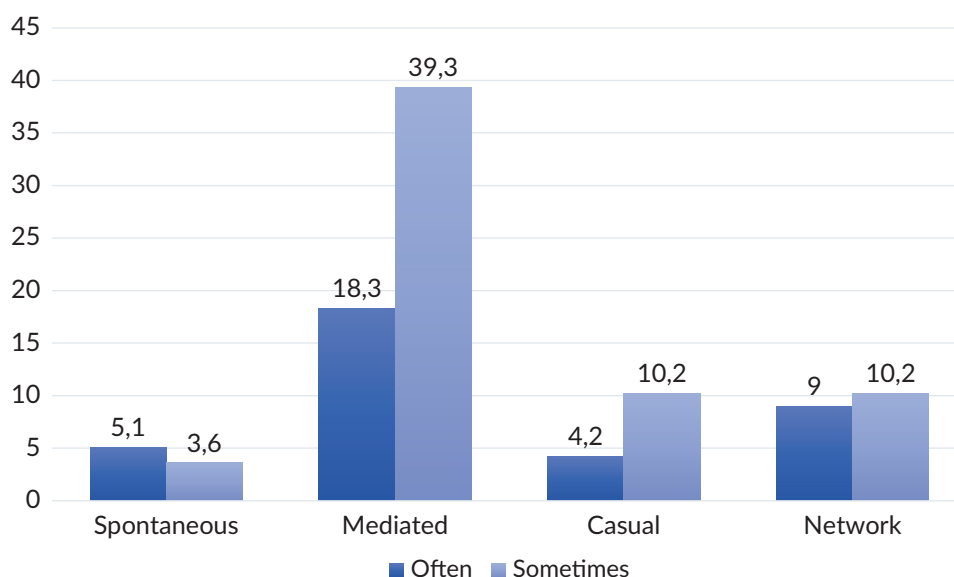
The survey sample is representative of the Italian population aged 18 to 35. It comprises 553 respondents active on TikTok. The geographic origin of respondents is distributed proportionally according to ISTAT (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica) data. The gender distribution is slightly skewed towards women, who represent 54.8%. Regarding the sample's political orientation, almost half of the respondents define themselves as progressives (49.2%), i.e., from the left to the center-left, while the second largest group is those who do not place themselves on the political spectrum (21%). Conservatives, placed on the right or center-right, represent 18.3%; while centrists, liberals, and moderates account for 11.6%.

Concerning exposure to political content on TikTok, the survey focuses on two main dimensions: frequency and mode. For the first, respondents were asked whether and how often they viewed content from political accounts during the election campaign weeks. Overall, more than 60% report having viewed TikToks from one of the analyzed accounts, though fewer do so frequently. Looking at differences by political orientation (Table 2), predictably the politically unaligned—who are generally less interested in the electoral campaigns—are the least exposed to political TikToks, while those who view them most frequently are progressives and, above all, liberals.

**Table 2.** Exposure frequency to political content on TikTok.

|                                   | Often (%) | Sometimes (%) | Never (%) |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|
| Conservative (right-center right) | 23.8      | 39.6          | 36.6      |
| Centrist                          | 31.3      | 37.5          | 31.3      |
| Progressive (left-center left)    | 21.7      | 42.3          | 36        |
| Non-political/Prefer not to say   | 16.4      | 27.6          | 56        |
| Total                             | 22.1      | 38.2          | 39.8      |

Excluding those who answered “never,” the remaining respondents were asked how they encountered this content, with four options: “spontaneous” (actively and independently sought), “mediated” (because I follow political/news accounts or political influencers), “casual” (randomly in the feed or via sponsored posts), and “network” (sent by contacts). Their responses were then cross-tabulated with viewing frequency (Figure 1).



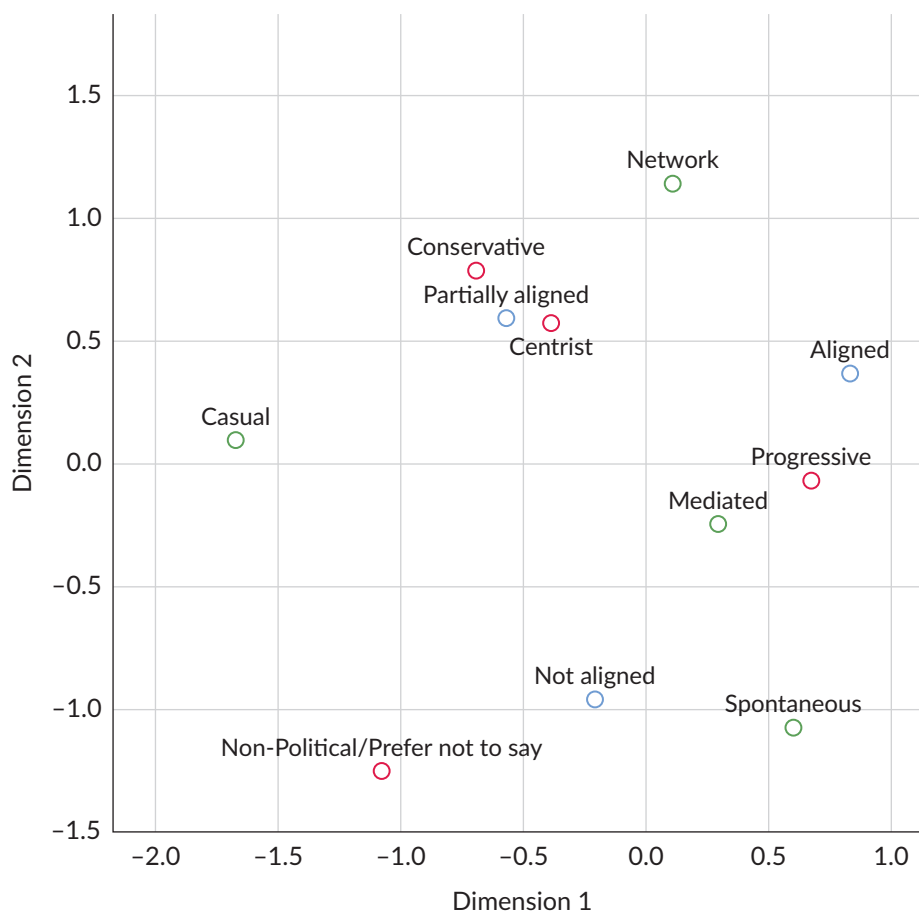
**Figure 1.** Frequency and nature of exposure to political content on TikTok (in percentages).

Overall, most respondents (57.6%) report encountering political content on TikTok because they follow a politically oriented account. Far fewer find it spontaneously (8.7%) or stumble upon it by chance (14.4%). Notably, “network” encounters (content sent by contacts) exceed “casual” feed exposures, though “mediated” views (from following political/news or influencer accounts) cannot distinguish whether content appeared because it was posted by those accounts or surfaced algorithmically in feed. The biggest differences between frequent and occasional viewers occur in the “mediated” and “casual” modes, suggesting that algorithmic

feed exposures, when they happen, remain infrequent. The only mode where frequent seekers outnumber occasional ones is “spontaneous” search, where more respondents actively sought election-related content regularly than sporadically.

We also examined content alignment by political orientation to explore ideological fragmentation and filter bubbles on TikTok. Users indicated whether the political videos they saw were mostly aligned, partially aligned, or distant from their own views. Overall, the political content that reached users during the period observed was, in most cases, distant from their positions: 43.8% of respondents said they had seen content that was not aligned with their political views. On the other hand, 27.3% of the content was fully aligned, while a further 28.9% was partially aligned. Although over half of the sample still encounters content within a broadly sympathetic value universe, the substantial share exposed to distant viewpoints prompts further reflection on ideological bubbles—and suggests that, for this cohort, these effects may be partially mitigated.

To further examine this aspect, the ideological coherence of political videos was related to users’ political positioning and their modes of exposure to videos through a multiple correspondence analysis. This analysis allows exploration of associations among the individual categories of the three variables considered. The resulting two-dimensional plot (Figure 2) accounts for 87.5% of the total variance (Dim1 = 45.3%; Dim2 = 42.2%), providing a reliable representation of the relationships among the categories.



**Figure 2.** Multiple correspondence analysis between political affiliation, nature of exposure to political content, and ideological consistency of political content viewed.

Specifically, Figure 2 reveals a clear association between “mediated” exposure, reception of content “aligned” with one’s own orientation, and membership in the “progressive” area. This suggests a consumption pattern akin to that of relational social networks, where informational experiences are heavily filtered by followed accounts, resulting in content consistent with users’ preexisting interests and preferences.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are apolitical or undeclared users who, while associated with receiving ideologically distant content, also exhibit a tendency toward active exposure—as if, in uncertainty or political distance, they occasionally sought out informative content to orient themselves during the election.

“Conservatives” and “centrists” occupy an intermediate zone of the plot, associating primarily with “network” and “casual” exposure modes and with reception of “partially aligned” content. This cluster aligns—albeit partially, given its link to network exposure—with TikTok’s prevailing exposure model, in which consumption is often driven by the recommendation algorithm and partially confined within an ideological bubble. In these cases, exposure is partly accidental but still oriented toward content at least partly compatible with users’ value universe.

### 5.3. Topics Correlation

The thematic analysis aims to compare the European issues most addressed by political accounts during the election campaign with those deemed priorities by young survey respondents. The goal is to identify potential convergences and divergences of interests, particularly given the centrality of user interests in the content-circulation mechanisms governed by recommendation algorithms.

With regard to the topics most covered by politicians on TikTok, Table 3 summarizes the aggregated results by political area.

**Table 3.** European topics addressed in TikTok videos\*.

|                          | Centrist (%)** | Right/Center-Right (%)** | Left/Center-Left (%)** | Total (%) |
|--------------------------|----------------|--------------------------|------------------------|-----------|
| Environment              | 4.65           | 8.33                     | 13.95                  | 8.96      |
| Human and civil rights   | 16.28          | 6.25                     | 16.28                  | 12.69     |
| Inequalities             | 25.58          | 14.58                    | 23.26                  | 20.90     |
| Economy                  | 18.6           | 12.50                    | 4.65                   | 11.94     |
| Immigration              | 6.98           | 18.75                    | 6.98                   | 11.19     |
| Employment               | 6.98           | 8.33                     | 13.95                  | 9.70      |
| Personal data protection | 2.33           | 0                        | 0                      | 0.75      |
| Border protection        | NA             | 8.33                     | 0                      | 2.99      |
| EU security and war      | 16.28          | 20.83                    | 20.93                  | 19.40     |
| Consumer protection      | 2.33           | 2.08                     | 0                      | 1.49      |
| Terrorism                | NA             | NA                       | NA                     | NA        |

Notes: \* = Manual coding performed by two coders (Krippendorff’s  $\alpha = 0.79$ ); \*\* = the aggregation was necessary for clarity of analysis and reflects formal and informal party alignments on the national scene and the composition is as follows—right/center-right (Fratelli d’Italia, Giorgia Meloni, Matteo Salvini, Antonio Tajani), left/center-left (Partito Democratico, Giuseppe Conte, Movimento 5 Stelle, Europa Verde), and centrist (Carlo Calenda; Matteo Renzi; + Europa).

In general, the most prominent issues are combating “inequalities,” “human and civil rights,” and “common security policies.” However, significant differences emerge across political alignments. For instance, the left/center-left focuses on typical themes such as “environment” and “employment,” whereas the right/center-right pay less attention to civil rights and more to characteristic topics like “immigration” and “border protection.” Liberals, predictably, focus more than other areas to economic issues. The least emphasized topics are “personal data protection” and “consumer protection.” No content related to “terrorism” was identified.

As for the issues young users perceive as priorities, the results are summarized in Table 4 and aggregated by respondents’ political orientation.

**Table 4.** Relevant European topics for TikTok users sample.

|                          | Conservative (%) | Centrist (%) | Progressive (%) | Non Political (%) | Total (%) |
|--------------------------|------------------|--------------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------|
| Environment              | 12.90            | 7.8          | 21.7            | 9.6               | 16        |
| Human and civil rights   | 4                | 3.1          | 13.2            | 13.2              | 10.3      |
| Inequalities             | 2                | 9.4          | 13.6            | 5.3               | 9.3       |
| Economy                  | 18.8             | 18.8         | 15.8            | 14.9              | 16.5      |
| Immigration              | 16.8             | 7.8          | 4               | 14                | 8.9       |
| Employment               | 10.9             | 9.4          | 8.5             | 16.7              | 10.7      |
| Personal data protection | 4                | 4.7          | 2.9             | 4.4               | 3.6       |
| Border protection        | 7.9              | 10.9         | 2.6             | 2.6               | 4.5       |
| EU security and war      | 11.9             | 12.5         | 9.2             | 9.6               | 10.2      |
| Consumer protection      | 1                | 6.3          | 4.4             | 5.3               | 4.2       |
| Terrorism                | 9.9              | 9.4          | 4               | 4.4               | 5.8       |

Overall, the most valued issues are “environment” and “economy,” followed at some distance by labor, rights, and common security policies. However, differences among political orientations are evident. Progressives pay most attention to the “environment,” whereas it is markedly less frequent in other categories; they also prioritize rights and the fight against inequalities—topics that are residual for other respondents. Among conservatives, “immigration” is predictably a strong issue, and, less obviously, “environmental” and common security policies also feature prominently. Centrists differ most from the average: besides the economy, they show the greatest support for “border protection” and common security policies, while “environment,” “immigration,” and especially rights are much less felt. Finally, the apolitical respondents share common ground with both progressives and conservatives, but unlike all other categories, their top priority is labor.

Even from this initial overview, analogies, but above all differences, with the political agenda on TikTok become apparent. To examine convergences and divergences between political and user agendas, these were compared using the Pearson correlation index (Table 5).

The results of this analysis show few significant correlations between the agendas, and all are of weak intensity. However, it is worth noting that a correlation, albeit minimal, exists between the overall user agenda and that of politics on TikTok. This nonetheless highlights a partial convergence between the topics desired and those proposed. Looking at the comparison of agendas broken down by political area, the most

**Table 5.** Pearson correlation analysis between the political agenda and users' agenda on TikTok.

|               | Right/Center-right | Left/Center-left | Centrist  | Politics  |
|---------------|--------------------|------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Conservative  | 0.570133*          | −0.02385         | 0.028612  | 0.176947  |
| Centrist      | 0.45813            | 0.006846         | 0.319374  | 0.286681  |
| Progressive   | 0.268955           | 0.60326*         | 0.556423* | 0.548718* |
| Non political | 0.430937           | 0.36928          | 0.36199   | 0.437524  |
| Users         | 0.467847           | 0.508811         | 0.520821  | 0.567206* |

Note: \*  $p > 0.05$ .

notable finding concerns progressives: not only do they show positive correlations with their reference area (the left/center-left), but also with the liberal politicians' agenda and with the general agenda, albeit all with very low intensity. The agenda of conservative users, by contrast, exhibits low correlation only with the agenda of its own political area. As for the final two user categories, no significant correlations emerge—a result that is understandable for the apolitical group and perhaps more intriguing for centrists.

#### 5.4. Content Evaluation

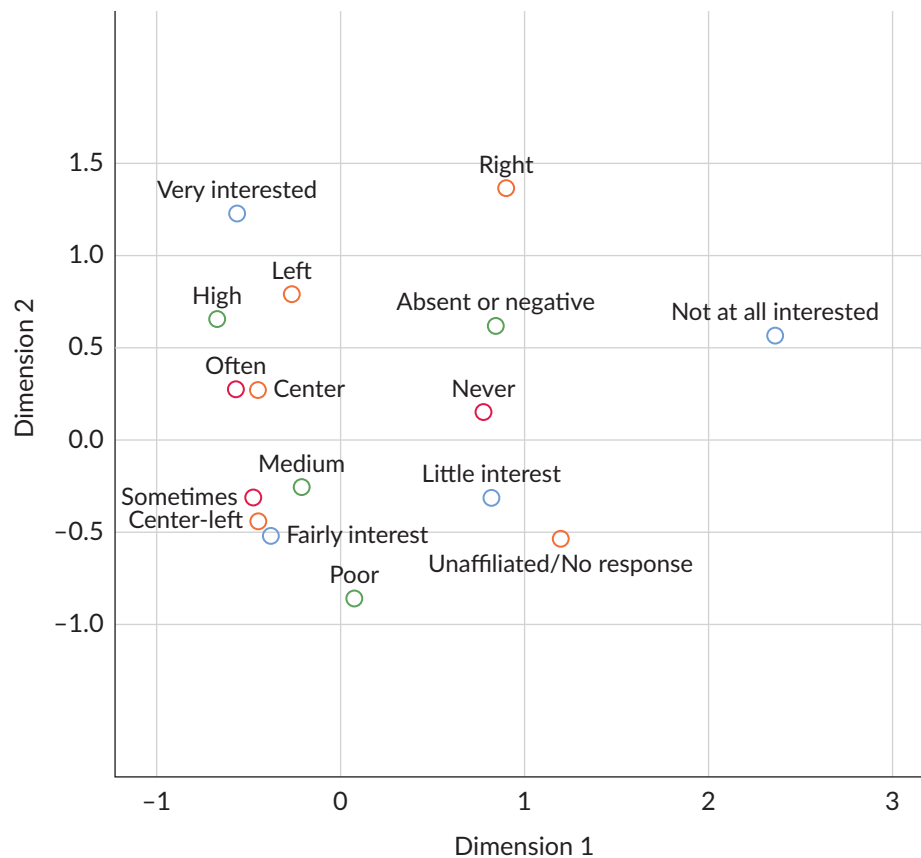
Regarding users' evaluations of politicians' TikToks during the European campaign, respondents were asked their opinions on three dimensions: technical production quality, content usefulness, and contextual appropriateness. Their answers were then combined into a single index assessing the quality of political TikToks, and these data were cross-tabulated with respondents' political orientations (Table 6).

**Table 6.** Rating of political content seen on TikTok.

| Quality Ratings | Conservative (%) | Centrist (%) | Progressive (%) | Non Political (%) | Total (%) |
|-----------------|------------------|--------------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------|
| None            | 20.3             | 22.7         | 13.8            | 25.5              | 18        |
| Low             | 10.9             | 20.5         | 22.4            | 19.6              | 19.5      |
| Medium          | 50               | 36.4         | 38.5            | 39.2              | 40.5      |
| High            | 18.8             | 20.5         | 25.3            | 15.7              | 21.9      |

Overall, most respondents rate the Italian political content they encountered on TikTok as “medium.” The proportions of those who gave “none,” “low,” or “high” ratings are not markedly different. However, the distribution by political orientation reveals more interesting differences, particularly between progressives and conservatives. Among progressives, fewer respondents select “none,” and the sample is more evenly split between those who rate the content very positively and those who rate it negatively. Among conservatives, negative ratings are far below the average, as are positive ones (though to a lesser extent), resulting in a higher concentration in the “medium” category. It is unsurprising that the non-political group offers the fewest ratings overall and the highest share of “medium” ratings, while centrists align more closely with the average pattern.

Cross-tabulating interest in UE election level, exposure frequency, ratings, and political orientation (disaggregated) via multiple correspondence analysis (Figure 3) reveals notable behavioral patterns that likely influence how this sample consumes and evaluates political content on TikTok.



**Figure 3.** Multiple correspondence analysis between political affiliation, interest in EU elections, exposure to political content, and judgment of political content.

The analysis reveals a fairly clear structure along the axes, suggesting several potentially interesting relationships among the variables. These are distributed along two latent dimensions: one related to political engagement (horizontal axis—high vs. low interest and exposure) and the other to political positioning (vertical axis—“extreme” vs. “moderate” positions). In the top left appear more activist profiles: very interested in the elections and giving high ratings to political content on TikTok, generally left-leaning, suggesting that the most engaged and exposed audiences tend to evaluate platform content positively. On the opposite side, albeit with weaker associations, are low interest in the elections, rare exposure, and absence of ratings, associated with right-wing positioning, describing disengaged or critical, predominantly conservative users. In the bottom left quadrant lie the “fairly” (interest), “sometimes” (exposure), and “medium” (rating) modes, together with centrist orientations (center, center-right, center-left): a moderate group with intermediate attitudes and behaviors. Finally, in the bottom right, the proximity of “little” interest, “poor” ratings, and “unaffiliated/no response” defines a set of apathetic and non-politicized users.

Regarding ratings, the outlined picture suggests that greater election interest and more frequent consumption lead to more positive evaluations. This hypothesis is also supported by the chi-square tests crossing the variables. Political interest is strongly associated with both content ratings ( $\chi^2(9) = 45.206$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and exposure frequency ( $\chi^2(6) = 64.823$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ); likewise, the relationship between exposure and ratings is highly significant ( $\chi^2(6) = 20.451$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ), suggesting that higher exposure to political content on TikTok and greater interest in the European elections translate into more favorable perceptions



of the content. The associations between ratings and orientation ( $\chi^2(15) = 30.880, p = 0.009$ ) and between orientation and exposure ( $\chi^2(10) = 18.323, p = 0.050$ ), however, are less pronounced, indicating a weaker link between ideological position, consumption mode, and content evaluations.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

Two years after the initial, and minimally impactful, entry of Italian politics onto TikTok, this study aims to analyze how Italian political actors used the platform during the European election campaign and how users are exposed to and evaluate those pieces of content. This exploratory analysis also allowed reflection on the shift in political communication from platforms combining relational and algorithmic logics (Klinger & Svensson, 2014; van Dijck & Poell, 2013) to one built primarily on profiling and recommendation algorithms (Gerbaudo, 2024). All of this occurs in an Italian context where no studies have simultaneously examined production and consumption of political content on TikTok, and where, in particular, the dynamics of user exposure to and evaluation of political content remain unexplored.

The research questions designed to capture these behaviors and explore the impact of the platform's predominantly algorithmic architecture are further enriched by the setting of the European elections—typically considered a second-order election (Reif & Schmitt, 1980; Roncarolo, 2010)—characterized by low political investment but strong engagement among young Italians (Consiglio Nazionale dei Giovani, 2024). In this context, the intersection of political and user interests is not guaranteed and communicative dynamics are less predictable.

RQ1 examines the dynamics of political content production and exposure on TikTok with a particular focus on the role of algorithmic logic in content circulation and how these videos capture users' attention. On the production side, results show uneven use of features that facilitate content replicability and virality (such as music, filters, stitch, and duet). The dominant function of the content produced by politicians is critical, consistent with TikTok's reputation as a space rewarding emotional and polarizing narratives (Cartes-Barroso et al., 2025).

Cross-referencing this production data with engagement metrics reveals an interesting pattern. The top-performing content by far comes from Giorgia Meloni. The Italian Prime Minister is the only one to make no use whatsoever of combined editing features. These performance results suggest that, at least in this context, engagement is not directly tied to the use of platform tools—though further investigation into their specific deployment is needed—but rather to the recognizability of the political personality and the strength of her fan base. This finding confirms claims made by several studies that the mere technical presence of affordances does not guarantee results unless coupled with audience support for the content creator (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Cervi & Tejedor, 2023).

After Meloni, the most successful videos come from accounts that predominantly used the platform for critical content. Taken together, these observations underscore the importance of emotional and polarizing elements and the political figure's reputation (Grantham et al., 2025; Greenfield et al., 2025) in activating consensus mechanisms on TikTok. The algorithmic logic, as theorized (centered on content performance), appears tempered by relational signals (such as follower count), affective cues (the figure's reputation), and emotional tones (critical messaging).

Confirming that relational components remain relevant even on TikTok, the survey results show that exposure to political content on TikTok arises from differentiated pathways based on users' interests and behaviors, combining dynamics of both networked publics (boyd, 2010) and algorithmic recommendation logics. A majority of the sample (60%) viewed political content—a notable figure given TikTok's orientation toward entertainment and leisure—and these videos were encountered primarily through mediation by followed accounts linked to the political-informational sphere. This suggests that the follower/following logic, considered less influential on TikTok (Zeng et al., 2021), still serves as a significant signal for the recommendation algorithm, as on relational social networks (boyd, 2010), and represents a content-orientation strategy in the political context (Riemer & Peter, 2021).

At the same time, the fact that over 40% of the sample viewed content not aligned with their own political opinions indicates an openness in users' political experience and suggests a partial mitigation of concerns about ideological bubbles on TikTok (Zhao, 2021). Multiple correspondence analysis reveals widely diversified exposure patterns to political content that correspond to users' interests, ideological positions, and behaviors on the platform. In particular, progressive users are more exposed to content aligned with their political stance via mediated modes, replicating networked mechanisms that involve individual action; apolitical users often display active exposure modes (seeking content autonomously) and most frequently encounter messages not in line with their own views; the communication pattern most consistent with TikTok's connective logic (Gerbaudo, 2024) is that of conservative users who experience partially casual and partially network-based exposure and receive content fairly coherent with their political orientation.

This picture tempers the scenario described by clustered publics, which do not completely replace the logic of online audiences, but rather reformulate it around behavioural patterns. This is also evident in the way users evaluate political content. Political videos on TikTok receive more positive ratings from users with higher election interest and greater exposure frequency—often left-leaning users, thus via mediated, coherent exposure—while the most negative ratings come from apolitical and right-wing users who most often associate with low election interest and scant content exposure. The low content evaluations by right-wing users—despite very high engagement percentages for Meloni and Salvini—suggest that positive outcomes relate more to support for the figure than to qualitative evaluation of the content, attenuating the impact of the platform's affordances (Grantham et al., 2025; Greenfield et al., 2025).

At the same time, the fact that political TikToks are particularly appreciated by progressive users, who tend to be interested and frequently exposed to content aligned with their views, demonstrates that, despite recognized technical quality, engagement does not increase accordingly.

Regarding RQ2, both politicians' and users' thematic distributions follow identity-based and generational logics. Dominant issues align with platform literature: topics of youth interest that are emotional and polarizing (Cartes-Barroso et al., 2025; Pérez Rastrilla et al., 2023). Correlations between the political agenda and users' priorities are very weak, becoming appreciable only among progressives who may simply be more engaged, consume more content, and rate it more favorably due to this overlap of interests. Thus, thematic alignment supports perceived quality but is not directly tied to engagement. This means that the highest-performing content is not always aligned with users' top priorities. The algorithm appears to favor emotionally intense or ideologically marked content over content coherent with users' interests (Cartes-Barroso et al., 2025). The presence of generational themes in right/center-right coalition content, such as environment, suggests a partial adaptation to platform codes rather than genuine convergence.

Overall, the study's results depict a hybrid landscape where algorithmic logics coexist with relational signals, personal motivations, and identity patterns. Algorithmic recommendation remains central to TikTok's communicative ecosystem, but focusing solely on this dimension risks overlooking individual users' characteristics, their capacity to interact with both the platform and political content, adapting it to their needs, and borrowing behaviors from other platforms and media contexts. Indeed, the data suggest that, when interest is present, users not only are exposed to political content but also actively navigate and evaluate their experience using mental schemas, values, and expectations that do not necessarily coincide with those of the platform. Far from contradicting the framework of deep mediatization (Couldry & Hepp, 2017) or diminishing the role of algorithms in clustered publics (Gerbaudo, 2024), this perspective redefines these concepts by highlighting the algorithms' capacity to integrate and respond to individual actions and predispositions to which they adapt.

Rather than merely determining if and how politics can reach young people, this study highlights which combinations of factors—pertaining to the user, the content, and the creator—promote more performative political communication on a complex topic such as the European elections. By considering distances and points of overlap between political offerings and users' interests and expectations, the emerging picture is more nuanced than a simple efficacy/inefficacy dichotomy. It nevertheless shows signs of convergence in both platform understanding and user interests, even as dynamics familiar from other social networks persist.

In summary, TikTok does not discard the logics of previous social networks (boyd, 2010; van Dijck & Poell, 2013) but transforms and integrates them with its algorithm in a performative and emotional key, akin to a process of remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1999). Political content can circulate and perform beyond its core electorate, yet its effectiveness depends on the ability to build a credible relationship among form, actor, and audience.

Despite promising findings, particularly regarding the integration of algorithmic and networked logics and how politicians and young users employ TikTok in the context of Italian elections, this study has structural limitations: the lack of a direct comparison between content evaluation and actual exposure to specific political videos; the focus on the European elections context, which, while interesting, limits generalization to other electoral moments; and the absence of a more qualitative approach to how political actors use the platform's editing tools. It should also be noted that user evaluations may be influenced by respondents' pre-existing political orientations, levels of political interest, visibility bias in exposure to political content, and familiarity with the political figures featured in the videos, among other factors. However, to minimize such biases, differences in political orientation and levels of political interest were taken into account in the analyses and respondents were asked to focus primarily on the technical and content-related qualities of the videos. Future research could address these limitations by integrating varied methodological perspectives to more deeply emphasize correlations between the production and consumption of political content, including longitudinal and comparative analyses across different elections and national contexts.

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## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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# Voices of Discontent: Unpacking Populist Rhetoric in Spain and the Rise of Anti-European Sentiment

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## Abstract

In the last decade, most EU countries have seen the unstoppable growth of populist parties, especially on the right, but also on the left. Their Euro-critical discourse, sometimes openly Eurosceptic, is helping to erode the legitimacy of the EU. This research aims to analyze the presence of populist discourse among major Spanish political parties during the 2024 European elections on platform X. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, we collected tweets from the official accounts of parties represented in the Spanish parliament, focusing on Unidas Podemos, Sumar, Partido Socialista Obrero Español, Partido Popular, and VOX from May 24 to June 10, 2024. A quantitative analysis with large language models, specifically the Text-Zero-Shot model, BART-Large-MNLI, and a socio-hermeneutic qualitative interpretation facilitated the identification of key populist indicators, including anti-elitism, appeals to the people, the expression of popular will, and the delineation of enemies. Our findings reveal that VOX is the only political party that, in this specific communicative (social network X) and political (European Parliament elections) context, employs a populist discourse characterized by a marked opposition between the people and political elites, both national and European, as well as critical and/or exclusionary rhetoric toward certain immigrant groups, especially from Arab countries. The results underscore the need for further research on how national contexts shape the articulation of populism in political communication strategies through social media.

## Keywords

big data; European elections; large language models; political communication; political debate; populism; social media; social network analysis; Spain; soft computing

## 1. Introduction

Populism is a longstanding phenomenon in Europe, with its roots traceable back decades before the recent surge in populist movements (Betz, 2018). Beginning in the 1960s, populism's presence in national parliaments began to grow, and its relevance has intensified in the past decade in the context of neo-capitalist globalization. This surge has led some scholars to define the current climate as an "illiberal moment" (Pappas, 2014). Identifying the causes behind this populist upsurge is complex and multifaceted, influenced by a variety of political, economic, and social factors unique to each national context. A significant contributing factor is the perceived failure of democratic representation, which has fueled the rise of populist parties (Hawkins & Rovira, 2018). This populist discourse is particularly worrying among the academic community due to the anti-Europeanism (Baldassari et al., 2020) and Euroscepticism (Treib, 2021) of some political parties, which question the social values and human rights defended by the EU.

The European Parliament (EP) elections have traditionally been categorized as second-order elections in the context of European integration and national politics. This characterization, originally posited by Reif and Schmitt (1980), suggests that EP elections are less salient and impactful compared to national elections. The notion of second-order elections is grounded in the idea that voters treat these elections primarily as an opportunity to express dissatisfaction with their national governments, leading to a higher representation of fringe or Eurosceptic parties (Hobolt, 2009).

Euroscepticism, defined as skepticism towards European integration and the EU, has become increasingly significant in shaping political landscapes across Europe. A more comprehensive understanding of Euroscepticism involves recognizing its multifaceted nature, which can be categorized into soft Euroscepticism—where staying within the EU is supported but with calls for reform—and hard Euroscepticism, which advocates for withdrawal from the EU (Pirro & Taggart, 2018). The growth of anti-European sentiment can be attributed to several factors, including economic crises, perceptions of democratic deficit, and cultural concerns regarding national identity (De Vries, 2018).

Research indicates that the rise of populist and Eurosceptic parties is often fueled by protest voting, wherein citizens express their grievances towards mainstream parties through their electoral choices in the EP elections (Norris, 2022). Moreover, social media has emerged as a critical platform for the dissemination of Eurosceptic messages, allowing fringe parties to amplify their anti-European rhetoric and engage with voters in ways that traditional media do not facilitate (Groshek & Al-Rawi, 2015). The digital landscape enables these parties to mobilize supporters by articulating dissatisfaction with the EU, connecting economic hardships to EU policies, and framing the discourse around national sovereignty (Boulianne, 2015).

Initially, Spain appeared somewhat insulated from the populist wave sweeping across Europe. However, this changed in 2014 with the emergence of Unidas Podemos, a party often categorized within the realm of left-wing populism (Gómez-Reino & Llamazares, 2018; Kioupkiolis, 2016). The party's rise can be attributed to several factors, including widespread corruption scandals (Orriols & Cordero, 2016), the enforcement of austerity measures by the EU (Sánchez-Cuenca, 2014), and significant cuts to social spending (Ayala Cañón, 2014).

The 2015 general elections marked a pivotal shift in Spain's political landscape, ending the dominance of the two-party system historically held by the Partido Popular (PP) and the Partido Socialista Obrero Español

(PSOE). For the first time in 30 years, these two parties could not maintain a governing majority (Torcal, 2014). By 2018, VOX, often described as a populist radical right or extreme right party (Jaráiz et al., 2020; Ortiz Barquero & Ramos-González, 2021), gained parliamentary representation during regional elections. Its rise can be partially traced to the political crisis surrounding Catalonia's independence movement as well as ongoing corruption controversies related to the PP (Gamper, 2018).

Recent literature highlights the role of new media in the proliferation of populism (Ernst et al., 2018; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020; Moffit, 2016). New media platforms create opportunities for populist figures to generate and disseminate ideological content rapidly and to engage directly with audiences (Esser et al., 2016). Understanding new populisms (those that appeared in Europe from 2008 onwards, coinciding with the economic and social crisis and the expansion of social networks) necessitates analyzing the information and communication contexts that shape them. TikTok, specifically, has become an important medium for new populisms; parties leverage this platform to communicate directly with younger audiences through viral content and relatable themes, thus challenging traditional political communication (Gerbaudo, 2024).

Fuchs (2021) also emphasizes the role of social media in the formation of new political movements, stating that these platforms allow for rapid information dissemination and the organization of grassroots support, further enhancing the capacity of populist parties to attract disillusioned voters. The political use of social media has revolutionized electoral campaigns, notably affecting how political messages are crafted and delivered. Research by Ahmed et al. (2023) highlights how social media platforms serve as arenas for political engagement, where Eurosceptic parties leverage these tools to circumvent mainstream media filters. This transformation allows them to reach broad audiences, particularly younger voters who are increasingly disengaged from traditional political structures. Additionally, studies have shown that social media not only amplifies Eurosceptic sentiments but also shapes public perceptions about the EU (Evans & Mellon, 2019).

The combination of protest voting and the strategic use of social media creates a fertile ground for the proliferation of Eurosceptic sentiments, which are clearly reflected in the electoral successes of such parties in the context of EP elections. For instance, the substantial gains made by far-right and populist movements during the 2014 and 2019 EP elections highlight the impact of these dynamics on the electoral landscape (Kritzing et al., 2020).

This study aims to identify which political parties and leaders adopt a populist discourse during the Spanish European elections in the social media X. To achieve the main goal, the following objectives have been established:

O1: Analyze how these discourses are articulated using established categories of populism from our theoretical framework.

O2: Determine the specific characteristics of these discourses that classify them as populist of the left or of the right.

### 1.1. Review of the Literature on Populism

Populism is a complex and evolving socio-historical phenomenon, presenting both methodological and epistemological challenges (Ortí, 1988). The international literature has defined populism in various ways, yet consensus eludes scholars. Weyland (2021) describes it as a political strategy characterized by charismatic leadership seeking power. Mudde (2004) views it as a weak ideology with a Manichean worldview that pits “the people” against elites. The Essex School, led by Laclau (2005), theorizes populism as a discursive construction of “the people” within a divide between them and the oligarchy. Others, like De la Torre (2017), refer to it as a rhetorical approach that appeals to the masses against elites.

Recent shifts in the literature suggest a more discursive interpretation of populism (Castanho et al., 2019), where populism is approached as a strategic discourse comprising three analytical conditions: (a) anti-elitist rhetoric, (b) idealization of the people, and (c) the defense of popular will as fundamental to democracy. This dichotomy establishes a clear opposition between “the people” and elites, generating a collective identity from widespread social discontent, often through demonizing the elite and idealizing the people (Laclau, 2005; Rosanvallon, 2021).

To assess whether a discourse is populist, at least two of the analytical conditions proposed in the previous paragraph must be present, including the anti-elitist dimension. Merely appealing to democratic principles related to “the people” does not suffice, as this is commonplace in mass democracies (Müller, 2017). Furthermore, localized criticism of elites alone cannot indicate populist sentiment, lest it classify every critique as populism.

In contrast to the Essex School’s perspective, which assigns a definitive ontological status to discourse, this research adopts a more sober methodological approach. Populism is viewed as a dynamic discourse shaped by its communicative context. This allows for a situation where actors may employ both populist and non-populist narratives, as demonstrated by traditional parties resorting to populist rhetoric under certain circumstances (March, 2017).

Previous research indicates that Unidas Podemos has cultivated a leftist populist discourse (Damiani, 2020; Gómez-Reino & Llamazares, 2018), whereas VOX is often ascribed a right-wing populist discourse (Ferreira, 2019; Marcos-Marne et al., 2021). However, some argue VOX aligns more closely with radical right ideologies, with populism as a peripheral component (Ramos-González & Ortiz, 2024). Consequently, this study hypothesizes that:

H1: Populism will be more prevalent in Unidas Podemos and VOX compared to other political parties.

The diverse expressions of populism necessitate a plural terminology, emphasizing the existence of multiple populisms shaped by distinct social contexts. The ideational approach recognizes that populist discourse interacts with broader ideologies like liberalism or socialism, leading to varied manifestations. Left-wing populism may align with underprivileged social sectors, advocating for wealth redistribution in a neoliberal context (Damiani, 2020; March, 2011). In contrast, right-wing populism often defines “the people” in terms of national identity and cultural preservation, excluding certain groups deemed alien (Mudde, 2007).

Additionally, the Essex School posits that both “people” and “elite” are empty signifiers, open to varied interpretations influenced by historical and cultural narratives (Laclau, 2005). In Europe, left-wing populism typically identifies “the people” through a social class lens, whereas right-wing populism frames it from a national identity perspective (Mudde & Rovira, 2017). Right-wing populism rejects social groups that it considers alien to the cultural and/or racial community to which it belongs. This leads to several hypotheses:

H2: Left-wing populist discourses will frame “the people” in social class terms.

H3: Right-wing populist discourses will frame “the people” based on national identity.

H4: Right-wing populist parties will identify various enemies (e.g., feminism, communism, and/or immigrants).

The anti-elite dimension is crucial to populism, and its representation varies according to historical and ideological contexts. Previous studies have indicated that left-wing populism often critiques economic elites (Maurer & Diehl, 2020), while right-wing populism tends to target media and cultural elites (Bornschieer, 2010; Mudde, 2007). Therefore, our study proposes:

H5: Left-wing populism will exhibit a greater focus on rhetoric against economic and political elites.

H6: Right-wing populism will feature more criticism directed at media and cultural elites.

In this study, we synthetically and critically adopt elements of the definitions proposed by the ideational perspective and the Essex School (Rodríguez-Sáez, 2021). We understand populism, at the supply level, as a basic discourse (Ortí, 1988) based on a process of inclusion (people) and exclusion (elites), which is activated depending on the contexts of communication.

Populism is structured around three core components: defense of popular will, idealization of the people, and denunciation of elites (Hawkins & Rovira, 2018). Ultimately, populism serves as a narrative of relatedness or affinity that helps construct national identity, and it is ideologically aligned to the left or right (Mudde & Rovira, 2017), channeling social unrest through the intense projection of an antagonist.

The emergence of new populisms closely intertwines with advancements in new media, particularly social media platforms, which offer opportunities for less-established actors to communicate directly with their audiences, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers (Moffit, 2016). Social media enables the dissemination of emotional messages (not based on reasoned arguments) that may polarize public discourse, yet this aspect has not been thoroughly examined. Future research should investigate the nature of populist discourse on social media, its potential polarizing effects, and how it employs scientific advancements to support political narratives (Mede & Schäfer, 2020). This study aims to expand upon existing work on populist communication strategies within contemporary political landscapes.



## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Data Collection

Data for this study were collected using the Web Data Research Assistant X platform (formerly Twitter) API from May 24 to June 10, 2024, coinciding with the official campaign for the European elections. Election day in Spain was June 9, so it was relevant to download the data until the following day, as in other studies addressing electoral processes on social media, which capture the entire debate. These studies considered the day after the election because it may include many posts targeting opponents, both in a conciliatory tone and in an inflammatory tone (e.g., Casas-Mas et al., 2024; Guevara et al., 2024), with populist rhetoric that may even question the transparency of the election results (Casas-Mas et al., 2025). This analysis focuses on the discourse of the politicians and parties participating in the campaign. Data were filtered based on two criteria: (a) temporal criteria (tweets produced during the election campaign) and (b) the official accounts of national political parties and leaders that gained seats in the Spanish parliament during the 2024 elections. The analysis comprises five political units arranged from left to right ideologically: Unidas Podemos/Irene Montero, Sumar/Estrella Galán, PSOE/Teresa Ribera, PP/Dolors Montserrat, and VOX/Jorge Buxadé.

Data was extracted into five Excel files, each corresponding to the established analytical categories. During the data cleaning process, 667 records were identified, revealing a total of 1,118 duplicate entries in the *N* and *sequence* columns. To mitigate repetition bias, only the first instance of each record was retained, ensuring that each message appeared only once per topic, resulting in a final dataset of 2,218 unique messages.

### 2.2. Glossary of Populist Terms

Following data collection, the first step involved creating a “glossary of terms” associated with each analytical category outlined in populism definitions—i.e., (a) anti-elitism, (b) appeal to the people, and (c) popular will—as well as two additional categories—(d) the enemy of the left and (e) the enemy of the right. This glossary aims to capture the mechanisms of radical right-wing populism (Mudde, 2007) in its representation of “the people” against perceived internal (e.g., communism) and external (e.g., illegal immigration) enemies. The terms within this framework serve as indicators rather than direct classifications of populist discourse, which remains complex and dynamic.

The glossary development process included: an examination of the specialized literature concerning populism in Spain, focusing on commonly used words by parties like VOX and Unidas Podemos; a manual review of a sample of messages from party accounts; and the crafting of hypothesis-based texts (see Table Annex 1 in the Supplementary File) for training large language models (LLMs) in subsequent phases.

### 2.3. LLMs

LLMs have recently gained traction in social science research, particularly for text coding tasks. Following OpenAI’s release of its transformer-based chatbot model, ChatGPT-3.5, the application of LLMs has increased significantly (Brown et al., 2020), becoming widely accessible. The extensive availability of varied datasets across contexts has made traditional manual coding increasingly impractical (Ye, 2023).

In this study, we apply the BART model for classifying texts gathered from X. Although LLMs are acknowledged for their effectiveness, uncertainty remains regarding their applicability in political discourse analysis on social media. Nevertheless, an increasing body of literature supports their use in these contexts, provided they are supplemented with rigorous qualitative analysis (Bail, 2024; Wu et al., 2023).

We employed the zero-shot classification technique (Radford et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2019), enabling the models to classify data into categories not considered in the training phase. This approach leverages the models' capabilities in understanding and generalizing natural language prompts, allowing for classification tasks without needing labeled examples.

We used BART for the classification process, specifically the Text-Zero-Shot model, BART-Large-MNLI (last updated September 5, 2023), obtained from the Hugging Face (n.d.) repository. This model excels in tasks requiring deep textual comprehension, particularly with unstructured and imperfect text, such as that from social media (Kumar & Jain, 2024; Lee et al., 2024). Previous research has analyzed the consistency, reproducibility, and differences between open-source Zero-Shot models (Gutiérrez et al., 2024) such as BART (Lewis et al., 2019), BERT (Devlin et al., 2019), and RoBERTa (Liu et al., 2019). Although they are continuously being trained, modified, and adapted to new contexts, these types of models have proven to be transparent and stable.

During the classification phase, we established a randomization seed and set the computation to CPU mode for improved floating-point precision. The classification hypothesis was defined as: "This text is about {topic}," applied to each message. Scores produced by the model reflect the likelihood that each hypothesis represents the content of a given post, such as the relevance of anti-elitism to a specific message.

While the classification engine effectively identifies terms within analysis categories, challenges persisted in data filtering, primarily due to linguistic polysemy and connotation. For example, the term "progre" (woke), employed derogatively by some right-wing parties to criticize left-wing forces, was misclassified during the qualitative review. This inconsistency illustrates the limitations of supervised learning algorithms in interpreting the multifaceted meanings prevalent in political discourse.

#### **2.4. Manual Cleaning and Word Clouds**

To address potential biases from theoretical design and the technical limitations of LLMs, we developed "word clouds" capturing significant terms used by the selected parties and leaders in their communications. These words extend beyond "strong messages" (scores  $\geq 0.8$ ) to encompass all messages from the electoral campaign, thus reflecting the overall debate context. This inductive approach allows for emerging terms not previously included in the initial glossary (e.g., "Left-wingers" for PSOE or "Green Pact" for VOX) and those originally excluded due to bias concerns (e.g., "Europe").

#### **2.5. Socio-Hermeneutic Qualitative Content Analysis**

The final step involved a socio-hermeneutic qualitative analysis (Serrano & Zurdo, 2024) of the aggregated results and word clouds. This analysis rests on the premise that populism, framed as a discursive logic (Laclau, 2005), is more than a tally of specific terms. It reflects a complex semantic articulation, where signifiers interplay with their meanings in concert with broader discourse.

Since the late 18th century, symbols such as the people (demos) or nation have been leveraged as strategic resources across diverse political ideologies (Álvarez Junco, 2016). The PSOE's frequent appeals to "the people" may reveal a "semantic inflation" in electoral competition rather than an authentic populist sentiment. Frequencies alone indicate word use rather than populist style, which encompasses deeper interpretive layers beyond manifest textual elements.

### 3. Results and Discussion

Our quantitative analysis revealed that while the final values of political discourse among the various parties show similarities, several factors allow us to distinguish between populist and non-populist rhetoric. The linguistic analysis, particularly the representation in word clouds (Figure 1), along with qualitative insights, clarifies that VOX distinctly embodies a populist discourse, setting it apart from its competitors in the 2024 elections. We will analyze the results, progressing from detailed (disaggregated) to broader (aggregate) observations.

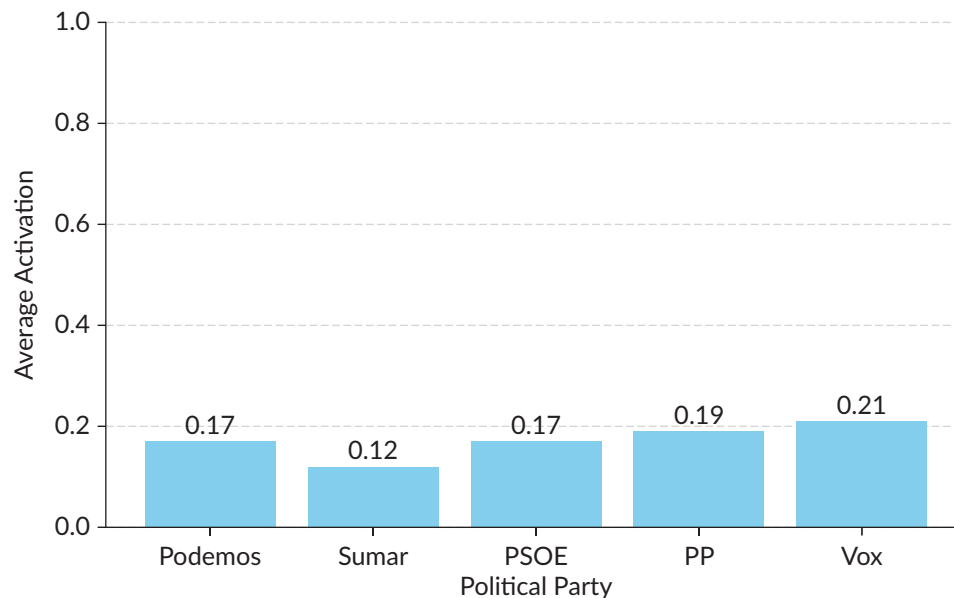


Figure 1. Word cloud of every political party and their leaders' discourse.

#### 3.1. Disaggregated Results of Anti-Elitism

Not every anti-elitist statement qualifies as populist; however, populist rhetoric inherently exhibits anti-elitism. Averages of anti-elitist sentiment among the analyzed parties are shown in Figure 2. SUMAR—coalition of leftist forces—records the lowest average at 0.12, suggesting the absence of populist characteristics. Qualitative analysis validates this result, as SUMAR and Unidas Podemos criticize European

leaders solely regarding their stance on the Israel–Palestine conflict, rather than engaging in an anti-elitist narrative against economic structures.



**Figure 2.** Average level of anti-elite discourse by political party.

Unidas Podemos, originally a party challenging political power since 2014, has diluted its anti-elitist rhetoric over time, especially post-2016, amid internal divisions and its integration into government. Our analysis shows that, in the context of the European elections, Unidas Podemos has not predominantly adopted a confrontational stance against elites. The PSOE's anti-elitism level mirrors that of Unidas Podemos, reinforcing the absence of populist markers within its discourse. The socio-hermeneutic analysis of messages (with an average of  $\geq 0.8$ ) and word clouds (the total of 2,218 messages) reinforces this hypothesis. This distances the PSOE, from the outset, from one of the basic populist markers.

The PP ranks second in anti-elitist rhetoric, primarily due to references to “corruption,” which skew results upward. Qualitative readings reveal that the PP's discourse is characterized by political confrontation rather than populism, focusing more on undermining the legitimacy of the government rather than critiquing elites. In this way, a qualitative reading allows us to analyze his discourse from a logic marked by referents typical of the Spanish political debate. What presides over is a logic of confrontation, polarized between opposition (PP) and government (PSOE), but devoid of anti-elitist elements. In the word clouds (Figure 1), we can see how the issue of “corruption” is central. In its campaign communication strategy, the PP does not allow accusations of corruption to be launched against the “government” and the “president of the government” with the aim of undermining its legitimacy. This leads us to interpret that, despite his attack on the government, the content and style of his speech can be explained entirely from a logic of political confrontation (opposition/government) and not from a populist logic.

VOX, in contrast, exceeds a 0.2 average in anti-elitism. Its rhetoric identifies adversaries in a polarizing way, aligning with populist discourse traits. The us-versus-them dichotomy portrays “Spaniards” versus political elites (the “PPSOE coalition” and “Brussels bureaucrats”), presenting a scapegoat narrative that resonates with broader European radical right trends.

In this sense, VOX's discourse is one of clear rejection of the main systemic parties in Spain. It seeks to present, with this, both political parties as if they were indistinguishable, with hardly any ideological-programmatic differences, which apply the political and economic measures imposed by "Brussels," thus emptying the popular will, another of the conditions of the populist discourse. VOX's Eurosceptic discourse feeds anti-European attitudes among its voters, who, far from seeing Europe as a necessary and desirable destination, as the philosopher Ortega would say, perceive it as responsible for their suffering. VOX's partners at the European and international level have a lowest common denominator: they are part of a kind of "nationalist international." An expression that is certainly paradoxical, but one that alludes to the alliance of sovereigntist parties that reject cultural cosmopolitanism and political subordination to supranational institutions, whether economic and/or political. For example: "The double standards of the ruling elites in Brussels. I just referred to it in Vistalegre. The interference of the European Commission in the patriotic or conservative governments of Europe must be put to an end" (Buxadé, 2024b).

The international literature has explained, from political variables, that the public perception of cartelization (Mair, 2015) and programmatic convergence (Kriesi & Pappas, 2024) would have caused the emergence and development of new populisms. It seems that VOX's strategy is to exploit this form of discontent by projecting an enemy of the people. But the attacks, at least in this context, are not directed against media and cultural elites, as expected in this study. On the contrary, the challenge is directed against the political elites. For example:

The pppsoe coalition has not gone badly for its MEPs. It has not gone badly for its lobbies. It has not gone badly for the bureaucrats they have placed in the institutions. It has not gone badly for large companies. But it has gone badly, very badly, for the Spaniards, the countryside and industry. (Buxadé, 2024c)

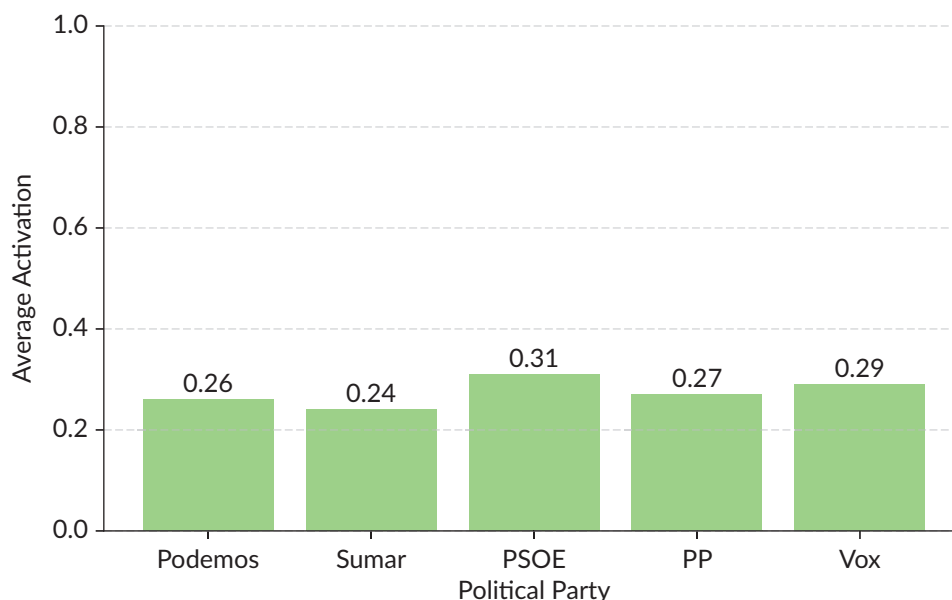
### **3.2. Disaggregated Results of "People"**

The people is an essential characteristic of any populist discourse (Urbinati, 2019). However, to be able to speak of a populist discourse, the anti-elitist dimension, at least, must also be present. Because otherwise, the concept would become too elastic, without well-defined boundaries capable of grasping the object and distinguishing it from nearby objects (Zanotti, 2024).

In a democracy, almost all political parties appeal to the people, as the averages of all political parties reveal. Values are placed above the indications of anti-elitism. However, when most social and political forces speak of the people, they refer to the entire demos, to the whole of citizenship, to what Rosanvallon (2021), in an attempt to differentiate it from the people of populism, defines as the "people number." The people, even in their most inclusive (numerical) sense, under the modern nation-state, are necessarily based on a constitutive exclusion. Citizens are not all. So the recognition of belonging is not universal. It excludes other forms of identity, such as the diaspora, founded on the principle of exile and diversity (Mate, 2024). Populism does nothing more than participate in the nationalism that has inhabited modern politics since the 18th century. However, it hypertrophies the principle of exclusion based on ethnic and/or cultural criteria.

Quantitative data (see Figure 3) show that most political parties appeal to the people in one way or another, with the PSOE having the highest average. However, the PSOE, but also the PP, when they speak

of the “Spaniards” (or “Spain”), do not appeal to the people as a homogeneous entity or with a defined identity. Its vision is inclusive: the citizens of Spain. Therefore, they do not draw an ethnically exclusive identity border.



**Figure 3.** Average level of “People” discourse by political party.

When carrying out the socio-hermeneutical analysis, we see that Sumar or Unidas Podemos, in the ideological bloc of the left, do not seem to exclude anyone from the people either. It does not do so with the elites or with other subordinate social categories, such as migrants. Both are spheres absent from his discursive strategies. What we do find, in both cases, in X’s messages and in the word clouds (Figure 1) is a plebeian (“the people,” “la gente”) and feminist (“the workers,” “las trabajadoras”) representations, close to modern socialist forms that include social positions that go beyond the hypothesis of social class.

Only VOX, according to the qualitative analysis carried out, speaks of the people in terms of populism, although its quantitative values are close to those of the rest of the political parties. This is because populism can be considered a relational discursive structure made up of three constant and interconnected spheres. They form, to use an expression by Bajtín (1999), discursive chains. Each link is related to the others. VOX, like the PSOE or the PP, speaks of the “Spaniards” and/or “Spain.” However, it does so in opposition to the political elites (“Europe,” “the Brussels bureaucrats,” or the “PPSOE coalition”) and to everything that comes from outside the Spanish borders (“illegal migrants”). All of them are part of that axis external to the people.

Its representation of the people, being inter-classist (“middle classes” an/or “businessmen”), but also appealing to social class (“ordinary Spaniards” and/or “rural workers”), is based, essentially, on a conception of the ethnic and cultural nation, far from the civic and enlightened path inaugurated by the French Revolution. The nation is, from this point of view, a community of belonging, a welcoming home, united by the bonds of tradition. For example: “Unmasking the pppsoe pincer in Brussels that has voted for a green and immigration pact and economic policies that only benefit lobbies and the powerful, leaving the middle and popular classes defenseless” (Buxadé, 2024d). Furthermore: “We have come to change the system.



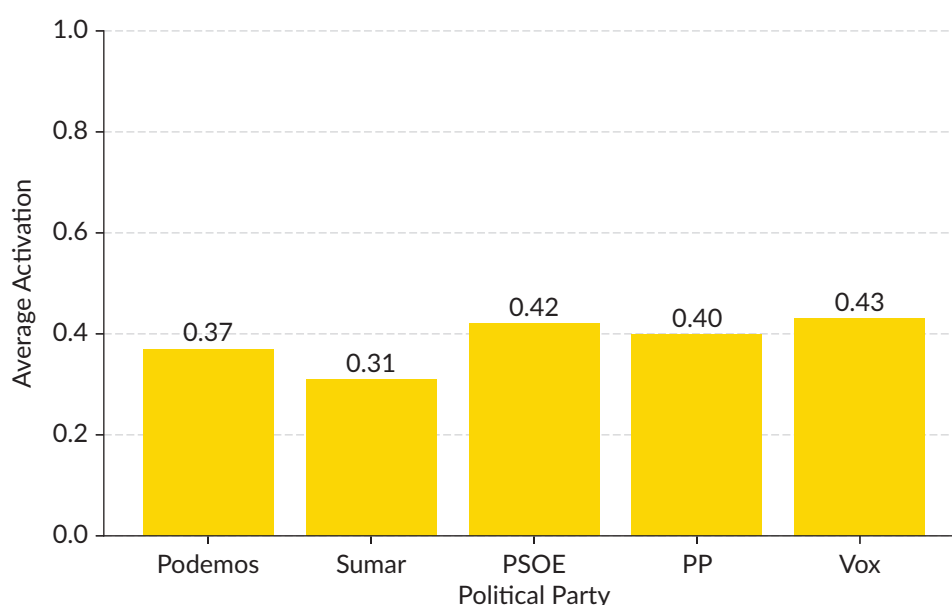
Against corruption. Against political waste. Against the agenda of the powerful. For ours, our neighborhoods, our communities, our families, our trades” (Buxadé, 2024f).

The defense of this mono-linguist/cultural conception of the “homeland” excludes the diversity, which comes to occupy the figure of the anti-Spanish. The nation of “Spaniards” would therefore find itself besieged and threatened on several fronts. On the one hand, at the cultural level, by a cosmopolitan, postmodern, and progressive spirit, synthesized in the word woke, which dissolves the web of meaning that defines the people. On the other hand, economic globalization and the constitution of supranational institutions would be causing the loss of national sovereignty. Also, the sovereigntist challenge of the “separatists” in Catalonia, with the active support of the “socialists” and the “communists,” would imply, internally, a direct attack on the unity of the nation. Finally, connecting with the ethno-nationalist spirit that has been sweeping Europe since the 2007/2008 crisis, the waves of “illegal immigrants” from Arab countries are importing values that are alien to and opposed to Spanish culture, as well as posing an economic challenge for the national working classes in the struggle for employment.

### 3.3. Disaggregated Results of Popular Will

In some theoretical perspectives, such as ideational, the people and the popular will are usually analyzed together (Hawkins & Rovira, 2018). This is what is known as people-centrism. This methodological tactic is explained, at least in part, by the fact that in political discourses both levels tend to overlap, which makes their interpretation difficult. Because of their entanglement, they can be considered conjoined conditions. This stumbling block has also been presented in our research.

As with the people, all political parties have fairly high values in the condition of popular will (see Figure 4). Sumar is the one with the lowest average (0.31) as opposed to VOX, which has the highest average (0.43). In a democracy, the volitional subject is the people. Appealing to it is an intrinsically democratic resource.



**Figure 4.** Average level of popular will discourse by political party.



Populism is considered an illiberal project of democracy; a radical democracy, according to some defenders of (left-wing) populism (Mouffe, 2018). In the sense that they go back to the Athenian model. Among other possible reasons, the illiberal logic would be due to the type of defense they make of the popular will, as if, following Rousseau, it were closed and homogeneous, without counterweights, unrestricted, and free from any obstacle (Müller, 2017; Urbinati, 2019). Plebiscite mechanisms—referendums—are the preferred resource of populist leaders in their promise to return power to its rightful owner: the demos (Rosanvallon, 2021).

But this is not clearly found in the communication strategies of the different parties, which encourage the people, as we have recorded through the qualitative analysis of the messages, to “vote” or “participate” in the elections to the EP. Only VOX, once the socio-hermeneutical analysis has been applied to the different data (messages and word clouds in Figure 1), uses a “populist style” when referring to the will of the people. But it is not understood if it is not in connection with the other dimensions analyzed. Again, it is the intense interlocking between spheres, not the quantity (the values of the averages), that allows us to penetrate the tangle of populist discourse. In this sense, when VOX defends the “will of the Spanish people” it is because it considers that it is being “trampled on” by the national and “Brussels” political elites, who impose their agenda (for example: the “green deal” that threatens “the interests of the Spanish countryside”), without considering the wishes of the citizens. For example: “Vote to end the political corruption of the institutions in Brussels that induce the vote to maintain their privileges in the absence of neutrality” (Buxadé, 2024e). Furthermore: “The green scam is faltering, vote for vox and let’s knock it down. Freedom and prosperity in the face of the prejudices of bureaucrats. The European Green Deal is faltering in the presence of the far right” (Buxadé, 2024a).

### **3.4. Disaggregated Results of Enemy**

The category of enemies is not necessarily populist. As Schmitt (2024) describes, politics is characterized by an adversarial logic (us and them). A conflict that in modern societies responds to the opposition of values, beliefs, and interests. Therefore, the projection of enemies or adversaries, as Mouffe (2007) prefers in his attempt to hide from Schmitt all existential edges (enemy as “hostis”), is not something defining of populism. On the other hand, the way (below against above) and the (high) intensity in which it does so is.

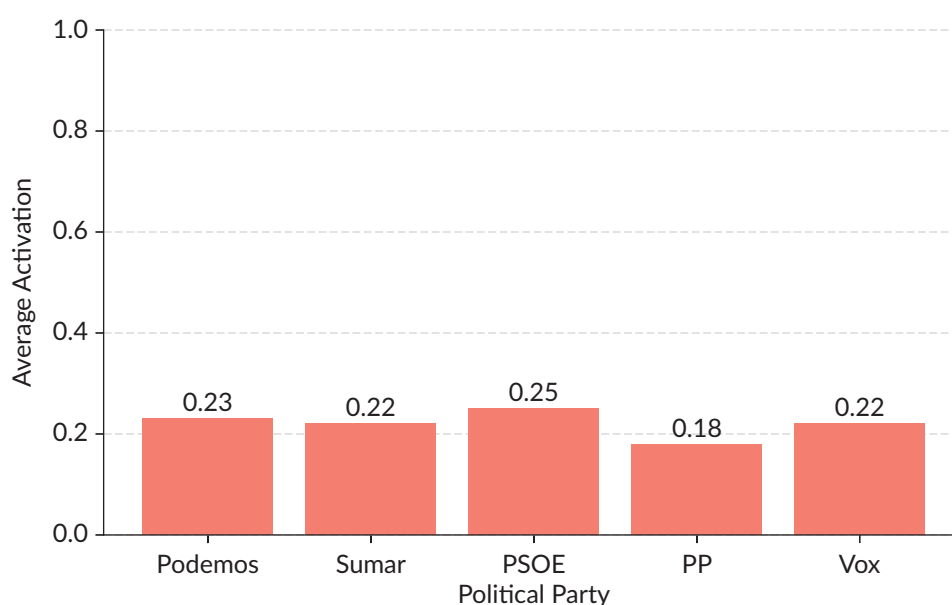
We understand that left-wing parties have their own adversaries (on the right) and right-wing parties have theirs (on the left). These parties also compete for the vote in their own ideological space. For this reason, it is common to see crossfire within the same ideological bloc (VOX accusing the PP of being the “cowardly right-winger” that assumes socialist policies). But in this study, we have focused above all on the struggle between ideological blocs. What we have observed, in aggregate, is that the averages are quite high, which reflects a climate of polarization of ideological blocs.

#### **3.4.1. Enemies of the Left**

The averages are quite even in all the parties of the left (see Figure 5). They come out, against all odds, quite high in those on the right, which is due to the distorting effects of some words included, within the “glossary of terms,” in the category of enemies of the left. This is the case, for example, of “ultra-right,” a weapon-word used by left-wing parties to discredit, in this case, the VOX party. However, this political party also uses this word in its messages, but in a radically different way. He does so with irony or to try to resignify it in a positive sense, as

an expression of rebellion and “freedom” in the face of the “progressive consensus.” As is made explicit in the methodology, language is polysemic and, at times, equivocal (Ricoeur, 2003). The parties of the right use those same words, but with a different meaning. This is something that, for technical reasons, the sorting machine is not yet able to capture. Latent meanings, omissions, ironies, etc., require a qualitative interpretation.

The PSOE presents the highest average in the left bloc. As can be seen in the word cloud (Figure 1), “ultra-right,” rather than “fascism” and/or “Franquista,” is a central signifier of its communicative framework. It reveals a clear strategy of confrontation. Whose objective, presumably, is to instill a certain fear in its electorate (less active and/or floating) in the face of the possibility of victory of political forces that have their echo in the old fascisms. So the PSOE presents itself as the guardian of democracy, of social rights, diversity, and freedom. A confrontation that is carried out from words such as “right,” “respect,” “future,” or “progress.” This is a type of communication strategy whose trait is repeated in Sumar and Unidad Podemos.



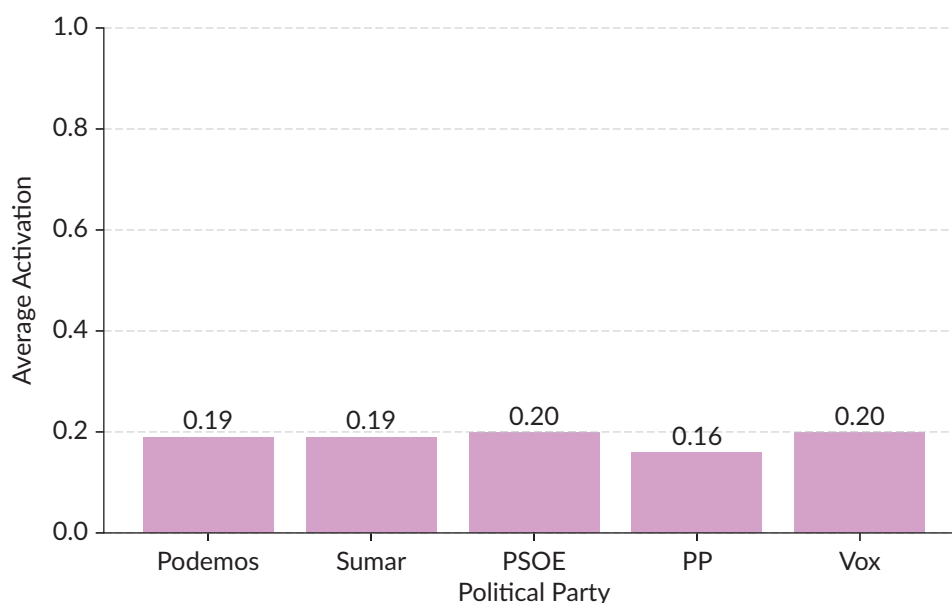
**Figure 5.** Average level of left-wing adversaries’ discourse by political party.

### 3.4.2. Enemies of the Right

The main objective of introducing this category was to capture the way in which right-wing populisms, as well as right-wing nationalist parties, the radical right, or the extreme right, attack other social groups (e.g., immigrants, LGBT collectives, and/or communists). Which is part of the anti-people. In the case of VOX, that of the Spanish evil (“communists”), non-Spanish (“illegal immigrant”), or anti-Spanish (“separatists”).

The final results, as with the category of enemies of the left, have been distorted for the same reason: the difficulty of the machine to understand that when left-wing political parties use “progres” (or progress) it is not pejorative. With the word clouds (Figure 1), we have also been able to detect that the PSOE uses, in an ironic and positive way, the term “left-handed,” a word that, in the Argentine context, Milei uses to insult left-wing parties.

In the case of the PP, the average (see Figure 6) is lower than in the rest (0.16). Some terms, such as “fugitive,” “independence,” or “separatism” have been identified in the messages and word clouds (Figure 1) that show one of the lines of confrontation of the Popular Party. All of these terms are related to their rejection of Catalan separatism and the “amnesty” law sponsored by the socialist government, which they consider a traitor to “the interests of all Spaniards.” Precisely, its main attack, in its attempt to present itself as the most reliable alternative government, is against the current government (the party governing Spain at the time of the European elections) and “President Sánchez.” They constantly relate to the word “corruption,” which was the one that skewed the results in the anti-elitist condition.



**Figure 6.** Average level of right-wing adversaries’ discourse by political party.

VOX, for its part, has all the characteristics that specialists attribute to the nationalist populist right. This party builds its national discourse based on the exclusion of other groups considered part of the outgroup. Among them are, as we have been able to verify in the socio-hermeneutical analysis, “the separatists,” the “progres,” and the “communists.” They constitute the internal enemy of the nation. However, in quantitative terms (averages) and centrality in the word cloud (Figure 1), “illegal immigration” of Arab origin stands out. That is their main scapegoat. On which it unloads the responsibility for what happens to the “Spanish worker.”

However, his attack is not based on a racial narrative, which has become taboo since the end of World War II. His rejection of immigration is clothed in socially accepted cultural arguments, such as the defense of freedom, a symbol of high emotional value that, given its polysemy, evokes very different meanings in people’s minds. In this way, Vox describes the Arab immigrant as an existential threat (due to the successive terrorist attacks suffered since 11-M and the alleged levels of crime) and a cultural one. For VOX, Islam, with its (alleged) religious dogmatism, based on sexism or patriarchy, represents a civilizational model antithetical to the European one, which would be an oasis of freedoms. They therefore refuse to play the card of multiculturalism, as the postmodern left would, since they consider it potentially corrosive to let in intolerant religious discourses. The Arab immigrant is the perverse reverse of the nation. For example: “We want a Europe with free women, not with beaten women or in burqas” (VOX Europa, 2024).

### 3.5. Aggregate Synthesis of the Results

In summary, our analysis, quantitative (classification machine learning) and socio-hermeneutic (qualitative interpretation), allows us to identify and point out that the political party VOX is the only political party of those analyzed that has activated a populist discursive strategy on platform X in the last European elections. In Figure 7, it can be seen that VOX is the only political party that presents high values in all spheres.

However, these averages, as we have been explaining, are only signs or indications of the brand of populism. However, subsequent qualitative analysis confirms the quantitative results. VOX's discourse is articulated on the basis of a dichotomous contrast between the European political elites (represented by Brussels) and national political elites (represented by the PP and the PSOE, as a coalition of interests), and the people (the Spaniards), understood as an ethnic-cultural nation that rejects other internal enemies (communists and separatists) and external enemies (immigrants).

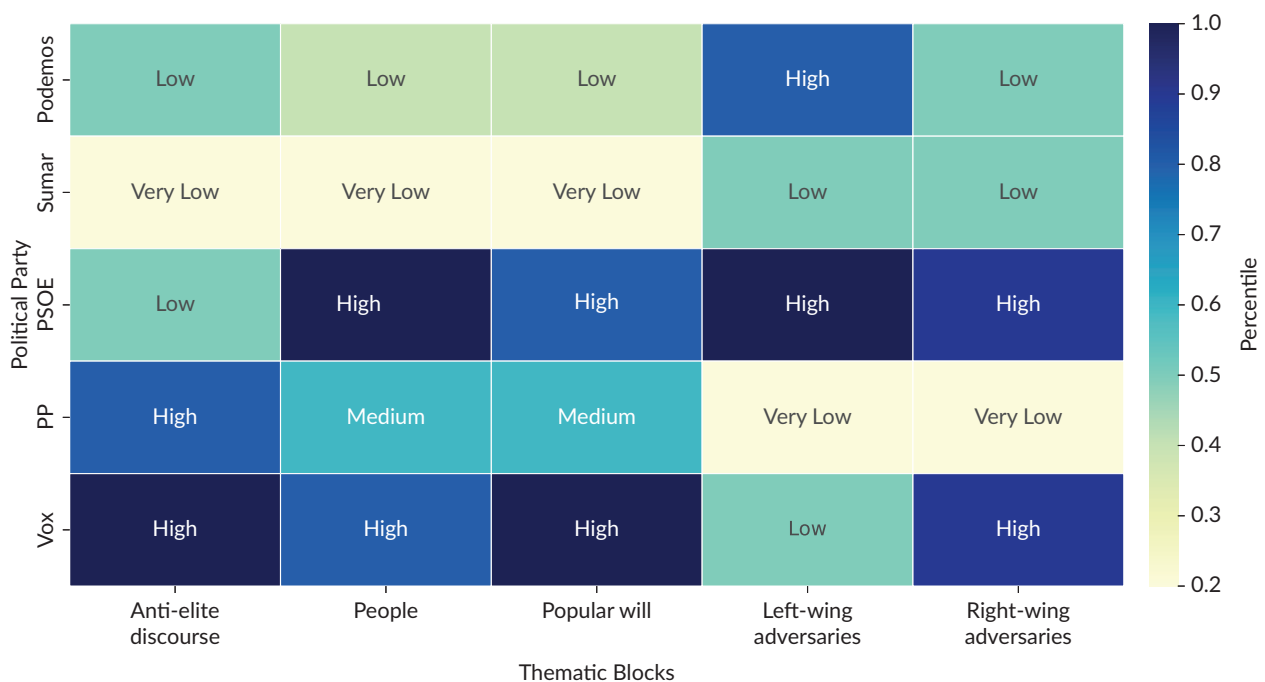


Figure 7. Categorical heatmap by party and block.

## 4. Conclusion

In this study, we set out to analyze the possible presence of populist discourse in the communication strategies of the main national political parties in the 2024 European elections in Spain on the platform X. We have seen that in this communicative and political context, there is no true populist climate. Of the political parties where we expected to find traces of populist discourse (H1), only VOX seems to have activated this kind of communicative narrative. In the rest of the political parties, once both the quantitative analysis, applying the Zero-Shot technique based on LLM, and the qualitative analysis, with a socio-hermeneutic interpretation of the downloaded messages and the word clouds, have not been carried out, we have not found the populist markers. This means, therefore, that no left-wing party, including Unidas Podemos, where we did expect to

find elements of populism, has launched a populist discourse. Consequently, H2 and H4, relating to left-wing populism, are not fulfilled.

With this, it is not being claimed that VOX is a populist party, and the rest are not. In a more modest way, from a formal and discursive approach, we maintain that in this precise context, only VOX has used a populist rhetoric. It is the only one that presents averages in all markers of populism. In accordance with the rest of the European right-wing populist parties, when VOX appeals to the people, it does not do so in an inclusive way (i.e., including all citizens). Its conception of the people, as expected (H3), is that of a culturally and ethnically homogeneous nation. However, the appeal to that people-nation (ethnos) merges and intersperses with other forms of representation that include social class (Spanish workers), a typical, although not exclusive, formula of left-wing populism.

The people who, as in any populist formula, are built by drawing highly exclusive political borders. The adversarial logic that defines politics has been exacerbated in a polarizing way. In the first place, in order for a national-popular identity to be symbolically constituted, the united people, it is necessary to project an enemy or them: the elites. VOX is the only party that has a clearly anti-elitist discourse. But, contrary to what we expected to find (H6), the criticism is not directed against the media (the dominant media) and cultural elites (left political hegemony). The people are built, instead, in opposition to the political elites, both national ("PPSOE coalition") and European ("Europe" and/or "Brussels bureaucrats"), to whom it is responsible for not wanting to respond to the real demands of Spain.

Finally, as is often observed in the case of right-wing populisms, VOX not only projects an enemy in an anti-oligarchic key. It also tries to weld an identity unity where there were only differences, denying other social groups (H4). The discourse of rejection, in this case, is turned against immigrants, especially of Arab origin, a segment of society that is excluded from the national identity (Spain). However, it also repudiates and attacks, as if they were symbolic figures of anti-Spain, part of the left ("progressive" and/or "communists") and the political parties with the desire to gain independence from Spain ("separatists").

Although the effectiveness of LLMs is widely acknowledged and empirically supported, there remains some uncertainty regarding the performance of these models in specific contexts, such as political discourse analysis in social media environments. Nonetheless, an increasing number of studies endorse their use for such purposes, provided that it is complemented by a thorough qualitative analysis (Bail, 2024; Wu et al., 2023).

The discursive construction of anti-European sentiment (Valdeón, 2006) began to take shape when Europe experienced various fractures that questioned the slogan of an "ever closer union." This fracture, in the case of Europe, tends to have anti-European features that are easily disseminated through propaganda on the internet (Caiani & Parenti, 2016). The cases of the Czech Republic and Slovakia are examples of the rise of far-right networks with a radical and Eurosceptic discourse (Caiani & Kluknavská, 2017). The rise of radical right-wing populist discourse in Europe (Ortu, 2014) has also been supported by a negative image of the EU, such as in the Serbian (Dražković et al., 2016) or German (Schafroth, 2022) media. Tensions in the eurozone have been rising through social media, with citizen discourse characterized by populism, Euroscepticism, and illiberalism (Vochocová & Rosenfeldová, 2023).

The Spanish case seems to confirm the thesis that the right-wing populist project, which some define with other concepts, such as national-populism (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018) or radical right-wing populism (Mudde, 2007), is making its way into the cosmopolitan project represented by the EU, undermining its spirit of unity in diversity. Right-wing populism, including that of VOX, is largely a defensive retreat, with tribal overtones, on the community of belonging in the face of the proliferation of a plurality of cultures and the dissolving effects of a global economy that escapes the control of states. The growing political use of social media by this political party has significantly shaped the nature of Euroscepticism, allowing anti-European sentiments to flourish in the Spanish public sphere. Understanding these elements is crucial for analyzing the evolving dynamics of European politics and the implications for future electoral outcomes in the country. It is in a context of uncertainty, at which time spirits lose their serenity, that right-wing populism has burst in with promises of security. Its offer of meaning lies in the affirmation of strong identities capable of providing the impression of protection. Right-wing populism, with its exclusionary nationalist rhetoric, in the final analysis, can end up leading to political expressions that were thought to have been overcome.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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# Political Discourse, Emotions, and Polarization: A Case Study of the President of the Madrid Region

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## Abstract

In this article, I take a constructionist approach to study the strategic use of emotions as a polarizing tool by the current president of the region of Madrid, Isabel Díaz-Ayuso. Most of the existing discourse studies on emotions focus on their categorization (since Damasio, 1994; Nabi, 2002; Scheibenzuber et al., 2023). However, categories by themselves do not explain why emotions work so well in political and polarizing discourses, which are the main interest of the present study. That is why emotions are here understood as object-oriented mental states that are distinguished between two different types of objects: the deep object (the one perceived by the person constructing the emotion as both valuable and vulnerable) and the shallow object (the one perceived as affecting the deep object). The discourse conveys a relation between them that can be positive (an opportunity) or negative (a threat), triggering positive or negative emotions, respectively. This research shows how analysing emotions as evaluative/cognitive constructions helps us to understand their success in the current political landscape. It also shows that messages about different topics can convey the same emotional structure, being therefore part of the same communicative strategy. I use as a case study the speeches by Díaz-Ayuso at the Assembly of Madrid because she is a very polarizing political figure. I approach it under the hypothesis that her discourses employ a strategy of using emotions for political intentions.

## Keywords

discourse analysis; emotions; Madrid; polarization; political discourse

## 1. Introduction

Emotions are increasingly recognized as central elements in discourse analysis, particularly within contemporary political communication (e.g., Mackenzie & Alba-Juez, 2019). In this article, I take a



constructionist approach (Alcántara-Plá, 2024) to study the strategic use of emotions by Isabel Díaz-Ayuso, the current president of the region of Madrid.

Defining emotion is a complex task, as the concept is dependent on interconnected systems and varies across different fields and theories. The term frequently intersects with concepts such as affect, feeling, and mood, terms often employed interchangeably (Batson et al., 1992), though careful distinctions should be maintained. Affect, for instance, is generally characterized as a broad sensation of pleasure or displeasure, whereas emotions represent more complex, discrete states associated with specific subjective feelings, intentional objects, and orientations toward action (Lindquist, 2017).

Despite definitional challenges, there is growing agreement on key features of emotion. A central tenet of the framework presented in this article is that emotions are fundamentally cognitive processes that take the form of evaluations or judgments. This perspective has historical roots in philosophy (at least since Aristotle) and is reflected in modern linguistic and psychological appraisal theories (e.g., Barrett, 2005; Frijda, 1986; Martin & White, 2005). Viewing emotions as evaluations challenges the notion that phenomena like hate speech are simply irrational, suggesting instead that they are based on a form of cognitive processing. This cognitive approach to emotions within discourse analysis aligns with a socio-cognitive framework, where emotions are understood as subjective constructs of the participants.

Crucially, from this viewpoint, emotions are constructed cognitively by the addressee. Although discourses are generated strategically with specific intentions, the emotional outcomes depend primarily on the recipient's interpretation. The addressee's understanding is thus paramount, as emotions emerge within their cognitive context, influenced not only by discourse content but also by internal and external factors accessible at that moment. This conceptualization aligns closely with the socio-cognitive approach, in which emotions and contexts are perceived as subjective constructs of participants (van Dijk, 2008), and it departs from studies solely categorizing emotions or focusing on a fixed stimulus-emotion-reaction link (Damasio, 1994).

In the present article, I take as a case study the speeches by Isabel Díaz-Ayuso, president of the Madrid Region, in order to understand whether she uses emotions in a strategic way. The hypothesis is that she does, since her discourse has been previously noted for its strong polarising effect (Fuentes Rodríguez & Brenes Peña, 2024). To prove it, I analyse her discourse looking at how she presents her opponents, how she presents herself (and her government), and how she talks about issues that she finds problematic for Madrid. The idea is to find common emotional structures that could point to general strategic goals.

## 2. Corpus

The corpus analysed in this study comprises all plenary session speeches delivered by Isabel Díaz-Ayuso in the Assembly of Madrid during the year 2024. The Assembly is one of the three governing institutions of the region of Madrid, along with the president of the community and the government. It constitutes the legislative branch of the region (in Spain, every region has its regional legislative assembly). Its members are elected by the citizens of Madrid through a universal, free, equal, direct, and secret suffrage, based on criteria of proportional representation. The number of deputies varies, having one deputy for every 50,000 inhabitants. There are currently 135 deputies: 70 from the Partido Popular (traditional right-wing party), 27 from Más



Madrid (new left-wing party), 27 from the Socialist Party (traditional left-wing party), and 11 from VOX (new extreme-right party). Isabel Díaz-Ayuso, from the Partido Popular, has been a deputy since 2011 and she has been the president of the region since 2019.

The speeches were extracted from the official transcripts published on the Assembly's website, which document verbatim records of all interventions made during parliamentary sessions. The compilation focuses exclusively on plenary debates, thus capturing a representative sample of Ayuso's public political discourse within a formal institutional setting.

The resulting dataset consists of 104,917 tokens, distributed across 30 plenary sessions held throughout the year. Each session may include multiple interventions by the president, depending on the structure of the debate and the political agenda of the day. The token count includes all words uttered by Ayuso during these sessions, excluding interventions by other speakers.

By encompassing a full legislative year, this corpus ensures the analysis of a representative sample of Díaz-Ayuso's communicative style, accounting for variations and consistencies in her rhetorical strategies. This breadth provides robustness to the study, permitting generalizable conclusions about how emotions are strategically mobilized within her political discourse.

### 3. Analysis of Emotions

#### 3.1. Emotions

The incorporation of emotions into discourse analysis not only acknowledges their central role in political communication but also aligns with the increasing emphasis placed on language within neuroscientific research on emotion (Barrett, 2017). Despite this convergence, there remains insufficient interdisciplinary dialogue between linguistics and neuroscience; linguistics still predominantly adheres to a classical conceptualization of emotion (Alcántara-Plá, 2024). Consequently, linguistic studies frequently limit themselves to identifying and categorizing emotions present within discourses, as well as assessing their predominant valence as positive or negative, without further exploring their complex communicative functions.

As it has been explained in Section 1, the proposed framework (Alcántara-Plá, 2024) provides a distinctive approach to emotions, emphasizing their complexity and that surpasses simple categorization. Central to our perspective is the notion of emotions as cognitive evaluations or judgments, thus challenging perceptions of emotions as irrational. This latter point is not, in fact, a novel proposal, despite its apparent divergence from the commonly held view of emotions as inherently separate from rationality—a perspective frequently echoed within discourse analysis. Modern psychology has recognized emotions as rational evaluative processes at least since Arnold's seminal work (1960), following a philosophical tradition traceable back to Aristotle. Within linguistics, this evaluative approach has been particularly advanced by the appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005), which situates emotional analysis within the category of "affect" under the broader attitude framework.

A main difference between previous evaluative proposals, such as the appraisal theory, which focused on the categorization of emotions, and the one I will use here is that I will not assume a relationship between stimuli,

emotions, and reactions, as it is often assumed in previous studies (e.g., Scheibenzuber et al., 2023). This relationship has been crucial for the study of discourse since texts are analysed as stimuli that provoke certain emotions. However, this connection is not supported by empirical evidence found in neuroscience (Lindquist et al., 2012): the reality is that the same stimulus can provoke different emotions in the same way that the same emotion can be constructed from very different stimuli. As is always the case in discourse, everything depends on the context, which I understand as cognitively constructed by the recipient (Givón, 2005). Thus, the emergence of emotions primarily depends on the addressee's interpretation within their own cognitive and contextual frameworks, aligning closely with socio-cognitive models where emotions and contexts are regarded as subjective participant constructs (van Dijk, 2008).

Finally, emotions are conceptualized as object-oriented mental states, distinguished from feelings by their inherent cognitive representation of specific objects. Expanding on previous work, Alcántara-Plá (2024) introduces a crucial distinction between two types of objects involved in emotion construction: the deep object and the shallow object. The deep object is understood as something perceived by the addressee as both valuable and vulnerable, and its perceived importance and vulnerability are key factors influencing the intensity of the constructed emotion. The shallow object is the one affecting the deep object; it must be represented with the potential of damaging or ameliorating it.

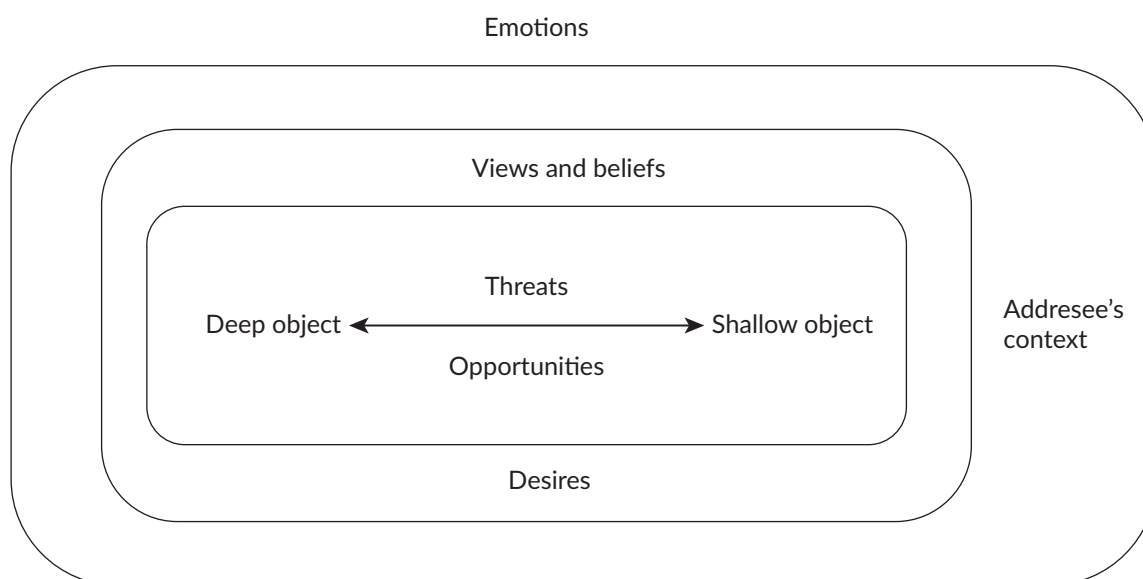
The construction of an emotion is triggered by the perceived relationship between the shallow object and the deep object in a specific context. This relationship is interpreted by the addressee and can be seen as either an opportunity (where the shallow object helps maintain or gain the deep object, triggering a positive emotion) or a threat (where the shallow object negatively affects or endangers the deep object, triggering a negative emotion). The degree of perceived threat or opportunity also impacts the intensity of the emotion.

### 3.2. Analysis

I take a constructionist approach where emotions are analysed into their constituent elements, which in turn helps us understand them as rational phenomena. As I have described in the previous section, the distinction between the two types of objects involved in emotion construction—the deep object and the shallow object—and the perceived relation between them is key (Alcántara-Plá, 2024).

Emotion construction is strongly influenced by the addressee's views, beliefs, and desires. These elements shape the cognitive representation of the shallow and deep objects and their perceived relationship. Views and beliefs are dynamic, circulating in society through discourses, and they do not need to be objectively true to effectively trigger emotions. Desires are also important as they define the goals and projects linked to the deep object. The overall context, encompassing these beliefs, views, desires, and the social environment, provides the scaffolding within which affective phenomena unfold.

Figure 1 shows all the relevant elements we need to analyse in order to understand why an emotion is constructed. These elements may vary in prominence depending on the specific message or context, but all of them are consistently present in the construction of any emotion. The success of a message, especially in polarized political discourse, lies in targeting something relevant to the recipient and presenting a scenario where the addressee perceives something valuable is at stake.



**Figure 1.** The structure of emotions with all the elements that must be analyzed. Source: Alcántara-Plá (2024).

### 3.3. Methodology

To analyse such a large corpus, I have used a hybrid methodology (Alcántara-Plá, 2020), starting from a quantitative analysis. The corpus has been processed using Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al., 2014) to have a list of the most frequent words and easy access to the concordances of those words. Since I am interested in the strategic use of emotions for polarisation, I searched the list for terms related to the three fields that are usually in play in polarised discourses. To group different elements under each of these fields, I have titled the sections inspired by Sergio Leone's well known movie *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*: the "ugly" is the out-group (in this case, the political opponents); the "good" is the in-group (Díaz-Ayuso, her government, and her political party); and the "bad" are those issues that Díaz Ayuso describes as the most harmful for Madrid (e.g., taxes, insecurity, immigration, etc.).

For the out-group, I have analysed all the messages where she was directly addressing members or parties of the opposition. Since the Assembly is a formal context, she always addresses them using the pronoun "ustedes," the polite form of "you" in Spanish. Besides "ustedes," the corpus shows that another frequent term clearly identified as an opponent is "Sánchez," referring to Pedro Sánchez, the president of Spain. As we will see, sometimes "Spain" is also conveyed as an opponent in a metonymic sense related to the government of Sanchez.

For the in-group, I have analysed those messages with pronouns in the first person: "yo" ("I"), "nosotros" ("we"), and "nos" ("us"). Although Díaz-Ayuso is the president, and I had expected a presence mostly as an agent of actions, "nos" is the most frequent form.

Finally, the problem with the highest frequency in the corpus is the high taxes. Other issues identified as "problems" by Díaz-Ayuso have also been analysed, e.g., the prices of housing and the lack of doctors.

## 4. Analysis of the Corpus

### 4.1. *The Ugly*

#### 4.1.1. The Opposition

A large number of messages delivered by Ayuso are addressed to her opponents, the deputies representing the other parties in the Assembly. She usually addresses them using the polite form “ustedes” (“you”), which is the 25th most frequent form in the corpus with 358 occurrences. If we take out articles, prepositions, and other empty words (such as “more”), only the form “Madrid” is more frequent than “ustedes” with 593 occurrences. Since the Assembly is a place for debating, it makes sense that the opponents are acknowledged in the discourse.

However, it seems a debate of a particular kind because there is not even one positive message involving “ustedes.” The 358 mentions are used to blame them for having done something wrong. We find accusations at different levels. In some cases, they are essentialist, describing how the opponents are:

Los ciudadanos que viven y trabajan en la Comunidad de Madrid, por responsabilidad y también por humanidad, la que a ustedes tanto les falta ¡siempre! [The citizens who live and work in the community of Madrid, out of responsibility and also out of humanity, which you always lack so much!]. (Quote 1)

Son ustedes cada vez mucho más dictatoriales [You are becoming more and more dictatorial]. (Quote 2)

Other mentions describe what the opponents have done:

Ustedes están asfixiando a las empresas, a los autónomos, expulsando la inversión..., porque lo único que quieren es tener a todo el pueblo adormecido, subvencionado y en la cola para que tengan que tener una cartilla de racionamiento, que es como gestionan ustedes en todas esas dictaduras [You are suffocating businesses, the self-employed, expelling investment...because the only thing you want is to have the entire population asleep, subsidized, and in line so that they have to have a ration card, which is how you manage all those dictatorships]. (Quote 3)

Yo entiendo que ustedes, como no pintan nada en todo ello, tienen que atacarnos y mentir en todos los plenos [I understand that you, since you have nothing to do with all this, must attack us and lie in every plenary session]. (Quote 4)

And other messages pretend to describe the opponents from the alleged point of view of normal citizens:

Y por eso nos dan estos escaños: porque quieren prosperidad y libertad, y a ustedes les quieren fuera de las instituciones [And that's why they give us these seats [at the Assembly]: because they want prosperity and freedom, and they want you out of the institutions]. (Quote 5)

¿Y saben ustedes por qué Madrid no les quiere? Porque ustedes no quieren a Madrid [And do you know why Madrid doesn't love you? Because you don't love Madrid]. (Quote 6)

From the point of view of the emotions, we found constant repetitions of the idea that these parties put in danger elements that are very relevant to the people of Madrid. They are not only “suffocating businesses” and lying in the Assembly, they are also “sinking investment in Spain by more than 50 percent”; they “keep impoverishing people with their speeches”; they “want to destroy and to dismantle [the health system] for political reasons”; they are “growing legal uncertainty with their attacks on the tourist industry and the service sector”; “the only thing they are doing is always attacking Spain, which is left without doctors”; and “they give privileges to the nationalists to buy them.” In short, “all they want is to ruin us.”

These examples show that one key strategy in her discourses is to connect them (“ustedes”) as shallow objects with several deep objects, always in a relation of threat. Being the focus on them, the negative emotion is usually constructed as hatred (of those who intend to harm the deep object). In some cases, the focus is on the deep object with hyperbolic comparisons with other countries, particularly Maduro’s Venezuela and Milei’s Argentina. When this is the case, fear (of losing the deep object) might prevail as a negative emotion.

#### 4.1.2. Sánchez and Spain

Although traditionally the Partido Popular is a nationalist party whose members strongly identify with the country and its symbols (such as the flag or the king), Ayuso has an ambivalent discourse about Spain (286 occurrences). We find two explanations for this in the corpus. On one hand, she uses Spain as a metonymic term for its government (see Quote 7), which she identifies as her main opponent. On the other hand, she makes comparisons to highlight the achievements of her region, and the rest of the country is the most obvious place to look for such comparisons (see Quote 8).

España tiene unos gravísimos problemas de falta de credibilidad. La prensa extranjera no da crédito no solo a las maniobras que se han urdido desde La Moncloa sin dar explicaciones, sino a que simplemente el presidente del Gobierno saliera ayer a llorar porque se le critica [Spain has very serious credibility problems. The foreign press can’t believe not only the maneuvers that have been hatched from La Moncloa without explanation, but also the fact that the prime minister simply came out crying yesterday because he was criticized]. (Quote 7)

Aquí tenemos mayores salarios que en el resto de España y los mejores planes sanitarios, las menores listas de espera [Here we have higher salaries than in the rest of Spain and the best healthcare plans, and the shortest waiting lists] (Quote 8)

Since Madrid is depicted as better than other regions, it is also shown as the driving force of the country’s economy.

La Comunidad de Madrid es el motor económico de España y la religión más libre y, por tanto, somos la región que sitúa a la persona en el centro de todas sus políticas; la libertad, la vida y la familia son nuestro motor [The community of Madrid is Spain’s economic engine and the most religiously free. Therefore, we are the region that places the individual at the centre of all its policies; freedom, life, and family are our driving force]. (Quote 9)

El papel de esta región capital se ha ido haciendo cada vez más importante para el conjunto de España [The role of this capital region has become increasingly important for Spain as a whole]. (Quote 10)

She also refers to Spain as a country in danger because of the current policies, constructing negative emotions with a relation of threat between the country (as a deep object) and the government (as a shallow object):

El odio que este tipo de mandatarios profesan por las democracias liberales es evidente, como evidente es que están llevando a España, a la fuerza, a una situación límite [The hatred that this type of leader professes for liberal democracies is evident, as is the fact that they are taking Spain to a critical situation]. (Quote 11)

Desde que la ultraizquierda tiene escaños en los parlamentos, la política en España se ha ido al traste [Since the far left has had seats in parliament, politics in Spain has gone down the drain]. (Quote 12)

Another common way of referencing the government is by focusing on the president, “Sánchez” (80 occurrences plus 19 as “president of the government”). She always does so in negative framings, accusing him of being detrimental to the country (and even more so to the region of Madrid). She accuses him of having “violated the transparency law 1,200 times,” “defamed Feijóo’s [former Partido Popular leader] wife, and my family as well, from the Congress, in interviews, and on at least three international trips,” and “having raised taxes 69 times.” At the same time, Sánchez is “cornered by corruption.”

As was also the case with “*ustedes*,” Díaz-Ayuso mentions issues related to Sánchez to reinforce a structure where the Spanish president is always the shallow object of negative emotions.

## 4.2. The Good

### 4.2.1. Us

It must be pointed out that Ayuso talks more frequently about “*nos*” (“us,” 297 occurrences) than about “*yo*” (“I,” 215) or “*nosotros*” (“we,” 197). It shows a defensive attitude, presenting “us” as under attack by the opposition, as can be seen in the following examples:

Tenemos delante a un Gobierno que nos insulta y que nos difama desde viajes en el extranjero [We are facing a government that insults us and defames us from abroad]. (Quote 13)

Y que todavía nos eche las culpas a nosotros [And you still blames us]. (Quote 14)

Nos están dejando sin inversiones por parte del Gobierno [They are leaving us without investments from the government]. (Quote 15)

¿De verdad que nos va a dar lecciones? [Are you really going to lecture us?] (Quote 16)

This last idea, of the opposition pictured as teachers giving lessons, is frequent in the corpus (e.g., “you tell us lessons in transparency and democracy” or “you give us lessons in immigration”). As we have seen in the

last section, from an emotional point of view, the strategy seems to be to focus on the shallow objects, which are always the same: the opposition and the Spanish government. The deep object acquires significance insofar as the pronoun “us” functions as a marker of identification between the ruling party (or Ayuso herself) and the citizens of Madrid. This identification is legitimized through electoral outcomes, a relationship that is explicitly articulated in several messages, including Quotes 17 and 18. It is important to note that this process of legitimation simultaneously entails the delegitimization of the addressees, who—as opposition—were not selected by the electorate to govern:

La inmensa mayoría que nos vota, que son todos los madrileños [The vast majority who vote for us, which is all the people of Madrid]. (Quote 17)

Yo estoy aquí porque lo han decidido los ciudadanos y es a ellos a quienes nos sometemos [I am here because the citizens have decided it and it is to them that we submit]. (Quote 18)

The identification works at different levels depending on the topic. In Quote 19, for example, “us” means the region of Madrid, as a metonymy of those who live in the region; in Quote 20, “us” are all the Spaniards, while in Quotes 21 and 22, “us” are the women:

Mientras nos quitan infraestructuras y proyectos a Madrid y ustedes, los socialistas madrileños, se callan [While they take away infrastructure and projects from Madrid, you, the socialists in Madrid, remain silent]. (Quote 19)

Ni siquiera nos cuentan a todos los españoles qué van a hacer con la amnistía durante estos días [They don't even tell all of us Spaniards what they're going to do with the amnesty in the coming days]. (Quote 20)

Nos deja a las mujeres en muy mal lugar [It leaves us women in a very bad place]. (Quote 21)

Es como nos quieren: victimizadas porque somos mujeres y dividiéndonos constantemente de los hombres [This is how they want us: victimized because we are women and constantly dividing us from men]. (Quote 22)

Ayuso, being a woman from Madrid (and therefore from Spain), can use “us” in all these senses, many times ambiguously, without specifying which “us” is the one in place. We could wonder, for example, who is the “us” of Quotes 15, 23, or 24:

Cada vez más jóvenes se nos van a ir y mucho talento si no se remedia [More and more young people will leave us, along with a lot of talent, if this is not addressed]. (Quote 23)

¿Cuánto nos cuesta lo de los 16 ministros a los que les pagamos todo eso? [How much does it cost us for the 16 ministers we pay all of that to?]. (Quote 24)

This ambiguity is intensified by the register used by Ayuso, frequently more informal than the one that we would expect in an Assembly. This use of the language favours the identification of the citizens with the “us.”



To take an example, in Quote 25, the terms “matón” (“bully”) and “achantar” (“to back down”) are very informal, and they present the confrontation with the Spanish president as a school fight:

Ayer [el presidente] se comportó como un matón con nosotros cuando fue a Televisión Española a amenazar a los jueces y a amenazar a los medios de comunicación y, por supuesto, meterse por medio con la Comunidad de Madrid; pues no nos vamos a achantar en nada y vamos a decir las verdades [Yesterday, he [the president of Spain] acted like a bully when he went on Spanish Television to threaten the judges and the media, and, of course, to interfere with the community of Madrid. We’re not going to back down on anything, and we’re going to tell the truth]. (Quote 25)

As we are seeing in the examples, the relation conveyed is usually of a threat against “us.” Besides, the objects threatened are usually perceived as deep objects by the citizens since they relate to an “us” that seems to include them. The deep objects are hyperbolically described, also intensifying the construction of negative emotions. “They” (the ugly opponents described in the previous section) “want to restrict *our* water and energy supplies so *we* can’t build data centres and continue to grow”; “they deny *us our* fiscal autonomy, they want to deny *us our* powers, because as, I insist, they are deeply authoritarian, they do not respect that *the citizens of the community of Madrid* have decided on other policies” (emphasis added).

In those cases where the opponents are not involved in the message, the emotions conveyed are positive, while the ambiguity of the “us” prevails. As we see in the following examples, Ayuso claims positive features of the region of Madrid, and these features are linked to her policies:

Y además nos hemos consolidado como la única región que presta atención gratuita en centros de discapacidad [And we have also established ourselves as the only region that provides free care in disability centers]. (Quote 26)

Lo constatan las cuatro principales agencias de rating que nos otorgan la máxima calificación por la gestión de la deuda, credibilidad y confianza que generamos en los mercados financieros [This is confirmed by the four main rating agencies that give us the highest rating for debt management, credibility and trust that we generate in the financial markets]. (Quote 27)

Nos ha convertido en la región con mayor número de nacimientos de España [It has made us the region with the highest number of births in Spain]. (Quote 28)

#### 4.2.2. “I” and “we”

It is interesting to note that when Ayuso uses “I” as the subject of a sentence, it is usually to talk about what the opponents have done, not herself:

Y yo creo que se ha puesto al servicio de todo el Partido Socialista [And I believe that you are at the service of the entire Socialist Party]. (Quote 29)

Yo la animo a seguir con ese discurso apocalíptico de la Comunidad de Madrid [I encourage you to continue with that apocalyptic discourse about the community of Madrid]. (Quote 30)

Yo entiendo que esto es un poco difícil de explicar cuando se tiene todo el aparato de un Gobierno contra un ciudadano particular [I understand that this is a little difficult to explain when you have the entire apparatus of a government against a private citizen] (Quote 31)

Entonces yo la animo a que se informe de las cuestiones más básicas, que sea respetuosa y que sea ejemplar, y que, por tanto, esté a la altura de las circunstancias [So I encourage you to educate yourself on the most basic issues, to be respectful and exemplary, and therefore to rise to the occasion] (Quote 32)

Even when she seems to be talking about herself, it is usually a way of revealing bad behaviour in the opposition:

Yo lo que no voy a hacer es blanquear ni lo que está sucediendo con la amnistía ni mucho menos con el concierto catalán, que retrae recursos de todos los españoles para que ustedes se mantengan en la Moncloa [What I am not going to do is whitewash what is happening with the amnesty, much less with the Catalan agreement, which withdraws resources from all Spaniards so that you can remain in Moncloa [in the government]]. (Quote 33)

Y usted decía que yo había ido provocar a la Complutense, cuando me ha realizado la ultraizquierda, con todos ustedes detrás, un escrache por ir a recoger un título [And you said that I had gone to the Complutense University to provoke, when the far left, with all of you behind, staged a public shaming against me for going to collect my certificate]. (Quote 34)

Yo me someto al control de este Gobierno cada semana, como no hace Pedro Sánchez cada vez que le conviene y no digamos en el Senado, donde lleva siete meses desaparecido [I submit to the control of this government every week, unlike Pedro Sánchez, who does so when it suits him, and let's not even mention the senate, where he has been missing for seven months]. (Quote 35)

The same happens when “we” is the subject. The actions described as carried out by “we” are compared with the actions of the opponents:

Nosotros damos ruedas de prensa con periodistas y con preguntas, no como ocurrió ayer [We hold press conferences with journalists and questions, not like what happened yesterday]. (Quote 36)

Nosotros triplicamos nuestros efectivos mientras esperamos a que el ministerio actúe [We tripled our staff while we waited for the ministry to act]. (Quote 37)

Somos el país más endeudado de la Unión Europea y la competitividad de las empresas se está hundiendo, mientras nosotros lideramos la creación de empresas y de puestos de trabajo en España [We are the most indebted country in the EU, and business competitiveness is plummeting, while we lead the creation of businesses and jobs in Spain]. (Quote 38)

España tiene la mayor tasa de paro juvenil y nosotros tenemos en la comunidad de la tasa más baja [Spain has the highest youth unemployment rate and we have the lowest rate in the community]. (Quote 39)

From an emotional point of view, these examples show that, even when describing positive aspects of her government, there is always a negative note about the opponents. There is a constant comparison with Spain and its government, as a counterexample to her success. This way, two emotions are conveyed at the same time. On one hand, there is a positive relation between her (or her government) and relevant deep objects such as the economy or the employment. On the other hand, the same discourse casts a shadow on these positive situations, constructing a negative emotion between the same deep objects and her opponents. We find the same strategy when the “we” is used to announce new policies:

Nosotros vamos a proponer, porque ya está bien de tanto daño y tanto dolor en esta zona, un parque para todos los vecinos y es lo que les fastidia, porque en el futuro lo que va a haber es un gran parque urbano [We are going to propose, because there has been enough damage and pain in this area, a park for all the residents, and that is what bothers you [referring to the opposition], because what there will be in the future is a large urban park]. (Quote 40)

Nosotros vamos a recuperar la Dirección General de Mujer porque esto de la igualdad, falsa igualdad, tiene que terminar de una vez [We are going to recover the General Directorate of Women because this equality, false equality, has to end once and for all]. (Quote 41)

If we focus on the positive side, the most common emotion is pride, intensified by the fact that, as the comparisons make clear, not only does Madrid have positive aspects, but it has aspects more positive than the others have:

Nosotros tenemos las mejores cifras, a pesar de las dificultades y del volumen que trabajamos en la Comunidad de Madrid [We have the best figures [in health care], despite the difficulties and the volume of work we do in the community of Madrid]. (Quote 42)

Dentro de las regiones de régimen común, nosotros somos los que tenemos las tasas más bajas [In comparison with the other regions, we are the ones with the lowest taxes]. (Quote 43)

Nosotros tenemos en la Comunidad de Madrid el mercado más paritario [In Madrid, we have the market with the best parity of representation]. (Quote 44)

Quote 45 summarises this emotion of intensified pride:

Y sí, Madrid lidera muchas cosas, yo sé que a ustedes les fastidia: somos la primera economía en España—insisto, por méritos propios, con los impuestos más bajos, líderes en la creación de empleo, vamos a tener la Ciudad de la Justicia más grande del mundo, somos la primera región en accesibilidad en Europa. Aquí las personas con dificultades en movilidad, las personas que tienen alguna discapacidad, tienen muchísima más libertad en todos los sentidos y más autonomía que en otros lugares, con la mayor esperanza de vida de Europa, con uno de los mejores índices de competitividad dentro de la Unión Europea, tenemos menores tasas de suicidios, tenemos más nacimientos, acogemos grandes eventos [And yes, Madrid leads in many things, I know it bothers you: we are the first economy in Spain—I insist, on our own merits, with the lowest taxes, leaders in job creation, we are going to have the largest city of justice in the world. We are the first region in

accessibility in Europe—here people with mobility difficulties, people who have some disability, have much more freedom in every sense and more autonomy than in other places—with the longest life expectancy in Europe, with one of the best competitiveness rates within the EU, we have lower rates of suicides, we have more births, we host major events]. (Quote 45)

As was the case with “nos,” we find also ambiguity in “*nosotros*,” that sometimes seems to be the ruling party in Madrid, but sometimes seems to be all the citizens, as it is made explicit in Quote 46:

Nosotros, por méritos propios, trabajadores, cotizadores, contribuyentes, todos, trabajamos a una para sacar adelante esta región y, por eso, cuando bajamos los impuestos, deflactamos, ayudamos a las clases medias y especialmente a los más vulnerables [We, on our own merits, workers, contributors, taxpayers, all of us, work together to move this region forward and, therefore, when we lower taxes, we deflate, we help the middle classes and especially the most vulnerable]. (Quote 46)

### 4.3. The Bad

The most frequent terms in Ayuso’s discourse reveal several topics characterized by negative emotional framing. The word “*impuestos*” (“taxes”) emerges as the most frequent, occurring 65 times. Taxes are consistently depicted negatively: they “suffocate” citizens, are employed by the government “to chase the self-employed,” and frequently appear alongside terms such as “bureaucracy” and “insecurity.” Actions described as “being chased” and “suffocated” evoke frames associated with insecurity and criminality, reinforced by Díaz-Ayuso’s metaphor of taxes as putting one’s hands in another person’s pockets: “We do not put our hands in the pockets of the middle classes with confiscatory and non-progressive taxes.”

Consequently, emotions elicited through these frames are inherently negative, as taxes (the shallow object) are portrayed as threats to personal security. Additionally, taxes are depicted as unjust and arbitrary (“taxes on demand—‘a la carta’—directed exclusively against Madrid”), compounding anger with the fear already generated by perceived insecurity and aggression.

Positive emotional framing around taxes, conversely, emerges from the Madrid government’s actions against taxation. The government “lowers taxes” (16 occurrences) and even “removes” them entirely (3 occurrences). Consistent with Díaz-Ayuso’s typical rhetorical approach, she contrasts her administration directly with the opposition: “Sánchez has raised taxes 69 times since he became president; I have lowered them 32 times,” further arguing that the Spanish government “intends to ruin Madrid with taxes to sustain itself.”

An additional approach to identifying negative issues, according to Ayuso, is through her use of the term “*problema*” (“problem”) employed 64 times to address societal issues. She identifies problems such as border protection, immigration, declining birth rates (described as “the demographic winter”), housing affordability, shortages of medical personnel, and declining competitiveness. A noteworthy observation from the analysis of these instances is that Ayuso situates these issues within the broader Spanish context rather than linking them directly to policies implemented within the Madrid region. This strategy is clear in Quotes 47, 48, and 49:

Los jóvenes españoles están perdiendo oportunidades y están perdiendo poder adquisitivo, y también tienen un problema de vivienda, ¡en España entera!, ¡y desde que está Pedro Sánchez muchísimo más!

[Young Spaniards are losing both opportunities and purchasing power, and they also have a housing problem, all over Spain! And even more so since Pedro Sánchez took over!]. (Quote 47)

En España hay un problema de falta de médicos que es más que evidente y ahora mismo hay más de 5,000 médicos extracomunitarios que están deseando trabajar en España y ustedes no les dan la oportunidad [In Spain there is a problem of a lack of doctors and right now, there are more than 5,000 non-EU doctors who are eager to work in Spain and you do not give them the opportunity]. (Quote 48)

Y lo hacen con absolutamente todo: con la utilización de la educación con las mujeres....Miren, ¡que no tienen discurso!, ¡hagan el favor de gestionar y ponerse a la altura porque este problema está en España entera! [And they do it with absolutely everything: with the use of education with women....Look, they have no discourse! Please take action and rise to the occasion because this problem is all over Spain!]. (Quote 49)

With respect to immigration—one of the most contentious issues in contemporary Europe—Díaz-Ayuso articulates two distinct and at times contradictory discourses. On one hand, she employs the term “illegal immigration” in 9 out of 45 references to immigration, sometimes embedding it in negative enumerations such as the one in Quote 50:

Cuando permitimos que la okupación, que los pederastas, que la inmigración ilegal sin control, los pirómanos o a las personas que han cometido graves delitos, encima, vuelen y reincidan [When we allow squatters, pedophiles, uncontrolled illegal immigration, arsonists, or people who have committed serious crimes to fly and reoffend]. (Quote 50)

On the other hand, certain statements suggest a more defensive stance toward immigrants, exemplified by assertions such as “not everything surrounding immigration is insecurity.” This apparent contradiction can be understood by examining the intended addressee of her discourse. When addressing the Spanish government, Ayuso tends to emphasize the concept of illegal immigration. Conversely, when responding to criticisms from VOX—the far-right party in the Assembly—regarding conditions in Madrid, she adopts a more moderate tone, implying that VOX is exaggerating the issue. Consistent with her broader rhetorical strategy, Ayuso frames immigration as a problem that lies beyond her jurisdiction: “If you have any complaints about illegal immigration or healthcare, go to the ministry.”

In summary, challenges faced by the region are communicated in a manner that consistently reinforces an emotional structure in which specific actors (the opposition or the government of Spain) are clearly identified as responsible (as shallow objects) for endangering various elements considered highly valuable to society.

## 5. Discussion

The analysis presented in the previous section reveals several noteworthy aspects of Díaz-Ayuso’s discourse. Firstly, the President’s discourse exhibits a high level of polarization. Throughout all her interventions, she maintains a strict division between the in-group and the out-group, which are represented through antagonistic characteristics. The opposition is portrayed unequivocally as “the Ugly”: harming the region of

Madrid and lacking legitimacy due to not having received sufficient votes to govern. As shown in Quotes 29–32, even when she appears to speak about herself (using the pronoun “I”), she is often, in fact, describing her opponents in negative terms. This sharply contrasts with the image she constructs of the “we,” associated with positive actions, frequently framed as repairing the damage caused by the opposition (Quotes 40 and 41).

Secondly, Díaz-Ayuso draws comparisons with Spain and other regions of the country to underscore Madrid’s successes (Quotes 7–12). This strategy involves a negative portrayal of Spain, which is depicted as being in decline. Such a depiction can be understood through a metonymic interpretation of “Spain” as referring to the government of Pedro Sánchez, who is the object of frequent criticism by her.

Thirdly, despite holding office and being in power, Díaz-Ayuso adopts a defensive and reactive stance (Quotes 13–16), using the pronoun “nos” (direct object form of the first person plural) more often than “nosotros” (subject form of the same pronoun). As noted previously, even when she uses the first-person singular, it is often to refer to actions taken by the opposition.

The construction of “we” is marked by a degree of ambiguity, as it shifts between different levels of reference and reveals a strong identification between Díaz-Ayuso, the region of Madrid, and its citizens (Quotes 19–22 and 46). This identification with the public may account for the occasional use of a highly informal register (e.g., Quote 25). In any case, the portrayal of both “we” and the region is strongly positive, frequently presented as outperforming others across various metrics (Quotes 42–45).

The corpus spans an entire legislative year during which a wide range of issues were addressed. Some topics stand out due to their particularly negative framing in the discourse, especially the issue of high taxation. However, the emotional analysis reveals a common structure underlying most messages, regardless of whether they concern taxes, housing prices, or the situation in Spain. The analysis of shallow and deep objects consistently reveals a recurrent pattern in which the opposition occupies the role of the shallow object in threat relations directed at various deep objects. In other words, most topics are used by Díaz-Ayuso to construct an emotional structure in which the opposition is portrayed as threatening some aspect of Madrid’s well-being. This strategy reinforces the construction of negative emotions toward other political parties, and especially toward the national government.

As discussed in Section 3, the structure of an emotion consists of several elements, though not all of them need to be explicitly stated in the discourse; it is sufficient for them to be present in the mental space of the individual constructing the emotion. Despite this, Díaz-Ayuso consistently chooses to make the shallow object explicit in her messages, clearly identifying her opponents as being at fault. At the same time, she employs strategies to prevent her government from being positioned as the shallow object in any negative relation. When a deep object appears that could potentially be associated with her administration, she makes it clear that the responsibility lies with the opposition (Quotes 47–49).

## 6. Conclusion

The points outlined in the discussion highlight the significant value of conducting an analysis of political discourse that goes beyond the categorization of emotions. A basic labelling of the emotions present in

Díaz-Ayuso's speeches might suggest a high prevalence of negative emotions such as fear or hate. However, a deeper analysis of the elements constituting the emotional structure reveals a broader strategy of polarization through discourse. The repeated emphasis on blaming the opposition for all the problems faced by the citizens of Madrid not only discredits and delegitimizes them but also establishes a strongly negative emotional frame toward them.

As discussed in Section 3, emotions are constructed in the mind of the addressee based on their prior conceptualizations (ideas, beliefs, and desires). These conceptualizations are dynamic and subject to change through experience, which may be either directly lived or transmitted linguistically. Díaz-Ayuso's persistent framing of the opposition as shallow objects of negative emotions leads addressees to conceptualize them accordingly. By consistently making these shallow objects explicit, she places the emotional focus on the opposition rather than on the issues that her government faces. The presence of deep objects in negative relations encourages the construction of emotions associated with fear (we do not want to lose a deep object we perceive as valuable and vulnerable). However, the constant presence of shallow objects promotes the construction of emotions linked to hatred (we focus on those who attack us).

Since the emotional reaction elicited is one of aversion toward the political opponent, the overall effect of her discourse is highly polarizing. Moreover, the focus is not primarily on the underlying causes of the issues addressed or on seeking solutions, but rather on identifying the guilty party, questioning their motivations, and considering how they can be overcome.

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# Weaponizing Wedge Issues: Strategies of Populism and Illiberalism in European Election Campaigning on Facebook

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## Abstract

The 2024 European Parliament elections took place against a backdrop of overlapping crises, including climate change, migration, and the Russian war against Ukraine, all of which have the potential to drive political polarization. These wedge issues can be strategically used in campaign communication to activate strong emotional and moral responses, exploit societal divisions, and fracture opposing coalitions. When combined with populist communication and illiberal rhetoric, they align closely with the attention dynamics of social media but also carry potential dangers for democratic discourse. However, research on how these elements are combined in parties' campaign communication remains limited. To address this gap, we conducted a comprehensive manual quantitative content analysis of 8,748 Facebook posts from parties in 13 EU member states, examining how wedge issues were communicated and combined with populism and

illiberalism during the 2024 European Parliament elections. Our analyses reveal that populist parties relied more heavily on wedge issues and combined them with populist communication and illiberal rhetoric more often than non-populist parties. Certain wedge issues appeared more conducive to these elements than others. The combination of wedge issues with populist communication and illiberal rhetoric as exclusionary rhetorical strategies thus emerges as a defining feature of populist digital campaigning. These elements can be seen as mutually reinforcing tools that structure harmful political interpretation patterns, particularly in times of polycrises. This underscores how digital platforms can be used to redefine the contours of democratic debate, making it even more essential to understand the communicative mechanisms through which parties influence public discourse in order to defend democracy.

### Keywords

election campaigning; European Parliament elections; European Union; Facebook; illiberalism; issue strategies; populism; social media; wedge issues

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## 1. Introduction

The 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections unfolded against a backdrop of overlapping and mutually reinforcing crises, among them the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine, intensifying climate change, and migration challenges, all of which can be associated with growing political polarization across EU member states. Citizens are confronted with what has been referred to as a polycrisis, in which multiple crises converge and interact in unpredictable ways. Polycrises are inseparable across political, social, economic, and environmental dimensions (Lawrence et al., 2024) and, unlike a single crisis, cause feedback loops where issues aggregate, leading to greater systemic stress and generalized public anxiety. The World Economic Forum (2023, p. 9) reported in its Global Risks Report that the idea of a world in permanent crisis mode has become normalized, resulting in social fragmentation and a decline in institutional trust. This includes declining trust in legacy media in many European countries, which is accompanied by the rise of highly partisan media and increased use of social media as political information sources (Newman et al., 2024, p. 67). A report from the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (Watson, 2024) describes how Europeans are increasingly navigating their daily lives in fear, uncertainty, and fatigue—conditions that allow political actors to act on and influence public emotions and shift responsibility.

In such an environment, electoral campaigns operate under intensified constraints and heightened strategic stakes. One central challenge for political parties is how to communicate effectively in ways that mobilize their base and appeal to new voters while avoiding the alienation of core constituencies. A key strategy in this regard involves the use of wedge issues—topics that activate strong emotional and moral responses, exploit latent societal divisions, and can potentially fracture opposing coalitions (Hillygus & Shields, 2008; Wiant, 2002). Wedge issues that may or may not be associated with deep-seated social cleavages—such as the war in Ukraine, climate change, and migration—offer parties opportunities to shift the terms of debate and reposition themselves within a dynamic electoral landscape.

While numerous studies have examined the strategic deployment of wedge issues across traditional communication channels (Bale et al., 2010; Green-Pedersen, 2007; Lefkofridi et al., 2014), we know comparatively little about how these strategies are embedded within broader communicative repertoires,

especially on platforms that offer parties message control and allow them to adapt their communication in real-time. In contrast to manifestos that describe the positions of the parties in the long term, social media platforms such as Facebook enable parties to frame issues without journalistic mediation, respond rapidly to political developments, and target specific audience segments. They also provide fertile ground for the amplification of polarizing communication, including populist (Engesser et al., 2017; Reinemann et al., 2017) and illiberal rhetoric (Bennett & Livingston, 2025), both of which have gained prominence in recent years.

We contribute to this growing body of literature with a comprehensive manual quantitative content analysis of 8,748 Facebook posts from parties in 13 EU member states on how wedge issues were communicated by political parties during the 2024 EP elections. We focus on three salient and politically divisive wedge issues—the war in Ukraine, migration, and environmental policy. Our analysis examines both the frequency with which these wedge issues were addressed by different party types and how they were related to populist and illiberal rhetoric, aiming to clarify whether wedge issues were used as a vehicle to agitate against elites or liberal democracy itself. If wedge issues are combined with populist or illiberal rhetoric, their divisive potential is significantly strengthened. For instance, portraying migration as a threat to national identity or security (rather than as a policy issue) taps into pre-existing fears and resentments, often targeting vulnerable groups and reinforcing hostility (Heft et al., 2022). Similarly, environmental regulations can be framed as elitist impositions that threaten local livelihoods rather than as necessary global commitments, invoking both anti-elitist and anti-EU sentiments (Dickson & Hobolt, 2024).

Despite a growing literature on populism, illiberalism, and wedge issues, to our knowledge, no study has so far comprehensively investigated how parties combine these elements in their campaign communication. Most prior research has focused on single countries, leaving a gap in understanding how these strategies vary across party types—particularly within the EU's multiparty and multilingual setting (Haas et al., 2023; Kollberg, 2024). By linking issue strategies to populist and illiberal rhetorical strategies across a novel, broad cross-national dataset, this study advances our understanding of how contemporary parties use social media to shape public discourse during campaigns. Our results show that populist parties were significantly more likely to highlight wedge issues than non-populist parties and to do so in conjunction with populist and illiberal rhetoric. Although the messaging of non-populist parties was not entirely free of polarizing elements, especially when addressing migration, the combination of wedge issues with exclusionary rhetorical strategies thus emerges as a defining feature of populist digital campaigning. This implies that wedge issues do not only structure campaign agendas but also serve as vehicles for the diffusion of illiberal and exclusionary rhetoric. This can have consequences for how democratic competition is conducted and how citizens experience political debates during elections.

## 2. Conceptual Framework

### 2.1. Political Parties' Social Media Strategies

Political parties' strategic political communication on social media is intentional and goal-oriented, which distinguishes it from other types of communication such as spontaneously posting a status update (Kiousis & Strömbäck, 2014). It encompasses all controlled communication activities of a party on social media that serve to coordinate actions with its various stakeholders, including members, supporters, voters more

generally, and journalists. Compared to other communication channels, social media provide political actors with several strategic advantages, among them both message control and agenda-setting power, particularly when it comes to divisive or emotionally charged topics (Kiousis & Strömbäck, 2014). Party-controlled communication on these platforms allows for bypassing the news media, directly communicating with certain target groups and with the electorate more generally, maintaining parties' interpretive sovereignty (Kalsnes, 2016; Klinger & Russmann, 2017; Stier et al., 2018). Moreover, social media communication enables parties to sense changes in their voters' opinions and react to them in real-time (Russmann, 2022), which is particularly advantageous regarding crisis-prone, emotionally charged issues such as wedge issues, where events and opinions in public discourse can change quickly.

When it comes to content, these strategic advantages are particularly important for communicating polarizing issues such as wedge issues that harbor the potential for the spread of extreme and divisive viewpoints and are therefore well-suited for reaching out to specific target groups. This makes this form of communication especially attractive for populist and other more extreme actors whose tendency to polarize seems to fit particularly well with wedge issues and for whom it is a strategic disadvantage that the news media often portray them in a negative light.

The essence of strategic social media communication is to engage people in the discussion of current issues and the shaping and co-creation of meaning around them (Hallahan et al., 2007). Strategically, these communication efforts aim to contribute to the fulfillment of organizational goals (Hallahan et al., 2007; Kiousis & Strömbäck, 2014), which in election campaigns is primarily to win as many votes as possible. A key requirement for this is to produce communication content that attracts the attention of voters, the news media, and the wider public.

Of the various strategies to achieve these goals, we focus on three that can be used to instrumentalize the current prevailing sense of crisis and uncertainty among the population and may thus seem particularly promising from a party perspective in today's times of polycrisis: the strategic use of wedge issues, of populist political communication, and of illiberal rhetoric. While it is undoubtedly important for society that parties address crisis-related issues, there is a risk of increasing and fostering the disintegration and polarization of society if these issues are linked to populist and illiberal narratives. We therefore consider it crucial to examine these three strategies in conjunction with each other—a focus lacking from research on social media campaigning so far.

## **2.2. The Strategic Use of Wedge Issues**

The main task of democratic politics is to implement a representative mandate to solve problems (respectively political issues) that affect society as a whole (Warren, 2017). Which of the many possible issues parties choose to campaign on can determine the outcome of an election. Wedge issues have long been recognized as a powerful tool in electoral politics. Schattschneider (1960, p. 69) described political conflicts as battles in which coalitions of diverse interests align behind a dominant cause while attempting to exploit “cracks in the opposition.” This strategic approach to political competition often involves deliberately amplifying contentious issues that can fracture opponents. Wiant (2002, p. 276) expanded on this idea by defining wedge issues as “a rhetorical strategy, usually focused on a social concern, that is intentionally constructed to divide party voters and polarize the public in order to gain political advantage.” To be

effective, wedge issues must create disagreement within the opponent's electorate while making voters perceive that their party is either neglecting or mishandling the issue (Hillygus & Shields, 2008).

Existing research has discussed various strategies for how parties can strategically instrumentalize issues in their election campaigns (for an overview, see Farkas et al., 2024). For the strategic use of wedge issues, three approaches seem particularly central: parties can highlight topics where they are perceived as especially competent (issue ownership), they can deliberately elevate issues neglected by other political actors (issue entrepreneurship), often in the form of contentious or morally charged concerns, or they can “ride the wave” by responding to issues that have gained salience through external events or media attention, regardless of ownership advantages (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994; Klüver & Sagarzazu, 2016). In multiparty systems, issue entrepreneurship is particularly accessible to outsider or challenger parties with fewer constraints linked to coalition formation or institutionalized party competition (Haas et al., 2023; van de Wardt et al., 2014). For political issues more generally, research from diverse European countries has shown that in parties' social media campaigns, the issue ownership strategy is most commonly used (e.g., Bene et al., 2024; Haßler et al., 2021; Magin et al., 2024; Plescia et al., 2020). In the case of wedge issues, however, it is possible that parties will combine all three strategies: wedge issues are typically high on the public agenda and have the potential to divide the electorate, since different parties and voter groups have diametrically opposed views on how to solve these problems. They thus allow parties to “ride the wave,” polarize debate, and mobilize voter segments (Hillygus & Shields, 2008; Wiant, 2002), while at the same time aligning with both issue ownership and issue entrepreneurship strategies (Dickson & Hobolt, 2024).

While much of the early research on wedge issues focused on the U.S. two-party system, scholars have increasingly applied the concept to multiparty contexts, where the dynamics are more complex (Haas et al., 2023). Van de Wardt et al. (2014) argued that simply being in the opposition is not enough for a party to use wedge issues successfully. Because coalition-building is an ongoing process, parties that have been part of past governing coalitions—or expect to participate in future ones—may be hesitant to aggressively campaign on wedge issues, as doing so could strain relationships with (potential) partners. By contrast, parties that have never been in government coalitions face fewer constraints and are more likely to use wedge issues to mobilize support and distinguish themselves in the electoral arena. This includes fringe parties, which are often populist or extremist, and frequently do not have a particularly good chance of participating in government.

Wedge issues are by no means a new phenomenon, neither in national nor EU contexts. However, their influence on contemporary politics continues to grow, with social media providing new channels for their strategic use. Their potential to attract attention and user engagement by means of polarization makes their strategic use on social media even more promising. In the 2024 EP election campaign, three wedge issues emerged as pivotal: Migration, while having been a perennial wedge issue for a long time, has particularly occupied the EU since the 2015 “migration crisis,” which deepened divisions within both center-right and center-left parties, forcing leaders to navigate difficult policy choices and exposing ideological rifts (Heinkelmann-Wild et al., 2020). Climate change is a highly polarizing issue that has risen even higher on the public agenda in Europe in recent years as its consequences have become ever clearer. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 poses existential questions for the EU regarding peace in Europe, its own defense capabilities, and its relationship with Russia (see also Broniecki & Høyland, 2025). We are interested in the importance that parties across the EU attached to these issues in their campaigns and ask:

RQ1: To what extent did (non-)populist parties address wedge issues on their Facebook pages during the 2024 EP election campaign?

### ***2.3. The Strategic Use of Populist Communication***

Populism divides the world into antagonistic parts: the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite” (Mudde, 2004) and sometimes other seemingly “dangerous outgroups” (Reinemann et al., 2017). In political communication research, populism is widely understood as a communication style, flexible in the sense that it is not tied to any specific political ideology. As such, it has been described by Mudde (2004) as a “thin-centered” ideology. According to a well-established conceptualization by Reinemann et al. (2017), populist communication encompasses three elements: people-centrism, anti-elitism, and exclusion of out-groups. Who exactly is meant by “the people” remains vague and is often determined solely by opposing “the people” to “the elites” (e.g., political institutions, the EU) or (certain) outgroups (e.g., migrants, parties with opposing viewpoints). Appealing to “the people” in a vague manner creates an impression of closeness and opens up the possibility that large groups of voters will feel addressed (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

Populist rhetoric can employ colloquial, emotionally charged, and simplified language, as well as personalization, dramatization (Engesser et al., 2017), vulgarities, rudeness, and directness (Aytaç et al., 2025; Gründl, 2022). All this suggests that populist communication can be strategically combined with wedge issues which, in addition, resonate with the antagonism inherent in populism due to their polarizing nature.

As previous research has shown (Bene et al., 2025; Engesser et al., 2017), social media appears to be a perfect environment for populist political communication since it enables political actors’ direct contact with “the people” without the mediation of traditional media (Ernst et al., 2017). Moreover, the attention economy of social media resonates well with the characteristics of populist communication described above, generating a relatively large amount of reach measured in reactions (Bene et al., 2022). This helps explain why populist political actors are often particularly engaged on social media (Ernst et al., 2019). Even though the use of populism as a communication style is neither limited to populist or extreme parties nor to right- or left-wing parties (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2017), previous research from various contexts has shown that populist and extremist parties, which have a particular interest in polarizing communication, often (but not always) make above-average use of this strategy (e.g., Ernst et al., 2019; Gründl, 2022). So far, however, these relationships have mainly been examined for the social media communication of political parties in general, without differentiating more closely between individual topics (for an exception, see the special issue of Bene et al., 2024). This leads to our second RQ:

RQ2: To what extent did (non-)populist parties combine wedge issues with populist communication on their Facebook pages during the 2024 EP election campaign?

### ***2.4. The Strategic Use of Illiberal Rhetoric***

Populism and illiberalism share a common hostility towards democratic power-limiting institutions (Enyedi, 2024), and previous studies have observed a rise of populism as a communicative phenomenon (de Vreese et al., 2018; Lilleker et al., 2022) with negative consequences for liberal democracy (Mudde & Rovira



Kaltwasser, 2017). While there is a clear link between populism and illiberalism, however, both are distinct phenomena that parties can use strategically, either in conjunction or separately, in their campaign communication.

While populism does not seek to abolish democracy but rather “challenges democracies from within the democratic system” (Ernst et al., 2017, p. 1348), illiberalism is defined by hostility toward liberal democratic institutions and minority rights (Enyedi, 2024; Zakaria, 1997). It promotes majoritarian rule, ethno-nationalism, and cultural traditionalism (Štětka & Mihelj, 2024), undermines liberal norms, reframes pluralism as weakness, and can intensify political polarization (Bennett & Kneuer, 2024; Laruelle, 2022). Illiberal democracy refers to regimes that violate liberal and constitutional principles and conduct unfair elections (Zakaria, 1997). Illiberalism works against principles such as limited power, a neutral state, and an open society (Enyedi, 2024). The illiberal public sphere is a communicative space where illiberal views, attitudes, and actors are promoted and reinforced, being hostile to the liberal public sphere and working to usurp its liberal opponents. Hence, illiberalism aims to undermine liberal democratic institutions and exploit internal conflicts among them (Laruelle, 2022).

All this puts illiberalism in direct opposition to the EU project: The European values stipulated in the Treaty on European Union, such as pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, and solidarity, are the basis for the functioning of the EU as a community (Article 3). Deviation from these values, through actions, policies, and communication that undermine or ignore them, represents a retreat from liberal democracy and a move towards illiberalism (e.g., Laruelle, 2022). This brings with it the risk of social division, which makes wedge issues particularly fertile ground for the spread of illiberal rhetoric. Parties relying on illiberal rhetoric as a communication strategy are thus calling the EU itself into question.

In Central and Eastern Europe, illiberal discourses have been strategically used to diminish trust in media, judiciary systems, and the EU (Havlík, 2019; Kondor et al., 2022). Štětka and Mihelj (2024) highlighted the emergence of an illiberal public sphere in Central and Eastern Europe and discussed the support for majority rule, ethno-nationalism, and cultural traditionalism. Bakardjieva and Konstantinova (2021) analyzed the case of Bulgaria, where illiberal discourses foster widespread dissatisfaction, undermine the authority of liberal values, and contribute to the erosion of civil society. Havlík (2019) discussed the case of the right-wing populist ANO movement in the Czech Republic engaged in technocratic populism and illiberal communication, finding evidence for the denial of political pluralism, anti-partyism, anti-constitutionalism, and support for majoritarianism. Kondor et al. (2022) demonstrated that Hungary’s public service media has effectively become a propaganda instrument for the government, closely linked to the hostile stance of their audience towards issues such as immigration.

Despite its potentially devastating effects, the use of illiberal rhetoric as a communication strategy by parties on social media has hardly been researched to date. Therefore, we ask:

RQ3: To what extent did (non-)populist parties combine wedge issues with illiberal rhetoric on their Facebook pages during the 2024 EP election campaign?

As explained above, it is reasonable to assume that the use of populist communication and illiberal rhetoric is particularly appropriate in the context of wedge issues that are in themselves polarizing and divisive. However,

it remains an open question how well various wedge issues are suited to these strategic goals, which leads to our final RQ:

RQ4: Which wedge issues were most likely to be combined with populist or illiberal communication styles by (non-)populist parties?

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Sample

To answer our RQs, we conducted a manual quantitative content analysis of the Facebook posts published by national parties during the 2024 EP election campaign across 13 EU countries: Austria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Romania, and Spain. These countries were selected because they differ significantly both geographically and in terms of various characteristics in their political and media systems relevant to our research interest (see Table A1 in the Supplementary File). The countries analyzed have a combined population of 315.7 million (70% of all EU citizens; European Commission, 2025) and cover 12 of the 24 official languages. Together, they reflect the diversity of EU countries and thus provide a good basis for investigating the 2024 EP election campaign on Facebook across the EU.

For cross-country studies of national party communication, social media platforms offer the advantage of not being nationally bound to the same extent as traditional broadcasting channels, providing similar conditions to users in different countries. Of the various social media platforms, we chose Facebook because it was the most important social media platform for news in most EU countries according to the most recent Reuters Digital News Report available during the planning of the study in 2023. Only in Germany did Facebook rank third, after YouTube and WhatsApp (no data available for Cyprus and Latvia; Newman et al., 2024).

Our sample includes the official Facebook pages of all political parties that received at least 5% of the national votes in the EP elections, except Ethniko Laiko Metopo (Cyprus), Kommounistikó Kómma Elládas (Greece), and TISZA (Hungary) which received more than 5% of the votes but did not have Facebook accounts. Parties that were part of a coalition were included in the sample if the coalition received more than 5% of the votes. In total, the Facebook activity of 85 parties was analyzed (for an overview of the parties, see Table A4 in the Supplementary File).

For each country, all Facebook posts published by the parties during one month before and including election day were collected with CrowdTangle one day after the election date, which varied slightly between the countries (June 7–8: Czech Republic; June 8: Latvia; June 9: Austria, Cyprus, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Poland, Portugal, Romania, and Spain), resulting in slightly different investigation periods. For reasons of research economy, only a sample of 50% of all posts by all parties could be coded for Hungary ( $n = 694$ ). For all other countries, full samples were coded. In total, our novel cross-country dataset consists of 8,748 Facebook posts (for the periods under investigation and the number of posts coded per country, see Table A2 in the Supplementary File).

### 3.2. Measurements

A manual content analysis enabled us to code not only written text, but also visual materials such as pictures and videos included in the Facebook posts which are pivotal to fully understanding their meaning. To ensure cross-country comparability of the data, we developed a joint coding scheme used in all countries. The descriptions of all categories used in this article can be found in Table A3 in the Supplementary File. For practical reasons, our coding encompassed the full text of each post, along with the first image or the first video (first minute).

As described above, we defined three policy issues as wedge issues: the war in Ukraine, migration policy, and environmental policy. We coded for each of these issues separately, indicating whether it was addressed (= 1) or not (= 0) in each post. Thus, several wedge issues could be coded as present in the same post.

Employing the concept by Reinemann et al. (2017), we measured the use of populist communication in the posts by means of three separate categories, each coded as present (= 1) or not (= 0) in each post: criticizing elites, referring to the people, and defining outgroups. For the analyses below, we categorized all posts as populist if at least one of these three elements had been coded as present.

To operationalize illiberal rhetoric, we derived 15 categories from the Treaty on European Union that measured whether core values of the EU were explicitly attacked or rejected (= 1) or not (= 0), such as rejecting the rule of law, countering academic freedom, or attacking minority values (for details see Table A3 in the Supplementary file).

To categorize parties, we used two well-established validated sources: The PopuList (Rooduijn et al., 2024) and the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES; Rovny et al., 2025). We categorized as “populist” all parties that were categorized as such by either PopuList or CHES (Table A4 in the Supplementary File). The PopuList uses a binary coding system, categorizing parties as either populist or not, and lists populist, far-right, and far-left parties. For identifying populist parties in the CHES dataset, we used the “anti\_elite\_sentiment” scale which measured “How salient has ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT and ANTI-ELITE RHETORIC been to each party during 2024?” on a scale from 0 (*not important at all*) to 10 (*extremely important*) and categorized parties scoring higher than 6.66 as populist (that is, the upper third of all parties). We labeled parties as “non-populist” if they were categorized as non-populist by CHES and PopuList or if they were categorized as non-populist by CHES and not listed by PopuList at all. Finally, we labeled parties that were neither categorized by CHES nor by PopuList as “not categorized.” Following this systematic categorization, 24 parties were categorized as “populist,” 50 parties as “non-populist,” and 11 parties as “not categorized.”

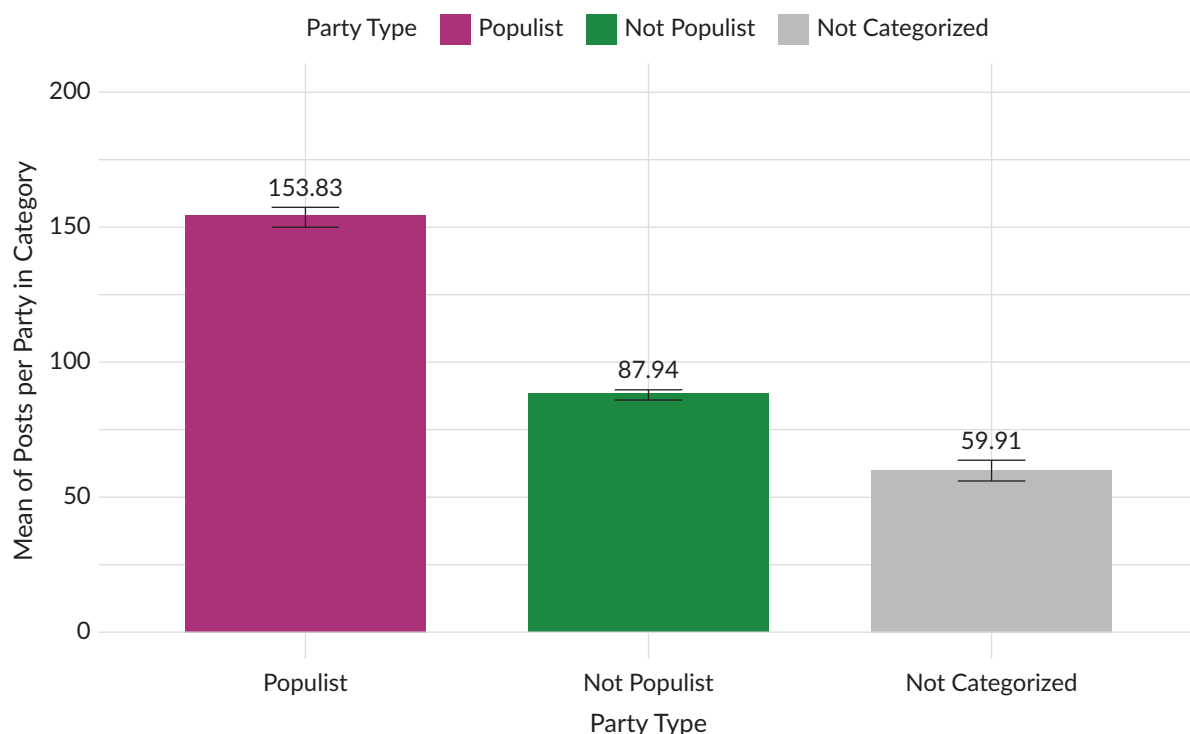
### 3.3. Reliability

The coding process was decentralized, with each country team responsible for coding both the posts used for intercoder reliability testing and the posts from parties in their own country. National coder teams consisted of two to five coders (see Table A2 in the Supplementary File). All coders were trained within their country teams to develop a common understanding of the codebook. To assess the reliability of the coding, intra-country reliability tests were conducted in each national team. Once sufficient reliability was achieved within country teams, all participating coders coded the same 100 English-language campaign posts from

European parties (e.g., European People's Party or Socialists and Democrats). Since these posts could be understood and coded by all coders, we were able to conduct inter-country reliability tests, which allowed us to assess the quality of the data for international comparisons. Reliability for all categories used in this analysis was sufficient, except for “references to the people,” where Holsti and Lotus achieved sufficient scores but Brennan-and-Prediger’s Kappa did not (see Table A3 in the Supplementary File). Since two out of three reliability indicators achieved good scores for “references to the people,” and in order to reflect all three sub-dimensions of populism, we decided to retain this variable. As a robustness check, we also conducted all corresponding analyses excluding the sub-dimension “references to the people” from the populism variable; results are available in the Supplementary File.

## 4. Results

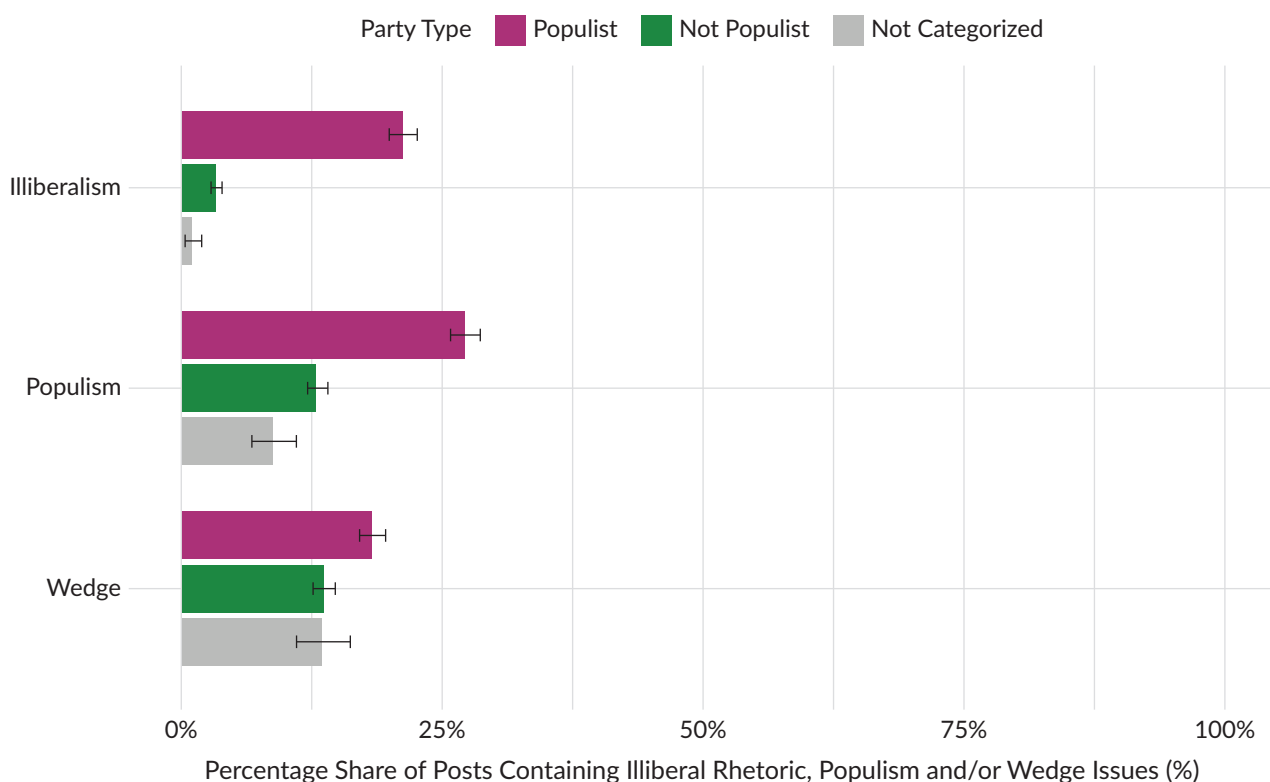
The results show that parties categorized as populist were more active on Facebook (*Mean* = 153.83 posts per party, *SD* = 110.88) than non-populist parties (*Mean* = 87.94, *SD* = 70.87) and parties that could not be categorized (*Mean* = 59.91, *SD* = 46.86; see Figure 1), confirming the close relationship between populist actors and social media as a communication channel, as found in previous research (Bene et al., 2022; Engesser et al., 2017).



**Figure 1.** Mean of the number of posts by party types with confidence intervals ( $n = 8,748$ —Populist: 3,692, Not Populist: 4,397, Not Categorized: 659).

Further, the results show that wedge issues were highlighted frequently in the EP election campaign across the 13 countries, though they did not dominate the campaign (see RQ1 on the frequency of wedge issues). A minority (15.6%) of all posts contained wedge issues (84.4% did not). Populist parties referred to wedge issues more frequently in their posts (18%) than parties categorized as non-populist (14%) or non-categorized (14%) (Figure 2). Furthermore, wedge issues tended to be highlighted increasingly over the

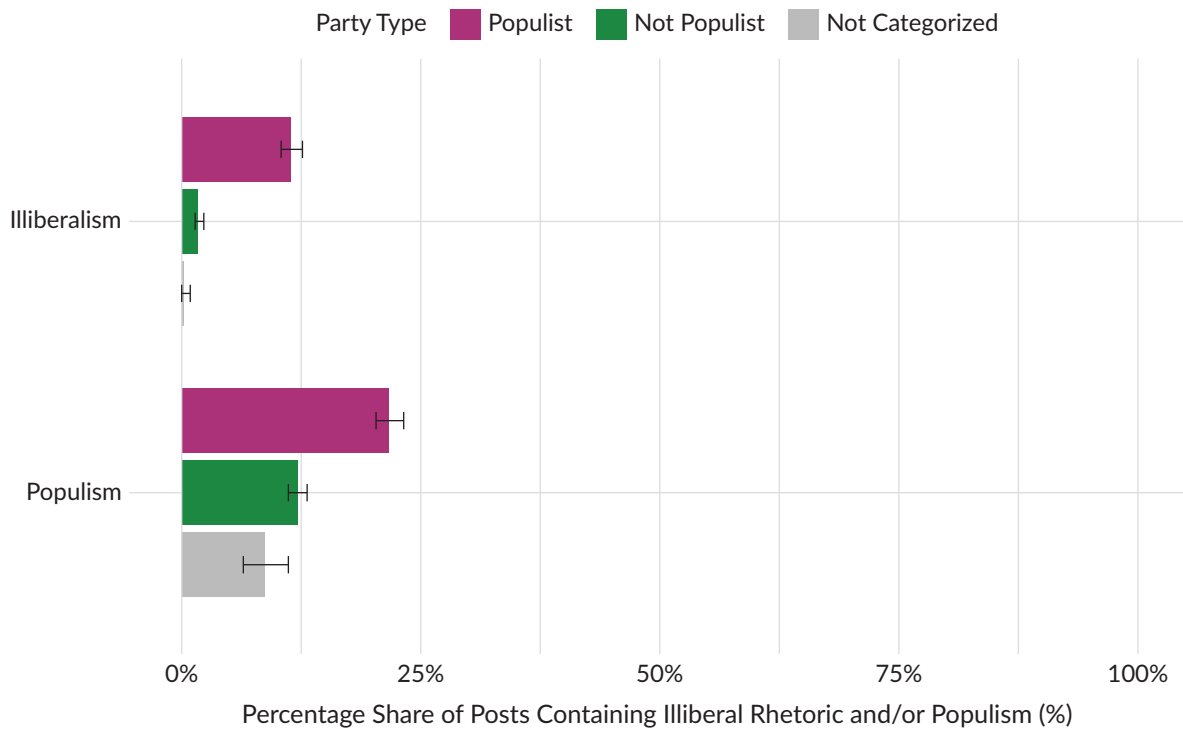
course of the campaign, although Facebook activity was lower on weekends (see Figure A3 in the Supplementary File). Wedge issues were thus relevant across all party types; however, the most significant differences emerged in the communication strategies employed: populist parties were most likely to use populist communication (27%) and illiberal rhetoric (21%). By contrast, non-populist parties employed populist communication in only 13% of their posts and adopted illiberal rhetoric (3%) particularly rarely. The communication style of non-categorized parties closely resembled that of non-populist parties, but at an even slightly lower level for both populist communication (9%) and illiberal rhetoric (1%). Among the parties that used illiberal and populist rhetoric, the most were the German AfD and Hungarian Fidesz (see Figures A1 and A2 in the Supplementary File).



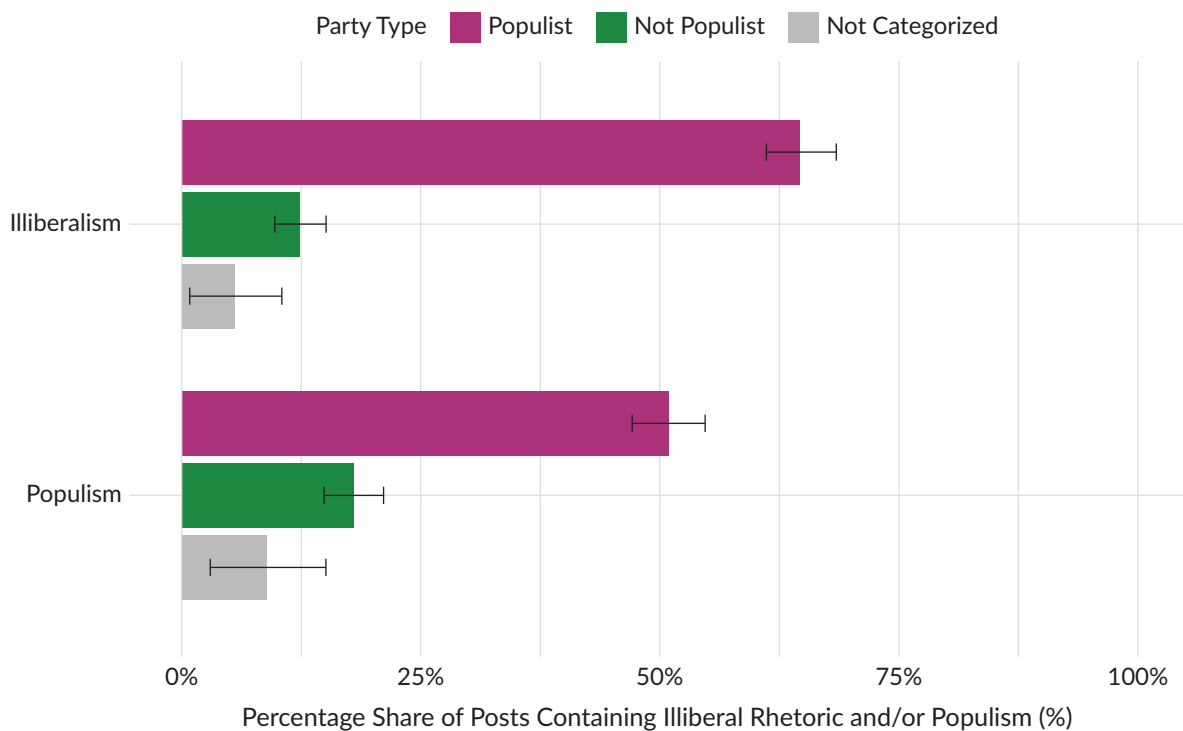
**Figure 2.** Content categories by party types with confidence intervals ( $n = 8,748$ ).

While these differences are rather small, much larger differences emerged when analyzing whether wedge issues were combined with populist and/or illiberal communication styles (see RQ2 on the combination of wedge issues with populism and RQ3 on the combination of wedge issues with illiberalism). Even in posts without the analyzed wedge issues (Figure 3), populist parties used much more illiberal rhetoric (12%) and populist communication (22%) than non-populist parties (2%, 12%) and non-categorized parties (0%, 9%).

However, these differences were even more pronounced in posts addressing wedge issues (Figure 4): In these cases, populist parties used illiberal rhetoric in 65% and populist communication in 51% of their posts, compared to only 12% and 18% for non-populist parties, respectively (non-categorized parties: 6%, 9%). These results show that parties' public communication on Facebook differed substantially depending on whether they were categorized as populist or not: Populist parties highlighted wedge issues more frequently, and when doing so, combined them much more often with illiberal rhetoric and/or populist elements (even



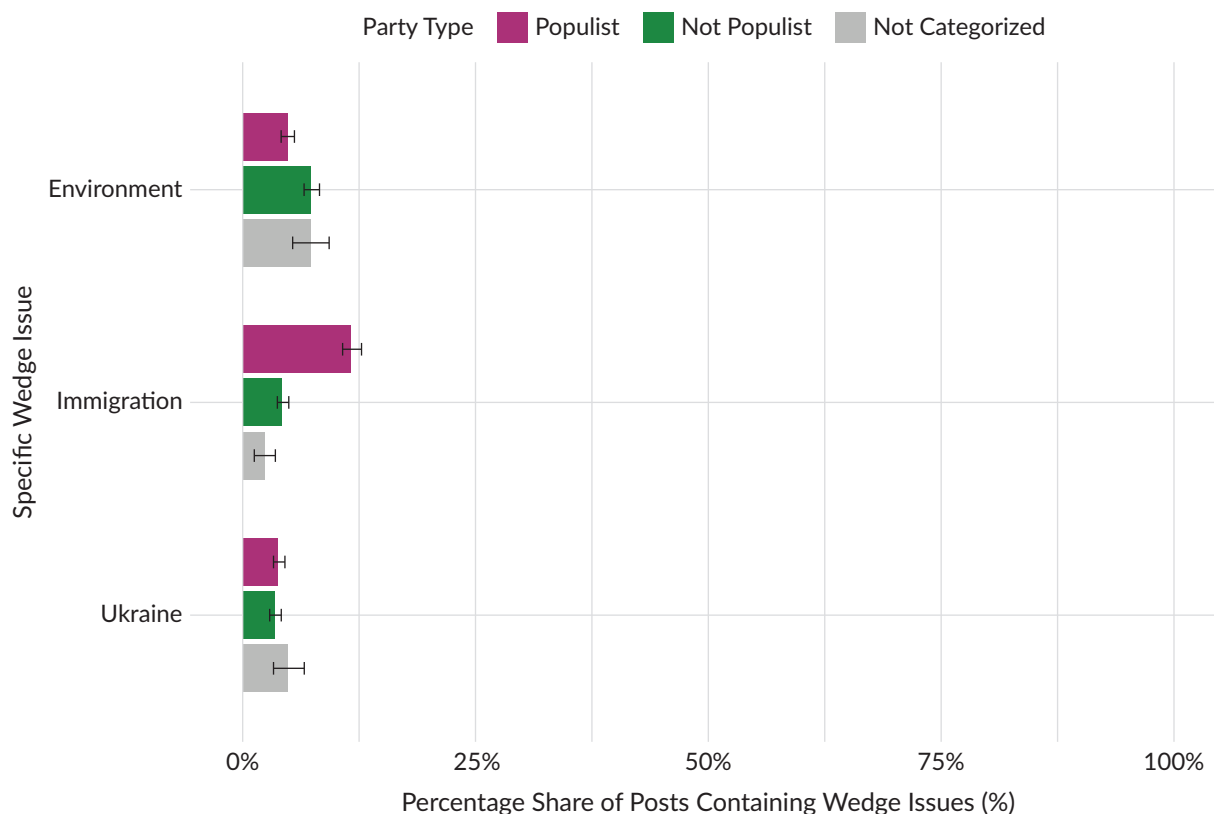
**Figure 3.** Content categories in posts not addressing the analyzed wedge issues by party types with confidence intervals ( $n = 7,386$ ).



**Figure 4.** Content categories in posts addressing wedge issues by party types with confidence intervals ( $n = 8,748$  Facebook posts;  $n = 1,362$  Facebook posts containing wedge issues).

though these elements were also slightly more often used by other parties in the context of wedge issues compared to other issues). Thus, it can be assumed that populist parties not only sought to put wedge issues on the public (Facebook) agenda but also engaged in setting the tone of the debate by using illiberal rhetoric and populist communication, potentially derailing a goal-directed, problem-oriented public discourse during election campaigns. More generally, it can be assumed that it plays into the hands of populist parties when other parties and the media emphasize wedge issues.

Next, we investigate how often the different party types addressed the three wedge issues (Figure 5). All party types addressed the war in Ukraine very rarely (3–5%). Environmental issues were used nearly equally by populist (5%), non-populist (7%), and non-categorized (7%) parties. This was also the wedge issue most often addressed by both non-populist and non-categorized parties. By contrast, by far the wedge issue most often highlighted by populist parties was migration (12%), which was only addressed in 4% of non-populist parties' posts and 2% of non-categorized parties' posts.

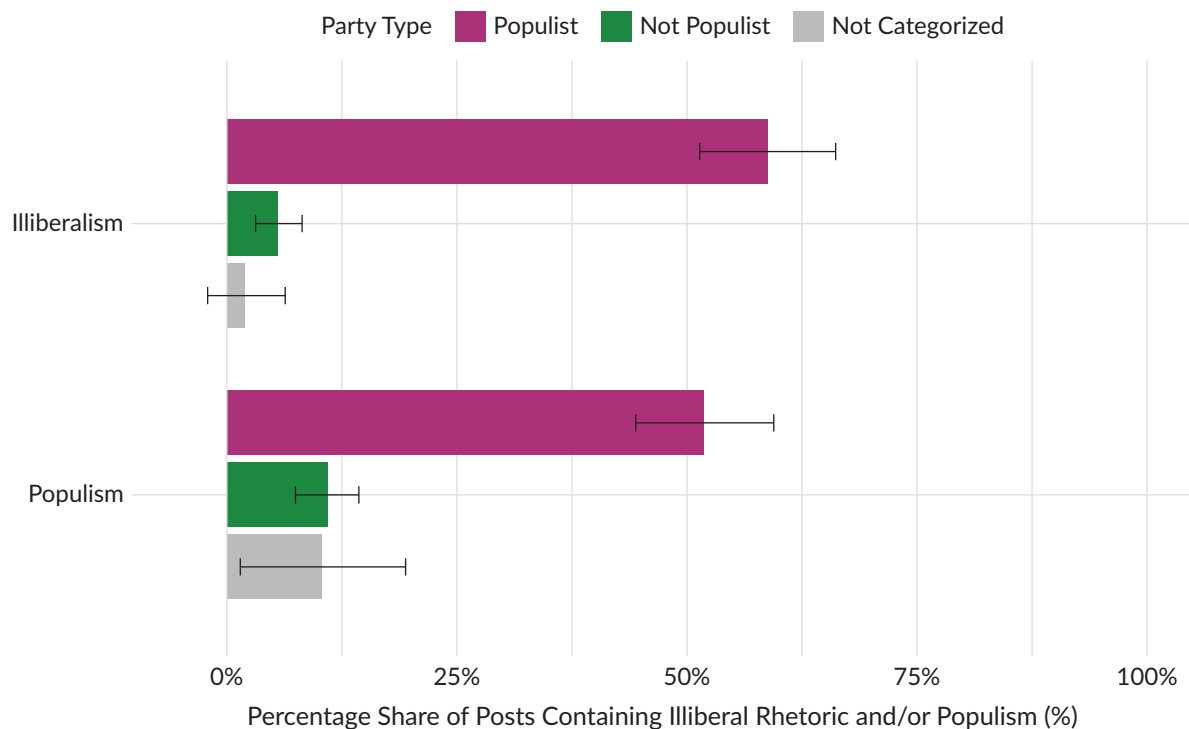


**Figure 5.** Posts addressing different wedge issues by party types with confidence intervals ( $n = 8,748$ ).

Furthermore, we investigate how the different party types combined the three wedge issues with populist communication and illiberal rhetoric (see RQ 4). In total, we observe clear differences across issues and parties in both the use of wedge issues and the communication style adopted in them. Figures 6–8 show that, across all three wedge issues, populist parties used both populist communication and illiberal rhetoric by far most frequently, but in the context of environmental policy and migration, they employed illiberal rhetoric even more often than populist communication. Compared to populist parties, non-populist parties used far less populist communication and illiberal rhetoric in wedge issue posts but still used both elements relatively often in the context of migration policy.



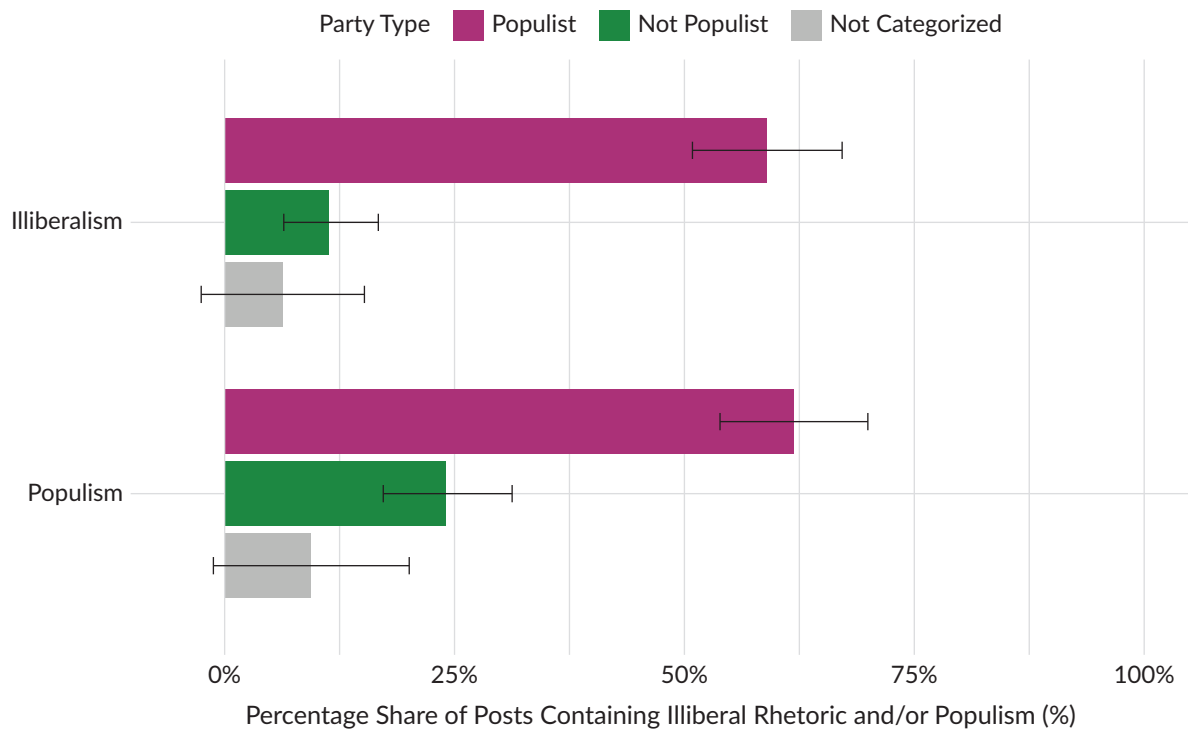
A closer examination of communication strategies in the context of the three wedge issues individually reveals distinct trends among party groups. In posts related to environmental policy (Figure 6), populist parties employed both illiberal rhetoric (in 59% of their posts) and populist communication (52%) in more than half of their posts. By contrast, both non-populist parties (populist communication: 11%; illiberalism: 6%) and non-categorized parties (populist communication: 10%; illiberalism: 2%) used both elements far less frequently.



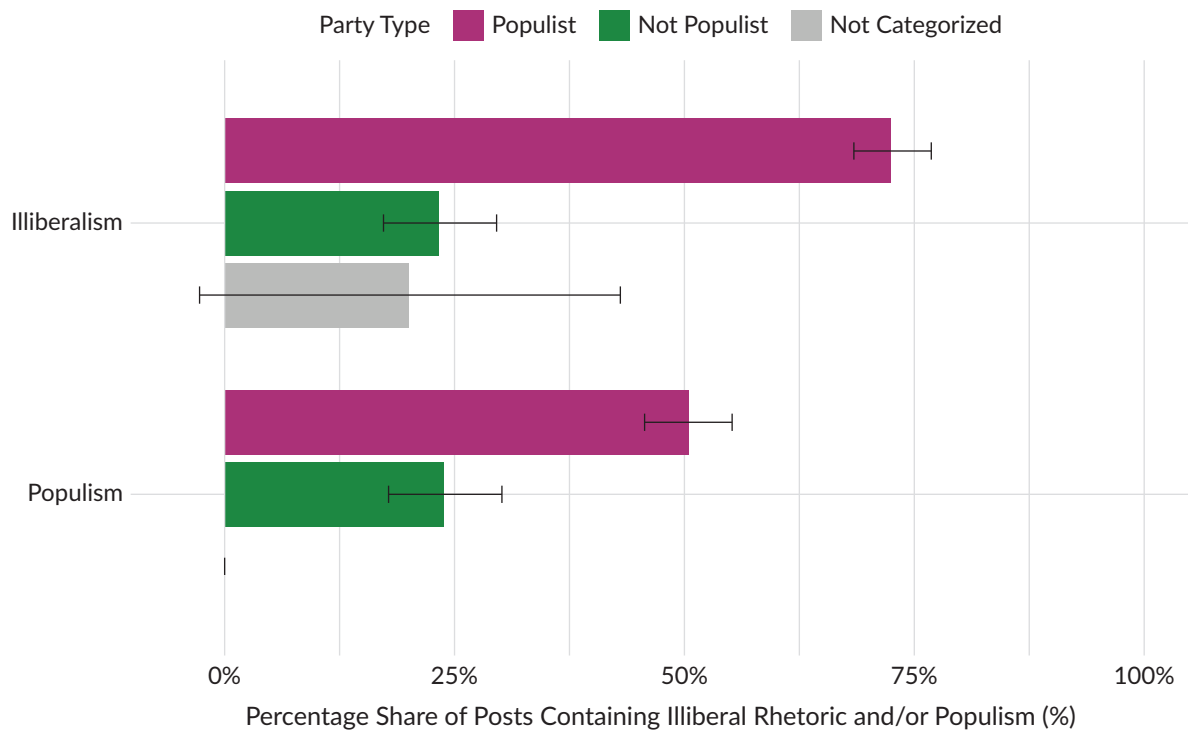
**Figure 6.** Content categories in posts addressing environmental policy by party type with confidence intervals ( $n = 546$ ).

For posts addressing the war in Ukraine, populist parties once again favored illiberal rhetoric (59%) and populist communication (62%), with the latter being used more commonly than for both other wedge issues (Figure 7). Non-populist parties employed illiberal rhetoric only rarely (11%), while populist communication appeared in 24% of their posts. Once more, non-categorized parties used both illiberal rhetoric (6%) and populist communication (9%) least often.

Regarding migration-related content, populist parties used illiberal rhetoric in 73% and populist communication in 50% of their posts, compared to only 23% and 24% of posts by non-populist parties, respectively, on migration policy (Figure 8). Non-categorized parties published only 15 posts addressing this wedge issue, adopting illiberal rhetoric in 20% and populist communication in 0% of these posts.



**Figure 7.** Content categories in posts addressing the war in Ukraine by party type with confidence intervals ( $n = 325$ ).



**Figure 8.** Content categories in posts addressing migration by party type with confidence intervals ( $n = 632$ ).

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined how political parties across 13 EU member states employed wedge issues and rhetorical strategies in their Facebook communication during the 2024 EP elections. The analysis revealed that wedge issues were used systematically, and that their treatment varied significantly depending on party type (RQ1). Populist parties relied more heavily on wedge issues and frequently combined them with populist communication (RQ2) and illiberal rhetoric compared to non-populist and non-categorized parties (RQ3). Moreover, the use of both populist communication and illiberal rhetoric clearly differed depending on which wedge issue the parties addressed (RQ4), indicating that some wedge topics are more conducive to these elements than others. Taken together, these findings shed light not only on how parties navigate elections during periods of intense political strain but also on how digital platforms are reshaping the structure and tone of electoral communication in Europe.

Two core findings stand out. First, populist parties were more likely than non-populist or non-categorized parties to focus on divisive issues and to frame these issues in polarizing ways. These results support existing research that conceptualizes wedge issues as tools for activating affective and attitudinal divisions within electorates (Hillygus & Shields, 2008; Wiant, 2002). Populist parties appear to strategically combine issue ownership and issue entrepreneurship, selecting topics where they are seen as competent while also elevating neglected or controversial concerns to set themselves apart from mainstream competitors (Dickson & Hobolt, 2024). Their communication practices align with the broader logic of populist discourse, which emphasizes the antagonism between a virtuous “people” and a corrupt “elite,” often coupled with the exclusion of external or internal outgroups (Engesser et al., 2017; Mudde, 2004).

Second, the findings showed that populist parties not only focused more frequently on wedge issues but also used them to influence the tone of debate. Posts addressing controversial topics were significantly more likely to include populist and illiberal elements. This indicates that wedge issues are used not only to attract attention but also to steer public conversation towards conflictual and exclusionary framings. These findings resonate with research showing that social media provides a favorable environment for emotionalized, polarizing communication (Ekman & Widholm, 2022; Stier et al., 2018). The strategic use of populist communication and illiberal rhetoric in digital campaign communication contributes to shifting the structure of debate away from deliberation and toward ideological confrontation.

The interaction between wedge issues and communication styles has further implications. When populist parties repeatedly combine wedge issues with populist, illiberal, and exclusionary messaging, they may initiate a discursive dynamic in which other actors feel pressurized to respond in similar terms. This rhetorical escalation can break taboos, normalize illiberal rhetoric, and shift the boundaries of acceptable political speech. Such dynamics challenge democratic norms from within the political system and may contribute to broader changes in political culture. This includes how crises are interpreted, how democratic legitimacy is understood, and how voters relate to and how much they trust liberal democratic institutions (Enyedi, 2024; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

The findings also contribute to research on digital political communication by highlighting the centrality of message control and platform-specific affordances in shaping campaign strategies. Facebook and other social media provided parties with an opportunity to bypass traditional media and present unmediated messages

that align closely with their strategic goals. While earlier scholarship emphasized the positive potential of social media for increasing participation, mobilization, and citizen empowerment (Hallahan et al., 2007; Kioussis & Strömbäck, 2014), this study underscores the risk of social media providing a platform for coordinated rhetorical action designed to fragment audiences and amplify ideological conflict. Rather than independent content features, wedge issues, populist communication, and illiberal rhetoric are mutually reinforcing tools that can be used to structure harmful political interpretation patterns in times of polycrises.

Some limitations should be acknowledged. The analysis focused exclusively on public Facebook communication and did not include other relevant platforms, private communication channels, or paid political advertising. Thus, we are unable to detect differences in communication strategies between platforms. Furthermore, while our data allow for cross-national insights, they cannot fully account for country-specific political and media dynamics that influence how populist and illiberal styles are interpreted. We did not compare parties with differing political ideologies (but see Figure A4 in the Supplementary File for a comparison of left-wing populists and right-wing populists). As this article was intended to provide an initial overview of this new research topic, comparisons focusing on countries and party ideologies would have gone beyond its scope. However, future studies should definitely tackle these issues, and our data offer unique potential for this. Finally, the study focused on message production rather than audience reception and media effects. Future research should examine how users engage with these messages, how algorithms amplify specific types of content, and how these patterns shape public attitudes over time.

Despite these limitations, the findings offer valuable insights into the evolving relationship between political strategy, digital media, and democratic discourse. For political communication research, the study points to the need for more integrative analyses that examine how parties combine issue agendas with communication styles to shape electoral competition. For public debate and democratic practice, the findings raise concerns about the growing importance of polarizing and illiberal rhetoric in campaign communication, particularly in times of political and societal polycrises, as in the case of the 2024 EP elections. The campaign strategies analyzed in this study reflect broader transformations in how parties engage with electorates under such conditions. The increased use of wedge issues and exclusionary rhetoric, especially by populist actors, underscores how digital platforms are used to redefine the contours of democratic debate. Wedge issues could potentially be used as a “Trojan horse” to introduce illiberal rhetoric into public debates and ultimately call democracy itself into question. As democratic systems face internal and external pressures, understanding the communicative mechanisms through which parties influence public discourse becomes essential. This study contributes to that understanding by showing how strategic communication in digital environments intersects with ideological positioning, institutional norms, and the fragility of democratic cohesion in contemporary Europe.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### Data Availability

Interested researchers are encouraged to contact the authors to request access to the data, which will be provided whenever feasible. For copyright and privacy reasons, the data cannot be published freely.

### LLMs Disclosure

In creating this manuscript, we used ChatGPT (GPT-4o) to assist in writing the R code for the analysis. ChatGPT (GPT-4o) and DeepL were used for language editing and to improve the consistency and flow of the original text. The initial texts were always written by the authors. All results were carefully reviewed and edited.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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# Social Media Strategies in Second-Order Elections: Insights From the 2019 European Election Campaign

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## Abstract

This article investigates the strategic use of Facebook in the 2019 European Parliament elections, challenging the traditional view of these elections as “second-order” national elections. Drawing on a comprehensive dataset, the research analyzes campaign materials from all EU member states, focusing on the thematic and visual strategies employed by political parties on Facebook. The findings reveal that digital visibility, measured by the volume of posts, is a stronger predictor of electoral success than thematic coherence or ideological messaging. The study integrates theories of hybrid media systems, symbolic politics, and cultural performance to argue that Facebook functions not merely as a communication tool but as a symbolic arena where legitimacy is performed and contested. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of how social media platforms are reshaping the dynamics of European electoral politics.

## Keywords

algorithmic visibility; digital campaigning; digital visibility; European elections; Facebook; political communication; social media

## 1. Introduction

The widespread use of social networking sites (SNSs) has significantly altered how people communicate, form and maintain relationships, express political views, and engage as active citizens. As interactions evolve, political organizations have adapted their communication strategies to leverage SNSs, promoting transparency and enhancing dialogue between citizens and political candidates. SNSs have become vital tools for politicians to connect with voters and mobilize supporters, enabling free participation and

amplifying marginalized voices. Voters now have unprecedented empowerment, able to communicate freely with each other and directly with political candidates throughout electoral campaigns. The use of SNSs has revolutionized political communication, fostering a fairer dialogue between the public and political elites, and allowing citizens to scrutinize actions publicly, thereby reshaping the political process (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Gainous & Wagner, 2013). This transformation is particularly evident in EU elections, often viewed as “second-order national elections” due to their perceived lesser importance compared to national elections and their focus on national rather than European issues, although since 2009 empirical evidence shows that voters and political parties have started to place more importance on European Parliament (EP) elections (Maier et al., 2021). This shift reflects a broader trend toward the Europeanisation of political engagement, wherein supranational governance structures are no longer perceived as peripheral to national political discourse.

Extensive research highlights various reasons for SNS use during electoral campaigns, such as increased exposure at minimal cost and the emergence of lesser-known candidates from anonymity (Nulty et al., 2016; Vergeer et al., 2011). Building on theories of symbolic performance and hybrid media systems (Alexander, 2011; Chadwick, 2013), our analysis focuses not merely on usage frequency but on how visibility itself becomes a strategic resource in digital campaigning. However, evidence suggesting that SNSs complement and enrich traditional communication methods, rather than merely supplementing them, is scarce. Recent studies indicate that SNSs are often employed as unidirectional communication tools (Golbeck et al., 2010; Graham et al., 2013) rather than interactive platforms. Similarly, Lilleker et al. (2011) found that despite the interactive features of Web 2.0 integrated into the 2009 EP election campaign, these tools were predominantly used for advertising rather than fostering interactive communication with citizens. While scholars concur on the underutilization of SNSs’ interactive features, there are conflicting findings regarding their impact on electoral outcomes. Some studies report a positive effect on electoral results (Koc-Michalska et al., 2016), whereas others observe that SNS engagement does not consistently lead to improved electoral outcomes (Bright et al., 2020).

There is extensive research on the use of SNSs in national election campaigns (see, for example, Ahmed et al., 2017; Babac & Podobnik, 2018; Cornfield, 2010; Ellis, 2018; Gibson, 2013; Gulati & Williams, 2013; Larsson, 2019; Magin et al., 2017; Strandberg, 2013), documenting the rate of adoption at the national level and the strategies politicians adapt to using this medium in various countries. However, there is limited research on social media adoption in European election campaigns (Nulty et al., 2016) and whether this contributes to an increased focus on European issues or better overall results for the main political parties. This article aims to bridge this gap.

The analysis presented in this study is particularly relevant in the context of EU elections, which are often described as second-order elections (Reif & Schmitt, 1980) due to their perceived lower importance compared to national elections and fewer voters who turn out to vote based primarily on domestic issues rather than European issues. Reif and Schmitt (1980) identify party campaigns as the main factor for this voter behaviour, given political parties’ lack of focus on European issues in their campaign (e.g., de Vreese, 2009; Hoeglinger, 2016; Petithomme, 2012). Indeed, Marsh (1998) also observes that “parties themselves generally work to make European elections second-order national elections” by focusing on domestic rather than European issues (Marsh, 1998, p. 607). Despite this perception, EU issues appear to have become more important for voters since the beginning of the 1990s (Hooghe & Marks, 2009) which means that both politicians and the



public have started to refocus their attention towards EU issues during these campaigns, highlighting the unique dynamics at play in European elections (Senninger & Wagner, 2015). In line with this stream of thought, Adam and Maier (2016) found evidence of mobilisation on EU issues in the specific context of the 2009 EP elections, suggesting the beginning of the transition away from the previous second-order party campaign model, even if the campaign was still not centred solely on EU issues. In addition, Eugster et al. (2021, p. 1445) show that, “in the context of the 2014 EP elections, established and especially governing parties no longer silenced EU issues to the same extent that they had in the past.”

Using Reif and Schmitt's (1980) second-order election model and continuing the work of other scholars (Beach et al., 2018; Eugster et al., 2021; Maier et al., 2021) that analysed the inclusion of European issues in the 2014 EP campaign, this article challenges the idea that European elections are still seen as second-order elections (at least not on social media) and seeks to add to the debate by answering the following research questions: In the age of information overload and social media saturation, what social media strategies were used by political parties in the 2019 EU election? What increased the focus of political parties on European issues? How (if at all) did Facebook adoption or non-adoption impact the overall results of the 2019 European election? While our operationalization of digital visibility focuses on the volume of campaign output (i.e., number of posts), we do not infer reach or engagement. Rather, we analyse visibility as a proxy for the intensity of campaign communication on Facebook. The focus is on Facebook not only because it remains the most widely adopted platform, but also because the dataset used in this study systematically tracked party-level Facebook activity across all 28 EU member states during the 2019 campaign. Comparable data for other platforms was not available. In February 2025, there were 5.24 billion social media users (63.7% of the global population; Kemp, 2025, p. 10) out of which 3.07 were Facebook users (more than any other social media platform; Kemp, 2025, p. 375). Our revised analysis disaggregates party-level dynamics, offering insights beyond EP group-level aggregation, thereby addressing key critiques of prior research that flattened intra-group variation and masked national nuances.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The contemporary literature on political communication has increasingly emphasized the transformative role of digital media in shaping both the visibility of political actors and the structure of electoral discourse. In particular, social media platforms, most notably Facebook, have emerged as central arenas where political campaigns unfold, symbolic capital is mobilized, and voter attention is actively contested.

SNSs began to be utilized as online campaign tools in 2006 (Gulati & Williams, 2013). Due to their interactive and instantaneous nature, they quickly became indispensable for politicians and political organizations, offering an innovative means to reach a global audience swiftly. Facebook's initial use in electoral campaigns was documented in 2006 (Karzen, 2015), but its significant impact was recognized during Obama's 2008 “Facebook election” (Johnson & Perlmutter, 2009, 2011), leading to a surge in popularity. Since then, Facebook has been increasingly adopted by politicians worldwide, establishing itself as a powerful medium capable of reaching supporters globally. Moreover, Facebook was selected for analysis due to the comprehensive availability of systematic party-level data across all EU member states in 2019—a feature not matched by other platforms in the studied context. Its widespread popularity makes Facebook a preferred platform for political communication, particularly during election campaigns (Dang-Xuan et al., 2013; Williams & Gulati, 2013), as politicians strive to connect with the public and garner



support. However, Lilleker et al. (2011) show that despite the interactive nature of the Web 2.0 feature integrated into the 2009 European campaign, these tools were predominantly being used for advertising at the detriment of interactive communication with citizens.

A plethora of studies focus largely on the use of Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) during electoral campaigns. Facebook and X have allowed candidates to increase their exposure at very little cost (Theocharis et al., 2015), a development that enabled lesser-known candidates to rise from obscurity (Vergeer et al., 2011)

As the media environment has evolved into a platform-based ecosystem, the communicative practices of political actors have shifted accordingly, reflecting not only new modes of dissemination but also new forms of symbolic performance. From a strategic communication perspective, Facebook operates simultaneously as a broadcasting outlet and as an engagement interface (Enli, 2017). It allows political parties to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and reach segmented audiences directly, often with highly personalized and targeted content. However, the mere volume of posts should not be conflated with communicative effectiveness. This study considers visibility—understood as the intensity of campaign output—as a symbolic performance in itself, rather than a direct measure of voter engagement or persuasive impact. This dynamic contributes to what Chadwick (2013) conceptualizes as a hybrid media system, in which legacy media, digital platforms, and party-owned outputs interact in complex feedback loops.

Within this system, the effectiveness of a campaign is no longer reducible to message clarity or ideological coherence, but depends increasingly on algorithmic amplification, temporal pacing, and participatory resonance. Importantly, the logic of social media is not only instrumental but also symbolic. Digital campaigning can be understood as a performative act, where legitimacy is constructed not through rational deliberation alone, but through affective framing, visual aesthetics, and the iterative circulation of emotionally charged content. In this view, what matters is not necessarily how widely content is shared (virality), but the symbolic gesture of communicative presence—how actively a party asserts itself in the digital public sphere. This insight draws on Edelman's (1988) theory of the political spectacle, which highlights how modern political communication relies on symbolic enactments of power. It also resonates with Alexander's (2011) notion of cultural performance, where political actors succeed by staging authenticity and authority in ways that feel credible to mediated audiences. In this sense, Facebook is not just a conduit for political messaging but a stage on which credibility is performed and legitimation is negotiated.

The EP elections offer a particularly relevant context for examining these dynamics. Scholarship has long documented a legitimacy gap in EP elections (Hix & Marsh, 2007; Schmidt, 2013), often attributed to the nationalization of campaign discourse—where domestic leaders and local grievances dominate at the expense of European-level issues. Yet recent studies suggest that parties capable of foregrounding transnational themes while adapting to digital media logic may succeed in partially bridging this gap (de Vreese, 2007). While some studies note a potential end of the second-order model (e.g., Hobolt & de Vries, 2016), others refer to its enduring relevance (e.g., Schmitt & Teperoglou, 2015; Schmitt & Toygur, 2016). In this light, social media does more than disseminate content: It reconfigures the communicative terrain on which European legitimacy is both contested and symbolically reconstructed. The participatory and affective affordances of Facebook further reinforce this dynamic. Theories of connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) highlight how digital networks facilitate new forms of individualized engagement, allowing users to

align with causes or parties through memes, short-form videos, or personalized visual cues. While originally formulated in the context of protest movements, the concept applies with increasing relevance to electoral campaigns—particularly in instances where parties craft messages that are not only ideologically aligned with European integration but also formatted for virality, emotionally resonant, and easily shareable within digital publics. Additionally, the literature on issue ownership (Petrocik, 1996) offers a useful lens through which to interpret parties' thematic strategies. In the context of a European election, a party's ability to project competence on EU-level matters—such as governance, legislation, or climate policy—can enhance its legitimacy. By thematically emphasizing such domains on platforms like Facebook, parties may symbolically claim ownership over transnational issues, while simultaneously affirming their relevance in an electoral field often marked by citizen detachment and informational overload.

Taken together, this theoretical framework integrates perspectives from strategic communication, symbolic politics, and European integration studies to offer a multi-layered understanding of Facebook-based campaigning used in the 2019 EP elections. It provides the conceptual foundation for examining how thematic emphasis, platform strategies, and transnational framing intersect in shaping electoral outcomes in a digitally mediated and politically fragmented European landscape. It also lays the groundwork for analysing how symbolic visibility, rather than coherent ideological messaging, increasingly defines success in supranational digital campaigns.

### 3. Methodology

This article draws on data from the 2019 European Election Campaign dataset coordinated by Roma Tre University under the European Elections Monitoring Center. The dataset was compiled through a collaborative effort involving over 100 scholars across all 28 EU member states, with the aim of systematically collecting and coding electoral materials produced during the campaign. The coding protocol employed a standardized quantitative grid applied uniformly across countries, covering posters, TV spots, press advertisements, and Facebook posts.

For this analysis, we focus exclusively on Facebook campaign activity, leveraging the largest component of the dataset: 8,716 Facebook posts originating from 200 official party accounts. Each country team coded posts from national political actors using a shared template and codebook. All posts were harvested directly from the official Facebook pages of political parties and candidates, linked to a centralized European Elections Monitoring Center platform that ensured real-time collection and accessibility. The dataset includes posts published during the official campaign period, and was archived and made available at <https://www.electionsmonitoringcenter.eu/archive>.

To ensure analytical comparability, we filtered the data to include only those parties, alliances, and independent candidates that secured at least one seat in the 2019 EP elections. This resulted in a final analytic sample of 135 parties (72% of the original 187) and 8,469 posts. All parties in the sample were assigned to one of the EP's transnational political groups (e.g., European People's Party [EPP], Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats [S&D], The Greens/European Free Alliance [Greens/EFA]), which we use as a categorical control variable in our statistical models.

Key variables used in the analysis include:

- Total campaign output: the raw number of Facebook posts per party, used as a proxy for digital campaign intensity.
- Thematic content: two binary variables were constructed to capture whether a post addresses (a) European-level issues or (b) social media/virality themes. These were derived from the issue codes recorded in variables V29\_0, V29\_1, and V29\_2, which allow up to three topics per post. We recoded these manually into thematic groupings based on the codebook definitions.

A post was coded as `european_issue = 1` if any of its topics referenced European institutions, legislation, shared policies, or other EU-level concerns. Similarly, `social_media = 1` was assigned if a topic involved platform logic, digital surveillance, fake news, or the role of social media in political discourse. Each topic variable was pre-processed to remove missing codes (–1), converted into numeric vectors, and matched against our recoding dictionary.

All data cleaning and transformations were performed in R. The thematic classification relied on manual inspection of the labels and field values in the original documentation; no automated keyword extraction or machine learning methods were employed. The classification of Facebook posts into thematic categories—specifically `european_issue` and `social_media`—was based on manual coding by the research team, drawing on predefined criteria. Variable transformations were performed in R using reproducible scripts, available upon request. Although the coding protocol was centralized and applied by trained researchers, no inter-coder reliability statistics (e.g., Cohen’s kappa, Krippendorff’s alpha) were released as part of the public dataset. As such, while the harmonization process ensured linguistic and structural consistency across countries (all variables were coded using numeric values and English-language labels), some measurement error due to coder subjectivity cannot be ruled out. This limitation is acknowledged in the discussion. The dataset is cross-sectional, covering a single election cycle, and observational in nature. Consequently, the relationships we identify are correlational and do not imply causation. Our core aim is to explore how variation in Facebook campaign volume and thematic emphasis aligns with electoral outcomes, while accounting for structural factors through the inclusion of party group affiliation as a control.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

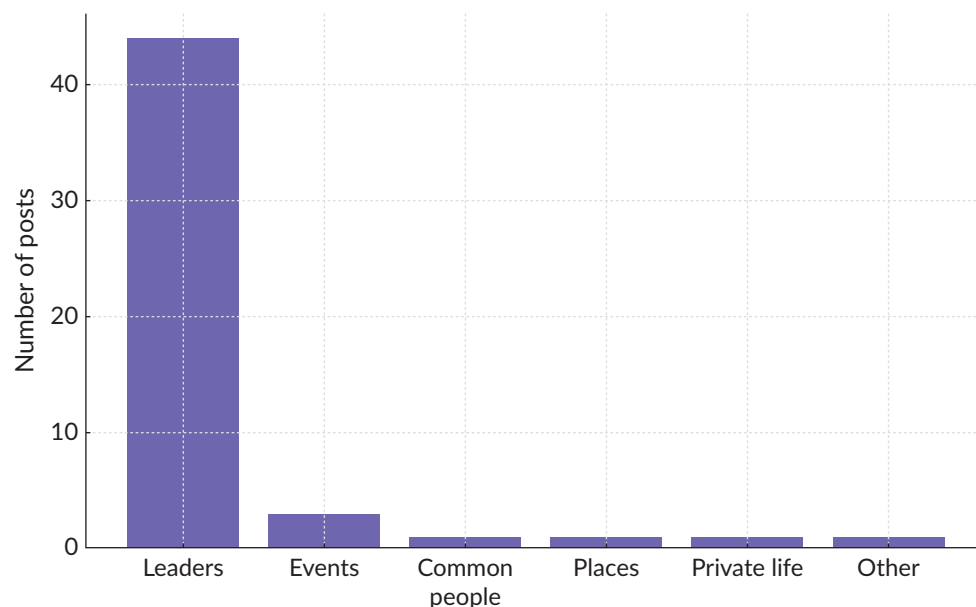
### 4.1. *Visual Framing and the Semiotic Performance of Digital Campaigning*

The extended content analysis of Facebook posts during the 2019 EP elections, based on cross-tabulations of visual and thematic attributes, provides a deeper understanding of how symbolic politics is enacted across digital platforms. When interpreted through the theoretical lens of hybrid media systems, political spectacle, and cultural performance, these patterns reveal a layered strategy of visibility, identity framing, and legitimacy construction.

Across nearly all regions and political groups, there is a marked predominance of original content—that is, posts produced directly by the monitored social media accounts. Over 75% of the content falls into this category, with even higher shares in Eastern Europe and among founding EU member states. This evidences not just a functional use of Facebook for dissemination, but a strategic effort to maintain discursive control

over campaign narratives. In line with Alexander's (2011) notion of cultural performance, parties appear acutely aware that political legitimacy must be staged—not merely argued—through curated, owned content.

Within this self-produced ecosystem, leaders and candidates dominate the visual field. Over 60% of analyzed photographs featured political figures as their central subject, with other categories—such as citizens, public spaces, or institutions—appearing marginally.



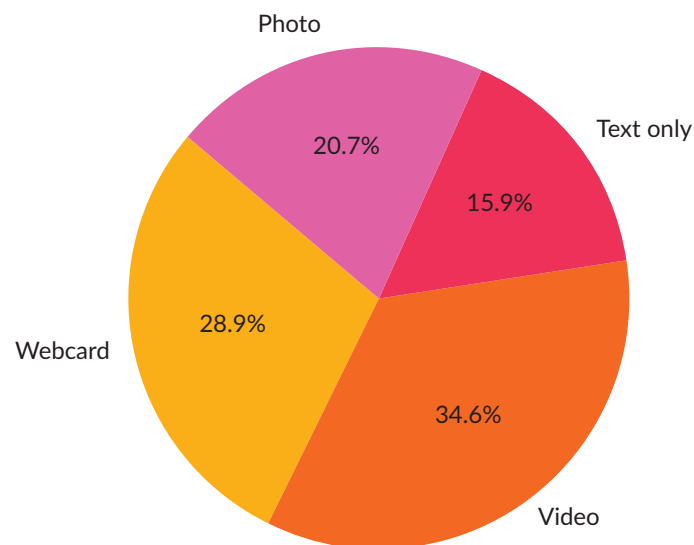
**Figure 1.** Primary subjects depicted in campaign photographs. Note: Political leaders dominate visual framing, followed by marginal use of public figures or symbolic landmarks.

This striking personalization echoes Edelman's (1988) theory of the political spectacle, in which the political actor becomes a signifier of authority, authenticity, and affective connection. The leader, visualized, becomes the campaign.

The formats of campaign material further reinforce the logic of digital visibility. The most common types include: webcards focused on single thematic issues; quote-based cards meant to be visually resonant and easily shared; and calls to action urging participation or viral dissemination (see Figure 2).

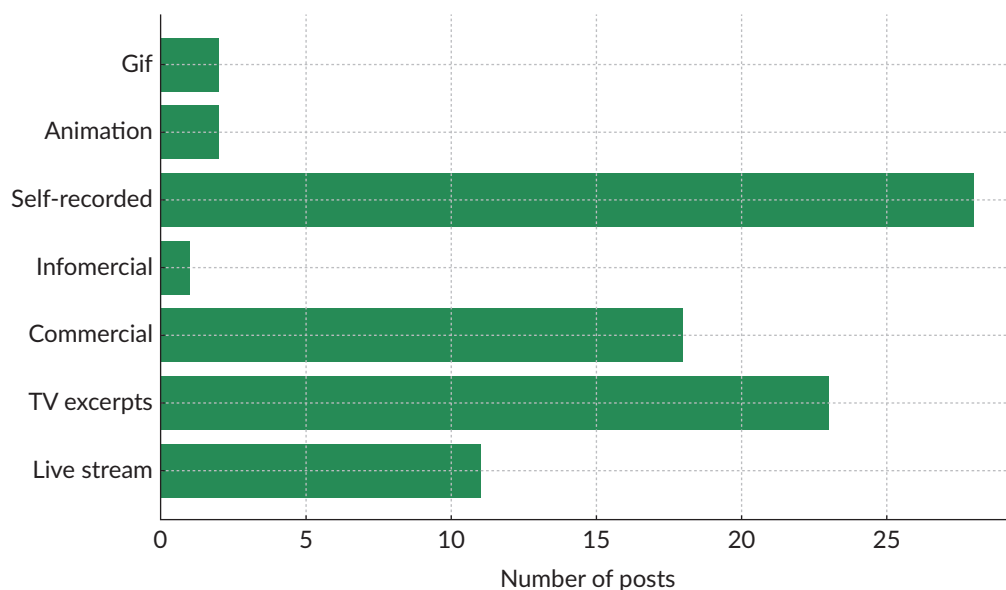
This modular architecture aligns with the platform logic of shareability and demonstrates parties' growing fluency in adapting to what Enli (2017) calls mediated authenticity. Political content here is not only ideational but also aesthetic, formatted for consumption within a competitive attention economy.

The video typology supports this argument. A significant share of campaign videos were either self-recorded (32.9%) or structured as short, edited segments akin to television commercials (21.2%), while others were derived from traditional media broadcasts (27.1%). This blending of amateur and professional production styles exemplifies the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013), where visual strategies are assembled from both legacy and digital-native formats to optimize engagement.



**Figure 2.** Distribution of visual content types (webcards, videos, photos, and text-only posts) in the 2019 EP Facebook campaign dataset.

Figure 3 illustrates the typology of video formats used by parties in their campaign communication, highlighting the prominence of self-recorded and broadcast-derived materials.



**Figure 3.** Typology of videos used in campaign communication. Note: Self-recorded and excerpted videos represent the majority of visual engagement formats.

Equally notable is the limited symbolic presence of the EU in the visual materials. Despite being the central institutional actor of the election, EU flags, institutions, or political group symbols appeared in fewer than 10% of posts. Even in the founding member states, typically considered more pro-European, EU imagery was underutilized. This supports existing critiques (Hix & Marsh, 2007; Schmidt, 2013) about the symbolic disconnect between EU governance and electoral imagination, and suggests that the Europeanization of discourse remains fragile at the visual level.

Nevertheless, the co-occurrence of EU themes and social media logic—as seen in the strong correlation between European issue posts and those dealing with digital themes—points to an emergent communicative strategy. Parties that combine European content with digitally adaptive formats (e.g., memes, webcards, videos) may be more effective in bridging the legitimacy gap. This hybrid content performs Europe in a format that resonates with users' emotional, symbolic, and algorithmic expectations—a form of platformed Europeanism that is both rhetorically and aesthetically attuned to the digital environment.

To summarize, the campaign strategies observed in the 2019 EP elections illustrate that Facebook is not merely a tool of message delivery, but a semiotic arena where legitimacy is staged through symbolic visibility, performative leadership, and adaptive visual grammars. The interplay between original content production, leader-centric imagery, and shareable formats underscores the transformation of European electoral politics into a field of digitally mediated symbolic struggle.

This study draws upon a comparative dataset documenting campaign activity during the 2019 EP elections across all EU member states. The dataset comprises systematically coded observations of political communication by individual parties and includes variables reflecting country of origin, political group affiliation within the EP, electoral performance (expressed as the number of seats won), and multiple indicators related to the content and format of campaign outreach, particularly on digital platforms such as Facebook. To ensure political relevance, the sample was restricted to parties, alliances, and candidates that obtained at least one seat and had verifiable campaign communication.

To concentrate the analysis specifically on digital campaigning through Facebook, we limited our dataset to observations that involved identifiable campaign messages. This was operationalized by selecting entries that either contained a written description of the campaign content (V34) or were explicitly flagged with a “yes” in variables V30 or V32, which denote the presence of online political communication. This filtering step ensured that the dataset reflected only parties that engaged in active digital campaigning, thereby allowing a focused assessment of Facebook's electoral relevance.

Subsequently, we examined the thematic orientation of the campaign content through variables V31 and V33, which include multiple comma-separated numeric codes representing the topics addressed in each campaign post. Based on a systematic review of the original codebook, we constructed two binary indicators—`social_media` and `european_issue`—by manually mapping specific numeric codes from the variables V29\_0, V29\_1, and V29\_2 to thematic categories. Each observation could contain up to three codes; these were cleaned, split, and matched against predefined lists. The mapping process was conducted in R, and a full reproducible script is available upon request. Codes for `social_media` include themes such as virality, fake news, and digital platforms, while `european_issue` captures references to EU institutions, policies, or integration. The thematic coding was conducted manually by the authors using R, based on the official dataset documentation and label structure. No automated classification techniques were used. Although inter-coder reliability metrics (e.g., Cohen's kappa) were not released by the original consortium, all coders operated under a harmonized international protocol, with a unified codebook and templates. Any observation containing at least one relevant code was marked as positive in the respective binary variable.

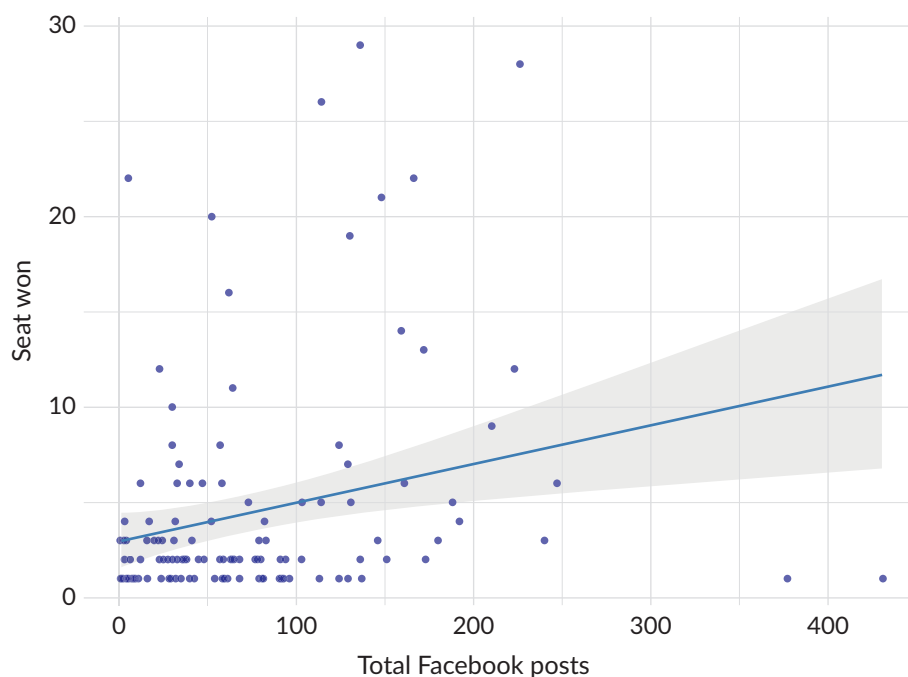
These indicators were then aggregated across each unique combination of member state and European political group—European Parliament political group affiliation (EP group), labeled as GRUPPO in the

dataset—yielding a dataset structured at the country  $\times$  political group level. For each unit, we computed the total number of campaign messages, the number of posts dealing with European issues or social media themes, the corresponding proportions of such posts, and the total number of seats won—recalculated directly from the raw number of seats won (SEGGI), as recorded in the original dataset provided by the European Elections Monitoring Center, values to ensure accuracy.

To investigate whether Facebook campaigning was associated with electoral performance, we performed Pearson correlation analyses between the number and proportion of thematically coded posts and the number of seats obtained by each party. These associations were further explored through scatterplots with fitted regression lines, and significance was tested using  $p$ -values.

The updated analysis reveals a moderate but statistically significant positive correlation between the total number of Facebook posts and seats won in the 2019 EP elections ( $r = 0.25$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This suggests that among the variables examined, only European-oriented messaging shows a weak but detectable association with electoral performance. Digital presence, when measured through post volume alone, appears insufficient to predict electoral outcomes without additional contextual factors.

As shown in Figure 4, parties that produced a higher volume of Facebook content tended to perform better electorally, though variation remains substantial.



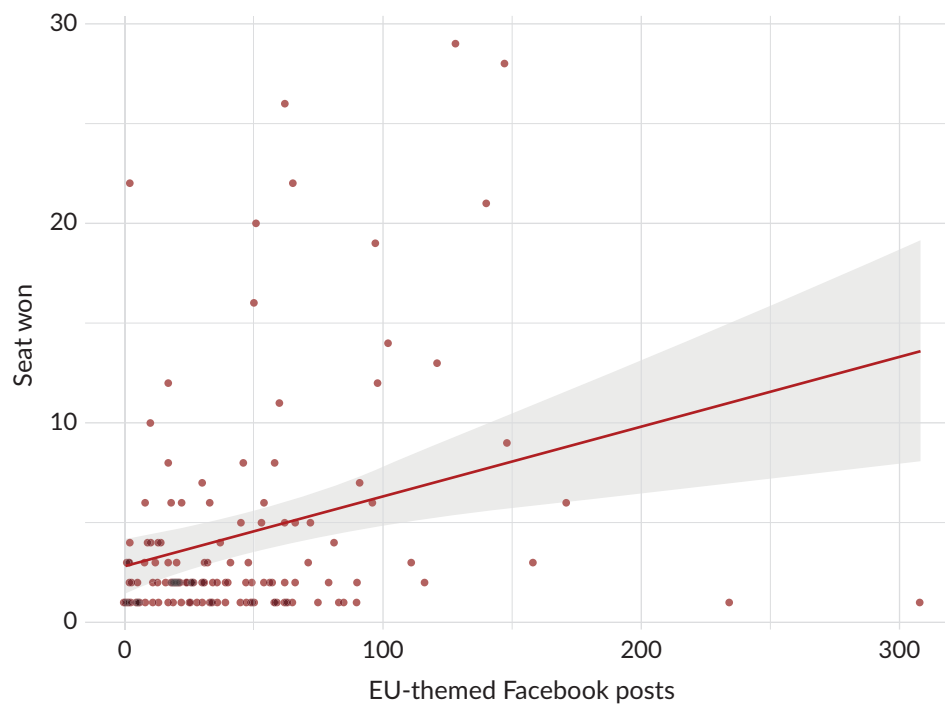
**Figure 4.** Correlation between total number of Facebook campaign posts and number of seats won at the 2019 EP elections (party-level data). Note: The linear fit illustrates a statistically significant positive association ( $r = 0.25$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), although with substantial heterogeneity across parties.

This finding underscores the importance of sustained visibility during election periods, rather than any particular message content alone, in gaining electoral traction in today's media-saturated political environments.



Thematic content remains relevant symbolically, but our updated analysis suggests that it does not independently predict electoral outcomes. While European and digital themes frequently co-occur, their individual contributions to electoral success appear marginal once structural factors are accounted for.

As illustrated in Figure 5, parties posting more frequently on EU-related topics, including fake news and digital platforms, tended to achieve slightly better electoral results.

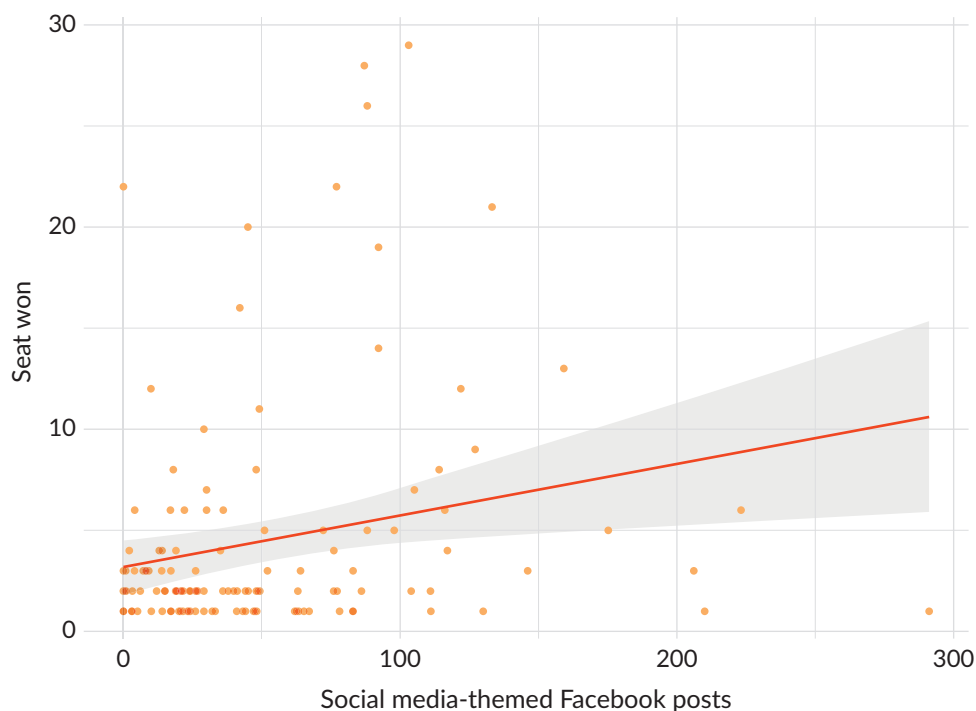


**Figure 5.** Correlation between the number of EU-themed posts (social media related themes—e.g., fake news, digital platforms, virality) and the number of seats won at the 2019 EP elections.

A modest but positive linear association is visible, suggesting that digital discourse may carry symbolic or mobilizing value in election campaigns. However, the proportions of these posts relative to the total campaign output (e.g., `pct_social_media` or `pct_european_issue`) did not significantly predict electoral success. This implies that it is not thematic intensity that matters, but rather the volume of communication—quantity appears to matter more than relative emphasis.

As shown in Figure 6, parties that addressed social media-related themes in their posts, such as platform governance or fake news, tended to perform slightly better electorally.

Preliminary comparative insights suggest variation across political families. Parties affiliated with ALDE (rebranded as Renew Europe after the 2019 elections) and the Greens (Verdi/ALE) appear more likely to produce high volumes of Facebook content with both European and digital themes. By contrast, parties in the EPP and S&D families tended to adopt more restrained digital strategies, both in quantity and in thematic reach. These divergences may reflect structural differences in campaign resources, generational divides in digital literacy, or strategic assumptions regarding the resonance of European content in domestic electorates. While these hypotheses lie beyond the scope of the current quantitative design, they open up



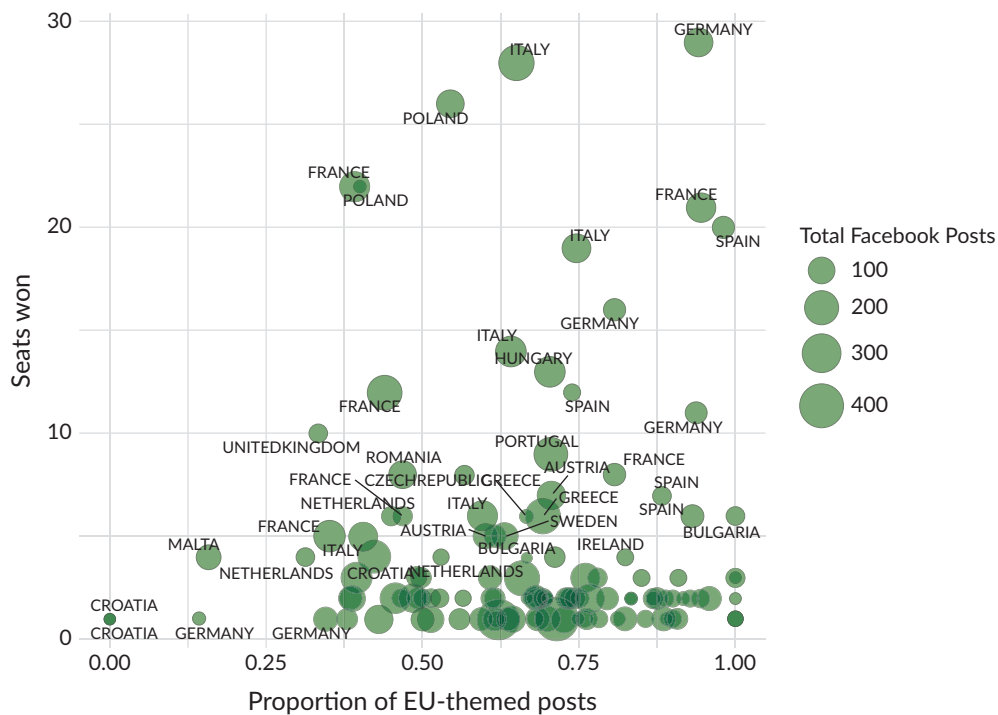
**Figure 6.** Correlation between number of Facebook posts addressing social media-themed content and number of seats won.

avenues for future mixed-method inquiry. Taken together, these findings highlight the extent to which Facebook operated as both a communicative infrastructure and a symbolic arena during the 2019 EP campaign. Digital visibility, particularly when coupled with Europe-oriented themes, appears to have offered measurable electoral dividends.

This interpretation is further supported by the bubble plot visualization (Figure 7), which maps each party group's proportion of European-themed posts against the total number of seats won, with bubble size representing total post volume. The bubble plot displays the proportion of EU-focused campaign posts (X-axis) against the number of seats won (Y-axis), with bubble size indicating the total volume of Facebook posts. A clear pattern of higher seat counts is visible among parties with greater overall post volume, regardless of thematic share.

This provides visual confirmation that symbolic effort alone is insufficient unless coupled with sustained digital presence. The dependent variable was the number of seats won by each party. Independent variables included the total number of Facebook posts, posts with social media themes, and posts addressing European issues. We also included a categorical control for European political group (GRUPPO), which captures structural and ideological differences across parties. Although direct data on campaign spending, incumbency, or party size were unavailable, GRUPPO partially accounts for these structural factors. We explicitly acknowledge the limitations of this model, particularly its correlational nature and the absence of critical control variables.

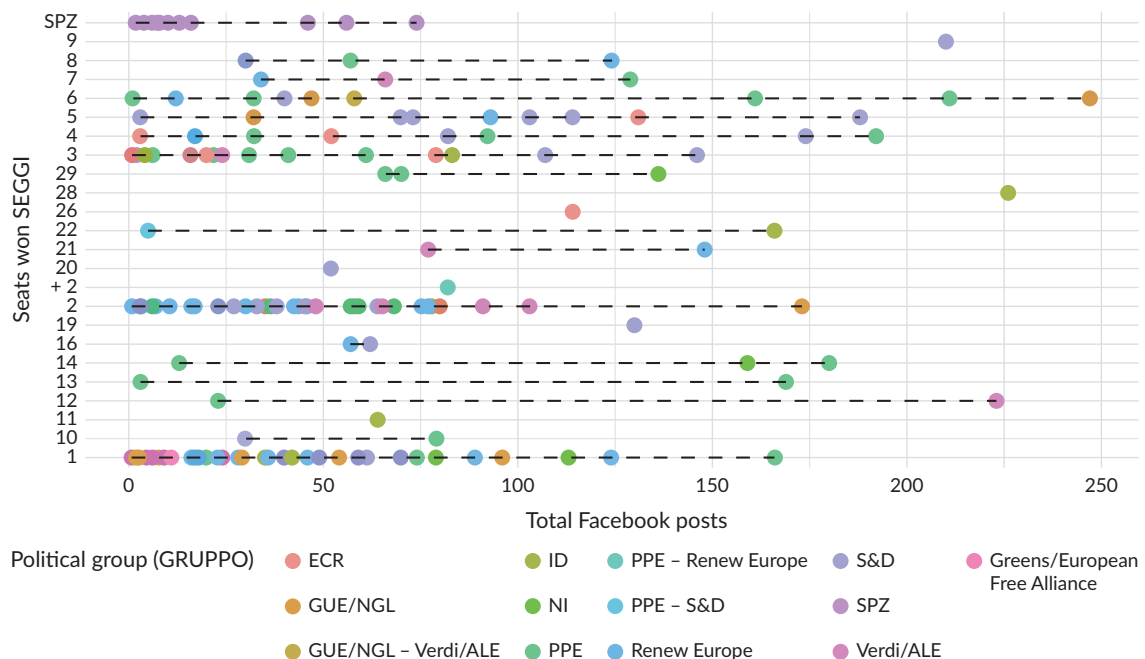
While our core analyses rely on group-level aggregations, we further examined party-level variation to address potential concerns related to ecological fallacy. Figure 8 presents a scatter plot of individual parties' total



**Figure 7.** Proportion of European-Themed Posts vs. Electoral Success.

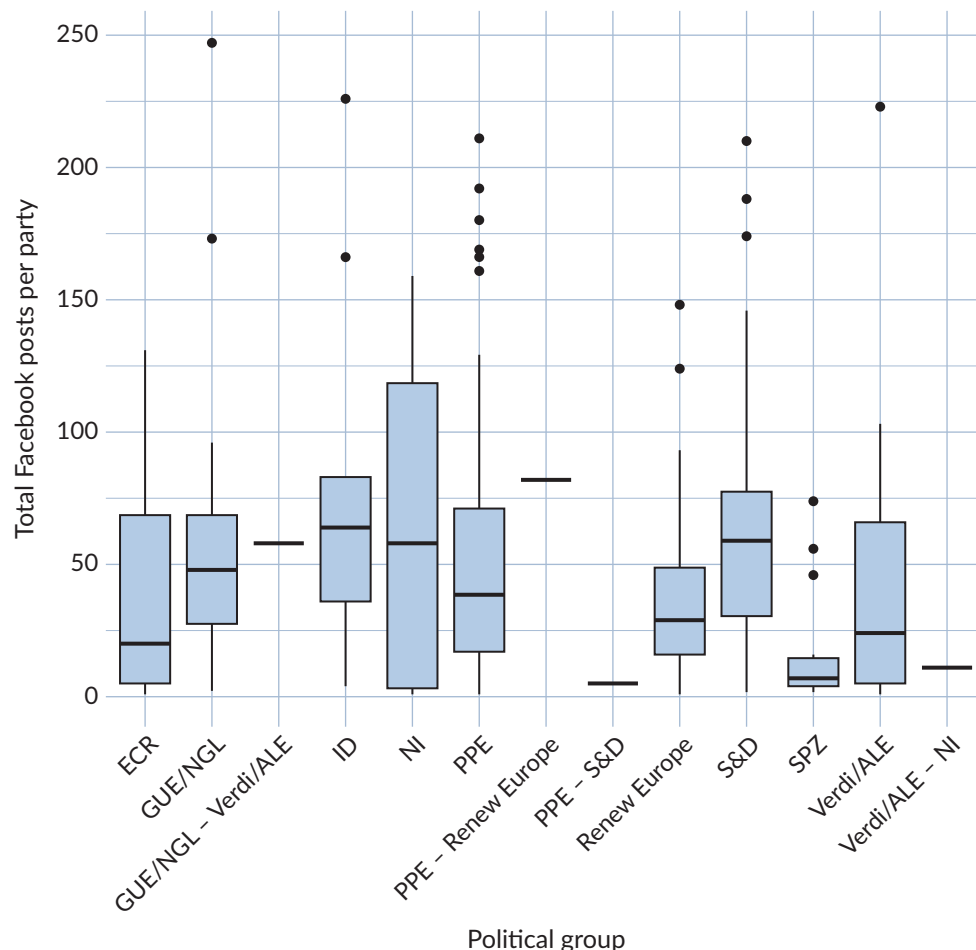
Facebook posts and their corresponding number of seats won in the 2019 EP elections. The disaggregated view reveals substantial variation not only across parties but also within political families.

As shown in Figure 8, the relationship between Facebook campaign activity and electoral performance varies widely across individual parties.



**Figure 8.** Scatter plot: Number of posts vs. seats won (by party)—aggregated at political party level.

This heterogeneity is further visualized in Figure 9, a boxplot showing the distribution of Facebook campaign output within each EP group. Notably, even among ideologically similar parties, such as those in the PPE or S&D, there are significant differences in digital activity levels.



**Figure 9.** Boxplot: Distribution of Facebook posts by political group.

These visualizations demonstrate that political communication strategies are not uniformly adopted even within the same party family. While high output does correlate weakly with electoral performance at the party level, the association is inconsistent, reinforcing the symbolic rather than deterministic role of digital campaigning.

To further test whether digital campaign strategies predicted electoral outcomes, we estimated a multiple linear regression with the number of seats won as the dependent variable. As shown in Figure 9, only one variable—the number of posts related to European-level issues—emerges as statistically significant ( $\beta = 0.056$ ,  $p < .1$ ), yet does not meet the conventional 0.05 threshold, suggesting that parties emphasizing EU-wide topics in their campaign output were slightly more successful. In contrast, neither the total number of Facebook posts nor the number of posts about social media themes displayed a significant relationship with electoral performance. The model also includes EP group affiliation (GRUPPO) as a categorical control to account for structural differences across party families. As expected, belonging to the S&D group is a strong predictor of electoral success ( $\beta = 18.57$ ,  $p < .01$ ), reflecting institutional advantages of established center-left parties

**Table 1.** Multiple linear regression predicting electoral success from Facebook campaigning variables.

|                          | Dependent variable |                    |
|--------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
|                          | Total seats        |                    |
| Total posts              | −0,020             | (0,030)            |
| European issues posts    | 0.056*             | (0,033)            |
| Social media posts       | 0.010              | (0.028)            |
| GRUPPO GUE/NGL           | −2,827             | (2.171)            |
| GRUPPO GUR/NGL–Verdi/ALE | 0.493              | (5.598)            |
| GRUPPO ID                | 3.209              | (2.339)            |
| GRUPPO NI                | −1.472             | (2.640)            |
| GRUPPO PPE               | −0.787             | (1.832)            |
| GRUPPO PPE–S&D           | 18.570***          | (5.556)            |
| GRUPPO Renew Europe      | −1.767             | (1.896)            |
| GRUPPO S&D               | −0.173             | (1.807)            |
| GRUPPO Verdi/ALE         | −2.015             | (2.070)            |
| GRUPPO Verdi/ALE–NI      | −2.815             | (5.558)            |
| Constant                 | 3.418**            | (1.464)            |
| Observations             | 128                |                    |
| $R^2$                    | 0.227              |                    |
| Adjusted $R^2$           | 0.139              |                    |
| Residual SE              | 5.361              | ( $df = 114$ )     |
| F Statistic              | 2.579***           | ( $df = 13; 114$ ) |

Note: \*  $p < 0.1$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

in 2019. The adjusted  $R^2$  of the model is 0.14, indicating modest explanatory power. The residual standard error (5.36) and F-statistic ( $F = 2.579$ ,  $p < .01$ ) suggest overall model significance, but underscore the limited variance explained by campaign-level digital metrics alone.

Overall, the regression and visualization together strengthen the case that electoral visibility in the European digital sphere is structured less by topic and more by rhythm—that is, by the algorithmically recognized persistence and intensity of engagement.

The empirical findings of this study offer a compelling illustration of how strategic visibility, thematic framing, and digital media logics converge to shape electoral performance in the EP context. When situated within the theoretical framework outlined above, several key insights emerge regarding the performative nature of political legitimacy and the operational dynamics of campaigning on Facebook.

First, the strong positive correlation between the total number of campaign posts and the number of seats won affirms the premise that algorithmic visibility and volume of communication are crucial resources in the contemporary hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013). This supports the notion that success in European elections is increasingly dependent on maintaining persistent symbolic presence in the digital arena, rather than relying solely on programmatic or ideological clarity. While the research refers to “algorithmic visibility,” we clarify that this term is used metaphorically to describe the logic of attention allocation on platforms like

Facebook. The dataset does not include interaction-level metrics such as engagement rates or reach, and thus no direct measurement of algorithmic processes is attempted. In the language of Edelman (1988), the political spectacle materializes here through sheer visibility: Political actors who successfully “flood” digital platforms with content perform power, presence, and relevance.

Second, the significant association between social media-themed posts and electoral success aligns with theories of connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). It suggests that parties capable of framing their messages in formats that resonate with digital publics—whether through discussions of fake news, platform governance, or engagement metaphors—are more likely to be rewarded electorally. Importantly, this does not necessarily imply ideological alignment with platform cultures, but rather strategic adaptation to their communicative grammar. The affective and participatory affordances of Facebook—short videos, emotional cues, viral tropes—appear to constitute a new form of symbolic capital, one that is politically convertible when managed skillfully.

Third, the correlation between European-issue-focused posts and the number of seats obtained provides empirical grounding to the claim that European legitimacy is not only eroded by nationalization (Hix & Marsh, 2007) but can also be strategically reconstructed through digital discourse. Parties that articulate European narratives in a digital vernacular, what we might call platformed Europeanism, seem to regain some of the legitimacy deficit traditionally associated with EP elections. This lends empirical weight to de Vreese’s (2007) claim that Europeanization of campaign content is both possible and electorally advantageous under the right media and strategic conditions, showing at the same time that European elections are seen less as second-order elections. This finding is indeed in line with existing research (Beach et al., 2018) that argues that the political campaigning leading up to the EP elections makes them less second-order.

Yet, the lack of significant correlation between the proportion of European or digital posts and electoral results nuances this narrative. It indicates that quantity matters more than proportion, and that legitimacy in this context is not necessarily awarded for thematic consistency or coherence, but for communicative saturation. From the perspective of Alexander’s (2011) theory of cultural performance, this could be interpreted as a shift from message integrity to performance density—where legitimacy is judged not by thematic purity, but by volume, frequency, and emotional connectivity.

Finally, the strong internal correlation between European issues and social media content suggests that these are not distinct dimensions but intertwined modes of symbolic production. This intersection supports the hypothesis that digitally mediated narratives of Europe—framed in emotionally salient, shareable, and semiotically rich formats—constitute a particularly effective rhetorical strategy. When campaigns link European legitimacy to affectively charged digital frames, they not only bridge the national-European divide, but also recode transnational politics into the idioms of platform culture.

In sum, the empirical patterns identified in this study lend strong support to the theoretical claim that Facebook is not simply a channel for campaign distribution but a symbolic environment in which legitimacy, credibility, and visibility are continuously negotiated. Political communication on Facebook during the 2019 EP elections reflects not just an adaptation to media logic, but a deeper transformation in how European electoral politics is staged, perceived, and ultimately validated.

This study has several limitations. First, the dataset is cross-sectional and does not allow causal inference. Second, certain structural party-level variables—such as campaign budgets, incumbency, or previous electoral strength—were not available. We used GRUPPO as a proxy, though it only partially accounts for these factors. Third, our operationalization of digital visibility relies on post volume rather than user engagement or algorithmic reach. Finally, while the original dataset followed a centralized protocol, inter-coder reliability metrics were not released, and coding consistency across countries cannot be independently verified.

## 5. Conclusion

The 2019 EP elections mark a significant evolution in the landscape of political communication, where Facebook emerged not merely as a distribution channel but as a symbolic arena for performing political legitimacy, visibility, and affective resonance. Our study demonstrates that electoral success in the digital age is increasingly tied to the volume and rhythm of online engagement rather than the thematic depth or ideological coherence of campaign messages. The strong correlation between the number of Facebook posts and the number of seats won underscores the importance of algorithmic visibility and persistent symbolic presence in shaping electoral outcomes.

Importantly, while posts addressing European issues and digital themes were positively associated with electoral performance, it was the sheer quantity of content—rather than its proportional emphasis—that proved most predictive. This finding suggests that in the hybrid media system, legitimacy is constructed through communicative saturation and emotional connectivity, rather than through consistent messaging. The study also highlights the emergence of a “platformed Europeanism,” where transnational political narratives are adapted to the communicative logic of social media, making them more accessible, emotionally resonant, and shareable with the public. In addition, this challenges the second-order elections model, showing that during the EP elections the public tends to focus less on EU institutional themes and more on political figures, as the data shows that in many cases, the leader becomes the campaign itself.

Our findings carry several implications for both scholars and practitioners. First, for political campaigners, the findings emphasize the strategic value of sustained digital presence. Campaigns should prioritize consistent, high-volume content production tailored to the aesthetic and emotional expectations of social media users. This includes leveraging visual storytelling, leader-centric imagery, and modular formats like web cards and short videos.

Second, for democratic institutions, the study raises questions about the nature of democratic legitimacy in the digital age. If visibility and emotional resonance outweigh ideological clarity and debating EU issues, there is a risk that electoral success may hinge more on social media performance than on policy, strategy or vision for the future of the EU.

And lastly, for scholars, the co-occurrence of European themes and social media strategies suggests a new avenue for studying the Europeanization of political discourse. Future research should explore how digital platforms can be harnessed to bridge the legitimacy gap in EU governance and foster a more transnational public sphere.



The findings also bring into light the power of algorithmic amplification in shaping political outcomes. As platforms like Facebook continue to mediate democratic processes, there is a growing need for transparency in content curation and for safeguards that ensure fair and equitable access to digital visibility.

This study therefore contributes to a deeper understanding of how social media platforms are reshaping the dynamics of European electoral politics. It calls for a rethinking of campaign strategies, democratic engagement, and regulatory frameworks in light of the performative and algorithmic nature of digital political communication.

This study is limited by its reliance on coded campaign content without integrating reception-side data. Future research could explore how such visual and thematic framing strategies are perceived by different voter segments, especially through experimental or ethnographic methods.

Further research should try to avoid limiting their analysis to Facebook and instead focus on a comparative analysis of the use of different SNSs during European election campaigns in order to assess the way political parties and candidates use social media platforms that differ in scope, reach, and characteristics. As the use of social media is expected to become universal (Gulati & Williams, 2013), more national case studies and more studies on the use of SNSs by politicians and political organisations in non-electoral periods are required to fully comprehend the way the patterns of communication change between non-electoral and electoral periods and between national electoral periods and European electoral periods.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### Data Availability

The dataset was archived and is available at <https://www.electionsmonitoringcenter.eu/archive>

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## Behind the Screen: The Use of Facebook Accounts With Inauthentic Behavior During European Elections

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### Abstract

Technology has reshaped political communication, allowing fake engagement to drive real influence in the democratic process. Hyperactive social media users, who are over-proportionally active in relation to the mean, are the new political activists, spreading partisan content at scale on social media platforms. Using The Authenticity Matrix tool, this study revealed Facebook accounts of hyperactive users exhibiting inauthentic behaviour that were used during the electoral campaign (May 10, 2024, to June 8, 2024) for the 2024 election of Romanian members of the European Parliament. The results indicate that, for some posts, up to 45% of shares were made by hyperactive users (four or more shares per post by the same account) and 33.9% by super-active users (10 or more times). This type of online behavior is considered by Meta as manipulation of “public opinion,” “political discussion,” and “public debate,” and Meta’s Community Standards is committed to preventing such behavior in the context of elections. Another key contribution of this research is the identification of dominant characteristics of hyperactive user accounts, using information publicly available on their social media profile, which provides insights into their specific features and helps users better identify them on social media. The article highlights that online social network platforms condemn these manipulative practices in theory, but they don’t take sufficient measures to effectively reduce them in order to limit their impact on our societies.

### Keywords

election campaign; Facebook; fake accounts; inauthentic behavior; manipulation; Meta; political communication; social media

## 1. Introduction

Online social networks (OSNs), like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok, have become part of our daily life, with 5.31 billion social media users around the world in April 2025, equating to 64.7% of the total global population (DataReportal, n.d.). They play a transformative role in modern society, fundamentally changing how people interact. Since social interaction has a crucial influence on shaping individual identity and building relationships between members of society, and the tradition of face-to-face communication and direct interaction in social contexts plays an important role in strengthening social ties, cultural exchange, and collective understanding, with the advent of social media, the way humans interact and communicate has undergone fundamental changes (Azzaakiyyah, 2023; Litt et al., 2020). OSNs are enabling users to connect with relatives and acquaintances, meet new people, share information, organize events, participate in social movements, directly access business opportunities worldwide, and build communities in a way humanity has never experienced before (Azzaakiyyah, 2023; Omar & Ondimu, 2024). Social media has democratized information and is shaping cultural trends and societal norms by promoting values and rights and by giving a voice to the previously unheard (Omar & Ondimu, 2024). By doing so, they have revolutionized public discourse, political communication, and campaign strategies (Omar & Ondimu, 2024; Rodenhäuser, 2023; Samoilenko, 2017). However, all these benefits are accompanied by challenges such as social isolation, unhealthy social comparisons, cultural appropriation, and the spread of disinformation (Azzaakiyyah, 2023; Gupta & Kaushal, 2017; Mughaid et al., 2023; Rodenhäuser, 2023; Voitovych et al., 2022). Since the widespread adoption of these platforms has also attracted malicious persons and entities that exploit them for fraudulent and misleading purposes, the rapid dissemination of both accurate information and disinformation, together with manipulated content, remains a central societal challenge. In this environment, 31% of EU citizens and 42% of Romanians tend to trust in OSNs, while 60% of EU citizens and 49% of Romanians tend not to trust OSNs (European Commission, 2024). At the same time, 68% of EU citizens and 79% of Romanians are declaring they have been exposed to disinformation and fake news over the past seven days (very often, often, sometimes; European Commission, 2023).

### *1.1. The Use of Fake Accounts in OSNs: Definitions and Taxonomy*

On OSNs, disinformation and manipulation can find a tool with which audiences can be reached, potentially worldwide, but also micro-targeted, with an impact never-before-seen. On social media, manipulation actions aimed at determining a “social actor” (person, group, community) to think and act in a way compatible with the initiator’s interests, and not with their own interests, have become common through the use of persuasion techniques at a rational and affective-emotional level, which intentionally distort the truth and inoculate a false perception of reality, leaving, however, the impression of freedom of thought and decision (Gherghel, 2009; Oprea, 2022). One of the ways in which manipulation on social media platforms is spread is by the creation and use of fake accounts. There is no consistent and widely accepted definition of fake accounts by industry and academia, which are also often referred to as “false accounts,” “inauthentic accounts,” “inauthentic behaviour accounts,” “cyber troops,” or “propagandists” (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017; Meta, n.d.-b, n.d.-c; Pamment et al., 2018; Weedon et al., 2017). Based on literature review, they are largely considered to be social media accounts designed to impersonate real users through fake personal information (names, photos) and/or behaviors (following, viewing, commenting, sharing), operated by humans, bots, or both, and which are created with the intent to mislead or deceive and to manipulate perceptions of popularity or influence (Huang & Liu, 2024; Moore, 2023; Oprea, 2022, 2023).



Scholars in social sciences and information technology propose several taxonomies for fake accounts or accounts with inauthentic behavior. A review of these classifications identifies several major types of accounts based on their operational characteristics and intent. A broad classification used in empirical research divides accounts into three main categories: real accounts, which are operated by genuine users with authentic identities; fake accounts that are typically controlled by humans that are hiding their identities and use false or misleading information, and the accounts are very often used for deceptive activities and to spread disinformation; and bot accounts, also known as social bots or Sybils, which are managed by automated software and can perform actions like posting, liking, or following at scale, often to manipulate engagement or disseminate content rapidly (Ferrara et al., 2016; Howard et al., 2018; Imperva, 2025; Michael, 2017; Tunç et al., 2024). One classification divides bots into two categories: good bots, such as search engine crawlers that index content; and bad bots that “are automated programs designed to perform harmful activities, such as scraping data, spamming, and launching denial-of-service attacks; these bots can mimic human behaviour, making them difficult to detect and block” (Imperva, 2025, p. 30). In 2024, automated traffic exceeded human-generated activity on the internet, constituting 51% of total web traffic (an increase from 49.6% in 2023 and 37.9% in 2018). Notably, bad bots accounted for 37% of all internet traffic, rising from 32% in 2023 and 20.4% in 2018 (Imperva, 2019, 2024, 2025).

Academics also refer to trolls. Moreau explains that “a troll is simply a user of an online social platform who deliberately tries to aggravate, annoy, disrupt, attack, offend or cause trouble by posting provocative and unconstructive content” (Moreau, 2017, as cited in Pamment et al., 2018, p. 62).

## **1.2. The Use of Fake Accounts in OSNs: Motivations and Threats**

There are many motivations behind the creation and use of fake accounts. Since the OSNs allow individuals to construct social identities without any boundaries, these fake profiles can be used to conduct astroturfing campaigns, spam activities, spread malware, and phishing attacks, manipulate public opinion through information-psychological operations (infopsy), and violate user privacy, posing significant threats to individual users, the broader online ecosystem, and societies (Albayati & Altamimi, 2019a; Bailey & Samoilenko, 2017, as cited in Samoilenko, 2017; Gupta & Kaushal, 2017; Mughaid et al., 2023; Rodenhäuser, 2023; Voitovych et al., 2022). Pasioka et al. (2021, p. 259) consider that mass distribution of specially programmed false accounts is also used as a vehicle for legal cybercrime business, for organization of stuffing of information flows, mass theft of personal data, to affect social marketing, for creation of fake news feeds and fake votes, and even to create conditions for the deterioration of trust in social networks.

Researchers highlight that the use of social media fake accounts can have dangerous and far-reaching consequences on our societies and can pose serious threats. In a 2017 Facebook report (now unavailable), the platform referred to fake accounts as “false amplifiers” describing their role as “manipulating public opinion” and “manipulating political discussion” (Weedon et al., 2017, p. 5). Pamment et al. (2018) characterize the behavior of fake accounts as generating a “bandwagon” effect, noting that these users employ “imposter accounts” created to appear as though they are controlled by someone else and that they conduct so-called “false-flag operations.” Bradshaw and Howard (2017, 2019) conceptualize these actors as organized cyber troops, sometimes consisting of “a handful of individuals managing hundreds of fake accounts” (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019, p. 17) and who “are government, military or political party teams committed to manipulating public opinion over social media” (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017, p. 3). Papakyriakopoulos et al. (2020) refer to



such users as “hyperactive users” (HAUs) emphasizing their significant role in political discourse, emergence as opinion leaders, agenda-setting effect, and capacity to create an alternative image of public opinion, thereby strongly influencing Facebook’s recommendation systems (Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020). In the meantime, the proliferation of fake accounts has even given rise to a black market for fake account services operated by both private companies and state agencies, further complicating efforts to maintain the integrity of social networks (Gupta & Kaushal, 2017; Hakimi et al., 2019).

### **1.3. The use of fake accounts on Facebook**

#### **1.3.1. Definitions and Taxonomy**

Meta defines fake accounts as “accounts created with malicious intent to violate our policies and personal profiles created to represent a business, organization or non-human entity, such as a pet....Many of these accounts are used in spam campaigns and are financially motivated” (Meta, n.d.-b). The platform distinguishes between abusive fake accounts (created to cause harm) and user-misclassified accounts (such as those made for pets, which are not intended to deceive; Schultz, 2019). Meta considers the activity of fake accounts as “inauthentic behavior,” whose definition is periodically updated in Meta’s Community Standards since October 10, 2019. The current version, consulted on May 8, 2025, defines “inauthentic behavior” as “a variety of complex forms of deception, performed by a network of inauthentic assets controlled by the same individual or individuals, with the goal of deceiving Meta or our community or to evade enforcement under the Community Standards” (Meta, n.d.-c). This definition is placed in relation to the authenticity concept, which evokes a sense that something or someone is genuine (in the sense that it is what it says it is) and true (in the sense that it is factual; Johnston & Lane, 2019; Molleda, 2010). At the same time, the platform considers that fake accounts play a central role in what they call “coordinated inauthentic behavior,” defined as “coordinated efforts to manipulate public debate for a strategic goal” which “is often associated with civic or political content” (Meta, n.d.-c). Also, the platform is referring to “inauthentic meta assets” which consist of accounts, pages, groups, and other (Meta, n.d.-c). In a 2017 Facebook report, which is currently no longer available, the platform considered that the fake accounts “have an ideological rather than a financial motivation,” and, that in some instances, they “attempt to influence political opinions on social media with large numbers of sparsely populated fake accounts that are used to share and engage with content at high volumes,” but, “in other cases, the networks may involve behavior by a smaller number of carefully curated accounts that exhibit authentic characteristics with well-developed online personas,” “coordinated people who are dedicated to operating inauthentic accounts,” their activity “can include topics around political figures or parties, divisive policies, religion, national governments, nations and/or ethnicities, institutions, or current events” (Weedon et al., 2017, p. 9).

Considering Meta’s Community Standards terminology, for research on the sharing type of engagement, Oprea identifies four categories of users in terms of Facebook posts sharing behavior:

- Normal user (NU): the account whose user has shared a specific post only once, either on their own timeline or in a group;
- Moderately active user (MAU): the account whose user has shared the same post twice or three times, either on their own timeline or on their own timeline and into one or more groups, or only into one or more groups;

- Hyperactive user (HAU): the account whose user has shared the same post four or more times, either on their own timeline or on their own timeline and into one or more groups, or only into one or more groups;
- Super-active user (SAU): the account whose user has shared the same post ten or more times, either on their own timeline or on their own timeline and into one or more groups, or only into one or more groups. (Oprea, 2023, p. 62).

While Meta defines inauthentic behavior as activity carried out by networks of inauthentic assets controlled by the same individual or individuals with the intention to deceive, it is important to note that not all inauthentic behavior originates from inauthentic accounts. A HAU or SAU displays inauthentic behavior, but it is not necessarily a fake account or one operated with malicious intent; it could simply be a hyperactive supporter or activist who is over-proportionally active in relation to the mean and his actions could simply reflect legitimate forms of democratic participation.

### 1.3.2. Preventing Measures

In the Community Standards, Meta (n.d.-c) explicitly states that the platform has a commitment to authenticity:

In line with our commitment to authenticity, we don't allow people to misrepresent themselves on our services, use fake accounts, artificially boost the popularity of content, or engage in behaviors designed to enable other violations under our Community Standards. Inauthentic behavior refers to a variety of complex forms of deception, performed by a network of inauthentic assets controlled by the same individual or individuals, with the goal of deceiving Meta or our community or to evade enforcement under the Community Standards.

Meta (n.d.-c) also states that they:

Are committed to preventing inauthentic behavior in the context of elections—these enforcement actions and standards apply agnostic of content, political or otherwise. This policy is intended to protect the authenticity of debate and discussion on our services, and create a space where people can trust the people and communities they interact with.

In this respect, Meta refers to three type of “inauthentic meta assets” that are not allowed on the platform:

To deceive Meta or our users about the identity, purpose, or origin of an audience or the entity that they represent, or the popularity of content or assets on our services, or a Meta asset's ownership or control network...to evade enforcement under the Community Standards [and the] misuse Meta reporting systems to harass, intimidate or silence others. (Meta, n.d.-c)

The platform also mentions five types of complex deception through the use of Meta assets which they don't allow engaging with: “inauthentic distribution,” “using a connected network of inauthentic Meta assets to increase the distribution of content, in order to mislead Meta or its users about the popularity of the content in question”; “inauthentic audience building,” “using inauthentic Meta assets to increase the viewership or following of network assets, in order to mislead Meta or its users about the origin, ownership or purpose of an asset or assets”; “foreign inauthentic behavior,” “foreign entities using inauthentic Meta assets to falsely

represent a domestic or local voice, in order to deceive an audience about the identity, purpose or origin of the entity they represent”; “inauthentic engagement,” “using a connected network of inauthentic Meta assets to deliver substantial quantities of fake engagement in ways designed to look authentic, in order to deceive Meta and its users about the popularity of content”; and “substantially similar deceptions,” “other substantially similar claimed or actual efforts by relatively sophisticated, connected networks of inauthentic Meta assets to deceive Meta or its users about the origin, popularity, or purpose of content” (Meta, n.d.-c).

Despite these policies, the occurrence of fake accounts on Facebook remains at impressive proportions. With 3.07 billion users in January 2025, Meta officially reported that, between October 2017 and December 2024, it managed to identify and delete from Facebook 35.58 billion fake accounts, which is equivalent to almost 12 times the number of users of the platform and over 4.4 times the global population (DataReportal, n.d.; Meta, n.d.-b; World Bank Group, 2025).

## 2. Fake Accounts Detection Approaches

### 2.1. General Overview

With the increasing prevalence of fake accounts on social media, researchers from interdisciplinary fields have looked for ways to detect them as part of either OSNs: self-regulatory strategies—Meta’s Community Standards (Meta, n.d.-a), X rules and policies (X, 2025); co-regulations—EU’s 2018 Code of Practice on Disinformation, strengthened in 2022 (European Commission, 2022); or even legislation—EU’s 2022 Digital Services Act (European Parliament and the Council Regulation of 19 October 2022, 2022), Australia’s Sharing of Abhorrent Violent Material 2019 Bill (Parliament of Australia, 2019), and Germany’s 2017 *Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz* (Network Enforcement Act; Bundesministerium der Justiz, 2017). By analyzing the literature, we can consider four major approaches to OSNs fake news detection:

- Feature-based detection: Analysis of individual account characteristics such as user behavior, activity patterns, profile completeness (Khaled et al., 2018; Oprea, 2024; Romanov et al., 2017);
- Graph-based and coordinated activity detection: Methods that identify groups of accounts acting in concert and in other abnormal patterns (Boshmaf et al., 2016; Graham et al., 2024; Gruzdt et al., 2022; Padmavathi & Vaishnavi, 2024);
- Machine learning techniques: Overview of algorithms used (e.g., support vector machines, neural networks, decision trees), their performance, and the features they leverage (Aljabri et al., 2023; Arega et al., 2023; Jadhav et al., 2021; Khaled et al., 2018; Mughaid et al., 2023);
- Hybrid and emerging methods: Discussion of combined approaches and the use of advanced analytics, such as natural language processing, and web scraping for content analysis (Abualigah et al., 2021; Arega et al., 2023).

The proposed fake account identification models have different success rates, which can achieve quite high levels of performance using computational models and algorithms, as 93% (Arega et al., 2023) or 97.1% (Mughaid et al., 2023) for support vector machine, and even 98.25% for K-Nearest Neighbor, 99.1% for artificial neural network (Azami & Passi, 2024), and 99.29, for decision tree algorithm (Elyusufi et al., 2019). Testing these models across a diverse research corpus remains a significant challenge. However, such evaluation is essential for developing models with robust and generalizable accuracy, thereby enabling their

widespread adoption. Advancements in this area have the potential to substantially reduce the prevalence of fake accounts on social media platforms.

## 2.2. “The Authenticity Matrix” Tool

Facebook, like all major OSNs, has increasingly restrictive API (application programming interface) protocol policies that don’t allow for automated data collection, including by researchers (Gotfredsen & Dowling, 2024; Hothman, 2019; Walker et al., 2019). In constant change of policies and with increasingly limited access to data, currently, researchers and journalists can access the content archive from Facebook through Meta Content Library and Content Library API, but only “posts to pages, groups, events and public profiles belonging to widely-known individuals and organizations” (Meta, 2025). Therefore, automated tools can only use data to which Meta offers access, but, in order to identify fake accounts and accounts with inauthentic behavior, data relating to accounts that don’t belong to “widely-known individuals and organizations” are impossible to be collected. This leaves room for those who use such fake account manipulation techniques to create and widely use accounts that do not fall into these categories, of no widely-known individuals and organizations, and which thus cannot be accessed by researchers and journalists.

Oprea’s Authenticity Matrix tool to detect accounts with inauthentic behavior was developed to address this issue and to provide scientific data about the real extent of the use of accounts with inauthentic behavior (Oprea, 2024). Using a Likert scale model, this tool analyzes all public information that can be manually accessed on Facebook accounts by any account that is not restricted and proposes an analysis matrix that allows establishing a degree of probability that a specific Facebook account has inauthentic behavior. The Authenticity Matrix is a methodological tool designed to assess the authenticity of Facebook’s accounts by analyzing three core dimensions: general/personal account information, account activity, and likes/interactions. Using a metric scale from 0 to 100 points, this matrix quantifies authenticity levels, enabling researchers to systematically evaluate account authenticity by placing them in one of three categories: accounts with authentic behavior, accounts with an average probability of inauthentic behavior, or, respectively, accounts with inauthentic behavior (Oprea, 2024).

The Authenticity Matrix uses a feature-based detection approach (see Section 2.1) and conducts a multi-dimensional assessment of the account’s authenticity based on several indicators. Two classes of indicators, account activity and likes/interactions, express the level of engagement, while general/personal account information indicators express a degree of transparency, which is required by Meta’s Community Standards. A user may display intense, atypical engagement while still retaining an overall profile configuration that does not meet Meta’s policies, so this tool cumulatively analyzes these indicators. The reliability of the Authenticity Matrix stems from its comprehensive design, which considers multiple indicators of authenticity rather than focusing exclusively on activity behavior (see Section 2.1).

It is essential to highlight that tools using machine learning models applied on the same type of indicators as the Authenticity Matrix (e.g., account names, profile photos, account activity, etc.) were previously developed (see Albayati & Altamimi, 2019b). Presently, they cannot be used on the corpus of this research due to Meta’s restrictive API policies, especially since 2019 (Gotfredsen & Dowling, 2024; Hothman, 2019; Walker et al., 2019). In this respect, the Authenticity Matrix manual approach finds its relevance since it can be used despite any restrictions on automated tools.

### 3. Manipulation and Democratic Processes

Advancements in communication technology over the last decades have enabled mass communication on an unprecedented scale. These technologies now facilitate direct and unmediated interactions between actors of influence (public institutions, private organizations, politicians, political parties, etc.) and their audiences while, simultaneously, providing the capacity to reach global populations. Technologies such as OSNs have been widely adopted and have become communication tools, including for political communication. Electoral campaigns are one of the key moments of public debate and a top opportunity for political actors to communicate and provide citizens with the necessary information to make voting decisions (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2025). In recent years, the spread of manipulation and disinformation has intensified before, during, and after these periods, altering the democratic process of voting (Bradshaw et al., 2020; Casero-Ripollés et al., 2025; European External Action Service, 2024).

The election month is the moment when the manipulation activity increases:

With threat actors adopting a more varied *modus operandi* and seizing heightened collective attention towards the topic of elections....In this phase, the networks created can be activated to launch attacks aimed at undermining the reputation of candidates and political parties. (European External Action Service, 2024)

The 2024 European Parliament Elections were among the electoral events with the most manipulation incidents recorded by the European External Action Service (2025), the foreign affairs service of the EU. Also, the European Digital Media Observatory Task Force on the 2024 European Parliament Elections reported that, in the last months before the elections, EU-related disinformation increased from 5% in January to 15% in May, the highest level since their monitoring began (European Digital Media Observatory Task Force, 2024). In a recent analysis of the electoral disinformation during the 2024 European Parliament Elections, Casero-Ripollés et al. (2025) identified that Southern Europe (41.7%) and Eastern Europe (31.4%) accumulated the highest percentage of electoral disinformation, with Romania considered to be a South-Eastern country, and with Facebook being the second origin source of false information (21.9%) after X (32.4%) and before legacy media (13.3%; Casero-Ripollés et al., 2025).

Since the previous European Parliament Elections in 2019 followed Brexit and the US 2016 election, when large manipulation campaigns were reported (Lilkov, 2019), concerns about manipulation and disinformation were raised by media outlets, NGOs, and EU institutions and officials (Avaaz, 2019; Scott, 2019). At the EU level, unprecedented cooperation took place in recent years to support the resilience of the member states. The European Commission, EU's executive branch, started a coordinated action on manipulation and disinformation mitigation by launching: a strategic communication task force to address this issue in 2015 (European External Action Service East StratCom Task Force); a co-regulatory code with OSNs platforms in 2018 (The Code of Practice Against Disinformation); a rapid alert system at EU institutions and member states levels in 2019; and a hub for independent community working to combat disinformation in 2020 (European Digital Media Observatory). It also created several regulatory measures: The Digital Services Act in 2020; the European Media Freedom Act in 2024; and the regulation of the transparency and targeting of political advertising in 2024 (European Commission, n.d.; European Commission, 2025; Navarro et al., 2025). Also, at the national level in Romania, local initiatives have been implemented to combat manipulation and

disinformation, ranging from media literacy programs run by NGOs and an optional subject on the same topic implemented in public schools, to other broader institutional measures (Ministry of Education, 2022; “Programul de Educație Media,” 2025).

Romania’s information ecosystem exhibits multiple vulnerabilities such as unclear media ownership and funding, distrust in traditional media, the use of social media for news, large exposure to anti-EU and anti-Western narratives, and a general social context which has lately been characterized by political instability (Durach et al., 2025; Institutul Român pentru Evaluare și Strategie, 2024; Radu, 2025; Toma & Suciu, 2024). At the same time, trust in politicians and political parties in Romania is the lowest among institutions, with 86% of the population saying they have little, very little, and no trust in political parties and 90% stating the same for politicians (Centrul de Sociologie Urbană și Regională, 2024; Institutul Român pentru Evaluare și Strategie, 2024).

In this general climate marked, on the one hand, by profound distrust, external interference, and multiple vulnerabilities of the Romania’s information ecosystem, and, on the other hand, by measures from European institutions, local civil society, and authorities to combat manipulation and disinformation, this study aims to understand if top political parties are complying with these efforts. In this respect, the study aims to assess whether political parties and electoral alliances taking part in the 2024 election of Romanian members of the European Parliament were engaging in manipulation strategies on social media despite the increasing number of institutional and civic countermeasures.

#### 4. Research Questions and Objectives

This study aims to determine whether accounts exhibiting inauthentic behavior were employed during the 2024 Romanian European Parliament election campaigns on OSNs. Such manipulation would involve inauthentic influence of Facebook recommendation algorithms (through shares made by accounts specially created for this purpose), thereby increasing the visibility of political content beyond what would have occurred through organic engagement alone. Furthermore, the research investigates whether accounts with inauthentic behavior used to promote specific political parties or electoral alliances disclosed their political affiliations or the potential nature of their involvement or support.

To this end, the following research questions have been formulated:

RQ1: To what extent were social media accounts displaying inauthentic behavior utilized during the 2024 election of Romanian members of the European Parliament campaign and what is the scale of their use?

RQ2: How were accounts with inauthentic behavior deployed throughout the campaign?

RQ3: What are the characteristics of social media accounts with inauthentic behavior?

To address the above RQs, this study analyzed the most shared posts in the election campaign on the official Facebook pages of the top four political parties or electoral alliances taking part in the 2024 election of Romanian members of the European Parliament in terms of the number of votes obtained (European

Parliament, 2024). We chose shares as the type of engagement because they are an important measurement for online engagement, they measure the explicit actions of a user with the content, people are more likely to trust information that is shared by friends and family, and because a post is more popular as it gets more shares, which also increases its visibility on the platform (Corzo, 2021; Moro et al., 2016, as cited in Corbu et al., 2022; Oprea, 2023). More visibility means including a post in as many users' news feeds as possible, which, in this case, means exposing more citizens to a specific political message. To do so, politicians, their teams, or their supporters could use a number of social media fake accounts or accounts with inauthentic behavior specifically created for this purpose, and this would mean, according to Facebook, a violation of Community Standards but also a form of manipulation of public opinion and political discussion and a practice of misleading people (Meta, n.d.-c; Weedon et al., 2017).

## 5. Methodology

### 5.1. Dataset

This preliminary explanatory research analyzed the three most shared posts in the election campaign on the official Facebook pages of the top four political parties or electoral alliances taking part in the 2024 election of Romanian members of the European Parliament in terms of the number of votes obtained, according to the results of the elections. We analysed all posts' content that was published between May 10, 2024, 00 AM, and June 8, 2024, 7 AM, on the pages of Partidul Social Democrat (PSD; from the Alianța PSD–PNL), Partidul Național Liberal (PNL; from Alianța PSD–PNL), Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor (AUR), and Uniunea Salvați România (USR; from the Alianța Dreapta Unită; Autoritatea Electorală Permanentă, 2019; European Parliament, 2024). During this period, the PSD page had 154 posts, the PNL page had 174 posts, the AUR page had 67 posts, and the USR page had 175 posts.

Data was collected manually, between December 2024–May 2025, using four personal regular Facebook accounts of the team. The manual collection process was the only one available because, due to Facebook's API restrictive policies, it is the only way to access the data, shares, and the Facebook accounts and groups in which they were distributed, which were needed for this research. The data was gathered on Microsoft Word documents and tabular spreadsheets in Microsoft Excel for which the search function was applied for the names of the accounts that shared the posts in order to identify accounts that made multiple shares and to monitor the number of shares for each account. Because of the large amount of data and the lack of an electronic data collection tool, we chose the top three most shared posts on each Facebook page during the election campaign period. The research corpus thus covered 6.7% of all shares during the analyzed period, up to a total of 70,293 shares. The posts included in the corpus have 4,476 shares where we could view the account of the user who shared them and the place where they were shared (on their own timeline, on their own timeline and in one or more groups, or only in several groups). Due to the privacy settings of Facebook, not all the shared data could be accessed using personal regular Facebook accounts, with the platform displaying at the end of the accessible shares the "some posts may not appear here due to their privacy settings" message. At the same time, in the case of AUR's page, even using high-end PCs, the Facebook platform stopped loading and would eventually crash into a blank screen. For this reason, for PSD's page, we could collect data for 8.7% of shares, 8.9% for PNL, 6.3% for AUR, and 6.9% for USR (Table 1).



**Table 1.** Research corpus vs research field (absolute number and percentage).

| Page name | Total shares per period | Total shares of the analyzed posts | Total shares analyzed |
|-----------|-------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| PSD       | 4,723                   | 825<br>17.5%                       | 409<br>8.7%           |
| PNL       | 4,063                   | 823<br>20.3%                       | 360<br>8.9%           |
| AUR       | 48,150                  | 11,514<br>26.3%                    | 3,027<br>6.3%         |
| USR       | 13,357                  | 1,749<br>13.1%                     | 924<br>6.9%           |

Taking into consideration that for such types of accounts, due to Facebook's restrictive policies, only manual collection is possible, this corpus provides sufficient data to identify inauthentic behavior in the share activity on these political pages.

Given the nature and size of the dataset, as well as the exploratory aim of the study, we opted for a qualitative-comparative approach supported by descriptive statistics. The relatively small and heterogeneous sample of accounts, combined with the non-randomized nature of data collection, led us to an analytical depth and transparency approach through structured coding and detailed qualitative documentation, which better serves the purpose of capturing patterns of inauthentic behavior and rhetorical strategies in the sample studied.

## 5.2. Findings

### 5.2.1. Engagement of Accounts With Inauthentic Behavior

This study identified Facebook accounts displaying inauthentic behavior that were actively engaged in the 2024 election campaign of Romanian members of the European Parliament on the official pages of the four political parties or electoral alliances. To address RQ1 and RQ2, the analysis focused on the relationship between the number of shares and the accounts responsible for sharing, particularly examining instances where individual accounts shared the same post at least four times, being a HAU.

Compared to typical posts outside the campaign period, one month before and after (April 10–May 9, 2024, and June 10–July 9, 2024), the analyzed posts proved a higher popularity, as measured by the number of shares. Notably, 23.2% of all shares were hyperactive shares made by HAUs (defined as users who shared the same post four or more times, either on their own timeline or on their own timeline and into one or more groups, or only into one or more groups). In some cases, hyperactive shares accounted for up to 45% of the total shares of the same post. These findings indicate a significant user engagement in repeatedly sharing posts from official political parties or electoral alliances' pages. Across pages, the proportion of HAU shares ranged from 14.2% to 45% (USR), 20.6% to 28.1% (AUR), 0% to 26.2% (PNL), and 0% to 17.1% (PSD) (Table 2). These results underscore a significant level of HAU involvement in sharing activities. The analysis

also revealed the presence of highly prolific users, including accounts that shared the same post 31 and 22 times, patterns of engagement that are indicative of inauthentic behavior.

**Table 2.** Distribution of HAUs and SAUs from total shares.

| Page name | Post no. | Percentage of HAUs from total shares | Percentage of SAUs from total shares |
|-----------|----------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| PSD       | PSD1     | 17.1                                 | 12                                   |
|           | PSD2     | 6.4                                  | 6.4                                  |
|           | PSD3     | 0                                    | 0                                    |
| PNL       | PNL1     | 26.2                                 | 10.3                                 |
|           | PNL2     | 6.6                                  | 0                                    |
|           | PNL3     | 0                                    | 0                                    |
| AUR       | AUR1     | 28.1                                 | 16.3                                 |
|           | AUR2     | 22                                   | 8.1                                  |
|           | AUR3     | 20.6                                 | 6.1                                  |
| USR       | USR1     | 14.2                                 | 3.9                                  |
|           | USR2     | 45                                   | 33.9                                 |
|           | USR2     | 18.6                                 | 8                                    |

The data demonstrate that inauthentic behavior accounts were used to amplify candidate posts through repeated sharing (RQ1), with even 33.9% of shares made by users sharing the same post 10 or more times (RQ2).

### 5.2.2. Profile of Accounts With Inauthentic Behavior

To address RQ3, the study analyzed publicly available information from HAU accounts. Several characteristics emerged (Table 3). Firstly, 7.1% of HAUs used account names that did not conform to typical human naming conventions in accordance with Meta’s Community Standards, and 18.8% lacked a profile picture, a cover photo depicting a human, or displayed other signs of inauthenticity.

In regards to HAUs posting regularity, we found that: 61.6% of HAUs posted more than four times per day or didn’t post at all for at least 30 consecutive days; 45.5% posted 10 or more times per day; also, some users posted on their account’s timeline 187 posts/day (taking into account the time between the first and the last one, an average of one post every seven minutes and 22 seconds), 184 posts/day (an average of one post every four minutes, approximately), 179 posts/day (an average of one post every one minute and 48 seconds), 166 posts/day (an average of one post every 4 minutes, approximately), 158 posts/day (an average of one post every 20 seconds), 145 posts/day (an average of one post every five minutes, approximately), or 139 posts/day (an average of one post every one minute and 45 seconds). There were accounts that posted as many as 75 posts in 10 minutes, once every eight seconds.

Only 16.1% of HAUs had no “likes” in any of the profile categories, and 40.2% of HAUs only posted on their account posts on political, civic, or other topics currently on the public agenda, and not personal posts, which

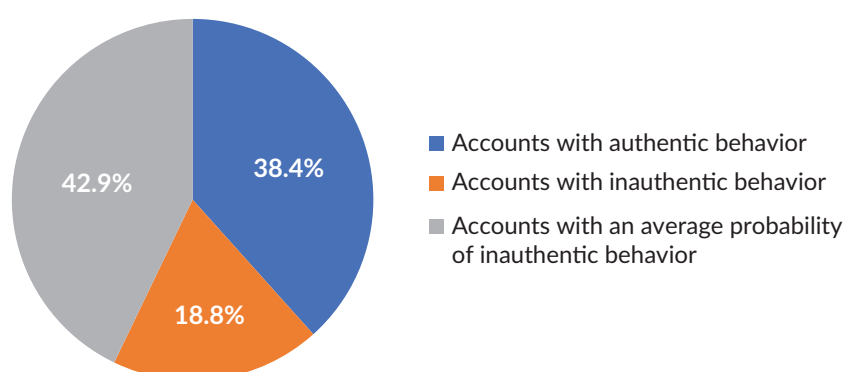
would indicate authenticity. Some HAU's don't have any friends or less than 10 friends on their accounts (17%), and 18.8% of HAU's don't have any personal photos or videos on their accounts.

Only 4.5% of HAU's disclosed political affiliation on their "about" profile section, meaning 95.5% did not, despite repeated sharing of political content; however, 27.7% displayed political support through profile pictures, cover photos, or profile picture frames.

**Table 3.** Profile of accounts with inauthentic behavior.

| Characteristics of HAU's profile                                                                                             | Percentage from the total of HAU's |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Don't disclose political affiliation on their "About" profile section                                                        | 95.5%                              |
| Post more than four times per day or don't post at all for at least 30 consecutive days                                      | 61.6%                              |
| Post 10 or more times per day                                                                                                | 45.5%                              |
| Post on their account only posts on political, civic, or other topics currently on the public agenda, and not personal posts | 40.2%                              |
| Display political support through profile pictures, cover photos, or profile picture frames                                  | 27.7%                              |
| Don't have any personal photos or videos on their accounts                                                                   | 18.8%                              |
| Lack a profile picture, a cover photo depicting a human, or displayed other signs of inauthenticity                          | 18.8%                              |
| Don't have any or fewer than 10 friends on their accounts                                                                    | 17%                                |
| No "likes" in any of the profile categories                                                                                  | 16.1%                              |
| Use account names that do not conform to typical human naming conventions in accordance with Meta's Community Standards      | 7.1%                               |

After applying Oprea's (2024) Authenticity Matrix tool, we have identified that from the hyperactive accounts, 38.4% are accounts with authentic behavior, 42.9% are accounts with an average probability of inauthentic behavior, and 18.8% are accounts with inauthentic behavior (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Authenticity behavior range of profile of accounts.

These findings highlight dominant traits of accounts displaying inauthentic behavior on OSN platforms (RQ3), such as the prevalence of human/non-human username and profile picture, the type of activity on the account's timeline, the level of transparency in terms of affiliation and support for a political party or

electoral alliance, and the level of involvement in the multiple distribution activities of the analyzed posts. Some accounts were inactive for weeks or months before suddenly becoming highly active, often posting dozens of times per day, predominantly with political or civic content.

### 5.3. Discussions

The proliferation of digital manipulation is recognized as a significant threat to democratic processes. This study contributes by demonstrating that Facebook accounts can be used inauthentically to amplify political messages during the 2024 election campaign of Romanian members of the European Parliament. Facebook itself classifies such activity as “manipulating public opinion,” “manipulating political discussion,” and “manipulat[ing] public debate” (Meta, n.d.-c; Weedon et al., 2017), targeting the platform’s recommendation algorithms through HAU behavior.

A key contribution of this research is the identification of dominant characteristics of HAU accounts, using information publicly available on their social media profile. This provides insights into their specific features and may help users to better identify them on social media. These findings need to be put in the broader context of algorithms that shape the digital world, in which we, as human beings, are spending more and more of our time—six hours and 38 minutes, on average, at the global level for 2024 (we are social & Meltwater, 2025). The question is how considerable is “the social power of algorithms” (Beer, 2020) since, as some scholars suggest, algorithms “construct regimes of power and knowledge” (Kushner, 2013) and we live under an “algorithmic governance” (Katzenbach & Ulbricht, 2019). These findings must be contextualized within the broader influence of algorithms on digital life as algorithms increasingly shape information exposure and public discourse.

Our research extends existing literature by showing that inauthentic behavior is also prevalent on political party pages and top political leaders and that such behavior includes the strategic use of the share engagement functionality (Oprea, 2023; Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020). Shares increase post visibility and can serve as signals of newsworthiness for traditional media (Zhang et al., 2018). Therefore, increasing the number of shares of political posts is essential for broadening public exposure to these messages, particularly during election campaigns when political stakes are heightened. This study does not seek to determine whether such sharing activity is intentional or unintentional, nor does it aim to establish whether the accounts involved were specifically created for this purpose. Previous research has documented instances of coordinated inauthentic behavior in the sharing of political content (Giglietto et al., 2020; Graham et al., 2024; Gruzd et al., 2022) and it is empirically recognized that political digital marketing specialists may employ false amplifiers, coordinated individuals managing inauthentic accounts, to boost social media content (Weedon et al., 2017). Meanwhile, the present study does not attempt to identify the authenticity of the accounts analyzed, but their behavior. Consequently, it may include false amplifiers, fake accounts operated by bots or trolls, or genuine accounts of ordinary users who, motivated by personal political conviction, actively share posts from their preferred political parties (Giglietto et al., 2020; Weedon et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the empirically observed behaviors violate Meta’s Community Standards.

Regarding the impact, our study found that, for the corpus we analyzed, 23.2% of shares were made by HAUs (four or more shares per post by the same account). In the meantime, for some posts, the hyperactive shares accounted for up to 45% of the share’s total. The shares of some posts made by SAUs were 33.9%

(posted 10 or more times). Taking into consideration the limitations of the tool we used, the results of the study still align with prior research, such as Papakyriakopoulos et al. (2020) who found HAU's accounted for about 25.8% of comments and 26.4% of likes on German political party Facebook pages, and Oprea (2023) who found that 18.3% of shares were made by HAU's (four or more times) and 46.3%, by SAU's (10 or more times). This practice appears intended to manipulate Facebook's recommendation algorithms, increasing the exposure of political content beyond what would occur organically. This type of behavior has two direct consequences: (a) it increases user exposure to a specific political message beyond what would occur if the content's popularity evolved organically within the platform, and (b) such amplification can further elevate the message's public visibility by prompting coverage in traditional media outlets, which may use indicators of high engagement or discussion on social media as criteria for determining newsworthiness.

An interesting finding is that, among HAU's, 38.4% were considered authentic by the analysis tool. This suggests that legitimate political engagement or activism can produce high-activity patterns that mimic inauthentic behavior and, furthermore, justifies the need for a multi-indicator approach to authenticity detection. This type of authentic behavior is healthy for political debate, being the very basis of the democratic processes. However, these authentic grassroots voices are often overshadowed by accounts operated with the purpose of distorting public discourse. Our focus as a society must be towards bringing them back to the center of the public debate and also to do the necessary efforts to clean the information ecosystem of disturbing actors and activities.

The research also developed a general profile of HAU's: 7.1% of them didn't use human names; 18.8% didn't have profile images featuring human faces; 17% didn't have any friends or fewer than 10 friends on their accounts; and 18.8% didn't have any personal photos or videos on their timeline. Also, 16.1% of HAU's had no "likes" in any of the profile categories. HAU's that posted more than four times per day or didn't post at all for at least 30 consecutive days were 61.6%, and 40.2% only posted on their account posts on political, civic, or other topics currently on the public agenda, with no personal posts. Although they are obviously involved in sharing political content on the platform, 95.5% of HAU's did not disclose political affiliation on their profile, but 27.7% displayed their political support through profile pictures, cover photos, or profile picture frames.

These findings are relevant in three ways. On the one hand, it allows a better understanding of the specifics of these accounts and helps to shape a profile for the inauthentic behavior accounts based on the prevalence of human/non-human user name and profile picture, the type of activity on the account's timeline, the level of transparency in terms of affiliation and support for a political party or candidate, and the level of involvement in the multiple sharing activities of the analyzed posts. On the other hand, it makes this type of account easier to recognize by scholars, fact-checking journalists, and the general public. At the same time, the findings highlight the extensive use of inauthentic accounts on official political parties' pages during sensitive periods, such as election campaigns. Given the reported deletion of 35.58 billion fake accounts by Meta in recent years (Meta, n.d.-b), social media platforms should collaborate more closely with researchers to address manipulation and disinformation. Enhanced data access for researchers and journalists, such as relaxed API protocol restrictions, would facilitate the development of tools for identifying inauthentic accounts on OSNs. This would be in line with Meta Community Standards' commitments to authenticity and to the prevention of inauthentic behavior, which states that the platform doesn't allow people to misrepresent themselves, to use fake accounts, or to artificially boost the popularity of content (Meta, n.d.-c). Also, this study employed a data manual collection approach to identify inauthentic accounts on Facebook.

While automated machine-learning models exist and can achieve high performances (e.g., Arega et al., 2023; Azami & Passi, 2024; Elyusufi et al., 2019; Mughaid et al., 2023), they are limited by Facebook's restrictive API protocol policies which limit access to information. Relevant data, such as where a post was shared (on an account/page or on a group), are only accessible through manual searches, and this type of information can be relevant to understand the coordination character of some accounts, like the behavior and characteristics of HAU's accounts. Here is where current research brings another relevant contribution.

The research has several important limitations, especially because of the manual data collection process. First, only a subset of posts from each candidate's page was included (6.7% of all shares during the analyzed period). Another limitation is the potential level of inaccuracy for the data collected due to human error, which we tried to limit by cross-checking the collected data. We also faced constraints to data access because of: the use of personal Facebook accounts; the dynamic nature of social media where posts, accounts, and interactions, can be deleted, blocked, etc.; and of temporal validity for data, since data was collected months after the election campaign and posts and account content could have been altered. At the same time, this tool may overlook users whose activity patterns are inauthentic, yet who are genuine supporters or activists. As such, methods focused on detecting coordinated behavior or hyperactivity—as proposed by Graham et al. (2024), Gruzdt et al. (2022), or Giglietto et al. (2020)—could complement our approach by identifying accounts that may be strategically curated to appear authentic, yet act in ways consistent with manipulation or astroturfing. At the same time, data interpretation using a manual tool may have a degree of subjectivity, potentially influencing the final outcomes; to mitigate this limitation, we cross-checked the results to enhance the accuracy of the analysis. All these limits pose challenges for the reliability of this research and, in general, for research conducted on Facebook and other OSNs. Overall, they underscore the need for improved data access and transparency from social media platforms to enable more comprehensive and accurate research on inauthentic behavior and its implications for democratic processes.

## 6. Conclusions

This study is a preliminary investigation on Facebook that demonstrates the use of accounts to amplify the visibility of political messages posted on the official pages of the top four political parties or electoral alliances taking part in the 2024 election campaign of Romanian members of the European Parliament. The analysis reveals the use of accounts engaged in behaviors classified as inauthentic according to Meta's Community Standards (Meta, n.d.-c), specifically aiming to misrepresent the popularity of certain content; such inauthentic activity primarily involved the repeated sharing of posts, either on their own timelines or across multiple groups. Facebook itself classifies such activity as "manipulating public opinion," "manipulating political discussion," and "manipulat[ing] public debate," and commits to preventing this type of behavior on the platform (Meta, n.d.-c; Weedon et al., 2017).

Data shows that political actors, their communication teams, and/or their supporters use—or at least tolerate the use of—manipulative techniques in political debate, despite the public perception of the scale of manipulation and disinformation and the negative consequences these practices have on the democratic process and on our societies. With posts where nearly half of the shares (45%) were made by HAUs, and the share engagement being one of the two main types of measurements for online engagement, this practice could raise concerns about the integrity of public discourse and the democratic process. Also, these findings concern political parties and electoral alliances comprising the leading political forces in an EU and NATO

member state, Romania, and to an electoral process at the European level, thus, a vote that is neither local nor isolated; despite all these, the manipulation of public discourse is not only tolerated, but increasingly prevalent. Furthermore, the scale of disinformation on Facebook has long been the subject of public debate in Europe and in Romania. OSNs, such as TikTok and Instagram, which have surged in popularity, operate with different user interaction models (for instance, they do not display who has shared a post), enabling alternative forms of manipulation that remain largely non-transparent and unknown, not only to the public but also to the research community. If such extensive manipulation is already normalized on a platform as heavily exposed to manipulation and disinformation as Facebook, it is plausible that on newly adopted OSNs, which are less transparent, these practices may be even more effectively concealed, carrying potentially greater and more damaging consequences for democratic societies.

These results consider the practical implications and show that, even if the OSN platforms condemn such practices in theory, they are not taking the necessary measures to effectively limit them. Thus, the relevance of these findings is significant for five main reasons. First, it provides OSN platforms and legislators with an understanding that additional measures (procedural-legislative, co-regulatory, and self-regulatory, but also of a technical nature) are needed to reduce these manipulation practices. Also, the research identified several predominant characteristics of these accounts with inauthentic behavior, offering valuable insights into their operationalization and providing potential markers for their identification. These findings have practical implications for enhancing fact-checking methodologies, benefitting both professional fact-checkers and everyday social media users. Furthermore, this article aims to raise awareness among the general audience—and, especially, for the actors involved in operating accounts with inauthentic behavior on a large scale—of the impact this practice has, the fact that it is a manipulative activity (in Meta's own words), and that it violates the Meta's Community Standards and, more importantly, basic deontological principles. This article underscores the necessity for more sophisticated technical solutions to detect fake accounts and accounts with inauthentic behavior that contravene OSN's community standards and terms and conditions rules. Additionally, policy interventions such as limiting the number of times a single account can share the same post may help mitigate the spread of inauthentic content. Finally, this research advocates for: a multi-solution approach to manipulation on OSN's, clear disclosure on how algorithms influence content visibility, a larger access to data for researchers and journalists, and a stronger enforcement policy to address this issue by empowering trust and safety specialists and content moderators worldwide with necessary resources.

Since, because of the limitations, this study is just a preliminary investigation, similar research should be carried out on corpora from other countries and across different OSNs, using diverse analytical methods, in order to better understand the true scale and societal impact of accounts with inauthentic behaviour operating within the vast ecosystem of billions of user profiles. They should be the ground for more robust legislative and co-regulatory measures. Also, they should argue for support from the media and civil society which is essential in contributing to the broader efforts of monitoring these practices and educating the public. Finally, greater awareness is needed among political actors, their communication teams, and even political supporters or activists, regarding the destructive impact such practices have on democratic processes and on our societies.



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## Conflict of Interests

The co-author Cosmin Bonciu is a member of the Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social-Democrat—PSD) of Romania since May 2021. The co-author Dragoș Tudorașcu-Dobre has been, between March 2020 and August 2021, a dues-paying member of the Party of Liberty, Unity and Solidarity (Partidul Libertate, Unitate și Solidaritate—PLUS), which was in an electoral alliance with the Save Romania Union party (Uniunea Salvați România—USR), followed by their merger in April 2021.

## Data Availability

Data are available here: [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1DFNDYNMJf6IGwnNCx6FxoqHuK\\_qc3RMV](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1DFNDYNMJf6IGwnNCx6FxoqHuK_qc3RMV)

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## Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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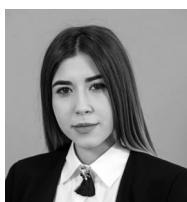


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# Visual Political Communication of Competing Leadership: Italy's 2024 European Election Campaign on Social Media

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## Abstract

The article presents an interdisciplinary analytical framework contributing to the growing research field of visual political communication, focusing on the case of the social media images published by Italian politicians during the 2024 European elections campaign (May–June 2024). In the first part, the article outlines the context of the analytical framework at the intersection of three main research fields: political communication, in particular the study of electoral campaigns via social media; visual culture and communication, precisely the analysis of the visual representation, self-representation, and counter-representation of political leaders; and computer science, in particular the application of machine learning techniques for computer vision to recognize and categorize visual political content. In the second part, the article offers an application of the analytical framework by sharing some empirical results of a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the visual content published by 21 Italian political actors on Facebook and Instagram during the campaign, focusing on their main visual formats, themes, and strategies of representation of political leadership. In the analysis, deep learning models are also employed to detect specific image characteristics by cross-referencing their outputs with manual cataloguing performed on the same images and for the same attributes. In the end, on the basis of the research carried out, the article suggests possible paths for future interdisciplinary analysis of online visual political communication.

## Keywords

AI images; computer vision; digital campaigns; electoral campaigns; political communication; political leadership; visual political communication

## 1. Introduction

This article offers a contribution to the increasing research field of visual politics, particularly visual political communication (Lilleker & Veneti, 2023; Veneti et al., 2019). It focuses on the 2024 European Parliament elections, which offered a fertile opportunity to study how political actors produce and disseminate visual content to shape political communication, frame key issues, and performatively construct leader identities. In particular, the article investigates these dynamics through a mixed-method analysis of social media images circulated by Italian political parties and candidates during the campaign period with the aim of analyzing their political meanings and strategic uses aimed at self-promotion and distinctive positioning.

Theoretically, the article is grounded in an interdisciplinary framework that combines various research strands from three key domains: political-electoral communication, visual culture and communication, and computer science. The research questions deal with the ways in which political images—photographs, graphics, and hybrid visual webcards—are crafted and deployed across digital platforms to assert leadership, mobilize public sentiment, and polarize debate. The empirical analysis thus aims to identify recurring patterns, stylistic repertoires, and thematic frames, while also assessing the extent to which different visual formats contribute to shifting representations of political leadership and power. Methodologically, it integrates quantitative and qualitative visual content analysis with computer vision and computational analysis.

The relevance of this inquiry lies in several converging trends. First, the increasing personalization of politics has led to the transformation of traditional codes of representation, offering new opportunities and requiring new visual strategies for self-representation and political branding of leadership. Second, social media platforms have introduced affordances and constraints that influence content production and circulation, fostering visual formats tailored to mobile devices and algorithmic visibility. Third, the hybridization of online visual practices and genres has blurred the symbolic boundaries between formal and informal political discourse, complicating established notions of institutional legitimacy and political participation, within an increasing trend towards “pop politics.”

The empirical component of this research is based on a systematic collection and analysis of visual content from a selected set of official social media accounts of political actors active in the Italian campaign for the 2024 European elections. By integrating qualitative and quantitative methodologies, including computational techniques for visual analysis, the study maps the diversity of visual practices across parties and candidates, with a focus also on the adoption of generative AI for image making. Recurring themes include national and European identity, migration, climate crisis, and Italy’s role in the European Union—each visually framed to either reinforce alignment or accentuate symbolic conflict.

This article proceeds in four sections. First, it outlines the theoretical background on visual political communication on social media during electoral campaigns, drawing on recent scholarly literature. Second, it presents the interdisciplinary methodological framework that was developed for the research project, including content analysis and computational tools for image recognition. Third, it presents and discusses the empirical findings derived from both quantitative and qualitative analyses of image typologies, visual formats, and political communication strategies, focusing mainly on the visual representation of political leaders and opponents. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the results and reflects on some implications of platform-driven visual political communication as well as on the methodological opportunities and challenges of analyzing visual data in an evolving and hybrid media ecosystem.

By critically examining how images function as meaningful tools of political leadership's image-making, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on visual politics and visual political communication and it offers methodological insights for future research in political communication. It underscores the need to consider both the content and infrastructure of visual campaigning to understand the evolving dynamics of political representation and potential voter engagement in the platform society (van Dijck et al., 2018).

## 2. Visual Politics and Electoral Campaigns on Social Media Platforms: A Literature Review

Since the article is positioned at the intersection of three major research fields, the literature review follows a similar tripartition. The first area is the study of political communication and electoral campaigns in the platform society. Contemporary electoral campaigns are carried out through a balance of traditional and innovative strategies. Within hybrid media systems (Chadwick, 2013) the coexistence of “old” and “new” media concerns the practices through which political communication is produced during campaigns (Novelli et al., 2022), the digital contexts and affordances enabling the participation of a plurality of social and political actors (Gerbaudo, 2019), and the visibility strategies that aim to shape political campaigns also according to platform logics (Bossetta, 2018; Lilleker & Veneti, 2023; Stier et al., 2018).

The second area focuses on visual culture and visual communication. This field of research deals with the production, circulation, social uses, and symbolic meanings of images, particularly in the process of visual representation, self-representation, and counter-representation of political leaders (Cheles & Giacone, 2022; Hall et al., 2024). As a vast literature has shown, the image of the political leader is the result of a process of social construction merging the traits of the “superleader” and those of the “everyman” within a media environment in which the symbolic boundaries between politics, news, and popular culture become increasingly hybrid (Farkas et al., 2022; Novelli, 2019; Wood et al., 2016). In this process, a central role is played by the practices of visual self-representation via social media aimed at constructing a trustworthy relationship based on intimacy, emotionality, and a seemingly ordinary and realistic quality. These practices are also expressed through selfie opportunities with electoral constituencies increasingly managed and nurtured as communities of fans of the politician-celebrity. These communicative practices are part of broader disintermediation strategies that circumvent the traditional media while attracting their attention, especially during newsworthy political events (Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Karadimitriou & Veneti, 2016). In this context, visual narratives and counter-narratives of political power—as well as strategies of self-representation and representation of political opponents—are equally relevant, and they both depend on the platformization of visual cultural production and online visibility regimes (Archetti, 2014; Magaudda & Solaroli, 2020). Indeed, these processes can facilitate the diffusion of specific visual formats or individual images at the expense of others. Their comprehension requires the development of new theoretical and methodological frameworks to investigate the processes of online circulation of images (Faulkner et al., 2018; Rogers, 2021) and their functions in visual political communication (Farkas, 2024; Schill, 2012). A recent line of research has focused on the patterns and effects of politicians' image-based political communication strategies on social media (Bracciale & Martella, 2023; Farkas & Bene, 2021) and the social media strategies of candidates and officeholders using computer graphics (Peng, 2021). More recently, the impact of generative AI software of visual content making during political campaigns has also emerged as a worthy area of empirical research (Atar, 2025).

The third and final disciplinary area is computer science, in particular the integration of tools offered by computer vision and the application of machine learning techniques for the analytical categorization of the symbolic and visual dimensions of political narratives (Joo & Steinert-Threlkeld, 2018; Peng & Lu, 2023). Considering the image classification task, the convolutional neural network (CNN) offers an ideal set of models. CNNs (LeCun et al., 1998) combine one of the most used operations in image processing and computer vision, namely, convolution, with a neural network having many “depth” levels (hence the concept of deep learning). Their strength lies in hierarchical feature extraction using convolutional filters which excel at capturing local patterns and textures. However, CNNs possess inherent limitations, primarily their restricted receptive fields, which can make it challenging to effectively model long-range dependencies and overall context within an image. To overcome this limitation, we chose to use a model based on vision transformers (Diko et al., 2024; Vaswani et al., 2017), a neural network adapted from the highly successful transformer architecture used in natural language processing. Vision transformers treat an image as a sequence of patches (tokens) and employ self-attention mechanisms to weigh the importance of different patches relative to each other. This approach presents advantages. First of all, the self-attention mechanism allows vision transformers to model dependencies between any two patches in the image, regardless of their spatial distance. This enables a more holistic understanding of the image content compared to the localized view of CNNs. Secondly, transformers have demonstrated exceptional capabilities in transfer learning. Models pre-trained on massive, diverse datasets such as ImageNet learn rich, general-purpose visual representations. These representations can be effectively transferred and fine-tuned for specific downstream tasks, even those with smaller, specialized datasets, often leading to superior performance compared to training from scratch or using CNNs pre-trained on the same data. The applications of visual transformers range from image classification to object detection, semantic segmentation, and more, thus showing competitive performance compared to CNN-based methods, especially in tasks that benefit from a more global understanding of the visual context.

### 3. Methodology

The analytical corpus consists of images produced and disseminated on social media by a selection of official accounts belonging to political parties and individual politicians during the Italian electoral campaign for the European Parliament elections held in June 2024. A total of 21 accounts were monitored, with 11 belonging to political parties: +Europa (+E), Alleanza Verdi Sinistra (AVS), Azione (AZ), Europa Verde (EV), Forza Italia (FI), Fratelli d'Italia (Fdi), Italia Viva (IV), Lega (LN), Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S), Partito Democratico (PD), and Sinistra Italiana (SI). Ten accounts belonged to prominent candidates/leaders from those parties: Angelo Bonelli (Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà), Antonio Tajani (FI), Carlo Calenda (AZ), Elly Schlein (PD), Emma Bonino (+E), Giorgia Meloni (Fdi), Giuseppe Conte (M5S), Matteo Renzi (IV), Matteo Salvini (LN), and Nicola Fratoianni (SI).

Data collection, conducted on Meta platforms (Facebook and Instagram), was carried out over the four weeks preceding the vote, from May 12 to June 9, 2024. It covered the entire production of social content published during this period by those accounts, including both materials directly related to the electoral campaign and more generic content. An automated acquisition platform (web scraping) was developed in collaboration with a web agency, which collected and archived posts shared by the monitored accounts on Facebook and Instagram during the analysis period. A total of 3,635 posts and 6,786 individual images were collected. The platform allowed for an initial systematization of the corpus through a manual tagging system.

A mixed-method (quantitative-qualitative) content analysis approach was then adopted. Once the relevant properties were identified, they were operationalized into variables and corresponding values. A dedicated back-end platform was also developed for content analysis where researchers uploaded individual images and filled out an analysis codebook consisting of 42 variables for each one. The analysis sheet, designed by the research team, was developed based on a review of tools and methods already used internationally for analyzing social media content in electoral campaigns (Novelli et al., 2022) and by observing previous classification efforts of electoral materials conducted during national and European campaign monitoring by research centers in Europe.

Although primarily aimed at analyzing visual content, variables were also included to explore the interplay between visual and textual elements of the content and posts. These variables sought to identify aspects such as the emotional/rational component of the message, the overall tone of the post, the presence of negative elements or calls to action, and platform-specific dynamics like production and resharing practices, sponsorships, and cross-platform integration (Schrieck et al., 2023).

The validation of the codebook's operational soundness and the adherence to reliability criteria—such as stability, reproducibility, and accuracy—took place during a testing phase involving a selection of corpus units. This was followed by the drafting of classification guidelines and a training period attended by all analysts involved.

Each of the 6,786 coded images was assigned a unique ID containing information on author, platform, format, and whether it belonged to a carousel. Using Python scripts, these IDs were employed to filter and automatically organize the images along various analytical dimensions: authorship, thematic, formal, and content-based. A shared ID was adopted for images belonging to the same carousel, differentiated by an alphabetical suffix, facilitating the aggregation and analysis of multiple contents from the same post. This enabled the extraction of the second corpus of posts ( $n = 3,635$ ), the comparison between the two corpora (images and posts), and the quantitative analysis of visual overproduction. Once the quantitative processing—aimed at identifying patterns, themes, and formats—was completed, the qualitative analysis of visual content led to the construction of a matrix of the most recurring visual formats, which helped highlight how images were used across the main thematic categories that emerged.

A computer vision approach was applied in parallel. The standard vision transformer architecture represents a significant shift in computer vision, yet it is not without challenges. A notable issue, particularly in deeper network layers, is feature collapsing. This phenomenon occurs as information passes through the sequence of transformer blocks. The powerful self-attention mechanism, designed to capture global relationships, can excessively aggregate features from different image patches. Consequently, the resulting feature representations become increasingly similar, losing their distinctiveness and fine-grained details such as edges, textures, and local patterns, which are effectively captured in the earlier layers. These low-level features are often vital for accurate image classification and other vision tasks, especially in scenarios like ours where the data corpus is very limited. Motivated by this, we shift our focus to the use of the residual vision transformer (ReViT; Diko et al., 2024), which specifically addresses this feature collapse problem. It retains the fundamental structure of the vision transformer but incorporates a crucial modification known as the Residual Attention mechanism to enhance feature diversity.

## 4. Visual Formats

### 4.1. The Classification of Visual Formats

The analysis of 3,635 posts published by 21 accounts identified 6,786 images, divided into two main categories: photographs (43%,  $n = 2,927$ ) and webcards (57%,  $n = 3,859$ ), each characterized by different types and production practices. Webcards are defined as visual content that can combine images (photographic or graphic), texts, symbols, logos, and slogans. Original content is largely predominant ( $n = 5,927$ ) compared to content derived from other sources, either through direct reposting ( $n = 279$ )—i.e., sharing a post produced by another account in its original form—or in the form of hybrid content ( $n = 580$ ), meaning shared content in which textual (copy, captions) and/or visual elements are modified or graphically reworked. The vast majority of photographs (86.7%) are specific ( $n = 2,539$ ), meaning they are situated images referring to particular contexts, events, or subjects. These are followed by generic or stock images (12.6%,  $n = 371$ ), considered as archival material, not linked to a specific event, without an associated place and/or date, and where the identity of subjects and/or objects is not explicitly stated.

The macro-category of webcards includes the following types: photographic, the most common (52.6%,  $n = 2,031$ ), where the image plays a central role compared to the text; textual (33.2%,  $n = 1,282$ ), where the written component visually dominates and the graphic component plays a marginal or merely background role; graphic (9.9%,  $n = 381$ ), characterized by data visualizations or concise informational elements such as infographics or stylized components; posters (2%,  $n = 77$ ); iconic photographs (1.7%,  $n = 65$ ); and memes (0.6%,  $n = 23$ ) are residual categories.

Although, overall, webcards are more widely used than photographs, the analysis by actors—i.e., the account holders—reveals different image usage practices tied to their previous traditions and communication styles. Among the leaders' accounts, photographs prevail over webcards ( $n = 1,760$  vs.  $n = 727$ ): Elly Schlein ( $n = 410$ ), Carlo Calenda ( $n = 316$ ), and Matteo Renzi ( $n = 256$ ) top the production list. The proportion of photographs within posted images is very high in some leaders' accounts: Matteo Renzi (92.4%), Giorgia Meloni (87.7%), Antonio Tajani (85.8%), and Elly Schlein (85.2%). In party accounts, however, webcards prevail over photographs ( $n = 3,132$  vs.  $n = 1,167$ ). Webcards are especially prevalent in the image content of certain parties: FdI (96.1%), PD (89.7%), +E (83.1%), and AVS (82%). The most prolific producer of this macro-category is LN, which alone generated 863 webcards (22.4% of the total), followed by FdI (10.2%,  $n = 394$ ).

The analysis of the functions that photographs and webcards serve within posts identified seven distinct types: agenda/calendar, as a reminder for appointments, events, and campaign initiatives; program, to present one or more program points; thematic, focused on a specific theme; news, based on current events and news stories; fundraising, to promote donations in support of the party; campaign activity, images of various electoral events and initiatives; and biographical/leader, related to the candidate/leader's personal and/or professional history. Among party accounts, the program function is particularly relevant, representing 14.6% ( $n = 626$ ) of the images, compared to just 3.5% ( $n = 86$ ) in leaders' accounts. Conversely, the news function ranks third for leader accounts at 10.5% ( $n = 260$ ), but drops to 5.2% ( $n = 224$ ) in party accounts. The biographical/leader (6.45% for party aggregate, 4.7% for leaders) and fundraising (2.5%, seen only in party aggregate) uses are marginal.

The two macro-categories correspond to clearly defined and differentiated communication practices and purposes. Webcards are far more frequently used than photographs for the agenda/calendar ( $n = 735$  vs.  $n = 99$ ), program ( $n = 628$  vs.  $n = 84$ ), and news ( $n = 434$  vs.  $n = 50$ ) functions. Conversely, for the campaign activity function, aimed at showcasing and documenting organized initiatives, photographs predominate ( $n = 1,922$  vs.  $n = 161$ ).

**Table 1.** Distribution of visual content functions across party and leader account aggregates, classified by main content category (photo and webcard).

| Functions           | Leader Accounts | Party Accounts | Total        |
|---------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|
| <b>Photo</b>        | <b>1,760</b>    | <b>1,167</b>   | <b>2,927</b> |
| News                | 30              | 20             | 50           |
| Agenda/Calendar     | 47              | 52             | 99           |
| Biographical/Leader | 108             | 81             | 189          |
| Campaign            | 1,172           | 750            | 1,922        |
| Program             | 26              | 58             | 84           |
| Thematic            | 352             | 190            | 542          |
| Other               | 25              | 16             | 41           |
| <b>Webcard</b>      | <b>727</b>      | <b>3,132</b>   | <b>3,859</b> |
| News                | 230             | 204            | 434          |
| Agenda/Calendar     | 157             | 578            | 735          |
| Biographical/Leader | 8               | 194            | 202          |
| Campaign            | 23              | 138            | 161          |
| Fundraising         | —               | 106            | 106          |
| Program             | 60              | 568            | 628          |
| Thematic            | 226             | 1188           | 1,414        |
| Other               | 23              | 156            | 179          |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>2,487</b>    | <b>4,299</b>   | <b>6,786</b> |

Filtering the two macro-categories according to thematic classification, webcards are used more frequently for policy issues ( $n = 1,911$ ) compared to photographs ( $n = 577$ ), whereas photographs are more commonly used for campaign issues ( $n = 2,098$ ) than webcards ( $n = 1,585$ ). There is no significant dominance of either macro-category for personal issues ( $n = 180$  webcards and  $n = 130$  photos) or political issues ( $n = 144$  webcards and  $n = 122$  photos). No substantial quantitative differences emerge between the two aggregates of party and leader accounts.

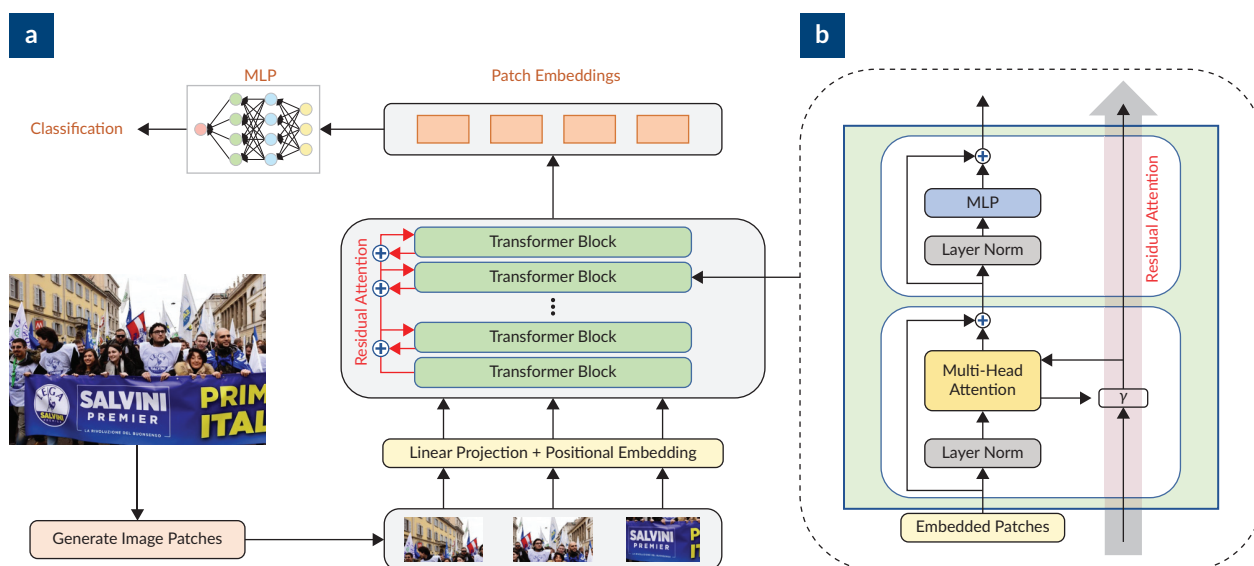
Finally, particularly significant in terms of format and use is the spread of carousels, which include multiple images in a single post. With carousels, the post becomes something to scroll through horizontally, without switching accounts. Across the 21 monitored accounts, 684 carousels were posted, containing 3,823 images. This means that over half (56%) of the total 6,786 images were published in a multi-image format: 2,552 photographs and 1,271 webcards. This mode is very widespread and, especially for webcards, many accounts have adopted graphic solutions—such as arrows and swipe indicators—to highlight it.



## 4.2. The Automatic Recognition of Visual Formats and Categories

The core task of the computer science work in this research project has been to develop an automated system to enable large-scale analysis of visual campaign materials across different candidates and platforms, which could be capable of accurately categorizing visual content from political campaigns distinguishing particularly between the two main categories of webcard and image. This initial classification can serve as a foundational step for more complex analyses, such as identifying specific themes within webcards.

A vision transformer approach was selected for this project. Specifically, we utilized the ReViT architecture (Diko et al., 2024) pre-trained on large-scale image data (Russakovsky et al., 2015) to benefit from its robust feature representations before fine-tuning our specific political campaign dataset. The ReViT architecture begins, like a standard vision transformer, with a sample input (web card or image) and proceeds with patch embedding (Dosovitskiy et al., 2020; Vaswani et al., 2017). The input sample is first divided into a grid of non-overlapping, fixed-size patches. Each patch is then flattened into a vector and linearly projected into a higher-dimensional embedding space. Crucially, learnable positional embeddings are added to these patch embeddings. Since the self-attention mechanism itself is permutation-invariant (doesn't inherently know the order or position of patches), these positional embeddings provide the model with essential information about the original spatial arrangement of the patches within the image. An additional learnable “class token” embedding is often prepended to the sequence of patch embeddings, serving as an aggregate representation of the entire image for the final classification task (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** ReViT Architecture in (a) and ReViT's transformer block composition in (b).

This embedded patch sequence then flows through a series of identical transformer blocks. Each block performs complex computations to refine the patch representations by considering their relationships. These blocks are stacked sequentially, allowing the model to build increasingly complex and abstract representations. The fine-tuning of the pre-trained ReViT model on the in-house political campaign dataset was performed using specific optimization and loss function choices. The training process employs a workflow centered on the ReViT model. Input samples consist of images paired with their corresponding labels (0 for web card, 1 for image). These images are fed into the ReViT model in batches. The model

transforms each image into a feature vector designed to capture class-specific information (0 or 1). These feature vectors are then passed to a loss function which assigns a continuous prediction score (from 0.0 to 1.0) to each vector. A threshold of 0.5 is used for classification: Scores below 0.5 indicate class 0 and scores 0.5 or above indicate class 1. The loss function quantifies the prediction error, specifically cross-entropy, by comparing the predicted scores with the true labels. Finally, this error is used by the optimizer, guided by hyperparameters, to adjust the ReViT model's parameters, improving its classification accuracy. To evaluate the performance of the ReViT model on our specific task of differentiating webcards from images within the political campaign dataset, we employed *k*-fold cross-validation (Kohavi, 1995). We utilized a cross-validation strategy with an 80%–20% ratio between training and testing data for each fold (corresponding to 5-fold cross-validation, where  $k = 5$ ).

As the final result of this experimental approach, across these folds, the fine-tuned ReViT model achieved a strong average accuracy of 97.7% in distinguishing between webcards and standard images from the political campaign dataset—thus representing a potentially productive model for future research on social media and visual politics.

## 5. The Visual Performance of Leadership in the Online Political Arena

### 5.1. Visual Dichotomies

Among the most recurrent visual formats being used across different actors, a stark dichotomous opposition stands out of “us vs. them.” This dichotomy is especially emphasized in the cases of Salvini and the LN, Renzi and Stati Uniti d'Europa, AZ, and the M5S. In a clearly planned and consistently pursued strategy, Salvini and the LN construct their positioning on various thematic categories around an explicit opposition between “(+) Italy” and “(–) Europe,” producing and publishing highly homogeneous and graphically coordinated images (though these employ a variety of tones and discursive registers, ranging from realistic to paradoxical, from aggressive to humorous). The images used are often generic: For example, a Margherita pizza contrasted with a pizza topped with pineapple (deemed “European” and not “Italian”).

This dichotomous format also includes an image posted by Salvini's profile and reshared with critical commentary by various other profiles (+E, Nicola Fratoianni). The image shows part of a man's face as he drinks from the same plastic bottle, with and without eco-caps (introduced by a European regulation in 2019 to reduce plastic pollution in the environment). Already the subject of a brief ironic video by Calenda that circulated widely online—featured by various news sites and re-performed by other internet users—the image content, which is socially interpretable as “idiotic” (Goriunova, 2013) in online sharing practices, is also reshared and recontextualized with re-framing attempts by multiple political profiles. An example is +E, which transforms the slogan initially used by LN and Salvini, “less Europe, more Italy,” into “less Europe, more Salvini = more plastic in our seas.” (Figure 2).

As is evident in the strategies of +E and Renzi, and to a lesser extent in several posts by the M5S, this dichotomous opposition is often articulated in explicitly visual terms: for instance, through color use (with a dominant blue/light blue, typical of Italian institutions, for “us”) contrasted with black and white for “them,” as well as in the selection of smiling, confident faces for “us” versus sad, threatening, or uncertain faces for “them.” The title of the dichotomous format “spot the difference,” frequently used by the M5S, also appears

on other profiles with a personalized twist. In Renzi's case, it is adapted to "spot the differenzi," aligning with the pop style of his political communication, which is also targeted at a younger audience (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** A composite pattern of the visual dichotomy format.

As emerges from these examples, the cross-cutting use of the dichotomous format in visual political communication during election campaigns primarily serves an argumentative and identificatory function (Schill, 2012), aimed at defining political positioning and constructing the political and moral image of leaders. This is often based on the delegitimization of opponents in the electoral competition.

## 5.2. From Electoral Photogeny to Digital Photo-genAI

A final, more limited group of images published on the monitored political profiles during the election campaign instead serves a predominantly "transportative" function (Schill, 2012), by enabling—thanks to the use of image-generating artificial intelligence software—forms of cultural imagination of possible futures. Two cases from the dataset are exemplary. In the first case, published by Angelo Bonelli, the contested project for a bridge over the Strait of Messina, promoted by Minister of Infrastructure and Transport Matteo Salvini, becomes the target of ironic criticism, portrayed as a bridge made of an inflatable children's structure.

In the second case, Salvini's profile once again publishes a dichotomously formatted webcard, where the idea of Europe that the LN's political project opposes is depicted through an overtly artificial and deliberately provocative image of a male pregnancy, while the idea of Italy is represented by a family made up of a smiling, apparently well-off white heterosexual couple with a son and a daughter, on a hillside overlooking a small town at sunset. Unrealistic, digitally created images are thus used to suggest possible futures, typically presented as dystopian, against which a political project can position itself as an alternative and conservative response (Figure 3).

This example also illustrates the shift from modern "electoral photogeny" (Barthes, 1957) to what, in the contemporary digital age, could be called "electoral photo-genAI," made possible by generative artificial intelligence.



**Figure 3.** A double example of AI-generated images diffused by Angelo Bonelli (left) and Matteo Salvini (right).

## 6. The Visual Representation of Political Leaders in the Electoral Campaign

As is well known (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011; Karvonen, 2010; Van Aelst et al., 2012), the personalization of politics is one of the hallmarks of modern politics. Parallel to the spread of new communication tools, it has led to the transformation of traditional forms and codes of representation of power (Cheles & Giacone, 2022) and, therefore, to the development of new strategies for the self-representation of leadership. Insofar as a fundamental objective of political communication is to highlight the differences and contrasts between one's own political party and its opponents, strategies for representing political opponents have also been developed. The most effective strategies aim to construct a veritable delegitimizing counter-framing around identity elements, campaign issues, and even personal traits of the opponent.

### 6.1. Self-Representation of Political Leaders

The analysis of the 6,786 images posted by the 21 accounts examined reveals that in over 61% of cases ( $n = 4,190$ ), a political figure is present. This percentage rises to over 70% in the accounts of political leaders and slightly decreases to 56.9% in those of political parties. In the vast majority of these cases (70%), the politician portrayed is either the account holder or the party secretary. This self-representation is more pronounced in the leaders' accounts, where it exceeds 90% ( $n = 1,578$ ) of the images with political figures ( $n = 1,743$ ), and is present in 59.7% ( $n = 1,463$ ) of the images published by parties ( $n = 2,447$ ).

The use of images on political leaders' social media—who post fewer images than party accounts (2,487 vs. 4,299)—thus serves a predominantly and almost exclusively celebratory function. The percentage of self-portraits hovers around 80% for Nicola Fratoianni (79%), Angelo Bonelli, Matteo Salvini (81%), and Carlo Calenda (84%); it exceeds 90% for Giuseppe Conte (92%), Matteo Renzi (99%), Elly Schlein (98.6%), and reaches 100% in the images of Emma Bonino, Giorgia Meloni, and Antonio Tajani, on whose social media no other political leaders are featured—neither positively nor negatively. The self-celebratory use of social media by some leaders is also evident in the number of their images posted during the four-week observation period: Schlein 365 of 370, Calenda 248 of 294, Salvini 242 of 297, Renzi 250 of 252, Conte 199 of 216, Fratoianni 143 of 180, Bonelli 13 of 16, Tajani 60 of 60, Meloni 41 of 41, and Bonino 17 of 17 (Table 2).

The personalization and management of political leaders' self-image on social media are carried out according to two distinct criteria. The first is percentage-based: the saturation level of the self-image compared to that of other political leaders, which is very high for all. The second is quantitative: the number of self-images, which varies considerably from leader to leader. It is along these two visual variables—saturation and presence—that leaders and parties define and differentiate their strategies of personalization and self-representation.

**Table 2.** Personalization and self-representation.

| Leader Account    | Presence of Politician(s) | % of Total  | Self-Representation | % of Self-Representation |
|-------------------|---------------------------|-------------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| Angelo Bonelli    | 16                        | 0.92%       | 13                  | 81.25%                   |
| Antonio Tajani    | 60                        | 3.44%       | 60                  | 100%                     |
| Carlo Calenda     | 294                       | 16.87%      | 248                 | 84.35%                   |
| Elly Schlein      | 370                       | 21.23%      | 365                 | 98.65%                   |
| Emma Bonino       | 17                        | 0.98%       | 17                  | 100%                     |
| Giorgia Meloni    | 41                        | 2.35%       | 41                  | 100%                     |
| Giuseppe Conte    | 216                       | 12.39%      | 199                 | 92.13%                   |
| Matteo Renzi      | 252                       | 14.46%      | 250                 | 99.21%                   |
| Matteo Salvini    | 297                       | 17.04%      | 242                 | 81.48%                   |
| Nicola Fratoianni | 180                       | 10.33%      | 143                 | 79.44%                   |
| <b>Total</b>      | <b>1,743</b>              | <b>100%</b> | <b>1,578</b>        |                          |

Note: For each leader account, the table shows the total number of images featuring a political figure, and the number and percentage of images portraying the account holder.

The predominant macro-type for leader self-representation is photography, as opposed to webcards (65.6% vs. 34.7%), a figure that rises in the personal accounts of leaders (84% vs. 15%) but is reversed in the accounts of party lists (44.5% vs. 55.5%) where the webcard serves as a more functional tool to connect the leader to various activities and the multiple discursive registers associated with campaign promotion.

As for the type of photographs, nearly all (89.7%) are specific shots documenting a precise event, a demonstration, or an occurrence, as opposed to 10% being generic or stock photos. The value of these photos lies in their immediacy and documentary capacity, as confirmed by an analysis of the production practice, which shows 73.5% are candid, spontaneous shots (not posed), compared to 24% that are posed or studio photos such as formal campaign portraits. These figures are even higher in leaders' accounts, with 77% spontaneous shots versus 19.7% posed.



The type of images reveals the kind of self-representation the leader aims to project, including the chosen traits and connotations. In the photos posted on their social accounts, leaders predominantly present themselves in their public/professional role (80.1%), in only 4.3% of cases in a private or informal setting (e.g., with family or during leisure time), and in 15% of cases in a context that is not easily classifiable. This public/professional dimension is itself divided into two main modes: the leader “on stage,” performing leadership (48.4%), and the leader “with ordinary people, supporters, or activists” (38.3%).

The “on stage” photos, taken during rallies and public events, are often characterized by an official, solemn tone. The leader is depicted alone on a large stage or shot from above or below, emphasizing their figure and focusing attention on them, or at the margins of the speech, together with other politicians or institutional figures present at the event, highlighting the shared and collective nature of political action (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** The leader on stage, alone, and with other leaders: Matteo Salvini during a presentation of his book in Ascoli Piceno on May 15th (left); and Carlo Calenda at TEDxPadova with the candidate Carlo Pasqualetto, on May 25th (right).

The category involving “ordinary people, supporters, and activists” includes spontaneous shots of the leader in the crowd, interacting with supporters, or posed with them in backstage or informal moments, in various forms. These include selfies with supporters—almost always featuring a calm, smiling expression—a style widely used by Renzi, Salvini, and Schlein; or crowd baths, where the leader is portrayed showing strong closeness and empathy with the public, often reaching out from the stage toward the crowd or appearing with children, evoking strong references to the traditional iconography of political and religious power (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** The leader off stage, surrounded by ordinary people: Giuseppe Conte in Catania, visiting the traditional “fera o’luni” on May 30th (left); Ely Schlein visits a company investing in innovation and circular sustainability and embraces one of the workers on June 3rd (right).

A common and widespread trait in the photographic self-representation of leaders is a marked, overt closeness and empathy with voters, expressed through physicality and corporeality—via contact, hugs, handshakes, touches, and other gestures of proximity.

The style and use of portraiture shift in webcards, where the aim is no longer to document an event or certify the leader's popularity, but rather to employ their image in a more promotional way to support a thematic-communicative function. A recurring feature in webcards is the repeated use of the same image of the leader—an almost institutional portrait, reused as if it were a symbol or visual trademark. This image is used to link and unify different types and thematic series of webcards: agenda, statements, fundraising, and the political program (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** On the left, an example of a webcard using a stock image of Antonio Tajani; on the right, a webcard portraying Giorgia Meloni alone on the stage, in front of a distant crowd.

The importance of typologies, production formats, representational models, and the functions of images in shaping visual communication strategies and leadership styles is evident in the comparison between the visual strategies adopted by the Italian Prime Minister and leader of FdI, Giorgia Meloni, and the secretary of the PD, Elly Schlein. Their personal accounts share extremely high levels of image saturation (98% and 100%, respectively), but they differ quantitatively: Elly Schlein appears in 370 images, while Meloni appears in only 41 (Table 2). This ratio is reversed on the parties' official accounts: Meloni features in 165 images, compared to just 53 for Schlein. For Meloni, it is the party that quantitatively promotes her image and centers communication on her figure, whereas for Schlein, it is her personal accounts—more than the party, which contains various factions and multiple leaders—that drive her visual representation.

With the exception of a single image with Minister Giorgio Crosetto at a military parade, in none of the more than 200 images published on Meloni's personal and party accounts does the prime minister share the stage with other national political leaders, not even those from allied parties. By contrast, there are numerous official photos with foreign leaders and prominent figures from sports and current affairs. Her personal accounts do not publish webcards featuring her image, only photographs of her—most taken during institutional meetings and events, some portraits, two from an election rally, and two selfies, posted simultaneously on both Facebook and Instagram. Meloni is never portrayed in the midst of crowds, in contact with supporters or voters, either in selfie mode or in a "crowd bath" style. In the few cases where the crowd does appear, it is distant, in the background of her rallies (Figure 6).



These modes, by contrast, are very common in the portraiture of Elly Schlein, who is rarely depicted alone, with a clear predominance of spontaneous, candid, and unposed photos. In some shots, she is almost difficult to identify in the midst of the crowd. This category of spontaneous and unposed images also includes the portraits used in the webcards published both on her personal accounts and those of the party.

Webcards featuring images of Meloni—across the various types such as statements, agenda, and program—are published only on the accounts of FdI. In all of them, she appears alone, in close or extreme close-up, in posed studio-style photos, with meticulous aesthetic care and attention. The result is a carefully crafted and coherent visual narrative centered on her figure—her gaze, hair, and smile. This represents an extreme personalization effort, an image-building operation focused on Meloni's leadership, which evolves and intensifies over the course of the campaign, culminating in a progressive blow-up on her figure, eventually reduced to a detail, a brand (Figure 7).



**Figure 7.** The image-building strategy of Giorgia Meloni: Three webcards published by FdI in the last days of the elections.

## 6.2. The Visual Representation of Political Opponents

How did Italian leaders and parties tackle the difficult task of building (and dismantling) their opponents' image through social media communication during the 2024 European elections? Some useful insights into this question can be found in the sub-corpora of images published by the two protagonists of the election campaign, Giorgia Meloni and Elly Schlein. It should be noted that we will focus here on the image of the opponent in the strict sense, i.e., the analysis of visual communication that includes the image of a leader who is a political opponent. This is both in recognition of the extremely personalized nature of contemporary politics and election campaigns, and in order to have a signifier that can be clearly traced back to the opposing camp.

The first interesting fact is that none of the images posted by the two leaders on Facebook and Instagram in the month before the vote depicts a political opponent. What is posted on Meloni and Schlein's personal accounts, therefore, concerns only the construction/maintenance of their personal image and the thematization of their campaign issues, as well as the narrative of the campaign itself. The portrayal of the enemy is entrusted entirely to the party accounts. This may foreshadow a sort of "Italian variant" of the cross-platform strategy, which would rather see a difference in the use of Facebook, for example, for sharing more "public" moments and

Instagram for the pursuit of a strategy of celebritization linked to the sharing of intimate moments (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Farkas & Bene, 2021).

The second interesting element is that all images posted by party accounts that feature an opponent are in webcard format, demonstrating the versatility of the format. Although they contain images of opponents and therefore fall within the category of webcards dedicated to attack, the images that make up the two sub-corpora of the visual production of Fdl and the PD are structured according to interesting strategies in terms of both format and content.

Let's start with the webcards ( $n = 20$ ) posted by the PD. The underlying strategy is clearly that of a personal attack, but directed almost equally at the main opponent, Giorgia Meloni ( $n = 12$ ), and at members of her party or coalition ( $n = 8$ ). The "direct" attacks on Giorgia Meloni can be divided into two categories. On the one hand, the use of statements by the leader to highlight her inconsistency ("hypocrites" reads the slogan on a webcard showing two Giorgias side by side, one declaring her government to be at the forefront of the fight against homophobia and the other pointing out that she did not sign the EU declaration on LGBTQ+ rights). On the other hand, there are more direct attacks, carried out through slogans such as "turn your back on the poor" and with the weapons of irony (Figure 8). The communication is graphically very consistent, regularly using a standard layout with a red strip at the bottom containing the slogan in capital letters and white font, but, visually, it probably commits a Lakoffian error. The elephant, Giorgia Meloni, despite appearing in 12 of the 20 images, demonstrates her centrality in the PD's visual communication. This is particularly evident in the comparative webcards: In the one already mentioned, relating to the "U-turn" on LGBTQ+ rights, she appears twice, although one image is intended to be a mirror image, distorted in expression and identified as the leader's "shadow" through the use of black and white. This strategy is also found in the only fully comparative webcard, which shows Schlein and Meloni facing each other, one in color and the other in black and white, under the PD secretary's statement: "That Giorgia Meloni is a woman, a mother and a Christian means NOTHING to Italians who cannot put bread on the table" (Figure 8). This is a somewhat clumsy attempt to reframe the cry from the Vox stage that Giorgia Meloni has managed to turn into a real catchphrase, an identifying feature of her political image that is difficult to dismantle and therefore dangerous to quote.



Figure 8. Direct attack webcard by PD (left) and a comparison attack webcard posted by Fdl (right).

In the webcards ( $n = 36$ ) posted by Fdl, the strategy is more complex, primarily because there are two leaders against whom action is being taken: Elly Schlein and Giuseppe Conte. This is a relevant element explaining the overall meaning of the campaign, with Giorgia Meloni's party devoting maximum attention ( $n = 22$ ) to attacking two different personalities, who in turn direct their attacks mainly at Giorgia Meloni through their parties and, in Conte's case, also through his personal account, thus confirming her undisputed central role. It should be added that, in Fdl's communication, the most attacked leader is Conte ( $n = 14$ , compared to 6 dedicated to Schlein and considering 4 in which the two are portrayed together). It is also possible to detect, with reference to Conte, a clear thematic consistency in the attacks, which are directed at the person but based on a specific political choice, indicating, at least in the speakers' intention, the concreteness of the argument. In eight out of 14 cases, the target of the attack is the "superbonus," a building incentive measure introduced by the second Conte government in May 2020, which the leader "does not regret" even though it has "exacerbated inequalities" and "will weigh heavily on (public) debt for decades." All webcards feature the aforementioned strategy of quoting a news article and affixing the logo of the publication that published it, as a reference to current events and, ultimately, to the concrete nature of Fdl's position. The use of the comparative format is also interesting: Whereas for Schlein the choice was purely visual, with the faces of the two leaders juxtaposed under a quote from the PD secretary talking about the prime minister, here the strategy is more "classic." Above Giorgia Meloni's confident and determined face are her achievements: "Increase in employment; increase in permanent contracts; defence of borders; increase in healthcare funding." Above Schlein's face, not coincidentally alone but in the foreground with Campania governor Vincenzo De Luca on her right and M5S leader Giuseppe Conte on her left, are some words that, again not coincidentally, represent the "real" battle horses of Meloni's opponents. Not ideals or policies, but assessments of her opponent. "There's Telemeloni," a reference to the government's control of public radio and television. "Giorgia is not a true female leader," a reference to the refusal to celebrate the prime minister's success as a champion of feminist ideals. "Get to work, asshole," off-air comments in which De Luca insulted Meloni during a clash between the two. Once again, Meloni is not only the center of attention, but also the real issue at stake in the elections, the topic of conversation, the obsession of her opponents. Finally, as a further element of disavowal of Schlein's leadership, half of the webcards containing attacks on other members of opposing parties refer to the aforementioned Giuseppe De Luca—a clear reference to the risk that a charismatic figure such as the governor of Campania could overshadow the PD leadership and hinder it in the event of an election victory (Figure 8).

## 7. Conclusion

This article developed an interdisciplinary framework to analyze visual political communication in the 2024 European elections, focusing on Italian politicians' social media content and visual representation strategies. It aimed at offering a methodological as well as empirical contribution to such a growing research area.

On the one hand, the article bridged political communication, visual culture, and computer science, applying quantitative and qualitative visual content analysis as well as computer vision to examine content typologies. Such a mixed-method analysis thus revealed key visual formats, themes, and leadership portrayals across Facebook and Instagram posts. In particular, the methodological section employing computer vision demonstrated the effectiveness of using a pre-trained ReViT to classify political campaign visuals as either webcards or photographs. Using ReViT's global context modeling and residual attention mechanism, high classification accuracy was achieved, with cross-validation yielding an average of 97.7%. Future work could

move beyond classification toward interactive analysis tools, incorporating methods like visual question answering (Kohavi, 1995) or object detection (Diko et al., 2024) to explore political imagery more deeply (e.g., identifying logos, individuals, or sentiment cues) bopenning new avenues for interdisciplinary research in visual political communication.

On the other hand, the empirical findings contribute to ongoing research on the ways in which political actors produce and disseminate visual content to shape political communication, frame key issues, and performatively construct leader identities during electoral campaigns. The findings highlight differentiated patterns in production practices and visual formats, as well as transversal strategies of legitimizing political leaders and delegitimizing opponents through visual symbolic contrasts and emotional appeals. Among the key results, webcards were far more frequently used than photographs for the agenda/calendar and program functions, while photographs were predominant for the campaign activity function aimed at documenting events. Also, for this reason, the vast majority of photographs were specific, not generic, referring to situated contexts, events, or subjects.

In particular, the research section on the visual self-representation of leadership showed a significant self-celebratory use of self-portraits on social media, hovering between 80% and 100% of images of leaders published by political actors in the four-week-long electoral campaign in Italy. Similarly, among the most recurrent visual formats used across different actors, a stark dichotomous opposition of “us vs. them” was registered. Such a dichotomous visual format mainly served an argumentative and identificatory function, defining political positioning and constructing the political and moral image of leaders, often based on the delegitimization of opponents in the electoral competition. Political leaders present themselves in their public/professional role, mainly “on stage” or with ordinary people, supporters, or activists. The research section on the visual representation of political opponents, instead, included quite direct attacks highlighting inconsistency and untrustworthiness. In the overall collected material, a quantitatively scarce but qualitatively interesting category of visual content included AI-generated images—a research object that might soon become increasingly central also in the field of visual politics and electoral campaigns.

Finally, mainly because of the requirements of the national funding body, the scope of this research was limited to a national context—and to a specific political and historical timeframe. At the same time, the proposed analytical framework and the collected empirical findings might also be used for comparative, cross-national analysis of visual political communication during electoral campaigns. Recent projects have increasingly pursued such a research strategy that might be further developed in the near future.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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