



Citation: Carlo Berti, Enzo Loner (2020) The 2019 European Elections on Twitter between Populism, Euroscepticism and Nationalism: The Case of Italy. *Società Mutamento Politica* 11(22): 275-288. doi: 10.13128/smp-12654

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

The 2019 European Elections on Twitter between Populism, Euroscepticism and Nationalism: The Case of Italy

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Abstract. European Parliament elections have often been defined second-order elections, focused on national rather than transnational issues. This paper investigates the combined impact of Eurosceptic populism and social media in the development of the campaign during the 2019 European Parliament elections. It evaluates how populist and non-populist politicians and parties campaigned for the European elections on Twitter by using the case study of Italy. Computer-assisted quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis of social media content are used to assess the relevance of Europe in political communication and the strategies used by different political actors. Findings show that the concept of nation plays a central role in the campaign, with Europe depicted either as an enemy (by nationalist populism) or a saviour (by pro-Europeans). Moreover, there is a tendency towards a “populist shift” in the communication style.

Keywords. Social media, political communication, populism, European Parliament, Italian politics.

INTRODUCTION

The 2019 European Parliament (EP) elections marked an unprecedented success of Eurosceptic and populist political forces all over Europe, as symbolized by the results of Nigel Farage’s Brexit Party in the UK (30.74%), Marine Le Pen’s Rassemblement National in France (23.31%), and Matteo Salvini’s League in Italy (34.33%). Already in 2014, EP elections showed an increasing support for Eurosceptic and populist parties, which was linked to a widespread dissatisfaction with EU politics and policies (Treib 2014) and the disenchantment towards European integration (Ruzza 2019).

EP elections have often been defined second-order elections, being considered by voters less important than national elections (Hix and Marsh 2011; Reiff and Schmitt 1980; Schmitt 2005), with electoral campaigns and voters’ behaviour often driven by national rather than transnational issues (Kunelius and Sparks 2001; Hix and Marsh 2007). The analysis of what top-

* The authors received financial support from the PRIN 2017 project “The transformation of democracy: Actors, strategies and outcomes in opposing populism in political, juridical and social arenas” (CUP E64I19003110005), funded by the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research.

ics and issues drive EP elections is part of a broader debate surrounding the normative qualities and empirical expressions of a European public sphere. At first, the discussion over the existence of a European public sphere largely focused on a traditional mass-mediated communication environment, with empirical studies generally investigating the press and television news (e.g. Semetko and Valkenburg 2000; van de Steeg 2002; Trenz 2004). Likewise, the theoretical debate concentrated on the potential emergence of a European public sphere through transnational media systems. For instance, Ward (2001) argued that the European Union (EU) democratic deficit included a lack of efficient communicative action, especially in terms of access to information and public debate about the EU and its functioning. Moreover, by looking at the emergence of a supranational press focused on European issues, Schlesinger (1999) argued that this new European public sphere was essentially elitist (a position that found empirical evidence in such works as Kantola 2001, and Trenz 2004).

Several empirical analyses focused on traditional mass-media highlighted that, rather than a genuinely supranational or transnational European public sphere, the main tendencies are towards either a Europeanization of national public spheres (Koopmans and Erbe 2004), or a national spin given to European issues (such as the introduction of the euro, as seen in Semetko, de Vreese and Peter 2000). Overall, the development of the European public sphere seems to happen along the lines of a parallelization of different national public spheres debating on issues of European relevance without generating a common public sphere (Nulty *et al.* 2016; Kriesi and Grande 2015).

However, academic interest recently shifted towards the influence of online communication on the evolution of a European public sphere, focusing initially on the general use of the internet and websites (e.g. van Os, Jankowski and Vergeer 2007; Vergeer, Hermans and Cunha 2013), and later on such social media as Facebook and Twitter (e.g. Krzyzanowski 2018; Larsson 2015). In a comparative study over the use of internet websites during the 2004 EP elections, van Os, Jankowski and Vergeer (2007) concluded that there were indicators of the existence of a European public sphere, while Larsson (2015) examined the use of Twitter by the EP outside of elections periods, monitoring the development of the use of social media platforms for communicating about European issues. Nulty *et al.* (2016) analysed the 2014 EP elections campaign on Twitter and found evidence of a parallelization of the discussion over EU issues, rather than of a transnational public sphere: this suggests that social media do not differ substantially from tradi-

tional media in their contribution to a European public sphere. Research on the coverage of EP election in such national contexts as Germany (Schweitzer 2009), Spain, and Portugal (Amaral *et al.* 2016) confirm difficulties in generating a transnational debate and a general tendency of political actors to focus on national issues (or frame European issues in national terms) on both websites and social media.

However, as noted at the beginning of this paper, the latest political developments across Europe saw an increasing success of populist forces both at national and European level. The growing importance of these political forces poses new challenges for national and transnational public debate about the EU. While one of the most common approaches to populism (the ideational approach) defines it as a thin-centred ideology that juxtaposes the pure people and the corrupt elite (Mudde 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017), populism was also approached as a communication style (Jagers and Walgrave 2007). The populist communication style is often characterized by explicit anti-elitism and the exclusion of such outgroups as migrants (Jagers and Walgrave 2007), while populist leaders may adopt different communication strategies to project a particular image of themselves (see Bracciale and Martella 2017). A common form of anti-elitism in contemporary European politics is Euroscepticism. A large number of populist parties in Europe are Eurosceptic (see Roduijn *et al.* 2019, for a classification of populist parties in the EU) and their presence might have a relevant impact in how the EU is communicated, especially during European electoral campaigns.

A number of studies already explored the impact of Euroscepticism on discourses about the EU (e.g. de Vries and Edwards 2009; Adam and Meier 2011; de Wilde and Trenz 2012; de Wilde, Michailidou and Trenz 2014). However, as yet, it is not clear how the combination of (i) increasingly successful Eurosceptic populist forces and (ii) a hybrid media system where social media are a fundamental tool of political communication (Chadwick 2017) can impact on political communication about the EU. Research in this direction would imply not only an analysis of how populists communicate about the EU on social media, but also of how non-populist forces react and adapt their communication about the EU in this new political environment.

This paper addresses this knowledge gap, by looking at how Italian populist and non-populist political leaders and parties communicated on Twitter during the electoral campaign for the 2019 EP elections. For this purpose, Italy is a critical case study, given the success of a number of Eurosceptic populist parties such as the Five-Star Movement, the League, and Brothers of Italy.

The next section reviews the relationship between populism, social media, and the European Union, before moving on to the empirical part of the study.

POPULISM, EUROSCEPTICISM, AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Two specific aspects of political communication are at the core of this research: the relationship between populism and social media and the way in which Eurosceptic populism can influence political communication about the EU. The aim of this investigation is to understand how Eurosceptic populism exploits social media to communicate about the EU during the European Parliament electoral campaign and how non-populist political forces react to this kind of communication.

Research demonstrated that both the mass media and the web substantially contribute to the spread of Euroscepticism, which spread on the media as well as in citizens' discursive production online (De Wilde and Trenz 2012; De Wilde, Michailidou and Trenz 2014). Moreover, analyses of online news seem to confirm the tendency of traditional media, with national politics being the most common frame, and the EU being often contested (Michailidou 2015). These studies, however, did not look at social media platforms, but mainly at news platforms and political blogs. In their research on televised campaigning for the 2009 EP elections, Adam and Meier (2011) found that countries with stronger Eurosceptic parties tended to focus more on EU issues (though with the notable exceptions of Germany and the UK). Such research raises further questions over the potential impact of Eurosceptic populist forces in the communication about the EU. As for research on social media, a number of studies showed the potential of social media platforms in engaging citizens in the public debate over European issues (e.g. Bossetta, Segesten and Trenz 2017; Barisione and Ceron 2017) and outlined the challenges that social media pose for European institutional communication (Krzyżanowski 2018). However, research on how populists' exploitation of social media can impact on the communication about EU-related topics is still lacking (with the exception of works on specific aspects of Euroscepticism, such as Brexit – see Ruzza and Pejovic 2019).

The topic is of utmost importance, given the current relevance of social media in political communication and the peculiar affinity between social media and populism. A growing body of literature demonstrated that social media are fundamental tools of political communication (Enli and Skogerbø 2013; Stier *et al.* 2018), and populists especially exploited them to spread their message, thus

forcing other relevant actors in the public debate (such as non-populist politicians and traditional media) to adapt to these modern forms of communication (Bobba and McDonnell 2016; Engesser *et al.* 2017; Gerbaudo 2018; Larsson 2019). Social media allow populists to spread their message in a disintermediated and fragmented way, bypassing journalistic gatekeeping and producing short, simple messages (Engesser *et al.* 2017). Unmediated political communication, moreover, turns social media into a source of information and news for journalists (Broersma and Graham 2013). The exploitation of this particular feature facilitates all political actors in exerting influence on the public agenda (Bracciale and Martella 2017; Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2018; Waisbord and Amado 2017); populists, however, are favoured by the logics of social media, which allow for a strong personalization and direct contact with the people.

Groshek and Koc-Michalska (2017) showed that the use of social media influences voters' behaviour and, in particular, helps populists to increase their consensus. By looking at the Italian case, Bobba and Roncarolo (2018) pointed out that populist messages on Facebook tend to receive more "likes"; a strong personalization of the message and a pronounced emotionality also seem to increase the likeability of social media messages (Bobba 2019).

All these studies show that the combination of populism and social media has a relevant impact on political communication. In order to better understand such impact with respect to communication about the EU and given the success of Eurosceptic populist forces during the last two EP electoral campaigns, it is important to investigate how populist forces use social media to talk about the EU and how this affects the social media strategy of all relevant political forces.

Although political actors make use of different social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram), this paper is focused on their use of Twitter. Twitter offers all the typical advantages of social media, namely disintermediated communication, speed, and potential for virality (Jacobs and Spierings 2018). This platform was used to understand the evolution of political discourses over time (Van Kessel and Castelein 2016) and to analyse the communication strategies of political parties and leaders during electoral campaigns (e.g. Casero-Ripollés *et al.* 2017). Moreover, Twitter is a relevant source of information for traditional media in the current hybrid media system (Chadwick 2017) and therefore has a strong potential to influence the media agenda and, more in general, the public debate (Bracciale and Martella 2017; Waisbord and Amado 2017). Thus, analysing Twitter means to explore an important source of discourses and

information during modern electoral campaigns (see Higgins 2017).

By using Italy as a case study, this paper aims to evaluate how populist and non-populist parties and political leaders used Twitter to communicate about the EU during the 2019 EP campaign. In particular, the focus is on the following research questions:

RQ1: How relevant was Europe in Italian populist and non-populist political actors' tweets during the electoral campaign?

RQ2: What topics and issues were Europe and the EU mostly associated to by political actors during the electoral campaign on Twitter? Were there relevant differences between populists and non-populists?

RQ3: How does a strong populist presence impact on the relevance of the EU in European electoral campaigns? Do populist and non-populist forces converge or diverge in framing the campaign at national/EU level? Is there a shift towards EU or away from EU?

The following section engages with the choice of Italy as a case study, and describes the methodology and methods of the empirical research.

CASE STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

The Italian political panorama at the time of the 2019 EP elections

At the time of the 2019 EP elections, the Italian government was supported by a coalition of two parties, the League (*Lega*) and the Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle* - M5S): both are populist parties, although with different features (Rooduijn *et al.* 2019). Together, they formed the first populist government of Western Europe (Garzia 2019). The M5S's distinctive trait is its anti-establishment stance (Diamanti 2014; Mosca 2014), a feature that can be problematic once the party reaches a position of power (as it happened after the 2018 national elections, when the League-M5S government was born). On the other hand, the League is mainly characterised by anti-immigration and Eurosceptic attitudes (Garzia 2019) as well as by a strong tendency towards personalization based on the figure of its leader and Secretary General, Matteo Salvini. Under Salvini's leadership, the League shifted from regionalism and localism towards far-right nationalism (Ruzza 2018). The main opponents to this populist government were the centre-left Democratic Party (Partito Democratico - PD), the centre-

right Forza Italia (FI), usually considered populist (but pro-European) in academic literature, and the far-right, nationalist and populist Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia - FdI), which has strong anti-immigration and Eurosceptic ideas (Rooduijn *et al.* 2019).

The 2019 EP elections in Italy, therefore, took place in this political environment characterised by the presence of a strong, tendentially Eurosceptic populist block (holding the most relevant governmental positions, and with high consensus among citizens), and a pro-European non-populist block. Populist parties obtained higher percentages of votes than non-populist parties. The League and the M5S obtained 34.26% and 17.06% of the votes, respectively. The electoral success for the League was evident, while the M5S markedly decreased its share of votes in comparison to the 2018 national elections, shifting from first to third most voted party in the country. Between this two populist parties, the non-populist Democratic Party obtained 22.74% of the votes. Forza Italia, whose leader Silvio Berlusconi is generally described as a populist, obtained 8.78% of the votes, followed by the populist and nationalist Brothers of Italy (6.44%). A number of smaller parties obtained lower percentages, but no seats in the European Parliament.

Methodology

To analyse how the themes of Europe and the European Union were treated on Twitter by the main populist and non-populist Italian political actors during the electoral campaign for the EP elections, we initially selected the Twitter profiles to analyse. We chose to use the profiles of the parties that eventually obtained seats (League, M5S, PD, FdI, FI) and those of their leaders and main candidates: Matteo Salvini (League), Luigi Di Maio (M5S), Giorgia Meloni (FdI), Silvio Berlusconi (FI), and Carlo Calenda (PD)¹.

All tweets (including retweets) by these profiles refer to the 1 April 2019 – 31 May 2019 time-span (total $n=15,156$). This period included nearly two months before the elections and a few days after the elections, thus allowing us to cover the most intense part of the electoral campaign and the immediate reactions to the results.

Among these tweets, we did an automatic selection of all those containing the root "Europ" or the acronym "UE" (EU). This allowed us to get a measure of the relevance of Europe and the EU during the electoral cam-

¹ Formally, the leader of the PD was his Secretary General Nicola Zingaretti. However, Zingaretti was not a candidate to the EP, while Carlo Calenda was the candidate who obtained the largest share of votes in his party.

Tab. 1. Total number of tweets retrieved for each profile selected.

	Political actor (politician or party)									
	Matteo Salvini	Luigi Di Maio	Carlo Calenda	Silvio Berlusconi	Giorgia Meloni	League	M5S	FdI	PD	FI
April 2019	615	16	551	62	29	1122	437	1590	829	909
May 2019	1411	12	539	534	38	1740	540	1941	823	1418
Total	2026	28	1090	596	67	2862	977	3531	1652	2327

campaign on Twitter. A quantitative textual analysis was subsequently conducted on the tweets that contained mentions to Europe. By analysing the words used in texts near direct references to Europe, we managed to investigate how Europe was strategically used and connected to other specific elements and issues.

Text analysis was conducted automatically through R by using the text mining package “tm” (Feinerer 2018) and the package “quanteda” for quantitative text analysis (Benoit *et al.* 2018). In particular, by using a “counting and dictionary” approach (Welbers *et al.* 2017: 254), we created graphs of the 25 most used words in connection with Europe and the EU by each profile (see Figures 4-5). To avoid the presence of very common but uninformative words in our analysis (e.g. prepositions and conjunctions), we used a stop-words list (Benoit *et al.* 2018)². We then grouped all these words into categories to systematize the analysis (see Table 3).

Finally, to confirm and exemplify results from quantitative analysis, we qualitatively selected a number of significant tweets from the full sample.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the number of tweets retrieved for each political actor analysed, while Table 2 shows the number of mentions of “Europ” and “EU” for each profile. A comparison between the total number of tweets and the references to Europe shows that Europe and the EU are not mentioned very frequently, thus suggesting that political actors decided not to particularly focus on European themes for their electoral campaigns.

Despite the apparently low general interest in European themes, Figure 1 demonstrates that, in the weeks before the European elections, there is a visible increase in the attention towards the European Union, as shown by the number of times “Europ” and “EU” are used on Twitter during the October 2018 – May 2019 period. Although this may be linked, at least partially, to the

Tab. 2. Number of tweets’ segments containing the root “Europ” or the acronym “EU” for each selected profile.

Political actor	Mentions of “Europ” or “EU”
Matteo Salvini	403
Luigi Di Maio	1
Carlo Calenda	166
Silvio Berlusconi	229
Giorgia Meloni	25
Lega	485
M5S	208
FdI	1077
PD	449
FI	814
Total	3,857

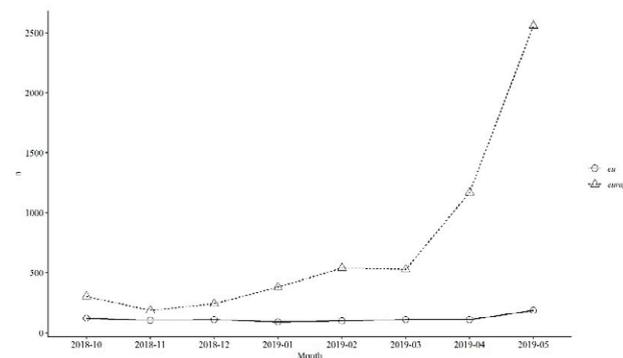


Fig. 1. Mentions of “Europ” or “EU” (October 2018-May 2019).

fact that leaders and parties had a tendency to increase their number of Tweets (especially during the month of May, as evident in Table 1), it still shows that the theme of Europe gained relevance during the electoral campaign.

Interestingly, Figures 2 and 3 show that most of the attention towards Europe comes from the parties which mix traits of populism and Eurosceptic nationalism.

² For the full list of stop-words, please contact the authors.

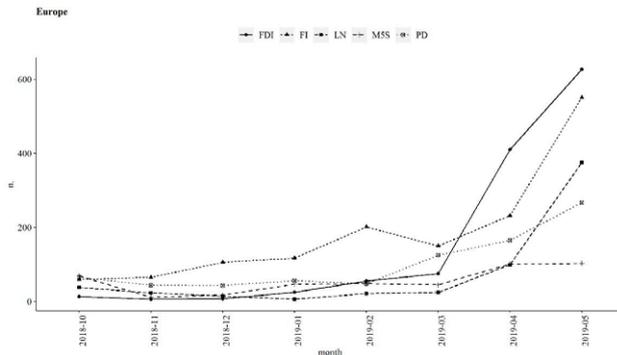


Fig. 2. Mentions of Europe by party (October 2018-May 2019).

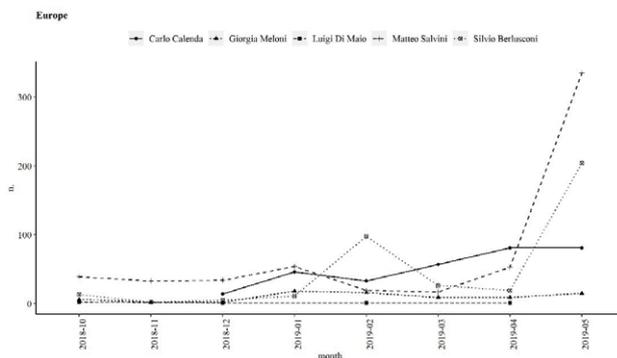


Fig. 3. Mentions of Europe by party leaders (October 2018-May 2019).

This confirms the results from a previous research highlighting that Eurosceptic political actors tend to focus more on European themes (Adam and Meier 2011). In particular, FdI is the most focused on Europe overall, while the League shows the sharpest increase from April to May (between this two parties, Silvio Berlusconi's party FI also showed much attention to Europe). Looking at political leaders, League's Matteo Salvini talks about Europe more than any other party leader, followed by Silvio Berlusconi, while the other politicians seem to expressly talk about Europe much less (in particular, Carlo Calenda's use of the word Europe decreases from April to May, while Luigi Di Maio never mentions Europe or the EU directly). The M5S appears rather disinterested in Europe. However, these tables show the absolute numbers of mentions of Europe in political Tweets, which also depends on the total of Tweets posted by the different actors.

A closer look at the data reveals a more nuanced image of how the different political actors strategically frame Europe during the electoral campaign. Figures 4 and 5 show a word-count of the 25 most used words

for each politician and party analysed. The graphs can be used to highlight differences and similarities in the strategies and issues that each political actor uses during the campaign. While the word "Europe" (or other terms referred to the EU) is present and relevant in the graphs of all actors (with the exception of Luigi Di Maio, who however rarely used Twitter for his campaigning), the patterns of words linked to it are quite heterogeneous, and point at different choices by politicians and parties.

Moreover, as evident from Table 3, the majority of the words can be inserted in a limited number of categories which shows two main tendencies: a) the "nationalization" of the European elections, and b) a "populist" shift in the strategies of the majority of political actors.

The "nationalization" of European elections

Table 3 shows that references to national issues and national politics are much more common than those to European themes and politics. References to Europe are overall rather generic, while those to Italy are numerous and heterogeneous. References to taxes, security, the Italian government and its members can be found throughout the sample of tweets. Moreover, the tendency to shift from the European to the national level is evident from the words under the category "References to other political actors": all these words refer to national political actors, with no mention to EU-level politics and institutions. Likewise, several words under the category "Campaign" also refer to national parties, and, for instance, no mention to EU-level parliamentary groups or alliances can be found.

To further highlight this tendency, it can be noted that, according to the patterns of most used words, populist parties and politicians focused on nationalism, by using the words "Italy" and "Italians" much more frequently than any other word.

This is the case, especially, of Giorgia Meloni and her party, FdI, who adopt a type of communication centred on a strong nationalism embodied in the figure of Meloni herself and her party. In Meloni's tweets, the two most used words (the hashtag "vote Italian", and "Italy") have a nationalist nuance; "Europ" only comes in third place. A similar pattern is found in FdI's most used words. This strategy is completed by a series of attacks to foreigners and EU institutions, such as in a tweet where the party announces a political gathering called "Non passa lo straniero" (a verse of a war song, translatable as "The foreigner shall not pass"), and adding «against the Europe of banks and bureaucrats and in defence of national borders» (Twitter, 23 May 2019). On the same day, another electoral tweet is posted, claiming:

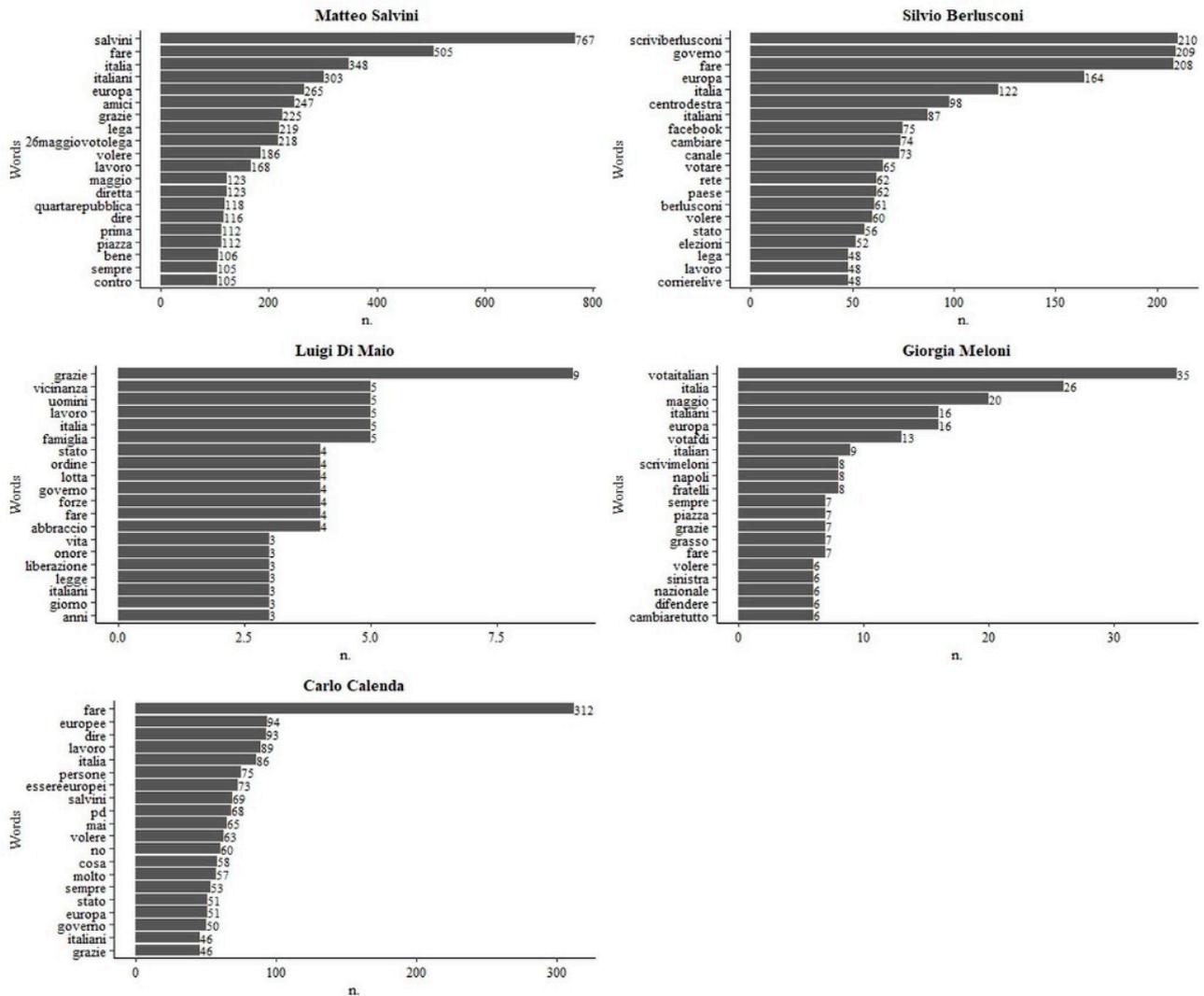


Fig. 4. 25 most used words by leaders in tweets mentioning Europe (April-May 2019).

On 26 May cross the symbol of Brothers of Italy and #WRITEMELONI. You can vote her all over Italy! #VoteItalian, vote who defends Italy (Twitter, 23 May 2019).

Although Meloni does not tweet often, it is remarkable to find among her most used words several references to Italy and Italians and the words “national”, “to defend”, and “immigration”.

Likewise, the presence of “Italy” and “Italians” among Salvini’s five most used words shows that he maintained a strategy based on nationalism, in which the theme of Europe is relevant not per se, but in terms of its (negative) influence on Italy. For instance, in a tweet he claimed:

The vote on 26 May is not a referendum on Salvini, on whether he is nice or not, but [a referendum] on Europe. #Italyfirst (Twitter, 17 May 2019).

This idea of the EU as an enemy of the nations (and, in particular, of Italy) is further highlighted in tweets where the nation is described as a home, and Europe as an invader, as in the following example:

#Salvini: I want to change Europe because its rules enter in our home every day (Twitter, 17 May 2019).

This nationalist strategy is mirrored by Salvini’s party, the League: “Italy” and “Italians” are among the most used words by the party’s account, together with several references to the party itself.

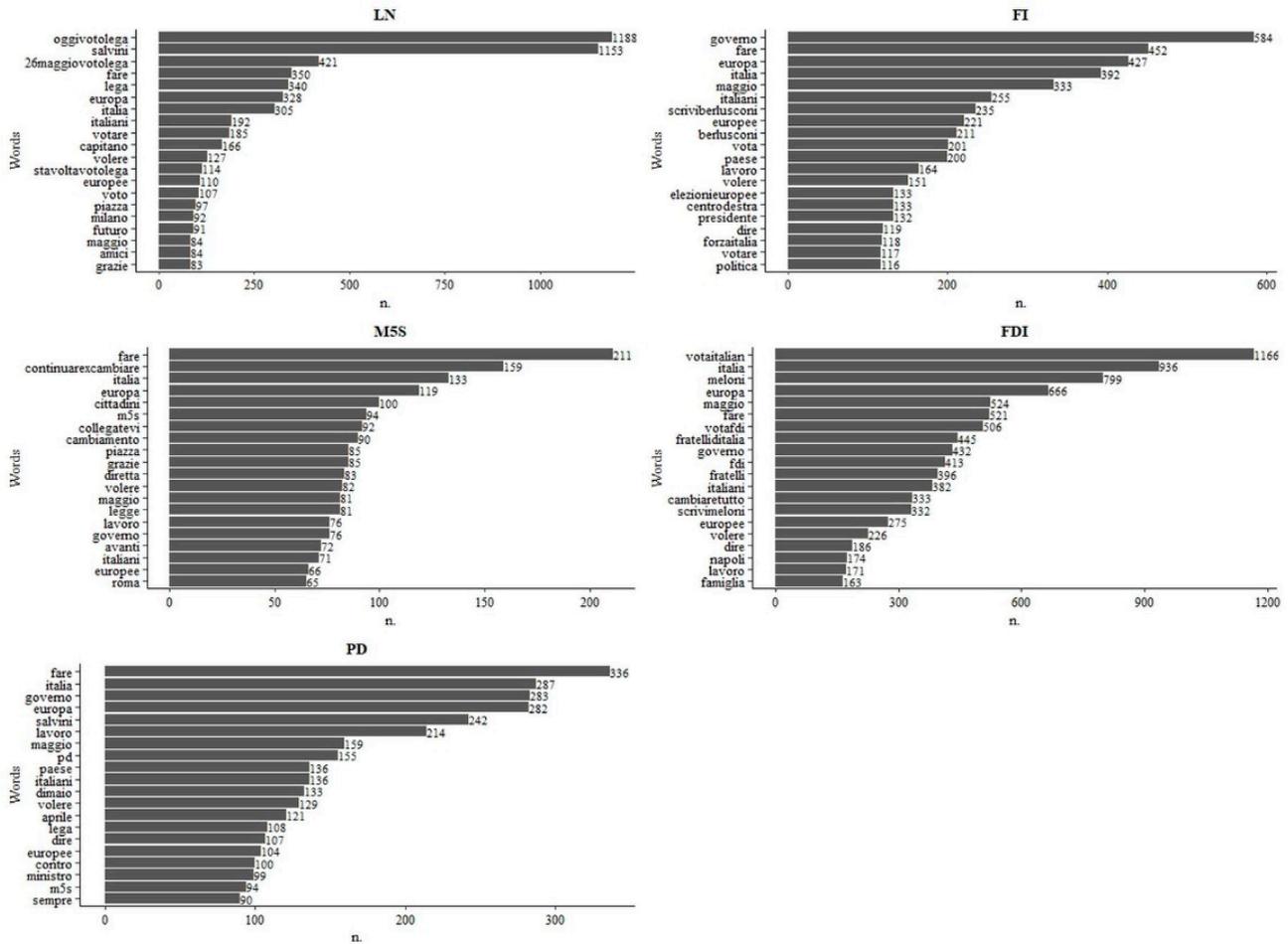


Fig. 5. 25 most used words by parties in tweets mentioning Europe (April-May 2019).

As previously noted, Luigi Di Maio’s tweets are scarce in number, and never mention Europe directly in the two months before the elections. However, the M5S party’s profile is much more active, and mentions Europe with frequency (“Europ” is the second most used word). Three elements about M5S’s Twitter communication can be noted: firstly, as in the case of the actors previously described, national politics prevails over European politics, as highlighted by the wide use of the word “Italy”; secondly, the issue of change appears, with the use of the hashtag “#continuarexcambiare” (to continue in order to change) and the word “cambiamento” (change); finally, the M5S appeals to people by defining them “cittadini” (citizens), which gives a more “civic” nuance to the people, thus marking a difference with the previous actors, who refer to the people mostly in terms of national identity (Canovan 2005). A good example of this difference can be seen in the following tweet:

The countdown has started. At the European elections of 26 May citizens will take back Europe, which is kept hostage by parties, lobbies, bankers and bureaucrats (Twitter, 2 April 2019).

While the League and FdI have a tendency to use nationalist rhetoric and arguments in favour of Italy, the Five-Star Movement focuses on the divide between European elites and citizens. Of course, these two strategies do not exclude each other and, as will be seen in the next section, the other populist parties and leaders also exploit the elite/people dichotomy typical of populism. However, it is relevant to note that, in defining the “people”, the nationalist element is central for the League, FdI, and their leaders, but only marginal for the M5S.

Silvio Berlusconi and his party (FI) show patterns of words that point to a relatively moderate style of communication, where “Europe” appears more than “Italy”, and a more institutional attitude dominates (with exten-

Tab. 3. Most used words by leaders/parties grouped into categories.

	Campaign	Personalization	References to other political actors	Appeals to people	Reference to nation/national issue/national politics	Reference to EU/European issues/European politics	Actions	Mediatization	Other
Matteo Salvini	Lega; #26maggiovotolega; maggio	Salvini		Amici; grazie	Italia; italiani; tasse; governo; sicurezza	Europ	Fare; volere; dire	diretta; #quartarepubblica	Lavoro; piazza; bene; contro; avanti; prima; meno; anni
Silvio Berlusconi	Centrodestra; elezioni	#scriviberlusconi; Berlusconi	Lega; Salvini; 5Stelle		Governo; Italia; italiani; Paese; Stato	Europ	Fare; cambiare; votare; volere; dovere; dire	Facebook; canale; rete; #corrierealive; #dimartedi	lavoro
Giorgia Meloni	Maggio; fratelli	#scrivimeloni	Grasso; sinistra	Grazie; insieme	#votaitalian; Italia; italiani; nazionale	Europ	Fare; volere; dire; difendere; #cambiare tutto		Napoli; piazza; lavoro; immigrazione; grande; auguri
Carlo Calenda	Elettorale; campagna		Salvini; PD; Di Maio	Persone; grazie	Italia; Stato; governo; italiani; Paese; ministro	Europ; #essere europei	Fare; dire; volere; parlare; pensare; dovere		Lavoro; bene; modo; meno
League	#oggi votolega; #26maggiovotolega; Lega; #stavoltavotolega; voto; maggio	Salvini; capitano; #colpadisalvini		Amici; grazie	Italia; italiani	Europ; #elezionieuropee	Fare; votare; volere; dire; cambiare	#quartarepubblica	Piazza; Milano; futuro; contro
Forza Italia	Maggio; vota; centrodestra; #forzaitalia; voto; elezioni	#scriviberlusconi; Berlusconi; Presidente		Grazie	Governo; Italia; italiani; Paese; Stato	Europ; #elezionieuropee	Fare; volere; dire; votare		Lavoro; politica; Roma; grande
Five-Star Movement	#continuarexcambiare; M5S; maggio; voto; #avantituttifour			Grazie	Italia; cittadini; governo; italiani; Paese; Stato	Europ, euro	Fare; volere; dire	Collegatevi; diretta	Cambiamento; piazza; legge; lavoro; avanti; Roma
Brothers of Italy	#votaitalian; maggio; #votafdi; #fratelliditalia; fdi; fratelli; #cambiare tutto	Meloni; #scrivimeloni	M5S; Lega	Grazie	Italia; governo; italiani; nazionale	Europ	Fare; volere; dire; cambiare		Napoli; lavoro; famiglia; conferenza
Democratic Party	Maggio; PD; #avantitutti		Salvini; Di Maio; Lega; M5S	Grazie; persone; donne	Italia; governo; Paese; italiani; ministro	Europ	Fare; volere; dire; dovere		Lavoro; aprile; contro; anni; diritti

sive use of words such as “government”, “to vote”, “centre-right”, “country”, “State”, “elections”, “politics”). For instance, when the Notre Dame Cathedral burned down on 15 April 2019, Berlusconi exploited the event to construct European identity and solidarity:

#NotreDame is the heart of Europe, symbol of our culture, civilization and religion, and it will have to be reconstructed. Every European citizen will do its share. Solidarity to the French people and to the 400 firefighters who risked their lives to save a symbol of all of us Europeans (Twitter, 16 April 2019).

Likewise, on the party’s Twitter account, the words of Antonio Tajani (prominent member of FI, and President of the European Parliament at the time of the elections) are quoted:

Unity is strenght³, and the European Union makes our country strong. This is the future that our youth expects from us (Twitter, 10 May 2019).

Finally, there is the Democratic Party’s Twitter communication. PD’s tweets are dominated by a balanced use of “Europe” and “Italy”. However, the subsequent most used words allow us to make two observations. First, the PD seems to use a strategy based on continuous attacks to political opponents at national level: “Salvini”, “government” (with reference to the current government, to which the PD opposes), “Di Maio”, “Lega”, “M5S” are all among the 25 most used words. Secondly, the combination of political attacks to national opponents and references to Italy (second most used word) and Italians (9th most used word) suggest that the focus of PD is at the national level and that its EP elections campaign is being played with an emphasis on Italy. For instance, 26 out of 34 tweets on 1 May 2019 include attacks to the Italian government; the same happens for 27 out of 46 tweets on 22 May 2019, just four days before the elections. Matteo Salvini and Luigi Di Maio, the leaders of the governing parties, are defined as clowns (“buffoni”), slobs (“cialtroni”, often used as hashtag), liars (“bugiardi”). This suggests a strategy largely based on national (rather than European) issues as well as on the character assassination of the leaders of opposing parties, which is a form of (negative) personalization of politics.

However, the strategy of PD’s most voted candidate, Carlo Calenda, is very different. Although Calenda does not use the word “Europe” much during the electoral campaign, his tweets demonstrate a largely Europeanist

strategy, as highlighted by the abundant use of the adjective “europee” (a reference to the European elections), but most importantly by the large use of the hashtag “#siamoeuropei” (we are Europeans). Calenda’s strategy clearly aims at the construction of a European identity, as evident in the following tweet:

Today I received Secretary Zingaretti’s [PD’s Secretary General] proposal to be a candidate in Europe for the Democratic Party. I accepted to promote, as an Italian and a European, research, education and culture, fundamental tools of social and political progress, and of real economic growth (Twitter, 12 April 2019).

In accepting to be a candidate for the PD, Calenda highlights a sort of equivalency between his national and European identity, both linked to the same political objectives.

The discrepancy between the party’s communication strategy, focused on national politics and attacks to adversaries, and the strategy of one of its main candidates, seems to reflect the composition of the PD’s electoral list, which includes members of the movement “Siamo Europei” (We are Europeans) founded by Calenda himself. PD’s communication appears to follow two different patterns, one that looks at Italy as the main field of the political contest and one that considers Europe the necessary focus for a European electoral campaign.

Towards a “populist” shift in communication strategies on Twitter

Several categories in Table 3 indicate typical features of populist communication, namely, personalization (Krämer 2014), appeals to the people (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017), and the mediatization of politics (Mazzoleni 2014).

Personalization is clearly the most common strategy in the sample, being largely used by nearly all politicians and parties (with the exceptions of Carlo Calenda, the M5S, and the PD). In Salvini’s tweets, “Salvini” is by far the most common word. His personalization is mixed with a strong mediatization, which is evident, for instance, from continuous reminders of Salvini’s appearances on TV and other media (in several cases with the use of hashtags, see Table 3) and extracts from his interviews. Another strategy enacted by Salvini to personalize his campaign is the use of self-irony: playing with political attacks against himself, he repeatedly accuses himself (ironically) of being responsible for all kinds of problems. For instance:

³ In the original version, “l’unione fa la forza”.

#Salvini: I don't play the victim role and I don't believe in conspiracies, but you turn on TV and, from morning to evening, everything is Salvini's fault. Rain, spread, Atalanta losing to Lazio⁴, 'there are no longer mid-seasons' (Twitter, 17 May 2019).

League's strategy largely reflects his leader's one: "Lega" and "Salvini" are by far the most used words (especially in the form of hashtags calling for votes)⁵ and this strong personalization is highlighted by the relevance of the word "Capitano" (Captain), a nickname used to address Matteo Salvini as the leader of his party and voters. In this case, the choice of word implies something stronger than personalization, namely a type of leadership in which the populist politician claims to represent and lead his people (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 43). Hence, for instance, the party's Twitter account advertises Salvini's public events by addressing him as "Captain", as in the following tweet:

The Captain in Putignano (Bari). #onSundayIvoteLeague #Italyfirst (Twitter, 22 May 2019).

The personalistic element is also strong in Silvio Berlusconi's and his party's tweets (the hashtag "#scriviberlusconi" – write Berlusconi – dominates Berlusconi's tweets, and is very relevant in FI's tweets), as well as in Giorgia Meloni and his party's tweets (e.g. "#writeMeloni" and "Meloni" are widely used).

On the other hand, the lack of personalization and self-reference by the M5S and the PD (including its candidate Calenda) suggests a much less personalized kind of politics on part of these political forces.

The personalization of politics is strictly linked to the mediatization of politics (Krämer 2014; Mazzoleni 2014). As evident from Table 3, four populist political actors (Salvini, Meloni, Berlusconi, and the M5S) share, among the most used words, several references to different media. A number of these words – such as "diretta"(live) or "collegatevi" (connect yourselves) – are used to announce an upcoming media event linked to the electoral campaign; others refer to different media channels such as social media (Facebook), newspapers (#corrierelive), and TV programmes (#quartarepubblica; #dimartedi). This suggests that populist actors actively exacerbate the mediatization of the electoral campaign by using social media as a platform to amplify other media content.

Finally, it is relevant to notice that most of the political actors investigated make large use of appeals to their followers. However, while the most common appeal to people is the word "grazie" (thank you), Salvini and the League stand out for their tendency to appeal to their audience as "amici" (friends). This increases the sense of closeness between the populist leader/party and their people. Other non-populist actors, such as Calenda and the PD, use words such as "people", while the M5S addresses "citizens", and Meloni and FdI stick to their nationalist spin by addressing people as "Italians".

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The empirical data and analysis presented in the previous section help to draw some conclusions about the communication strategies adopted on social media during a European electoral campaign characterized by a strong Eurosceptic populist presence.

Firstly, it is shown that Europe indeed acquired relevance in the course of the EP electoral campaign. As noted, however, such relevance was far from homogeneous across parties: it was, in fact, dominant among Eurosceptic populists (in this particular case, the two leaders Salvini and Meloni, and their parties), who targeted the EU in order to reinforce their nationalism. This confirms previous results showing that political environments with a strong Eurosceptic component seem to focus more on EU issues. At the same time, however, the construction of the EU as an enemy of the nation gave the electoral campaign a strong national spin: rather than focusing on European issues of transnational relevance, populists focus on national issues on which the EU supposedly exerts (negative) influence.

This brings to an answer to the second research question: the 2019 EP electoral campaign in Italy was centred mainly on national themes and issues. Notably, the presence of nationalist populist parties and politicians led to a campaign where the nation played a central role, with the EU playing the role of its enemy or its saviour, alternatively. Strongly supported by nationalist populists (who continuously stressed it by addressing "Italy" and "Italians"), nationalism became the target of other political actors (specifically, Calenda, Berlusconi, and FI), who opposed it with the unifying role of the EU. While nationalist populism was generating a conflict between Italy and the EU (and while the Democratic Party chose to antagonize it with a national focus and personalized attacks), Calenda, Berlusconi, and FI strategically differentiated themselves by constructing a European identity.

⁴ "Spread" is intended here in its financial meaning, in relation to the interest rates on bonds; "Atalanta losing to Lazio" refers to a football match.

⁵ In particular, the hashtags "#26maggiovotolega" (on 26 May I vote for Lega), "#oggivotolega#" (today I vote for Lega), and "#stavoltavotolega" (this time I vote for Lega).

This offers some insights on the potential twofold (and opposite) effect that a strong presence of Eurosceptic populist forces can have on European electoral campaigns: on the one hand, populists tend to antagonize the EU and focus on nationalist instances and themes; on the other hand, this may cause a reaction of non-populists, who are pushed to construct themselves as European, in opposition to nationalism.

Thus, to answer the third research question, while there appears to be a general convergence between populists and non-populists in focusing the campaign on the national level, the strong populist presence can push some non-populist actors to use divergence as a strategic tool and, in reaction to nationalist populism, opt for a stronger European identity. Nationalist populism, at least in the Italian case, pushes the electoral campaign towards a “nationalization” of European issues (as in Semetko, de Vreese and Peter 2000), rather than towards the Europeanization of national issues (Koopmans and Erbe 2004). Thus, nationalist populism exacerbates the parallelization of national public sphere and the tendency to focus on national issues, moving the political debate further away from a genuine European public sphere.

However, this shift is not clear-cut. While the pressure of populist political communication pushes the campaign toward the national level, non-populist forces are faced with the decision of how to react. These decisions appear to be crucial in determining what direction the campaign will take. If political actors decide to react mainly as the Democratic Party did, namely by antagonizing populists at the national level and by widely using personal and political attacks, then the campaign will mostly be nation-centred, with the EU depicted as an external enemy by populists. If, however, non-populists choose to react as Calenda, Berlusconi and FI did, the campaign is likely to have a stronger focus on the EU, European issues, and European identity. Although the relationship between single nations and the EU remains central, this kind of pro-European campaign constitutes a step towards the Europeanization of the public sphere.

However, given the remarkable and generalized lack of references to any European political actor (such as EP groups or European institutions) or European policy, it is difficult to speak of a European public sphere.

Future research on the influence of populism on political communication about the EU on social media are encouraged. The study presented here is limited to a single country, during a single European electoral campaign. Further investigations should focus on other national contexts and on their comparison and explore how populists and non-populists communicate about the EU outside of electoral campaigns. In light of the results

presented here about the possibility of non-populist actors to choose different strategies to contrast populists, it would also be interesting to test the efficacy that these strategies have on voters.

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