European narratives on social media platforms: the Italian case during the Covid-19 pandemic

Narrativas europeias em plataformas de redes sociais: o caso italiano durante a pandemia de Covid-19

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Abstract

We present the findings of a quali-quantitative study of public opinion concerning Europeanization on social media platforms in Italy during the Covid-19 pandemics. The study aims to investigate which narratives about Europe are published on Italian digital platform. The research is based on a content and discourse analysis of the 720 most impactful posts published by different actors on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, between September and November, 2021. In order to assess the state of online discussions bearing the highest level of engagement during the pandemics, we took into account the actors responsible for the posts, the narratives surrounding the most relevant European issues (based on EuroBarometer polls), and the sentiment towards Europe.

Our quantitative results show that professionally-produced content is more dominant, and the main topics on the social media agenda are Health and Economy, in particular related to health measures and the social and economic restrictions imposed by the Italian government on citizens. Our qualitative results show that Europeanization constituted a leverage for populism in news and contents on Italian social media platforms. The positioning towards Europe is fluid and ambivalent (encompassing both positive and negative sentiment) in populist rhetoric, and Europeanization is manipulated for national purposes.

Keywords: news platformization; Europeanization; Italy; social media debate, populism

Resumo

Apresentamos os resultados de um estudo quali-quantitativo sobre a opinião pública em relação à europeização em plataformas de redes sociais em Itália durante a pandemia de Covid-19. O estudo tem como objetivo investigar quais as narrativas sobre a Europa a serem publicadas em plataformas digitais italianas. A pesquisa baseia-se numa análise de conteúdo e discurso dos 720 posts mais impactantes publicados por diferentes atores no Facebook, YouTube e Twitter, entre setembro e novembro de 2021. Para avaliar o estado das discussões online com o maior nível de envolvimento durante a pandemia, tomou-se em consideração os responsáveis pelos posts, as narrativas em torno dos problemas europeus mais relevantes (com base em pesquisas do EuroBarometer) e o sentimento em relação à Europa.

Os nossos resultados quantitativos mostram que o conteúdo produzido a título profissional é predominante. Apontam ainda para a Saúde e Economia como temas principais na agenda das redes sociais, em particular aqueles que se relacionam com medidas de saúde e as restrições sociais e económicas impostas pelo governo italiano aos cidadãos. Os resultados qualitativos indicam que a europeização constituiu uma alavanca para o populismo nas notícias e conteúdos das plataformas das redes sociais italianas. A posição em relação à Europa é fluida e ambivalente (abrangendo tanto sentimentos positivos quanto negativos) na retórica populista, sendo a europeização manipulada para fins nacionais.

Keywords: plataformação de notícias; europeização; Itália; debate em redes sociais; populismo

Introduction

In this article, we explore the extent to which the platformization of news offers the conditions to understand how public opinion concerning Europeanization is formed in Italy, particularly during such critical moments as the Covid-19 outbreak. The two major concepts considered are those of platformization – on the technological side – and Europeanization, on the cultural side of online news discourse.

Social media have become significant spaces, where European issues intersect with the digital sphere. As platforms play a central role in orienting public discourse, understanding their possible European shaping is crucial. Particularly, news platformization refers to the influence of digital platforms on the production, distribution, and consumption of information (van Dijck, Poell & de Waal, 2018). As identified in the scientific literature, news platformization is characterised by key trends such as polarization and toxic debate, fake news, populism, as well as more positive or neutral phenomena such as synergy with traditional outlets, or alternative media projects, to name a few.

Such a process is linked to the more general mechanisms of deep penetration of reality by platforms (van Dijck, Poell 2013; van Dijck, Nieborg & Poell, 2018). This is crucial to investigate when one considers that a strictly European dimension of media culture has been never dominant in Europe, with audiences traditionally attracted by American or by national contents (Sassoon, 2006; Bourdon, 2011). Additionally, most popular platforms in Italy – and in Europe as well - are owned by non-European companies. What we observe is the corporate takeover of the digital world (Smyrnaios & Rebillard, 2019) by oligopolist platforms that not only acquired unrivalled distribution power, but also attribute visibility to specific content through their algorithms (Gillespie 2018; Napoli, Caplan 2017), thus conditioning the agenda of the mass media (Siapera 2013).

In the Italian public sphere, there is a tension between cultural Europeanization and populist sentiments, which have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis. Europeanization is a complex concept that encompasses both cultural-discursive and structural-material aspects. It encompasses the multifaceted process of becoming European, as examined by Carpentier et al. (2023). One way to approach this concept is by studying various European democratic models, which, despite their diversity across Europe, are considered representative of the entire continent (Carpentier et al., 2023: 10). Moreover, the link between democratization and mediatization (Couldry & Hepp, 2018) is a consistent trend throughout modern European history, premised on the expectation that media will nourish democratic processes and foster supranational integration.

The relation between Europeanization and platformization, though, is far from being understood. Cross-European audiences only emerge as specific events occur: European elections, economic crises affecting the entire region (Post & Vollbracht, 2013), the schedule of the European Parliament's sessions (Gattermann, 2013), or the shifts in EU monetary policy (Koopmans, Erbe, & Meyer, 2010). Furthermore, attention towards Europe peaks when European issues impact on local problems (Trenz, 2004; Peters & de Vreese 2004; Barisione & Ceron, 2017): in other words, the relation between Brussels and the Member States is more relevant than the relations among countries, in a way that has been described as a "vertical", rather than "horizontal", Europeanization (Koopmans, 2003; Koopmans, Herbe & Meyer, 2010).

Italy's Europeanization faces challenges such as EU directive implementation, political resistance, and limited public engagement. Populism, on the other hand, plays a significant role in shaping the political landscape and influencing public discourse. The rise of populism in European democracies has escalated due to the

economic crisis, the refugee crisis and the results of the British referendum. Populist parties have capitalized on anti-immigration sentiment, Euroscepticism, and the perceived disconnect between political elites and ordinary citizens. In this context, social media platforms provide a channel for populist movements to reach citizens. The spread of populism is facilitated by news platformization and politicians have harnessed the power of social media to rally support against the establishment.

The study explores news platformization's impact on the process of Europeanization and, in particular, the narratives about Europe published on social media in Italy during the Covid-19 pandemic. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic took hold of 114 countries, including Italy, by March 2020, and not only posed significant challenges for public health but also had a profound impact on the media industry, as digital platforms became even more significant spaces for dissemination of news on the pandemic. This crisis brought to light the challenges Italy faced and their implications for the process of Europeanization.

The study delves into three crucial facets of Europeanization: firstly, it investigates the news production process and the role of various social actors in generating news within an interconnected information ecosystem; secondly, it examines how the platformization of news influences the agenda-setting process and determines which European issues became prominent in news coverage during the pandemic; lastly, the research explores the impact of news platformization on populist issues, as populism and Euroscepticism in Italy appear to have advanced in parallel, and news platformization might have been shaping such a process.

The empirical research was based on a sample of 720 posts published between September and November 2021 on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. We subjected these posts to both content and discourse analysis. As the posts were selected based on their relevance (in terms of social media audiences KPI[1]), they offer – despite the limitations of our research – some insights into the state of Italian debate concerning Europeanization.

In the following pages we will first deal with the process of platformization and then with how social media platforms can constitute a stage for (populist) discourses about Europe/Europeanization. We draw on a wide review of the literature, both theoretical and empirical, on complex concepts such as Europeanization and populism. Subsequently, we will describe the methodology, the sample of posts/tweets analyzed and the data interpretation approaches. Finally, we will discuss the results, focusing on how in Italy the narratives on Europe have intertwined with the pupulist discourses on social media, during the last period of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis.

Platformization of social media contents

Platformization refers to the penetration of digital platforms into various economic sectors and aspects of daily life, including the restructuring of cultural practices (Poell, Nieborg, van Dijck, 2019). This process involves interconnected elements such as datafication, commodification, and algorithmic distribution (Van Dijck, Poell & De Waal, 2018), which shape the information that Europeans receive, and how they engage with it. Recent research has highlighted the crucial role of social media as the primary avenue through which

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[1] Key performance indicators, are the metrics used to measure how a social page/account performs in terms of user engagement. Basically, they consist in tracked data related to a company's presence on individual platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, or across all social platforms collectively.

consumers interact with news in most of the industrialized countries (Newman et al., 2021; Auxier, & Anderson, 2021).

Following Van Dijck's line of though (2013), we consider platforms to be more than mere technical facilitators, as they form an ecosystem of connective media in which people spend a large part of their everyday life. Those phenomena can be synthetized by the notion of *platformization*, which describes the transformative impacts of this technological infrastructure which influences the production, distribution and circulation of services and cultural content (Poell, Nieborg, Van Dijck, 2019). By the notion of 'platformization' we understand a process that describes the rise of a non-neutral environment, or the mediation of social life through technologies and practices such as platforms (Helmond, 2015).

Among the sectors impacted by the process, Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal's book (2018) focuses primarily on news and journalism. Contextualizing the digital evolutions of the news field through the book's conceptual framework, built around the key-mechanisms of datafication, commodification, and selection, the authors define the platformization of news as a contested process involving a number of actors and reciprocal tensions between, on the one hand, infrastructural platforms "making extensive efforts to become central nodes in the production, circulation, and commodification of news by developing new data services and news-related features" (p.7), and, on the other hand, "a wide variety of online news content producers — from legacy media to producers of disinformation" (p.7) that "target online platforms to distribute and monetize their content" (p.8). As a consequence, "the production of news becomes progressively tailored to obey the mechanisms and organizing principles driving the platform ecosystem" (p.9), while for a number of reasons the platforms distance themselves from any official recognition of "their editorial function and responsibility in the news sphere" (p.9). According to the authors, these developments are reshaping not only the practices of production, distribution and consumption, but most relevantly the socially constructed set of core public values — such as journalistic independence as well as accurate news coverage — that have historically defined journalism's professional identity and role in democracies. In other words, with the personalized practices of news consumption, which can also isolate platform and social media users within ideological filter bubbles, "the realization of such values comes under pressure in the platform ecosystem", where platforms, social media and online search engines undermine both "the control of news organizations over the selection of news" and, fundamentally, "the privileged position of professional journalism" (Van Dijck, Poell, & de Waaal, 2018, pp. 50–53; see Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2017).

A relevant part of the discussion on platform journalism focuses on the relationships between new(s) strategies of content format curation and audience engagement based on digital analytics. Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018) recall that "due to the many different paths through which today's audiences consume news and leave a data trail, a wealth of audience metrics have become available, spawning a number of measurement and data services". Indeed, it has become "essential for news organizations to trace how each piece of separate content circulates online", even if, in terms of public value, "a fully data-driven news production and distribution process potentially conflicts with journalistic independence and comprehensive news coverage, putting additional commercial pressure on journalists to produce content that triggers user engagement". This tendency has created path dependencies through which the data infrastructures of the larger platforms can eventually "shape the scope of editorial decision-making […] in terms of topics to focus on and reconfiguring the presentation of content" — for example, helping professional journalists to "surface relevant trends, photos, videos and posts from Facebook and Instagram" (Van Dijck, Poell & de Waal, 2018, pp. 54–55).

The platformization of news-making and consumption implies a shift from the foundational principle of editorial autonomy pertaining to the work of professional journalists as intermediaries (Matthews, 2014), to a data-driven personalized model shaped by online user behaviors and preferred interests (Nielsen & Ganter, 2018). This process has been investigated in terms of a rise of new intermediaries (Diakopoulos 2016; Iosifidis & Nicoli 2020; Martin 2021; Wallace 2018), with attention directed towards the increasing dependence of news outlets on the power of infrastructural platforms (Nieborg & Poell 2018; van Dijck, Nieborg & Poell 2019). Such a shift also has consequences on the design of news contents, formats and types that can acquire visibility and even virality by soliciting emotional responses and augmenting online engagement (Van Dijck, Poell & de Waal, 2018, p. 65), thus also requiring renewed frameworks to study the role of emotions and the affective dimension in the platform society (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

More recently, research on platforms and journalism has focused on the shifting balance between professional journalists and platform algorithms, as well as on the relevance of audience metrics and analytics of performance (KPI). Within the journalistic field, the need to process huge amounts of data highlights the relevance of algorithms and various mechanisms of automation in the process of news production and distribution (Lamot 2022; Segesten, Bossetta, Holmberg & Nihorster 2022). The algorithmic processing of data extracted by users' activity can support journalistic organizations in tailoring their contents and targeting audiences — giving web analytics companies an unprecedented influence on the news-making process (Belair-Gagnon & Holton, 2018; Dvir-Gvirsman & Tsuriel 2022), when not imposing the need of a proper algorithmic curation (Claussen, Peukert & Sen 2019; Willig 2022).

It would be improper to state that journalism is driven by algorithms and audience metrics. However algorithms and methods of quantifying audience engagement have become widespread and influential in journalism. This transformative influence has been extensively discussed by Carlson (2018) and Anderson (2011), building upon Bourdieu's characterization of the "audience ratings mentality" that began to dominate the journalistic field in the mid-1990s.

This process is based on the tension between, on the one hand, the possibility of news audiences participating and being "engaged" through platforms (Hurcombe, Burgess & Harrington 2021; Merten 2021; Thorson, Cotter, Medeiros & Park 2021), as well as, on the other hand, the possibility of journalists increasingly understanding their audience and the commodification of audiences made possible by online traceable data. Furthermore, under pressures to increase productivity and web traffic, journalists can fall into forms of professional and cognitive dependency on metrics outputs.

In the context of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2016), there is a dominance of a few players - dependent on the services and governance standards of what we know as GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft) or MAGNAF, if we also consider Netflix (Petit, 2020). We may notice that in the literature there is no agreed-upon distinction between platforms and social media: on the one side, Gillespie's definition would make the two categories coincide (Gillespie 2017: 255; 2018), while other authors also include other services, such as e-commerce, food delivery, or hosting platforms under the first category (Srnicek 2016; van Dijck, Poell & de Waal 2018). In all cases, one of the business principles of platform, or surveillance, capitalism (Zuboff, 2019) is the necessity of keeping people on the website as long as possible (Gillespie, 2018). An inevitable interference of platforms on content production follows from this, implying, for example, a difficult compromise between freedom of speech principles and business goals.

Our approach considers platforms as a "complex assemblage of people, machines and procedures" (Gillespie, 2014, p. 26), thus, not as neutral digital tools, but on the contrary as connective artefacts constitutive of,

as well as constituted by, active socio-technical assemblages that are in the process of significantly transforming the information system.

Platformization, populism and Europeanization

Traditional sources of news have been supplemented by new actors, such as social media and online news aggregators. This has led to an increased fragmentation of information sources and widespread dissemination of unverified or even false news, which is commonly considered the major negative externality of news platformization (Johnson & St. John III 2020; Osatuy & Hughes 2018).

Our study focuses on how narratives about Europe are published on and debated in social media, in the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis, which has made evident the challenges that Italy faced, and their impact on Europeanization (Cachia, 2021). This paper focuses on three key dimensions of Europeanization: news production, agenda-setting, and audience engagement with populist discourses. Firstly, it investigates the role played by different social actors in producing news in a "networked" environment (van der Haak, Parks & Castells 2011), ranging from legacy media to so-called citizen journalists and individual accounts of journalists and opinion-makers, which – due to the platformization process itself – may become more popular than the outlets they work for (Dvir-Gvirsman & Tsuriel 2022; Hanusch 2017). Secondly, it examines how news platformization influences the agenda-setting process, and which European issues were prioritized in news coverage during the pandemic. Lastly, the study explores how news platformization affects populist issues.

As to the context, the Italian public sphere is characterized by tension between cultural Europeanization and populist temptations, possibly exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis. As stated, interest for Europe is propelled by major events, such as the European elections, a Europe-wide economic crisis (Post & Vollbracht, 2013), or changes in monetary policies (Koopmans, Erbe, & Meyer, 2010). In this respect, there is no conclusive evidence of a cross-European public sphere (Bärenreuter, et al, 2009; de Vreese, 2007). This being said, the phenomenon is way more complex, as Europeanity and Europeanization are multifaceted notions: what it means to be European ("Europeanity") and to become European ("Europeanization") are contested notions. Europeanization is also a discursive as well as a material concept. Therefore, its manifestations in the social media debate will always result from an assemblage of the discursive and the material, because these components are entangled or knotted (Carpentier, 2021). Furthermore, one finds oneself either analysing the more culturalist-discursive components of E&E or analysing the structural-material components of E&E, but hardly ever do theorization and analyses of E&E do both (Carpentier et al, 2023).

The Europeanization process in Italy faces several challenges, which include the implementation of EU directives, along with political resistance and a lack of public engagement. Europeanization appears as a top-down and technocracy-inspired process, in the eyes of Italian citizens. In fact, the Italian political system, characterized by party fragmentation and unstable alliances, has witnessed the emergence of Eurosceptic parties, such as Lega Nord, Fratelli d'Italia and the Five Star Movement, which have all adopted critical positions towards the EU (Monteleone, 2021; Zappettini & Maccaferri 2021), with the EU blamed for its opacity, suffocating bureaucracy and decision-making complexity.

Populism is a multifaceted phenomenon with varying approaches to its study (Caiani and Graziano, 2016) and it emerged as a significant force shaping the political landscape and influencing public discourse. Some scholars regard it as a communicative style (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007; Block and Negrine, 2017). In other

words, it is an adaptable ideology that can be molded to fit various contexts, positing that society is divided into two distinct and opposing groups.

Populist foreign policy does represent a substantive rupture with the international orientations of traditional parties (Giurlando, 2021). Populism can be defined as a broad expression of discontent, challenging the system of checks and balances implemented to prevent direct democracy (Pelinka, 2013, p.3). Its fundamental principle involves contrasting a (corrupt) elite in the name of "the people," thereby advocating for the use of direct democratic mechanisms (Greven, 2017, p.1; for Italy Miconi, 2015; Revelli, 2017). Mudde (2004) characterizes populism as a "thin ideology" that prioritizes division over problem-solving. Laclau (2005) and Mouffe (2018) contend that populism represents a manner of perceiving and discussing the world that transcends traditional left-right political divisions. Although challenging to define, populism has undeniably left its mark on political discourse in recent decades. Some scholars argue that Western democracies are currently immersed in a populist spirit (Mudde, 2004).

The global financial crisis of 2008 and subsequent economic challenges have contributed to the consolidation of populism in Europe and in Italy as well (Cardoso et al, 2017). Many citizens, especially in disadvantaged regions, have felt left behind by globalization, in a way that is reminiscent of the juxtaposition between the "space of flows" and the "space of places", as the hallmark of contemporary society (Ruggie, 1993). Populist parties have exploited these grievances, criticizing mainstream political parties and portraying themselves as champions of the common people against an out-of-touch establishment. They gained traction by capitalizing on anti-immigration sentiment, Euroscepticism, and a perceived disconnection between political elites and the ordinary citizens, and presenting themselves as defenders of national sovereignty. The Eurozone crisis further fuelled populist sentiments, and in particular right-wing populism. Parties like the UK Independence Party and Italy's Five Star Movement have advocated leaving the EU or re-negotiating membership terms. While left-wing populism is said to have emancipatory and progressive aims (Gerbaudo, 2018), right-wing populism is usually legitimated by strategies of othering, looking for a scapegoat to be identified as a threat to 'our nation'. This creates a "politics of fear" (Wodak, 2021: 6), and offers simple answers to citizens' fears and challenges by constructing the 'Other' as the enemy to blame for people's problems, while tapping into traditional stereotypes (Wodak, 2021: 4). Right-wing politicians often functionalize national identity in terms of an opposition between *us* and the *others*, who do not belong to the native community (Wodak, 2021: 100). For example, the influx of refugees and migrants, particularly from the Middle East and North Africa, has been a significant factor in shaping populist narratives in Italy. Populist parties have capitalized on fears related to cultural identity, security, and the sustainability of the welfare systems. Issues surrounding immigrants and asylum-seekers have become central to populist discourse, leading to polarization (Dal Lago 1999).

It has also been observed that platformization favors the spread of populism. Populists have recognized the influence of social media. Political figures such as Nigel Farage in the UK and Donald Trump in the US have utilized social media to advance their own agendas (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018). Gerbaudo (2018, p.746) characterizes the relationship between social media and populism as an "elective affinity," where social media has provided a favorable channel for populist movements to rally ordinary people against the establishment. Social media have become recruitment grounds for disaffected citizens (Bartlett, 2014) and effective platforms for expressing opposition to mainstream media (Gerbaudo, 2018). This "hijacking" of social media by populists stems from a sense of betrayal felt by many users towards global forces, which promised them a world of connectivity, but plunged them into economic insecurity (Gerbaudo, 2018, p.752).

Gerbaudo (2018, p.747) argues that this widespread discontent, fueled by the "failings of the neoliberal system," is a significant factor contributing to the rise of populism in recent years.

Not surprisingly, the spread of opinion cascades against Europe and Eurosceptic discourses prove to be more frequent during electoral campaigns. Eurosceptic discourses could also depend on ideology: right-wing populists pose Eurosceptic exclusionary discourse, based on the loss of sovereignty and the distinction between "they"—"us," excluding outgroups, whereas left-wing populists present a Eurosceptic inclusive discourse, to maintain the foundational values of Europe, such as equality or solidarity between different people and countries (Alonso-Munoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2020). Recent studies examined the potential alignment between populism and anti-European sentiment, illustrated by the achievements of Eurosceptic and populist political parties. In line with Conti, Di Mauro & Memoli (2022), we state that in Italy populism and Euroscepticism have advanced in parallel without convergence, except for the M5S party, where a convergence between the two is noticeable. Finally, during the COVID-19 outbreak, populist parties developed a specific communication strategy for handling the crisis: on the one hand, the pandemic gave relevance to populist issues (Bertero & Seddone, 2021); on the other hand, we observed an unexpected disjuncture between the populist and the nationalist dimensions of the discourse.

Methodology and sampling

To capture key features of online discussion in Italy, we conducted an extensive analysis on the three most used platforms: YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. We utilized a digital methods approach (Rogers, 2013), combining qualitative and quantitative techniques to extract and analyse unstructured data from social media.

For the quantitative content analysis, the choice of platforms to be analyzed is in line with use rates by the Italian population: Facebook is used by 57% of the Italian population, a percentage that for some reason, is very close to the European average; YouTube is used by 66.9% of Italian citizens, and in the EU it is less popular only in Bulgaria (62.9%) and Romania (64.3%); and, even if granular data are not available, Twitter is arguably used by an elite of opinion-makers, only accounting for 5% of the Italian population.[2]

We collected Facebook posts, Twitter tweets and YouTube videos for a period of three months: September, October, and November 2021. This period constitutes the timespan under observation that witnessed the spread of the so-called forth wave of the Sars-CoV-2 epidemic. In Italy, this period was also characterized by a return to strict measures for tackling the pandemic and by the massive imposition of non-pharmaceutical interventions – mask mandates, travel bans, curfew, shutdown of schools and offices – on the part of national and local government authorities. Some opposition to public health rules actually emerged in late 2021, especially after the introduction of the EU Digital COVID Certificate, known in Italy as 'the Green Pass'. This stands in contrast to reactions that took place during the first wave of the pandemic in February-April 2020, which hit the Northern regions with particular strength and witnessed an almost universal consensus in favor of lockdowns, social distancing rules, and the similar.

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[2] Elaboration on Data Report and We Are Social data, 2021.

The collection occurred via the publicly authorized APIs[3], made available by the platforms, with no unauthorized scraping.[4] Data have been collected through specific and reliable tools: CrowdTangle for Facebook;[5] Brandwatch for Twitter;[6] whilst, for YouTube data, we used the analytics and the Data Tools provided by the platform itself.[7] We extracted data only from Facebook pages and groups that are public entities, Twitter public accounts that are public entities, and YouTube videos in public channels.[8]

Within this sample, we sought to include different types of social media contents, namely a) posts and tweets published by a selected list of media agents on Facebook and Twitter; b) posts, tweets and videos published by any user of Facebook pages, Twitter and YouTube; c) posts published by any user/member of public Facebook groups. To select which contents (posts, tweets and videos) should be coded and categorised among all the ones extracted, we took into consideration the metrics that, on each social media platform, could be a better indicator of attention paid by users. Taking into account that different platforms use alternative metrics for that purpose, some indicators are more reliable than others. These are considered Key Performance Indicators (KPI) in social media, as metrics used both to measure the performance and success of a social media content strategy and to assess the effectiveness of social media publication activities. To be more precise, we ordered all posts by their relevance, using the following KPIs: "Total Interactions"[9] on Facebook; "Reach"[10] on Twitter; and "Relevance"[11] on YouTube. Finally, the ten most relevant on-topic posts, tweets or videos per month for each dimension were selected to be included in our sample to be coded and categorised. Relevance in this case refers to the post being 'on topic', that is, concerning European issues, with the exclusion of plain lexical references, such as the price of a commodity in Euros.

A codebook was prepared to categorise each of the 10 most relevant posts in each platform for any dimension according to 60 variables. Those variables were grouped in four sections: the adequacy of the post (if the post was on-topic related to Europe); the format of the post; the agent (producer) who posted; the scope of the post (or the geographical dimension alluded to or implied); and the four major dimensions of Europeanization. In this last case, out of all the possible dimensions of Europeanization, we considered the four which were deemed to be the most important for EU citizens, according to the 2020 Eurobarometer: Europe; economic crisis; climate and environment; health (with the latter being imposed by the Sars-Cov-2 outbreak).

A sample of 720 on-topic posts was selected and a codebook was implemented and tested[12] by means of a content analysis. This method was previously tested for analysing any sort of media content, among which

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[3] API stands for Application Programming Interface and refers to a set of defined rules that enable different digital applications to communicate with each other. In other words, it consists in software that sends information back and forth between a website, or app, and a user.

[4] According to Art. 26, par. 2 of the GDPR, a joint control agreement was made available to the data subjects. Sharing this information was important, also for compliance with the privacy by design principle, as set out in Art. 25 GDPR.

[5] See https://help.crowdtangle.com/it/.

[6] See https://www.brandwatch.com/p/brandwatch-for-research/.

[7] See https://tools.digitalmethods.net/netvizz/youtube/.

[8] We did not collect comments or any other form of personal inputs. Beyond the public nature of the content itself, what is more relevant concerns the fact that both social media terms of use and Art.89 GDPR allow the use of data for scientific research purposes.

[9] Total Interactions is a metric obtained with the sum of reactions (like, *ahahs*, surprise, and the like), comments and shares.

[10] Reach refers to user traffic on the Twitter account, understood as the potential reach in terms of readership; this metric estimates the impact of the author, or the number of people who may have seen the tweet.

[11] Relevance is a metric obtained with the sum of View Count, Like Count, and Comment Count.

[12] Two researchers acted as main coders, following extensive training. They independently coded 50 posts (21% of the targeted number of analyzed posts per month), with the purpose of measuring the inter-coder agreement levels (Intercoder Reliability Test, Lombard et al. 2002). ICR was calculated and Krippendorf's Alpha statistical measure was

speeches, advertisements, and blogs and social media posts (Neuendorf, 2017). We applied the methods of content analysis as "a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (Berelson, 1952, p.17) to make "inferences from verbal, visual, or written data to describe specific phenomena" (Downe-Wambolt, 1992, p. 314).

Figure 1. Synopsis of the research plan

As context, it makes sense to recall that in Italy the research period (Fall 2021) was dominated by a vibrant discussion around the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as by the economic concerns relating to the Recovery Fund. In September 2021, the law decree on the so-called "Super Green Pass" was released and published in the Official Gazette. This law extended the use of the Covid certificate to all workers, with the declared aim of encouraging higher take up of vaccinations across the population. Politicians used the opportunity offered by the COVID-19 pandemic and the introduction of the Super Green Pass, to showcase their positions in favour or against European policies, using the comparison between the restrictive measures imposed in Italy and the more or less stringent ones in place in other European countries.

From an economic point of view, in Italy there was an intense debate on the Recovery Fund, the European plan to support EU countries. As we know, the fund aims to ensure the necessary funds to support the recovery of Member States, and more specifically by means of the National Plan for Recovery and Resilience (PNRR), to be submitted to Brussels; as inevitable, it generated significant polarization of Italian debate. Concerning the environment issue in Italy, in the last months of 2021 the tax relief called "Superbonus" was finally initiated (and subject to political debate); it consisted in a 110% deduction of the expenses incurred for the implementation of specific interventions aimed at energy efficiency and the installation of photovoltaic systems.

Lastly, for the qualitative analysis, we interrogated a number of relevant posts through critical discourse analysis. Critical discourse analysis is an approach to the study of how language constructs reality, focusing on contextual meaning, the social aspect of communication and how such narratives are used to achieve certain effects (Van Dijk A.T, 1994). The researchers carried out careful observation of the text to examine the topics, framed by a specific ideology or political perspective, trying to distance themselves from the data, incorporating it into the social while adopting a self-reflexive position (Wodak and Meyer, 2001). With this approach, we reread in depth the selected contents (the subsample) to bring out the implicit meanings, the relationships between the actors and the rhetorical constructions of the narratives, specifically with regard to the sentiment of the post.

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applied to the results (Krippendorff, 2011). As a result of that training and of those statistical measures, the percentage of agreement was 90,5%-100%, which are considered of adequate reliability (Krippendorff, 2004).

Findings

We clustered key quantitative and qualitative findings related to the three key dimensions:

(1) news production, with a focus on the role of different actors in the information arena;

(2) the agenda-setting process, or the narrative about Europe produced by those actors;

(3) audience engagement and the sentiment towards Europe.

Considering quantitative data and in regard to the most relevant posts, tweets and videos pertaining to (1) News production and Publishing agents, we found that 49% of the content is published by the legacy media; 18% by political agents (parties, politicians or groups); and only 6% by other organizations (either public institutions or private companies). It is interesting, however, that about 28% of contents are published by individual users ("Non-organization"), such as journalists, bloggers and even citizens: we can consider these contents as user-generated contents.

Chart 1. The type of agents on digital media platforms publishing top-ranked contents
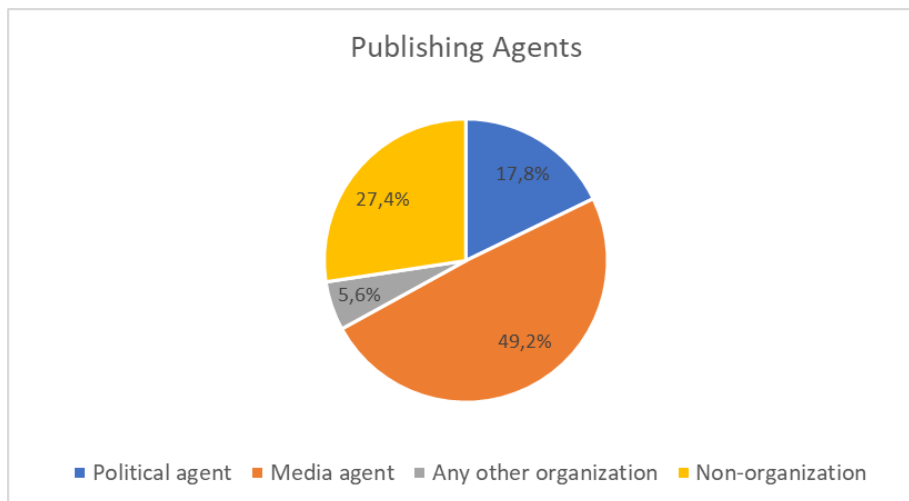
As for platforms and European themes, it is interesting to note that 91.2% of political agents are politicians and – when it gets to their ideological position – 29.4% of them are independent, whereas 26.4% are, to a variable extent, far-right nationalists (eg., the former leader of the opposition, Giorgia Meloni; or the Five-Star Movement MP, Pino Cabras).

With regard to media agents, the news published on social platforms easily echo the voice of the press: indeed, 70% of them are newspapers (*Corriere della Sera, La Repubblica, Il Fatto Quotidiano*), while only 16% and 12% are, respectively, broadcast media or Internet sources.

Chart 2. Agents publishing contents about the four dimensions of Europeanization
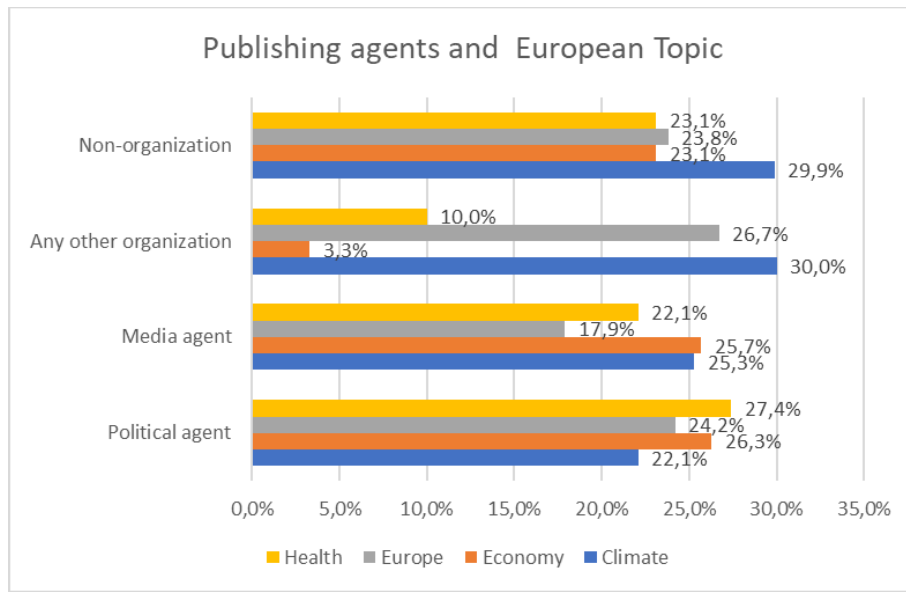

Chart 2 shows the breakdown of these statistics by themes based on the dimensions of Europeanization: Europe as such; Health; Climate; and Economy. Here, we note that high-ranked posted by political agents mainly focus on Health (27.4%), in particular with regard to the the EU Digital COVID Certificate that was known in Italy as 'Green Pass', especially during September 2021. Non-professional social media contents (Non-organization agents) and media agents instead focused their attention on climate issues (around 30%), in particular environmental sustainability and energy saving, especially in November (the month that was reportedly the fourth warmest in history, according to the Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S), implemented by the European Weather Forecasting Centre on behalf of the European Commission). In relation to ecological sustainability, in Italy a tax benefit named "Superbonus" was introduced at the time, having been mentioned by both public institutions ("Any other organization") and individual users ("Non organization"). This initiative made available a 110% deduction (effective from 1st July 2020 and then extended until 2022) on the expenses invested in carrying out particular measures aimed at enhancing energy efficiency, such as installing photovoltaic systems. Economic issues and general references to Europe are more present in the contents published by both Political and Media Agents, especially as concerns the health measures and economic policies imposed by the Draghi government in relation to containing the Covid-19 pandemics.

We also noticed that the news production of the legacy media is transversal to the three platforms. Non-institutional organizations (mostly unions of citizens) mainly publish in Facebook Groups, which are the non-professional channel *par excellence* (in which 99% of contents are not institutional); political agents prefer to share content on Facebook Pages (57%) and Twitter accounts (40%). The so-called citizen journalism, also recognized as "participatory journalism, oppositional reporting, alternative journalism, social media activism" (Abbott, 2017; Baker & Blaagaard, 2016; Harcup, 2014) therefore seems to have limited impact, and to remain specific to a few given online environments.

Concerning the agenda-setting process (2), we tried to detect narratives about Europe as they were implicitly or explicitly invoked or constructed in top-ranked social media contents as well as the very process of agenda-setting. In particular, the contents related to Economy and Health focused above all on the following topics:

-        the Recovery Plan, or the €750 billion fund approved in July 2020 by the European Council to support member states affected by the COVID-19 pandemic:

> "Without these 42 reforms, Italy is at risk of not receiving the Recovery money. Italy must approve 42 reforms in 100 days to receive European funds from the Recovery Fund. The political control room for the PNRR could meet as early as this week for the first time." (*Corriere della Sera*, Twitter account, September 20, 2021)[13]

-        the Green Pass as a national anomaly:

> "It does not exist in Europe, it does not even exist in the United States, where the obligation has been imposed on federal employees, but not on all workers. I believe it exists only in Saudi Arabia, so we enter the 'Saudi renaissance'." (Marco Travaglio, journalist, Facebook page, September 16, 2021)[14]

The last post expresses a recurrent critique of the government's decision to implement the Green Pass and make it mandatory for all categories of workers. As is often the case, among the attacks directed against the Italian national management of the Covid-19 crisis, some cases stand out as presenting false, misleading, or unreliable information. The following is an example related to the "price of Covid19 test", which has been widely talked about in our observation period:

> "Throughout Europe, swabs are practically free and can be found on every street corner. Therefore, adherence to vaccines takes place with respect for human dignity. Instead, here in Italy the prices of Covid-19 test are a paradise for health speculators, beyond any economic or scientific justification." (Pino Cabras, Five Star Movement politician, Facebook page, September 22, 2021)[15]

The narratives around climate-related issues mainly concern the law and regulation dimension, as in the following example from Twitter:

> "Farm to Fork, the commissions of the EU Parliament approve the text: pesticide cuts and fair income for farmers are requested." (*Il Fatto Quotidiano*, Twitter account, October 10, 2021)[16]

Another example draws on the technological innovations required for energy saving:

> "The EU launches the single charger, stop electronic waste." (Ansa, Press Agency, Twitter account, November 20, 2021)[17]

As anticipated, at the time, the tax relief called "Superbonus" was underway, and this was mentioned in a long series of impactful social media posts.

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[13] https://twitter.com/Corriere/status/1439821133566578688.
[14] https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=561344531682213.
[15] https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=881335829442733.
[16] https://twitter.com/fattoquotidiano/status/1436363410715942918.
[17] https://twitter.com/Agenzia_Ansa/status/1441009198012186624.

Looking at the big picture, we notice how the issues related to the themes of Economy and Health – due to the observation period – cluster around the very same topic, which is the introduction of the Green Pass and the mandatory vaccination for all citizens aged 50+. These are the main topics that seemed to be high on the agenda in Italian social media at the time. Here, we could identify various news items which, often presenting false information, aimed at inflating the perception of risk for the unvaccinated out of proportion, as in the following user-generated content:

> "Dear no-vaxes, look at what's happening in Europe (especially in Eastern Europe) where little vaccination is done. A slaughterhouse... The UK abolished almost all restrictions in July, from masks to distancing, and zero Green Pass." (Facebook post, October 20, 2021)[18]

In the same perspective we can consider a YouTube content from an Italian TV channel:

> Prof. Galimberti against the no green pass protesters: "Do they know how to move the wheels of the brain a little? Or are they big sheep who follow anything to do violent gymnastics?" *(La 7,* media outlet, YouTube video, October 13, 2021)[19]

Lastly, we took into account the sentiment of the social media contents (3), so as to ascertain whether this was coupled with critical positions towards Europe. To be precise, we relied on a spectrum of variables from "mostly positive" to "mostly negative". No significantly polarised findings emerged from this research strand, since around 80% of the content had a "predominantly neutral" sentiment.

Chart 3. Sentiment about Europe in the top-ranked social media posts
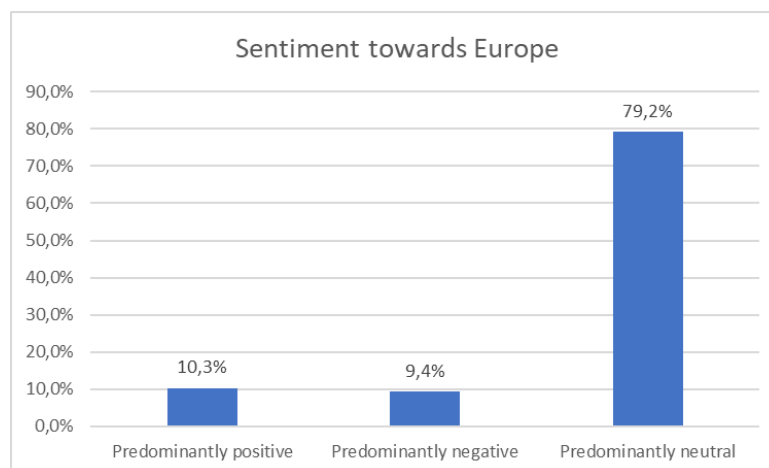
However, we questioned this apparent "neutrality" of social media contents through a qualitative reading of the posts/tweets. We went beyond quantitative content analysis (with the codebook), focusing instead on the narratives and rhetoric used in social media content.

Considering qualitative data, through critical discourse analysis we detected pro-Europe actors insisting on the unique prerogatives of the Italian case. As a point in case of this tendency, we can quote the statement

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[18] https://www.facebook.com/groups/443201412889634/permalink/1036949330181503.
[19] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LuYspqtLlMQ&ab_channel=La7Attualit%C3%A0.

of a Minister, as it appeared on Twitter: "#on the air Mandatory vaccination for over 50s. Minister Brunetta declares: "We are the first in Europe." (*La7*, Twitter page, October 27, 2021)[20] Similar narratives were expressed by the centre-left parties:

> "We are well aware that the pandemic will not be definitively defeated until all countries have access to the vaccine. We are proud, like the Democratic Party, that the government always insists on this point and that it does so in Italy and in Europe, reminding everyone that this is the right way." (Caterina Biti, Senator of the Democratic Party, Facebook page, October 20, 2021)[21]

Or, as a popular TV doctor happened to observe, Italy would demonstrate good practice in the regulation of people's "wrong behaviour", based on which "I think we need a standard at European level as soon as possible." (*Adnkronos*, Press Agency, Twitter page, December 10, 2021)[22]

On the opposite side of the spectrum, we detected a fundamentally pro-European perspective which was also formally – and surprisingly - embraced by nationalist actors, who, in order to highlight the oppressive character of the anti-Covid-19 measures, imposed by the Italian government, described Italy as "the only European state that also requires the Green Pass to work", as posted by right-wing leader, Giorgia Meloni, on September 24, 2021: "Only illegal immigrants, criminals and squatters do not need a government pass. Here you are, Italy in the era of the Government of the best." A common narrative places emphasis on the idea that "we Italians are the worst in Europe", due to the implementation of the Green Pass. A tweet from an individual user follows as an example: "Italy is the only country in Europe that requires the green pass and not the legal minimum wage to go to work." (Twitter post, October 11, 2021)[23].

Discussion

News production: the centrality of legacy media on social media outlets.

What emerges from this cluster of findings is the centrality of legacy media on social media outlets. The centrality of media outlets and political agents would not come as a surprise, per se, as they both employ specific agencies for content creation and social media curation (Dale, 2014). However, for some scholars (Harcup, 2016), citizen journalism is interconnected with political activity, and public journalism as a journalistic approach is used to enlighten the people collectively.

We also noticed that news production of legacy media is transversal to the three platforms. The "publishing agents" of 75% of the posts/tweets in our sample were published on social media by political agents[24], media or organizations/institutions: these contents were therefore presumably formulated by digital communication agencies or social media managers.

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[20] https://twitter.com/La7tv/status/1478823401573822468.
[21] https://www.facebook.com/118591018251602/posts/4197306520380011.
[22] https://twitter.com/Adnkronos?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor.
[23] https://twitter.com/Moonlightshad1/status/1447521510130860032.
[24] In particular, 91.2% of *political agents* are politicians and, with regard to the political position in the EU parliament, they represent 29.4% Independents and 26.4% Far-Right Nationalists (eg. Giorgia Meloni, Pino Cabras, MoVimento 5 stelle).

Non-institutional organizations (mostly unions of citizens) mainly publish in Facebook Groups, which are the non-professional channel par excellence (in which 99% of contents are not institutional); political agents prefer to share content on Facebook Pages (57%) and Twitter accounts (40%). The so-called citizen journalism, also recognized as "participatory journalism, oppositional reporting, alternative journalism, social media activism" (Abbott, 2017; Baker & Blaagaard, 2016; Harcup, 2014) therefore seems to have limited impact, and to remain specific to a few given online environments.

The platformization of news on the Europeanization theme offers the conditions for the development of public opinion on certain topics: the agenda-setting of news platforms during the research period (September-November 2021) was dominated by narratives centred around the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the so-called "Super Green Pass", as well as economic concerns relating to the Recovery Fund. These narratives seem to consider Europe as an agent that, on the one hand, imposes or dictates regulations that impact economic life, and, on the other, dispenses economic support funds.

A peculiar twist in populist rhetoric

Through this qualitative analysis of discourse, we found that social media discourse was dominated by populist rhetoric. We expected to detect features of the most classical polarization of internal debate, with anti-European, nationalist and populist positions largely overlapping with each other. Instead, what we observed was a peculiar twist on social media discourse – at least at the level of most-influential posts – with pro-Europe actors insisting on the unique prerogatives of the Italian case, and the populist actors taking on a pan-European perspective, by using the comparison between the restrictive measures imposed in Italy and those of other countries which were not adopting the same level of rigidity in Covid-19 measures as Italy did. In other words, Europe and European issues would come out 'better off' in public opinion during the Covid-19 pandemics as compared to before the pandemics.

The positioning towards Europe seems fluid and ambivalent (encompassing both positive and negative sentiment, both of which contained in the above data under "neutral" sentiment) in populist rhetoric. Europeanization is thus manipulated for national purposes: in posts/tweets we found the classical populist rhetoric of the good versus the bad guys, comparing Italy's Covid-19 measures with those of other EU countries, either to support/defend or to attack the Italian national government (e.g. "we are the best in Europe" because we oblige people to get vaccinated; "we are the worst in Europe" because we are the only ones with the Green Pass).

What we observe is an unheard-of combination of polarizing topics. On the one hand, pro-European voices refused any comparison with other countries, especially with those which handled the pandemic in a more liberal way – Sweden in particular, and the Nordics in general. The exceptionality of the Italian case, what is more, was backed up by both the celebration of the Covid-related measures as good practices, and by the scapegoating of common citizens – and, lately, of the unvaccinated – as undisciplined, and responsible for the contagion (Miconi, Pezzano & Risi, 2023).

Vertical and horizontal Europeanization

A final remark is possible, which has to do with the juxtaposition between vertical and horizontal Europeanization. All in all, the lack of a horizontal dialogue among nations – or the lack of interest of media audiences towards what happens even in border countries – stands as proof of the limited success of the

Europeanization project (Koomans, 2003; Machill et al 2006, 60). European news gets some notoriety (in Italy too) when it impacts on internal affairs, especially in relation to such critical issues as the regulation of migration, or negotiations around funding and public debt. It is therefore more noticeable that this horizontal dimension has been evoked by populist and anti-European actors, by comparing the non-pharmaceutical interventions imposed by the Draghi government with those – generally less stringent – put in place in other countries. In particular, the Italian version of the EU Digital COVID Certificate explicitly violated the indications of the European Council,[25] as it excluded unvaccinated citizens from work, schools, public transportations, and actually from social life, thus triggering the most violent polarization and radicalization of public discourse and social media discussion (Pilati & Miconi, 2022). As a consequence, a sort of pro-European discourse was paradoxically embraced by anti-European actors and political forces, with this ideological twist standing out as the most relevant finding of this research. Further investigations will be needed, in order to understand whether this position is purely instrumental and manipulative – as it certainly is, to some degree – or whether it can possibly ignite a new form of political sentiment, akin to what some authors define as a critique of the European Union in the very name of European values (Weller, 2021).

Conclusion

This paper aimed at understanding the interplay between news platformization and Europeanization, using the Italian case during the Covid-19 pandemic as a lens for analysis. By examining the dimensions of agenda-setting, news production and populism it provides insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by the Italian news industry in the digital age.

This article results from empirical research on how recent news platformatization, translating as the penetration of the "platform society" logic in news making and dissemination, has brought, alongside convergence, a new stage for discourses on Europe/ Europeanization. Findings show how discourses on Europe have been entangled with populist discourses on social media, during the last period of the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy. This is undeniably an important current topic within the field of Communication Studies, considering the recent rise of right-wing nationalist populist movements that use social media as a regular tool to mobilize citizens, hence continuously shattering the pillars of the European project.

Our interpretative hypothesis is that Euroscepticism no longer appears as a populist narrative during the Covid-19 pandemics: here Europe becomes the device through which to activate populist rhetoric targeting domestic policies, simply because it was not possible to turn European Institutions as scapegoats of national issues during the pandemics. This is because Covid-19 measures were not directly imposed on national institutions (the kind of protest typically leveraged against European policies on domestic affairs), but were, instead, provided in the form of softer policy with room for adaptation to domestic contexts. This made national governments directly responsible for the direction of their application and turned them into the most likely target for populist rhetoric. In other words, during the study period, the social media contents that dealt with Europe presented comparisons between Italy and "the other European states", because the political-media narratives on social media focused essentially on national scapegoats.

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[25] See the European regulation of the Covid certificate, which was also granted to those who "tested negative", unlike the Italian so-called "Super Green Pass", at https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/coronavirus/eu-digital-covid-certificate/.

Even though the limitations of this work do not allow for all-embracing conclusions, a final inference can be made about the nexus between Europeanization and platformization. Based on empirical evidence, it is widely held that platformization of public discourse is working *against* the rise of a common European public sphere, due both to national boundaries now being even less porous than in the case of legacy media (Hänska & Bauchowitz 2019, 8), and to the fact that properly pan-European themes rarely win the heart of the people (Machill, Beiller & Fischer 2007, 200). Conti and Memoli (2016, 92-93) go as far as to observe that not only the most active users of social media are less likely to trust the European Union than the most active consumers of legacy media, but they are also more skeptical than users of the open web. Interestingly enough, and in a very different vein, we have found a virtuous circle between the use of social media and the rise of pro-European sentiment. People more exposed to Twitter and Facebook were more prone to collect information about other countries – and namely, about the Covid measures put in place by other governments which were, almost in all cases, less restrictive than the Italian. In other words, a form of *horizontal* Europeanization took shape for a while, which is considered to be the weak spot of European media systems, if not of the overall cultural unification (Koopmans, Herbe & Meyer, 2010; Koopmans & Statham 2010) frame. To which degree this will turn to be an exceptional case, or hint towards a broader process, will have to be investigated with further research.

Our study demonstrates the need to continue reflecting on Europeanization, but it also shows the need to critically assess how new processes of Europeanization are inevitably intertwined with populist movements and discourses produced by different agents in an era of social media and news platformization. The findings of this research will have implications for policymakers, media organizations, and scholars interested in the evolving media landscape and its impact on European integration. A critical approach is needed to evaluate the reliability of information sources and promote informed citizenship in the context of news platformization during the pandemic and beyond.

Acknowledgment/Funding information

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Appendix

- Political agents include a political party, politician or EU parliamentary groups;

- News media include any news media agent, as an institution or as an independent news media producer. The category also includes legacy media (print, broadcast or online) or news blogs, news video channels or live news streaming;

- Any other organization includes any other organization that is not a political agent or a media agent, but has an institutional presence (headquarters, website, etc) outside social media, for example, private companies, NGOs, Unions, public agencies, professional bodies;

- Non-organization can be an individual or group that has no institutional existence outside social media. An individual is always a "non-organization", even in the case of a known individual, like a blogger or an influencer. But one should also consider a "non-organization" as a non-individual, if the agent who posted is a page or an account with no real existence, or website outside social media. Non organizations can be individual journalists, online influencers, common citizens as doctors, lawyers, artists, athletes, etc.