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CHAPTER EIGHT

Pandemic frames: how is the European Union narrated by Italian (populist) parties during COVID-19's first wave in Italy

Elisa Volpi, Lorenzo Cicchi and Tobias Widmann

1. Introduction and research question

The last decade of Italian governments has been, to say the least, extremely composite. It started and ended with two 'Super Mario' technocratic governments (Garzia and Karremans 2021); in between, five cabinets, of different political compositions, stayed in power between 2012 and 2021. The two subsequent Conte I (2018-2019) and Conte II (2019-2021) cabinets were of particular interests, as they were an emanation of two successive opposite coalitions, both including the Five Star Movement (M5S). The first coalition (called the 'yellow-green' government after the party colours of the M5s and the League, respectively) lasted until August 2019, when Salvini's League withdrew its support. Then, the colour red replaced the green in the Government's palette. The 'yellow-red' government, led again by Conte, brought together in coalition the *Partito Democratico* (Democratic Party, PD), *Liberi e Uguali* (Free and Equal, LeU) and *Italia Viva* (IV), a new centrist party born as a fission from the PD and led by its former general secretary, Matteo Renzi.

During the Conte II Cabinet, the Covid-19 pandemic broke out. The Covid-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges to the European Union and its member states, in terms of their health and border policies, the protection of civil liberties and the principles and workings of

representative democracy. Wide ranging decisions had to be taken in a small amount of time. With the Next Generation EU Fund the European member states have taken important decisions to mitigate the immediate economic consequences of the pandemic. History will tell if we are living a transformative crisis (Mégie and Vauchez 2014) or rather a prolonged turbulence (Ansell et al. 2017); what is certain is that the first wave of the pandemic was perceived as a major crisis event, in which the role of the European Union was crucial.

The combination of the high salience of the EU in this crisis, and the particular setting of the Italian government-oppositions structure with one major populist political parties on both sides, constitutes a valuable environment for the following research question.

RQ: How do political parties frame the EU during times of crisis? And do populist parties, generally characterised by Eurosceptic stances, use different narrative strategies regarding the European Union if they are in government or in opposition?

We test this research question against the Italian case, including all parties in the analysis but giving particular emphasis to the Five Star Movement, the League and Brothers of Italy. For the former, we also shed some additional light on the personal communication of two crucial figures, namely Giuseppe Conte and Luigi Di Maio, the only available sources of personal communication in our dataset. The remainder of this article is structured as follows. First, we present a review of the literature on the Euroscepticism of populist parties, on specific works on the Five Star Movement, the League and Brothers of Italy, and on Covid-19. The data and methods section explains how the original dataset and coding procedure underpinning this research have been designed. Then, in the empirical analysis we show how the Italian political parties have framed the EU during the acute phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, shedding some light as well on the most discussed issues and sentiment. Finally, we close with some concluding remarks and avenues for further research on this topic.

2. Theoretical framework

In this paragraph, we first provide a discussion of the multifaceted concept of populism, of Euroscepticism and analyse their interdependence. Then, we provide a brief review of the literature on the League, the Five

Star Movement and Brothers of Italy, and discuss some initial studies on Covid-19 and in particular in respect to populist parties. Finally, we situate our contribution to this debate.

2.1. The relationship between populism and Euroscepticism

Populism has occupied a central space in scholarly research in social science since the 1960s, with an increase of attention in the early 2000s due to the wave of new populist parties, and in many cases very successful from the electoral standpoint, in Western Europe. Although scholars still (and probably will always) disagree on whether populism should be conceived of as an ideology (Mudde 2004), a discourse (Hawkins 2009), a communication style (Moffitt 2015), a frame (Aslanidis 2015), or even a claim (Bonikowski and Gidron 2015), many concur on the so-called “ideational approach” to populism (Hawkins et al. 2018). According to this, populism constitutes a message or set of ideas revolving around the normative distinction and antagonistic relationship between the ‘pure people’ and the ‘corrupted elite’.

The debate on the conceptualization of Euroscepticism is instead more recent, given that the public salience of European integration has increased only toward the early 1990s, in particular after the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, whose ratification transformed the EU in a multilevel polity with greater levels of sovereignty pooled at the supranational level (see Hooghe and Marks 2009). Taggart (1998) was one of the first scholar to explicitly define Euroscepticism. He claimed that “Euroscepticism expresses the idea of contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration” (Taggart 1998: 366). Later studies have built on this conceptualization and distinguished between different types and degrees of opposition to European integration and the EU; for the purpose of this article, this general definition is sufficient. In light of its role as a founding member of the EU, Italy had been for a long time among the greatest supporters of the integration process (Lucarelli 2015). This enthusiasm for the EU was shared both by political elites and regular citizens. Yet, something has changed since 1994. At the party level, Euroscepticism has become a feature of extreme parties both on the left and on the right side of the spectrum. At the same time, approval for the EU has dropped from over 60% to about 43% in 2019 (Conti, Marangoni and Verzichelli 2020). Italy is

therefore seen as one of the countries in which the rise of Euroscepticism has been the steepest. Yet, while the support for the EU has decreased since the introduction of the Euro, there have been two negative peaks more recently. First, in the aftermath of the economic crisis (2010-2011) which culminated in the technocratic government led by Mario Monti. After these events, the EU was blamed for its austerity policies. Second, in 2015-2016, when the immigration crisis reached its maximum. In this case, the European rules about asylum seekers were to blame, since they seemed to impose a higher cost on arrival countries. In particular, there was a feeling of being left alone managing a crisis that should have been shared among all EU member states. It is therefore not surprising that after the last general elections the Eurosceptic parties are more popular than pro-European parties.

Populism and Euroscepticism are, at the conceptual level, inherently distinct but also closely intertwined. Populism is a general set of ideas about the functioning of democracy, while Euroscepticism refers to a position toward a specific political issue (European integration). Taking into consideration here only on the political supply side (political parties), populism and Euroscepticism can often be observed in tandem. In practice, many populist parties are Eurosceptic, and many Eurosceptic parties are populist. Euroscepticism and populism can typically be found at the ideological fringes of party systems, in particular among parties with radical left socioeconomic positions on the one hand, and radical right sociocultural positions on the other (Rooduijn and van Kessel 2019). Other scholars have reflected on this 'tandem', with a more theoretical and normative approach (Harmesan 2010) or empirically. For instance, Kneuer (2019) has focused on the *mélange* of populist and Eurosceptic parties in the context of the European debt and refugee crisis from the demand side (i.e. voter), finding that new populist parties mostly emerged during the debt crisis, and that one unifying feature of all successful populist parties is their increasing Eurosceptic and even nationalist stance. Other studies have focused more on country-specific cases, such as Orbán's Hungary (Csehi and Zgut 2021).

As for the Italian case, the Five Star Movement and the League have also received quite the scholarly attention; Brothers of Italy, less so. Despite the longstanding career of its leader Giorgia Meloni, this party is relatively young. Born in 2012 as a split from Berlusconi's People of Free-

dom, it is the main heir of the Italian neo-fascist conservative movement that had the Italian Social Movement (1946–1995) and National Alliance (1995–2009) as its main political representatives. Most of the literature includes this party in broader analyses of Italy’s far-right euroscepticism and populism (Pasquinucci 2020) or in comparative studies (De Vries and Hobolt 2020), especially after its recent surge in popularity (Vercesi 2021). As far as the League is concerned, more single-party studies can be found. Already in the 1990s, scholars have investigated the role of the – at the time – secessionist, Northern-oriented party (Tarchi 1998); more recently, studies have focused on other elements of this political party, such as its populist, regionalist and extreme right stances (McDonnell 2006; Passarelli 2015), despite its first definition as a party of ‘regional populism’ goes way back (Diani 1996). More specific studies have analysed the League’s anti-immigration positions, either comparatively across countries (among others, van Spanje 2010) or in parallel with the Five Star Movement (Carlotti and Gianfreda 2020). Both Brothers of Italy and the League are classified by ‘PopuList’ as far-right, eurosceptic populist parties (see also next paragraph). The Five Star Movement, born in 2009 as an organized movement spin-off of the ‘Vaffa Day’ initiated by former comedian Beppe Grillo, has been one of the most electorally successful European populist parties since the 2013 election, the moment of electoral ‘earthquake’ before the 2018 ‘tsunami’ (Calossi and Cicchi 2018). While its classification as a populist party is unanimously accepted, some have considered more of a left-libertarian party, others as an anti-immigrant right party, while others have simply deemed it as unclassifiable. Pirro (2018), for instance, claims that the Five Star Movement’s peculiarity can be conceptualised in terms of ‘polyvalent populism’ – a variant of populism that rests on concomitant ideological discordance, newness, and radicalness. Bickerton and Invernizzi (2018), comparing the Five Star Movement and Spain’s *Podemos*, go further and claim that none of the three classical definition of ‘anti-system’, ‘anti-establishment’ and ‘populist’ captures the originality of these movements. They are, rather, characterized by a combination of ‘populist’ and ‘technocratic’ conceptions of politics and modes of presentation, considering them to be part of a completely new party family. Mosca and Tronconi (2019), instead, consider it as characterized by an ‘eclectic populism’. They claim that although displaying a clear anti-establishment identity, in economic terms it pre-

sents left-of-centre positions inconsistently mixed with more conservative proposals, while on the issues of citizenship and immigration, it has an elusive positioning, mixing national securitisation and international humanitarianism. In any case, it is safe to claim that the League and the Five Star Movement are widely regarded as Eurosceptic and populist parties even if they differ in terms of both their origins and ideological orientation (Bulli and Soare 2018).

2.2. Covid-19 as a case-study for populist parties

Covid-19, as a global and very recent (actually still ongoing) crisis, has received plenty of scholar attention but relatively few studies have been published yet about its impact on (populist) political parties. More generally on societal reactions to Covid, some scholars have focused on the opposition to lockdown, focusing on the health versus economic priorities dilemma. For instance, Tisdell (2020) have presented modelling on the trade-offs between the level of activity and the severity of social restrictions to prevent the spread of Covid-19, claiming – unsurprisingly – that economic recovery will be hampered if governments continue to protect the most vulnerable in society from Covid-19. An already richer area of research focuses more on Covid-19 and rising inequalities, ranging from employment, a living wage, family life and health (Blundell et al. 2020) to educational inequalities (Doyle 2020). Finally, others (such as Schmidt 2020) have analysed the new institutional process emerging from the pandemic with a specific focus on the European Union. They claim that, while the full effects of the pandemic are yet to be felt in the European Union, the scale of the crisis has opened the possibility of a change in the Union decision-making process. Previous crises have been marked by a clash between intergovernmental, the member states, and the supra-national institutions, the European Commission, and the European Parliament. Thus, the European Union may be entering a new phase where there will be a better balance among institutions.

Buščíková and Baboš (2020) do actually examine the populist response to the crisis. They provide, however, a limited and qualitative account of how the ‘technocratic populist’ Prime Ministers of Czechia and Slovakia, Andrej Babiš and Igor Matovič respectively, responded to the crisis by bypassing institutionalised channels of crisis response, engaged in erratic yet responsive policy-making and politicised medical expertise

for political purposes. A more comprehensive contribution to this debate is the edited volume by Bobba and Hubé (2021), that analyses exactly at the reaction to Covid-19 by populist parties from a comparative perspective by looking at eight European countries (UK, Spain, Italy, France, Germany, Hungary, Czech Republic and Poland). They provide a first overview of how populist parties responded to the Covid-19 pandemic crisis in Europe, claiming that, although populism would normally benefit from crisis situations (e.g., political representation or economic crises), the peculiar nature of this health crisis does not make the benefit obvious, since for a crisis to be exploited, it must be politicized. They find that while populists have tried to take advantage of the crisis situation, the impossibility of taking ownership of the Covid-19 issue has made the crisis hard to be exploited. In particular, they claim that populists in power have tried to depoliticize the pandemic, whereas radical right-populists in opposition tried to politicize the crisis, though failing to gain the relevant public support. The chapter by Bertero and Seddone, in particular, based on a qualitative analysis of the first four months of the crisis, finds that the League attempted to adapt the emergency to its usual populist strongholds. The Five Star Movement, by contrast, due to its position as a government party, emphasised its responsiveness by appealing for national unity and claiming the ownership for those governmental actions providing direct support to citizens.

This article moves in the same direction and adds a number of new elements. Firstly, it tries to shed light, using a quantitative approach based on a novel dataset of text analysis sources, on how these two populist parties framed the EU in particular during the first six months of the crisis. Secondly, it compares the Five Star Movement and the League vis-à-vis the other government and mainstream opposition parties, contributing to a broader understanding of the reaction of the party system at large to this crisis. Thirdly, it gives a brief comparative overview of the Italian specificity in respect to the other countries for which we have available data, helping to put the Italian case in perspective – in particular, considering that Italy was the first country to be hit by the pandemic. Fourthly, it provides a detailed account of the evolution of parties over the six months considered, analysing in particular the ‘watershed’ moment of the official proposal in late May of the Recovery Fund. Finally, it gives some final in-

sights on how the two main figures of the Five Star Movement, Giuseppe Conte and Luigi Di Maio, differ in their communication about the EU.

3. Research design, data and methods

In this paragraph we provide a discussion of the data employed for the text analysis underpinning the present chapter and the coding procedure employed.

3.1. Building the dataset

The analysis of this chapter relies on a novel dataset based on a manual content analysis of text data. The dataset consists of two different types of sources:

1. Social media outputs: Facebook and Twitter posts;
2. Other forms of direct political communication: press releases, interviews and speeches.

The unit of analysis of the dataset is the individual document. The period of data collection covers the months between February 1st and July 31st, 2020 (6 months), i.e. the first wave of the pandemic. In addition to Italy, which constitutes the specific focus of the empirical analysis, additional six Eurozone countries are included: the remaining three of the ‘big four’ (Spain, France and Germany) and three smaller member states (Netherlands, Austria and Ireland). This allows the mapping of domestic public discourse also outside of Italy, in the core of Eurozone countries, during the first wave of the pandemic in which macroeconomic coordination in the EMU and economic policies played a major part in the debates. More broadly, this case selection choice was made in order to concentrate on member states with comparable cleavages of party competition. For each member state, one country expert was recruited. These experts first identified the relevant actors and parties. The actors were chosen as the three apical figures among head of government (e.g. Prime Minister), Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Health or Minister of Finances, according to the country’s specificity. In the Italian case, these three are the Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Luigi Di Maio and the Minister of Health Roberto Speranza. As for the political parties, all parties represented in the National Parliaments were included

in the data collection. Overall, more than 60 parties from the seven Eurozone countries were included in the analysis; for Italy, 9 parties were taken into consideration: the Five Star Movement, the League (*Lega*, L), the Democratic Party, Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*, FdI), Silvio Berlusconi's Forward Italy (*Forza Italia*, FI), Roberto Speranza's Article One (*Articolo Uno*, A1) +Europe (*+Europa*, +E), Matteo Renzi's centrist party Italy Alive (*Italia Viva*, IV) and the leftist Italian Left (*Sinistra Italiana*, SI). Since we focus on a single country, we do not group parties according to broad categorization of parties in different party families such as the ones, very popular in comparative research, of Rooduijn et al. (2019) and their 'PopuList' project. These are extremely valuable when dealing with large-N comparative approaches across countries; here, we perform our analysis looking at party differences, with a specific focus on the already mentioned difference between 'populists in power' and 'populists in opposition' (M5S and L).

To collect party communication from social media, messages from relevant accounts on Facebook and Twitter, the two most important social media networks for political discussions, were scraped¹. Other forms of direct political communication, such as press releases, statements, and speeches were collected by the country experts from the official party websites. Subsequently, specific keyword strings were used in order to single out only documents that address the COVID-19 pandemic and the European Union. It is worth stressing that documents that did not address either the European Union or Europe in general, but the pandemic from a mere domestic perspective, were excluded from the analysis. After this pre-sampling step, the data set consisted of more than 5,000 documents. Table 8.1 below summarizes the number of documents per category and country.

Table 8.1. Parties' text documents.			
Country	Press releases	Social media	Total
Austria	88	177	265
France	276	179	455

¹ We used R package "rtweet" for Twitter data and the software "Facepager" for Facebook.

Germany	439	340	779
Ireland	169	79	248
Italy	220	223	443
Netherlands	127	137	264
Spain	141	291	432

As already discussed, this study is based on the 443 Italian party sources, evidence from other countries is only partially taken into consideration in the empirical analysis.

3.2. Coding procedure: issues, frames, sentiment

The analysis of how the EU is evaluated in domestic public spheres, including the Italian one, is based on a mix of qualitative and quantitative frame-analysis (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Snow et al. 1986). Framing, in this sense, is defined in line with Entman (1993: 52), who argues that to frame “is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described”.

The codebook was developed inductively going through a sample of the corpus of media and party communication. The manual coding was conducted by an international team of coders that were centrally trained and supervised at the European University Institute. For each unit of analysis (the individual document), the codebook provides three main variables that are described in turn:

1. Issue;
2. Frame;
3. Sentiment.

Firstly, *issues*: here, the aim is to identify the particular topics that each item refers to: What is the actor talking about? Each item can be coded with three issues. Issues are grouped into topics being discussed in a European context, topics in a Domestic issue, and Miscellaneous issues. In line with our research design, domestic and miscellaneous documents are excluded from the analysis since the aim of this study is to examine documents that address the European Union.

Secondly, concerning *framing*, this step moves beyond what is being talked about, to how. In this case, the particular focus is on the framing of the European Union and Europe in general. Framing is defined as the emphasis of certain characteristics about an issue (Entman 1993). In coding the frame, the question is: What is the speaker emphasizing about the European Union? Which narratives about the EU are being used? For the operationalization of the issue-specific frames, mixed approach that includes inductive and deductive coding was used. First, a manual pre-analysis of random samples of documents explored the framing of the EU in each of the included countries inductively. This exercise revealed a number of issue-specific frames that were later included in the codebook. Subsequently, the country experts used the list of frames deductively to code the documents from their respective countries. However, country experts were also encouraged to keep an open mind to country-specific frames that appear regularly in their own country documents but were not part of the codebook. Eight issue-specific frames (four positive, and four negative) were then identified. These are:

Negative issue-specific frames:

1. The EU exploits the Covid-19 crisis;
 2. The EU has failed in the Covid-19 crisis;
 3. The EU provides help to the wrong people during the Covid-19 crisis;
 4. The Covid-19 crisis proves that we should go back to Nation States.
- Positive issue-specific frames:
6. More European Integration is needed in the Covid-19 crisis;
 7. The Covid-19 crisis is a chance for a better Europe in the future;
 8. The EU is necessary as a political tool to overcome the Covid-19 crisis;
 9. The EU is a community of destiny which can only fight the Covid-19 crisis together.

Finally, the *sentiment* variable captures the language used in the documents and measures the stance taken towards a specific issue/target in the document. We conceptualized the sentiment with different levels of negativity and positivity. Negative language, for instance, can contain words associated with anger, fear, or hatred. It could also include derogatory terms or insults. Positive language can appeal to joy, hope or pride.

In general, there are five possible options ranging from very negative to very positive.

More information about issues, frames and sentiment can be found in the appendix of this article. Before moving on to the empirical analysis, it is worth noting that inter-coder reliability was ensured by following strategies from previous research with complex coding schemes (see, for example, Kriesi et al. 2019). Following this approach, regular meetings were organized during the training period and progress during the coding period was closely supervised in order to resolve difficult coding decisions. Close attention was paid to ensure that coding decisions were applied in a harmonized manner to make the final dataset as comparable across countries as possible.

4. Empirical analysis

We turn now to the results of our empirical analysis which is organized around two parts. In the first part we look at all the parties represented in Parliament. Namely, M5S, A1, FdI, FI, IV, L, PD, +E and SI. For each party, we analyse the most salient issues when discussing Covid-19 in relation to the EU, that is, *what* they talked about. Next, we examine *how* these parties talk about the EU, i.e., the frames that were used and the tone of parties' communication.

In the second part of our analysis, instead, we focus on the communication by two politicians, specifically, the Prime Minister, Giuseppe Conte, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Luigi Di Maio. We select them because they are both representatives of the M5S, therefore, they are good examples of how a populist party communicates once in government. For this second part, we analyse the most discussed issues, the frames and the sentiment as well.

4.1. Political parties

First of all, we ask ourselves: what were the most discussed issues related to the EU by Italian political parties? Figure 1 shows the average proportion of documents devoted to specific issues by each political party and the 90% confidence intervals. The confidence intervals are useful to check whether differences between parties are statistically significant. However, especially for some parties, we have a few observations, therefore, it should not be surprising that most of the confidence intervals overlap.

PANDEMIC FRAMES

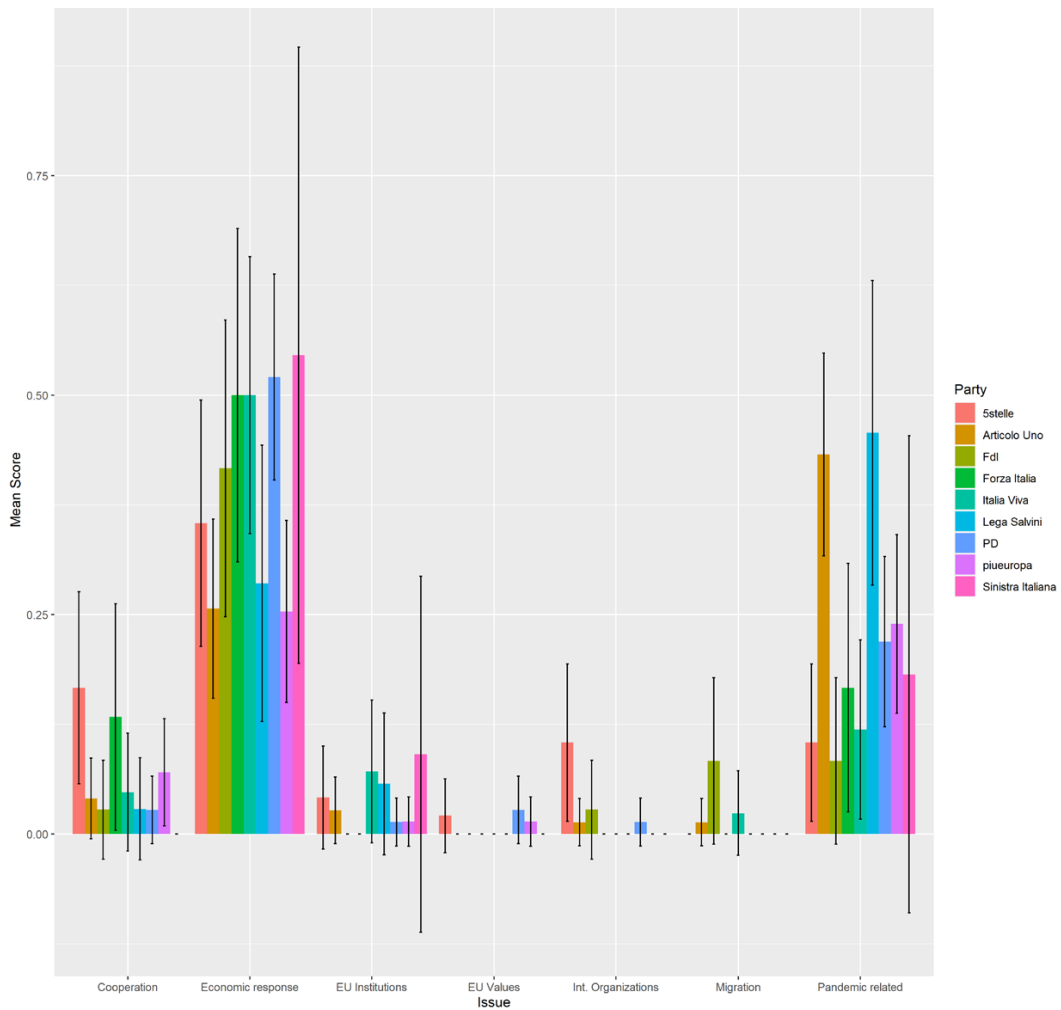


Fig. 8.1. The most salient issues discussed by Italian political parties (90% C.I.).

For the majority of Italian parties, the most salient issue when discussing the EU was the economic response to the crisis. This is not surprising considering that Italy was among the most-hit countries during the first wave of Covid-19. However, there are a couple of exceptions, namely *Lega* and *Articolo 1*.

Salvini's party spoke more often about the EU's pandemic handling in general, rather than in economics terms. The party differentiated itself from its allies (*Forza Italia* and *Fratelli d'Italia*) that, instead, concentrated more on the economy. It seems like within the centre-right block, the parties avoid speaking about the same topics. What it is also interesting to notice is that topics that are owned by the right, e.g. migration, became suddenly much less salient than what they used to be.

Concerning *Articolo 1*, the party controlled one of the most crucial departments in this crisis, namely, the Ministry of Health, held by Roberto Speranza. The party was therefore very active in terms of communications: 167 documents were produced, with the largest majority being press releases (125). In these releases the party reported statements from its Members of Parliaments and from the Minister Speranza. The EU was a quite salient issue, with 61 documents mentioning the supra-national context. Probably because of Speranza's role, the most debated issue was the general response to the pandemic at the EU level (32 documents), followed by the economic response of the EU (19 documents).

The great attention devoted by Italian parties to the EU economic response to the pandemic is not only an Italian feature. Figure 2 shows the average percentage of attention given to the same issues analysed in Figure 1 in the Italy and in the other EU countries. The figure clearly indicates that the EU's economic plan to overcome the crisis was also the most debated issue in the rest of the continent, followed by the more generic discussion about the pandemic. The only difference between Italy and the other countries is that the issue of cooperation within the EU² was less salient among Italian parties compared to the rest of the member states. The fact that Italy is not an exception in the European political landscape might help to generalize our findings also to other countries. Clearly, the M5S represents a unique case, as no other country has a similar kind of populist party in government. Yet, we expect that our findings about FdI and *Lega* might actually describe well the attitude and the communication style of other far-right populist parties in Europe during the Covid-19 crisis.

Then, we move on to discussing frames and sentiment used by parties when they talk about the EU. Frames were grouped in 'positive' and 'negative', as explained in the previous section.

² Cooperation within the EU refers exclusively to the collaboration on various subjects carried out between the various EU member states. The items coded under this category, therefore do not refer to the cooperation of the EU with other regions of the world (in our coding scheme we had a separated category for this type of items). Finally, cooperation within the EU has nothing to do with the category labelled "EU Institutions" as the latter groups all the references to the EU institutions such as the European Parliament or the Commission.

PANDEMIC FRAMES

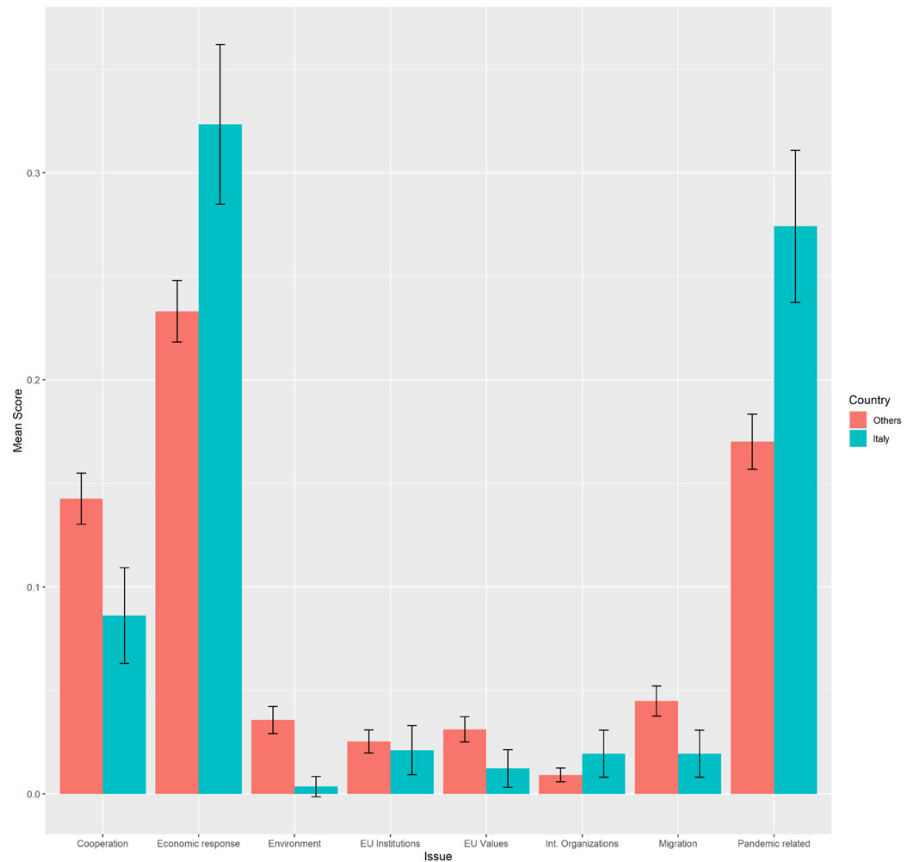


Fig 8.2. The most salient issues discussed in Italy and in the other European countries (90% C.I.)

Figure 3 and 4 show the proportion of documents using a specific frame for each party, with 90% confidence intervals. Because of the limited number of observations, the same caveat applies. From the two figures a clear trend emerges: positive frames are used prevalently by mainstream parties and by the M5S (the only populist party in government), while negative frames prevail among the two right-wing populist parties.

More in detail, we can see that the most common frame is the pragmatic one, that is, the EU is a necessary tool to overcome the crisis. This is the preferred frame by *Forza Italia*, *Partito Democratico*, *Italia Viva*, and *+Europa*. The M5S, while uses this frame frequently, also sees Europe as a community of destiny. *Sinistra Italiana*, instead, mostly sees the Covid-19 crisis as a chance for a better EU. While positive frames are basically never used by the *Lega*, *Fratelli d'Italia* refers sometimes to the EU in a pragmatic manner. Yet, negative references are more common among the

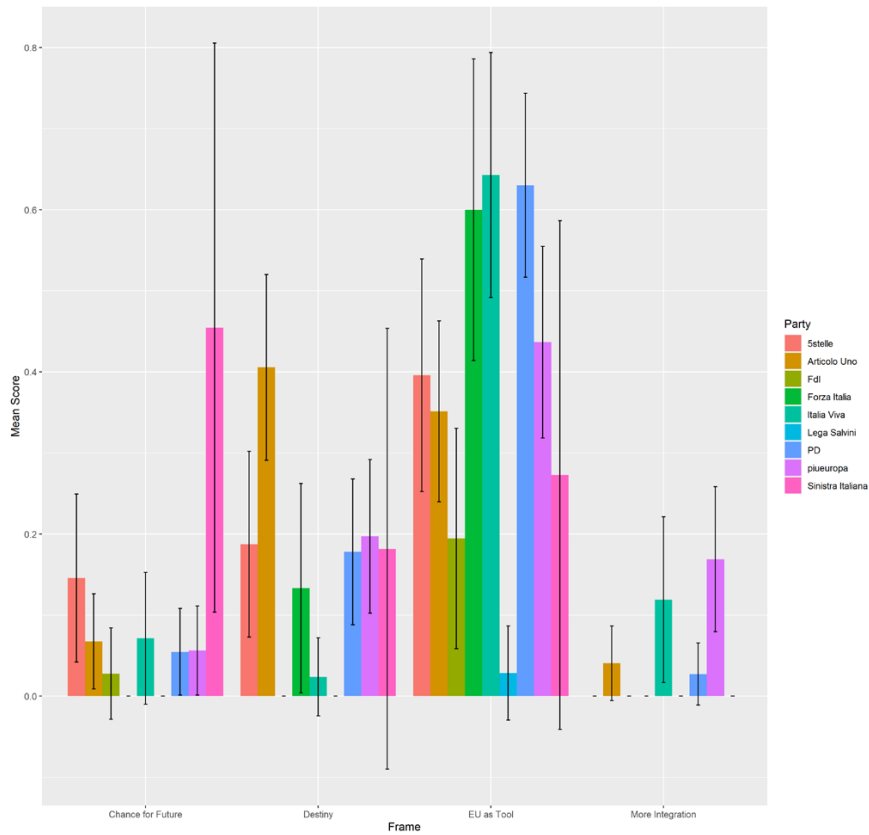


Fig. 8.3. Frequency of the use of positive frames by Italian political parties (90% C.I.).

centre-right block. Both *Lega* and *Fdl* highlight the failure of the EU that is also mentioned by *Forza Italia* in its communication. *Lega* and *Fdl* make less use of the other negative frames, with *Lega* sometimes underlying how the EU helps the wrong people and *Fdl* talking about how the EU exploits the crisis.

This difference between *Lega* and *Fdl* and all the other parties is found also when we look at the tone of the communication, that is, the prevailing sentiment of the documents analysed. To measure the tone, we created a continuous variable ranging from -2 (when the tone was very negative) to +2 (when the sentiment was very positive). Figure 5, in which sentiment is plotted for all the parties, shows how a negative language is mostly used by *Lega* and *Fdl*. Also *Forza Italia* and *Sinistra Italiana* use a negative tone sometimes, but not with the same frequency of the other two populist parties. *Sinistra Italiana*, hence, for the difference in the tone and in the frame used is unique compared to the other governing parties and this makes it look more like an opposition party. This is certainly consistent

PANDEMIC FRAMES

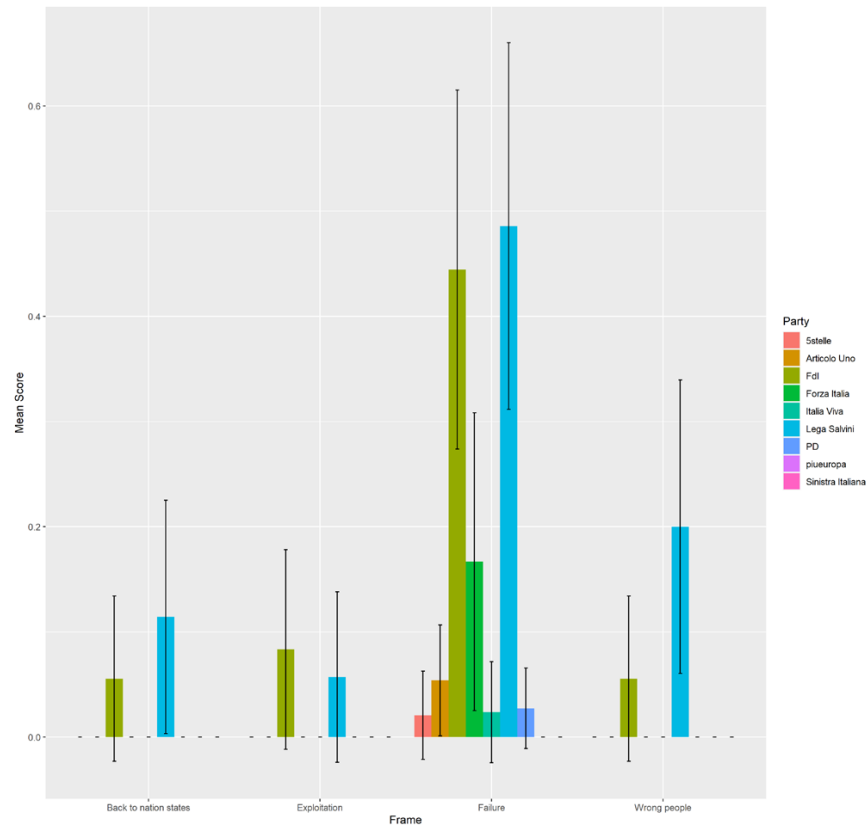


Fig. 8.4. Frequency of the use of negative frames by Italian political parties (90% C.I.).

with, and to a certain degree predicted, the later political developments within the Italian Parliament: the following Draghi I cabinet received the support of *Articolo 1*, with *Sinistra Italiana* remaining in the opposition. Conversely, the party that speaks more favourably about the EU is *Italia Viva*.

Were the differences between parties stable over time? In other words, did parties change the way they communicate about the EU over the months of the crisis? To explore this hypothesis, we plot the use of negative and positive frames by all the parties between February and July 2020, as shown in Figure 6. The first aspect to be noticed is that especially right-wing populist parties, such as Fdi and *Lega*, changed their attitude over time vis-à-vis the EU. Specifically, the use of negative frames despite being prevalent, became less frequent in the spring (between April and June), that is, when the EU suspended the Stability and Growth Pact and when the discussion on the Recovery Fund started. Criticism increased again around June, most likely because of the opposition of “frugal” coun-

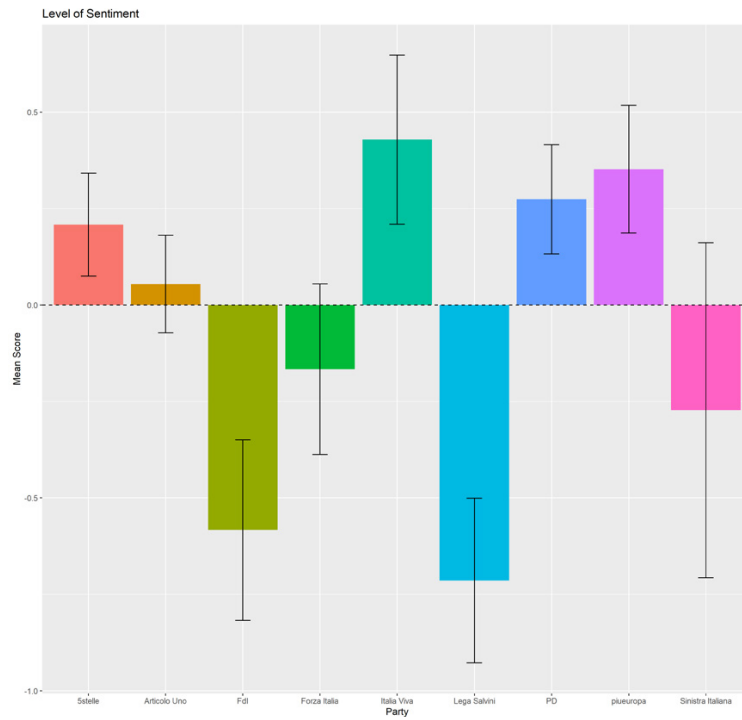


Fig. 8.5. Level of sentiment in the communication about the EU of Italian political parties (90% C.I.).

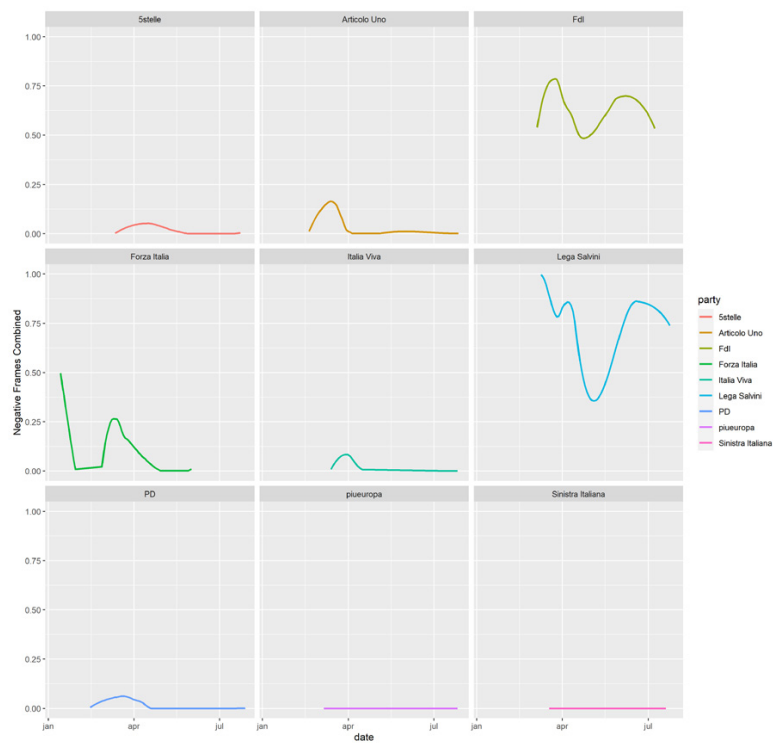


Fig. 8.6. The use of negative frames by Italian parties over time (1st February – 31st July 2020).

tries to the economic package proposed by the European institutions. But after the signature of the agreement between the countries, negative frames decreased again with *Fratelli d'Italia* showing also an increase in the use of positive framing (we do not witness a similar increase for the *Lega*, instead).

We can also see that among the parties in government, it was especially the M5S that changed its way of communicating about the EU: while negative frames were hardly used, there was also a decrease in the use of positive frames compared to the beginning of the Covid-19 first wave. This is especially the case when the Recovery Fund was discussed, while the agreement overlapped with a new peak in the use of positive frames.

To summarize, Italian political parties either spoke about the EU in a positive manner (both in terms of frames and sentiment) or in a negative way. In other words, there are no ambiguous cases. Specifically, there seems to be a clear divide between the two far-right parties in the opposition and the rest of political groups represented in Parliament. The radical-right is indeed the most sceptic about the EU and its communication is dominated by negative frames and a critical language. While over time we do not witness great changes in parties' attitudes vis-à-vis the EU, our data indicates that positivity decreased within the M5S and it increased among the members of FdI. This is especially the case after the approval of the Recovery Fund in summer 2020.

4.2. Politicians: A comparison between Conte and Di Maio

From the analysis of parties' communication, we have seen that the M5S, the largest party in government during the first wave of Covid-19, had overall a positive attitude towards the EU. Like many other parties, the M5S mostly focused its attention on the economic measures proposed by the EU to overcome the crisis. Do we find the same when we analyse the communication by two of the most popular representatives of the party? To answer this question, we plotted the share of official communications released by Giuseppe Conte, Prime Minister, and Luigi Di Maio, Minister of Foreign Affairs, devoted to EU issues. As indicated by Figure 7, Conte discussed the economic response by the EU much more than his colleague Di Maio.

As explained by Bachtler, Mendez and Wislade (2020), Conte was particularly outspoken on the need for a coordinated response at the EU level. For example, together with other Prime Ministers from eight mem-

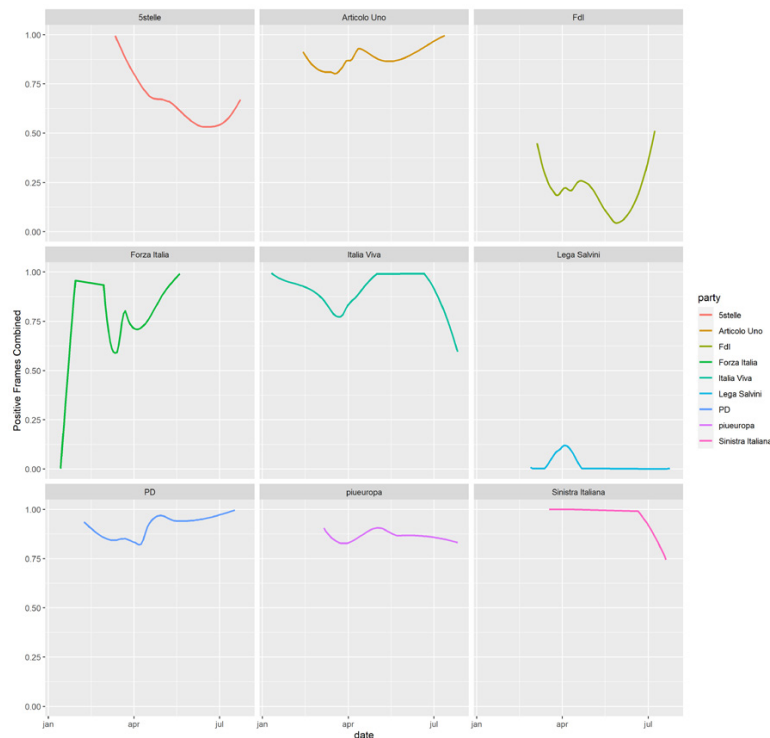


Fig. 8.7. The use of positive frames by Italian parties over time (1st February – 31st July 2020).

ber states, Conte sent a joint letter the President of the European Council Charles Michel in late March 2020 demanding a common debt instrument issued at the European level. In Italy, Conte also led the discussion around the opportunity to use the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), stressing the necessity to find new tools to fight the economic crisis and warning the EU institutions and some of the other member states to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, like “doing too little or reacting too slowly”. Di Maio, instead, perhaps also in line with his role as head of Italy’s international relations, devoted most of his attention to the pandemic in general, but also to cooperation within the EU and migration.

None of the two, however, used negative frames to describe the EU. The two leaders were, therefore, aligned to the frames generally used by their party. In Figure 8 we show the use of positive frames by Conte and Di Maio. As we can see, there are some differences between the two politicians. Firstly, Conte made more “pragmatic” references, he mostly pictured the EU as a necessary tool to overcome the crisis. Di Maio, instead, used equally this pragmatic frame and the one about Europe as a com-

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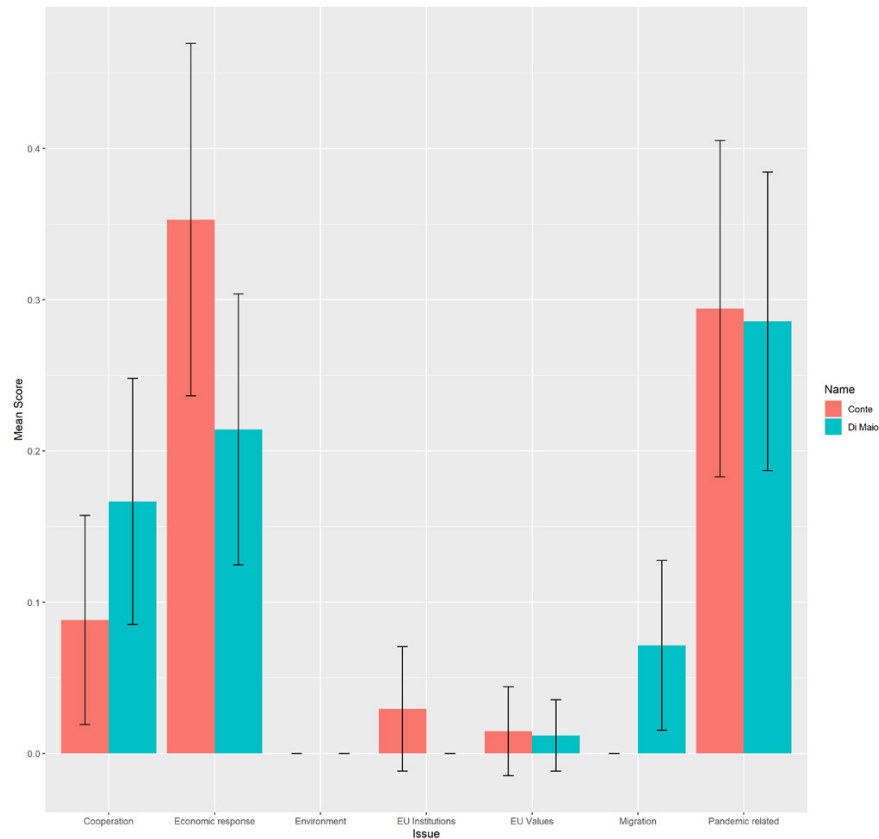


Fig. 8.8. The most salient issues discussed by Conte and Di Maio (90% C.I.).

munity of destiny. Somehow surprisingly given the original scepticism of the M5S towards the EU (but not *that* surprising, considering that – for instance – the M5S in late 2019 voted in favour of the new Von der Leyen Commission), Di Maio also called for more European integration, something that Conte never did.

There are differences also in terms of the tone used by the two leaders to talk about the EU. As indicated by Figure 9, on average Conte has a greater score than Di Maio (respectively, around 0.25 and 0.15 on the scale ranging from -2 to +2), but the use of positive language is not stable over time. Figure 10 shows the development overtime for the two politicians. As we can see, Conte started using a very positive language, but then his enthusiasm dropped in March, around the time when Christine Lagarde, the president of ECB, stated that: “We are not here to close [bond] spreads, there are other tools and other actors to deal with these issues.” A sentence that Conte commented like this: “the ECB must en-

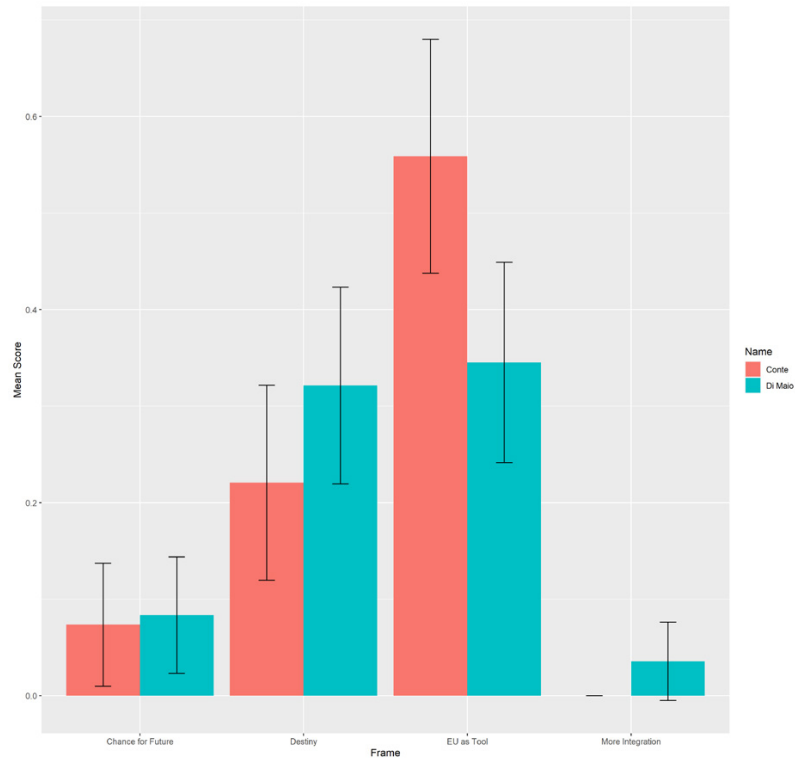


Fig. 8.9. Most used frames by Conte and Di Maio (90% C.I.).

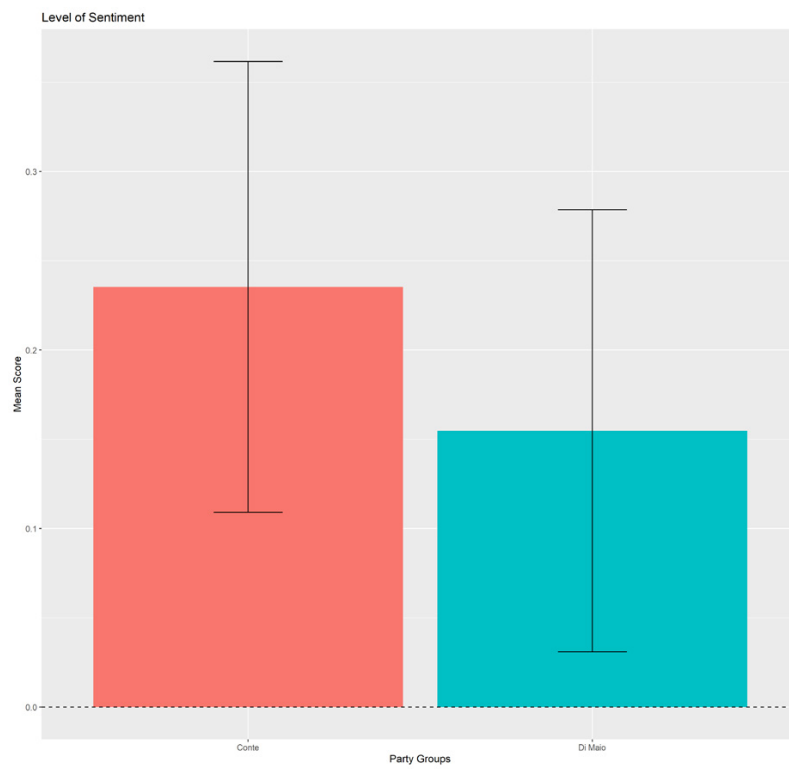


Fig. 8.10. Average level of sentiment for Conte and Di Maio.

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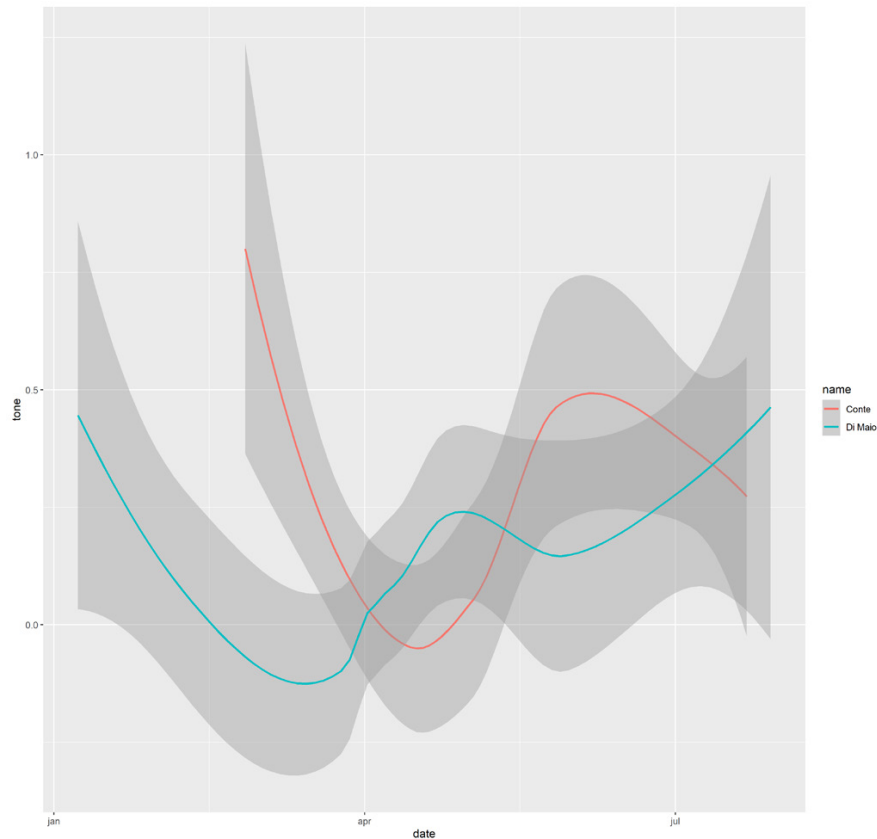


Fig. 8.11. The level of sentiment for Conte and Di Maio overtime (1st February – 31st July 2020).

sure the stability of the markets not make them fibrillate: its task is to facilitate and not hinder the interventions for the health emergency”. Conte’s tone reached its minimum in May and then increased again over summer, but never came back to the original peak. Di Maio’s language also swung over time, but with less variation and in July the Minister of Foreign Affairs reached the same tone that he had in February before the crisis started.

To conclude, our data suggests that Conte and Di Maio represent quite well the attitude of their party vis-à-vis the EU, but the two leaders also played a different role at the EU level. Conte was more vocal in demanding an action from the EU especially in economic terms, in line also with his more pragmatic view of the EU’s role to overcome the crisis. Conte became more critical of the EU over-time and tried to coordinate a collective action among the most-hit countries. Di Maio’s tone, while less positive

than Conte's, was more stable. Di Maio addressed a wider set of issues and used different frames when discussing the EU.

5. Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to assess whether there is any specificity in the way populist parties talked about the EU during the first phase of the Covid-19 crisis. In particular, we wanted to test whether populist parties in government differ in their communication style compared to populist parties in opposition. To answer these questions, we focused on the Italian case, characterized by the presence of populist parties both in government and not but also for being the first European country hit by the pandemic. Specifically, we collected different kinds of party communications (social media, press releases) and we analysed their content by looking at the most salient issues, the frames used to describe the EU and the tone of the language of these communications. Our analysis indicates that being in government substantively changes the attitude of populist parties towards the EU. The M5S, that before being in government had a quite sceptic view of the EU, has proved to be rather supportive of the EU. In other words, the M5S speaks as favourably of the EU as other mainstream parties, like for instance, the Democratic Party. However, the EU is still harshly criticized by the populist parties in opposition, namely *Lega* and FdI. To summarize, Euroscepticism seems to be rather driven by being in government or not. Populist parties look more like mainstream parties when they are in government and they keep their Eurosceptic stances when they are in opposition. The recent developments in Italian politics, even if not included in our analysis, seem to support our finding. Since February 2021 Italy has a new government led by the former ECB president, Mario Draghi, and supported by the same parties of the Conte II plus *Forza Italia* and *Lega*. Since the *Lega* came back to power, Salvini changed suddenly his way of talking about the EU to the point that the Italian media talked about his (unexpected) "pro-European turn". Euroscepticism seems to be an asset only when in opposition.

SCIENZA POLITICA 13

POPULISM IN CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN POLITICS

Actors and processes in time of crisis

Edited by Enrico Calossi, Paola Imperatore

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