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Comparative examination of the discourse of far-right parties on social media: Fidesz (Hungary) and Fratelli d'italia (italy)

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Abstract: The power of social media platforms in constantly reshaping politics and political communication has been an ardent topic in relation to the current state of democracy. Latest elections in several countries drew scholars' attention to how far-right parties repack populist ideas and share them on social media to target and coagulate a larger audience. Given the amplitude of the phenomenon, this paper opts for a comparative analysis of the presence on Facebook of two elected far-right populist parties in two European countries, Italy (Fratelli d'Italia) and Hungary (Fidesz). Quantitative methods such as semantic analysis and NLP are used to reveal the most prominent topics in the parties' online discourse and similarities between them. The attention given by the two parties is discussed in terms of engagement received. The results clearly display similar recurrent rhetoric and narratives around prominent conflicting issues in regard to immigration, LGBTQ+ rights and national sovereignty. This paper addresses the presentation of far-right parties on social media in a comparative manner, giving insights into what might make their discourse so appealing for large audiences, later turning into their voters.

Key-words: populism, political communication, Facebook, online discourse, right-wing

1. Introduction

In the context of a visible trend of European politics to incline to the right side of the political spectrum, it is relevant to research and understand the power social media holds in building modern political discourse. Politics and political ideologies such as populism have been a subject of academic interest due to their significant impact on society. The increasing influence of social media has further expanded this field of study, offering new insights into how political actors interact with the public. Placed at the intersection of political science and media studies, this paper

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provides a comparative analysis of the online presence of Fidesz and Fratelli d'Italia, revealing the discussed subjects they use to resonate with their audiences. Fidesz is a far-right Hungarian party that has been present in the Parliament for 10 years, its presence being of a populist and anti-liberal nature that poses great danger to the rights of certain communities. Fratelli d'Italia has not been on the political stage for as long as Fidesz , but they were quick to win a great amount of votes thanks to their socially conservative ideology that is generally similar to that of the Hungarian counterpart. The relative prominence of right-wing populist parties across Europe made the comparative analysis of their social media communication increasingly possible.

The following paper will compare the Facebook communication of Fidesz and Fratelli d'Italia, using their engagement, as well as their common narrative themes, in order to gain a better grasp on the varieties of political communication of right-wing populist parties in different contexts. The study adopts a comparative and longitudinal approach, utilizing data extracted from Facebook using Facepager's open API starting from the 1st of January 2023, until the 1st of January 2024. The paper analyses the social media activity and the generated engagement of the two parties using descriptive methods. Furthermore, it makes uses of co-occurrence networks in order to compare and contrast the common topics of each party in their social media posts. The findings reveal the way in which both parties frame themselves using similar a rhetoric, while adapting their messaging based on the context of each country. The paper aims to add to the ever expanding field of research on the role of digital media platforms in political communication and their use by right-wing populist parties and actors.

2. Literature review

2. 1. Political Communication and the social media

Political communication can be described as "an interactive process concerning the transmission of information among politicians, the news media, and the public" (Norris 2001, 11631). The process of political communication operates in multiple directions. It moves downward as governing institutions communicate with their citizens, while public opinion flows upward towards public authorities. Additionally, political actors engage in a horizontal communication process amongst each other (Norris 1997, 11631-11632).

Norris divides literature on political communication into three major categories. The first category, production process-oriented research, is focused on how messages are generated by political actors and transmitted through various channels. The second category, content-focused literature, places emphasis in the details of the messages transmitted. Lastly, effects-focused research aims to study the impact of these messages, such as the potential effects of exposure to different types of communication (Norris 2001, 11632-11633).

In terms of the development of political communication, Blumler and Kavanagh (1999, 211-213) identify three periods through which the field has evolved. In the first period, political communication was largely limited to communication by political institutions and parties. Discussions had a clear substantive character; however, somewhat paradoxically, voting remained rigidly tied to long-standing party affiliations. The second period emerged with the widespread adoption of television. Political actors had to adapt to the new medium by changing their messaging and methods of transmission. This shift can be credited with the rise of key features of professional campaigning. The third period has further expanded the field of political communication through several developments, parties now facing higher competitive pressures than in previous eras. Furthermore, the need for consultancy has also increased, media thoroughly becoming an integral part of the campaign process, while parties must account for the growing

segmentation and diversification of of political communication due to the vast number of information sources the public has access to (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999, 211-213).

As a result of the growing influence of online platforms, politics has changed its approach to addressing issues while trying to bridge the gap between voters and candidates. Social networking sites, such as Facebook, were designed to facilitate people's creation of their virtual identity, connect with others in the digital space, and access both their own list of their connections and those of others (Boyd and Ellison 2008, 214-221). These sites have opened a new channel through which institutions and citizens are able to communicate with each other in a more direct manner (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan 2013, 1289). Karlsen and Enjolras (2016, 352-354) have found that political parties that were able to synergize traditional and new channels were able to gain more influence in party politics. Furthermore, various social media platforms are shown to have different uses by political actors, aiming to address a diverse range of target groups (Stier et al. 2018, 58-66.). Elishar-Malka et al. (2020, 191-199) identify four phases of development in the relation of political communication and online platforms. The first phase is characterized by a childlike innocence and "*quasi-messianic*" perceptions towards the internet's effect on society. The second phase reflects disappointment in the internet's ability to bring about world-changing effects. The third phase marks the rise of social media platforms and a renewed sense of optimism. The current, fourth phase, however, refers to the quasi-takeover of digital spaces by political actors. This phase involves the concerted and planned use of social media accounts for political purposes, as well as the incorporation of big data analysis to target audiences and communicate directly with followers.

2. 2. Far-right political communication

In the last few years, far-right parties have been effective in utilizing social media and online platforms to disseminate their messages directly to the public. This phenomenon can be observed in different parts of the world. According to Ihlebaek, Figenschou and Haanshuus (2023), this mechanism is determined by the limited access to mainstream media of which far-right political actors have always been very critical. Their activity on online platforms can be traced back to the early 90's, the authors mentioning that one of the best known far-right forums was founded in 1995. When it comes to political discourse, their success is determined by certain practices: agenda-setting tactics, mainstreaming extreme content, and memes. Ekstrom, Patrona and Thornborrow (2018) also mention the importance of the rhetorical skill that dates back to Aristotle, this refers to "convincing 'performances'" and the successful transmission of a political message to win votes.

Initially attributed only to mass media, agenda setting is a process of presenting certain issues "frequently and prominently" so that the public would perceive them as being "more important than others" (Coleman et al. 2009, 147-148). In the past, mass media was considered the main mediator between the political sphere and the people (McCombs and Shaw 1972, 176).
However, within the advancement of social media, politicians use these platforms to target and address directly to the people, without the intervention of the traditional mass media. As many digital platforms enhance visual content, political - especially far-right - parties are noted to use memes to repack "old ideas such as fascism, racism and white supremacy" to be more appealing to newer and larger audiences (McSwiney et al. 2021, 2502-2521). Rhetorical skill refers to the successful delivery of a message to the public through "convincing performances" (Ekstrom et. al. 2018). As suggested by the authors, these rhetorical skills are usually associated with the populist style of discourse. This style cannot be characterized by elements common with all right-wing political actors and that can be transferred from a cultural context to another. Populist discourse is rather a "set of motivated choices" that resonate with the public at a cultural and social level.

2. 3. Facebook as a tool in modern politics

Political communication has been reshaped by the new media culture, as now it is understood as a continuous, bidirectional process and even a dialogue between those who elect and those who want to be elected. Moreover, politics has been reshaped by the introduction of the electronic voting system and the rise of online-only political campaigns (Harvey 2014). In this sense, very populated social networking platforms such as Facebook can now be considered "political arenas" (Nave et al. 2018) and be used as political tools that can bring people closer to the political scene (Rußmann 2012, 123-124).

Nonetheless, the political discourse on social media has been criticised for creating *spirals of silence* and *echo chambers* – virtual spaces where divergent opinions are isolated and ignored in favour of similar sets of ideas and values that are voiced and augmented (Kushin and Kitchener 2009). However, the same authors point out that the multi-level dialogue manages to diminish political polarisation. Contrasting with this opinion, Garimella et al. (2018, 920-921) argue that this online behaviour actually favours political polarisation and reduces the plurality of opinions an individual is exposed to. Every echo chamber can be understood as a network and every participant as a node. Political parties create echo chambers around their online presence and surround themselves with people with the same values – illustrating the homophilia principle that connections are formed because of similarities between two entities (McPherson et al. 2001, 429).

One definitory aspect of social media is their ability to connect billions of people – Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan (2013, 1289) claim that the architecture of Facebook encourages its users to express their opinions within the platform, which facilitates the analysis of users' interactions. Bene (2017, 6-7) affirmed that the interactivity on Facebook is rather hard to define in conventional terms, as the interactivity usually refers to the ties between specific participants and a well-defined audience – meanwhile on Facebook, users create their own networks. The same author mentions the three types of interactions on Facebook: likes, comments, and shares, each one being significant for measuring publics' engagement.

2. 4. Analysis of the background of the political landscapes

2. 4. 1. Hungary

Hungary has a single-chamber parliamentary system. Since the first democratic election in 1990, after the fall of the communist regime, Hungary has utilized a mixed member electoral system with an almost equal number of seats reserved for representatives elected on the basis of single-member districts and party-lists. (Benoit 2003, 477–478). Initially, the size of the parliament was 386, of which 55% was voted on by proportional representation by way of party lists. Candidates for the district seats were elected in a two-round majoritarian election in which, if the first round did not produce a 50%+1 majority, the second round would feature the two candidates with the most votes. The party list section was divided into county and national lists. Voters directly selected candidates from the county lists, while the national lists were determined by counting the unused votes for each party from both the constituency and county lists (Kovács and Vida 2015, 57-59).

By the 2014 elections, the Fidesz majority parliament and government changed the electoral system. They reduced the size of the parliament to 199 seats and changed the proportion of the parliament to have a slight majority of district seats (106, to the 93 party list seats). They further changed the two-round majoritarian election of district representatives, to a one-round simple majority. The revision also abolished the county lists, leaving the national lists on which citizens are able to directly vote (Kovács and Vida 2015, 57-61). However, the alteration came with controversies, as critiques have highlighted the dominance of partisan interests in the revision

process, arguing that the new system lays the base for a hegemonic party-system (Várnagy and Ilonszki 2017, 20-21).

Fidesz, initially called the Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége (Alliance of Young Democrats) was founded in 1988, under the then communist regime of Hungary. The party initially had a liberal-democratic profile, however in the 90's it would turn towards conservatism (Ilikova and Tushev 2020, 329-330). Following the 1994 elections, the center-right was in a disarray in Hungary, as the socialist party took over the government in the second parliamentary election of post-communist Hungary. By the next election however, the center-right would cooperate to take back the government, which led to the first prime-ministerial term of Viktor Orbán. For the 2002 elections the center-right largely concentrated under Fidesz, that, despite losing the leadership of the government, still remained the party with the largest number of seats in the parliament (Fowler 2004, 86-93).

After the decline of electoral support for the democratic-socialist MSZP, and the rise of the Hungarian right-wing and far-right, represented by the Jobbik party, Fidesz has also taken a populist turn. Capitalizing on the scandalous nature of the then government party, Fidesz took back the government after the 2010 elections, where it achieved a plurality of the votes (Becker 2010, 30-33). Becker notes that Fidesz has capitalized on the growing politically motivated "cultural struggles". They ran a law and order-based campaign, that coincided in a rise in anti-Roma sentiments. The party has also reached out to the Hungarian diaspora, by proposing a citizenship law, which entitles ethnic Hungarian people abroad with citizenship, despite having no residence in the country itself – a move that would cause further tension between Hungary and its neighbours (Becker 2010, 33-35).

Between 2010 and 2014, Fidesz has worked on weakening its opposition and instilling its power, through the use of its super majority and the rewriting of the constitutional order. The party has created a so-called "system of national cooperation", further capitalising on the unprepared response from internal and external opposition (Batory 2016, 289-292). Fidesz would further embrace populist rhetoric in the wake of the 2015 migration crisis, by expressing a lack of tolerance towards asylum seekers (Li et al. 2022, 548-549). They have continued to enjoy electoral successes in both the 2018 and 2022 elections, where they respectively won 133 and 135 parliamentary seats out of 199 (Kovalcsik & Bódi 2023, 65-66).

Batory (2016, 298-299) argues that the success of Fidesz, or rather the lack of preparedness against its consolidation of power, stems from their history. Unlike right-wing populist parties that have recently come to prominence, the party has started out not as an extremist or outsider agent, but rather as a relatively established center-right party. Li et al. (2022, 547-553) find three methods through which Fidesz has maintained power through the last decade. Firstly, it utilises rhetoric in order to consolidate power, consistently invoking threats to the nation as a way to rally people and distract them from other issues. Furthermore, it has shown strong resistance against asylum seekers supported by the voting population. Lastly, Fidesz uses the government's economic policy to support its populist agenda (Li et al. 2022, 550-552).

The party's, and subsequently, the government's populist rhetoric dominates the country as Fidesz uses the government to amplify their right-wing populist messaging (Gera 2023, 109; Demeter 2018, 180-181). This is especially evident in the speeches of Viktor Orbán, who frequently labels specific groups as enemies or antagonists who oppose Hungary as a state or nation. (Tóth 2020, 378). Similarly, in their rhetoric they also tend to reference certain malicious elites, who target the country and the state. (Enyedi 2018, 1068). Common elements of their rhetoric include critiques of liberalism and liberal values (Brubaker 2017, 1208), anti-EU sentiments (Demeter 2018, 191-193), as well as citing asylum seekers and immigration as a security concern (Tóth 2020, 378-380).

Fidesz has worked to reinvent nationalism and Hungarian identity in a populist manner. Gera (2023, 116-123) notes the meticulous way in which anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric was integrated in the

government's discourse under the guise of protecting the traditional family and children, while LGBTQ+ ideas and sentiments were portrayed as originating from outside influences. Thus, the party portrayed itself as defending the nation from outside threats, similarly to their rhetoric during the migration crisis. Molnar and Whigham (2019, 141-143) highlight how the party and specifically Orbán uses sport and particularly football in an attempt to reinvent the idea of a strong nation and national identity.

Orbán and his party employ a variety of framing techniques in their Eurosceptic narratives. They equate the European Union with a model of "corrupt elites" that prey upon the nation, while simultaneously portraying the EU as undermining the notion of popular sovereignty by opposing Fidesz (Csehi and Zgut 2021, 58-60). Csehi and Zgut also identified 'anti-imperialist' themes within Fidesz's Eurosceptic narrative, depicting the EU as having an imperialist intent towards Hungary and the Central Eastern European region. Regarding the War in Ukraine, Fidesz and the Hungarian government have been consistently critical of Ukraine and the West while often spreading Russian propaganda. The party has positioned itself as "Pro-Peace", calling for negotiations and concessions from Ukraine, thereby framing Ukraine, the European Union and 'the West' as "Pro-War" (Grygiel 2023, 180-187).

Utilizing Facebook for campaigning and political messaging has been a common method for political parties in Hungary to engage with their followers (Karl 2017, 352). Facebook played a significant role in electoral campaigning during the 2018 and 2022 elections (Juhász and Bene 2022, 744-745; Tóth et al. 2019, 176). Tóth et al. further noted that in 2018 Fidesz used Facebook to further amplify their messaging about outside and inside threats.

2. 4. 2. Italy

To fully grasp the context of this paper, it is essential to explore Italy's political background and the ideological trends that emerged following the country's transition to democracy. The concept of the Constitutional Arch was created during the '60's in reference to the parties that were the principal figures in the creation of the 1948 Constitution. The Constitutional Arch was a support pillar for politicians who called for national unity and it created asymmetry between the left-wing and the right-wing, as the latter was not included in the Arch (Università degli Studi di Teramo n.d.). During the year 1947, mass political parties experienced a great rupture, with smaller parties forming after detaching from them. A government crisis in May of the same year determined a temporary formation of a government composed solely by Christian democrats. This was the work of Alcide De Gasperi who, in the same year, visited the USA and obtained great economic assistance alongside a political decision to exclude communists and socialists from the government. In April 1948 the elections that brought forth the success of Christian democracy took place, with centrists becoming more radicalized (Mondadori Media n.d.).

By the 1960's, the Italian state was trying to overall isolate the Italian Communist Party. In 1962, the government was formed by three parties: the Christian Democracy, the Italian Republican Party and the Socialist Democratic Italian Party. The new political agenda shifted significantly to the left, focusing on issues like the nationalization of electrical energy, the reform of the middle school system and urban planning. Although these parties faced various challenges over the years, they managed to maintain their influence (Iuso n.d.). The desire for a change in the political landscape was so strong that two movements took off simultaneously: one advocating for reforms (such as abortion and divorce) and the other characterized by violence. The 1970's are remembered as "the years of lead" due to the large number of bullets that was used by terrorists, with some were affiliated with "black terrorism", inspired by the fascist ideology, while others were part of the "red terrorism", which followed the communist doctrine were generally less violent. The first attack took place in Milan in 1969, and the last in Bologna in 1980. (Associazione Nazionale Partigiani Italia Brescia n.d.). One of the most significant incidents was the assassination

of president Aldo Moro in 1978, which severely diminished the social support these terrorist groups had, causing them to start collaborating with the authorities (Rubini 2021).

Following the coup d'etat Chile faced in 1973, Enrico Berlinguer, the Italian Communist Party's secretary, published the "Historical compromise" in the Rinascita magazine, proposing a coalition between the ICP and the Christian Democracy. However, all the parliamentary forces refused to include the ICP with a major coalition (Li Gotti 2023). In the 1990's the Italian political system went through a major reform, entering a period referred to as the Second Republic. During this time, the parliamentary system evolved into a form of premiership, and the electoral system transitioned from a purely proportional representation to a predominantly majoritarian system (Politica Semplice n.d.).

In November 2017 the electoral system was modified due to the precedent law being deemed as unconstitutional (Colotto n.d.). According to Calabria University (n.d.), the 2015 law, known as Porcellum, was criticized for "transforming a relative majority of votes (potentially even very modest) into an absolute majority of seats". Before the new law (3 November 2017 n.165, known as the Rosatellum bis) the electoral system was proportional with a majority bonus with a possible second turn. Rosatellum changed the system into a mixed one in which one third of deputies are elected in single-member constituencies and the remaining two thirds are elected with a proportional list system ("blocked" lists). The Chamber of Deputies now presents itself with 400 seats, with 147 assigned for single-member constituencies, 245 for multi-member districts and 8 for diaspora voters. The Senate has 200 seats which are assigned in the same manner (with 74, 122 and 4 seats respectively). Another important aspect of the Italian electoral system is the gender quota (or the pink quota) that ensures that women are represented in each constituency and that party lists are not overwhelmingly made up of one gender.

Fratelli d'Italia was created in December 2012 after splitting from Silvio Berlusconi's Il Popolo della Libertà. The political party's creator was Georgia Meloni who was already known for her right-wing beliefs, as soon as she separated from PdL she started preparing for the 2013 elections that were to take place in February. Not having much time to prepare, their campaign revolved around a list that was only made of simple policy proposals. Nevertheless, FdI registered 1.96% of the votes and had eight deputies elected. (Donà 2022, 780-783) According to Donà, in March 2014, Meloni was officially designated as the president of the party and FdI's logo officially changed, combining the one of the late Alleanza Nazionale and FdI-Cn, opponents now describing Fratelli d'Italia as a neo-fascist party, while FdI identifying as post-fascist. In the coming years FdI rose thanks to Meloni's public speeches, one of her most famous appearances in which she stated "I am Georgia. I am a woman, I am a mother, I am Christian" went viral in an attempt to mock her, however this failed and instead helped her campaign. (Donà 2022, 780-783) In September 2022, FdI won the elections with 26% of votes, making Meloni the prime minister of the Italian Republic. (La Reppublica)

The 2022 elections had a very low turnout compared to previous years, with it being the lowest rate in the history of the Italian republic. In 2018 the turnout was 72,94% for the Chamber of Deputies and 73% for the Senate, by 2022, the turnout for both Chambers has fallen just below 64%. (TG24, 2022) Fratelli d'Italia won the 2022 elections with 26% of the votes (about 7.3 million votes), making Meloni the prime minister of the Italian Republic. (La Reppublica, n.d.) The runner up was the Democratic Party with 19,1% of votes, while Movimento 5 Stelle placed in third place with a percentage of 15,4. (Scavo and Fishman 2022)

Scavo and Fishman (2022) indicate that while FdI supporters tend to be men, they do not greatly outnumber women. Fratelli d'Italia tends to be more popular among people that are between 35 and 49 years old, with the age category that least chose to vote for the party being 18-34. Their education level is mostly low, being equal to primary education (5th grade) or lower secondary education (8th grade) and belonging to the a low-to medium income category. FdI is the most

popular across merchants, artisans and self-employed people, as well as manual workers (the so-called *operai* category) (Scavo and Fishman 2022).

3. Research design

3. 1. Scope and objectives

In the context of a visible trend in the European political scene towards extreme positions on the right side of the political spectrum and the increasing direct presence of political parties and political communication online, this paper focuses on analyzing the Facebook discourse of two right-wing political parties: Fidesz, from Hungary, and Fratelli d'Italia, from Italy. Hence, the present study aims to track the political discourse promoted by the two political parties and the engagement specificities seen in the social media activity for these two.

3. 2. Research questions

The research questions to be answered using both concepts from literature and the concrete analysis of later detailed acts of communication to this research paper are:

> RQ1: What are the main topics of the posts on the Facebook pages of said political parties?
>
> RQ2: What are the common topics, if any, of the two political parties?
>
> RQ3: How did the engagement rate change, if it did, throughout the given period?

3. 3. Methodology

To provide a comprehensive overview of the current European right-wing political landscape, this study adopts a comparative and longitudinal approach. It analyses the communication activity on Facebook from two prominent political parties from two countries over a one-year period. The paper employs a quantitative methodology, examining a big dataset from the selected social media platform. The analysis was designed to make use of quantitative methods such as semantic analysis and natural language processing (NLP). The specifics of the discourse on social media are to be analysed using Facebook's metrics such as the length of the posts, the engagement received from the community, and the frequency of posting. Identifying the main topics in both parties' discourses will involve creating co-occurrence networks through processing natural language. A co-occurrence network is a visual representation that highlights the relationships between words that appear in the same context. To address the research questions, KH Coder was used to construct the co-occurrence networks, whereas the data visualizations were built in Tableau Public.

3. 4. Data sampling and extraction

This paper uses one dataset with data extracted from Facebook using Facepager's open API. Facebook was chosen as (1) both Fidesz and Fratelli d'Italia are especially active on this platform and (2) the platform's architecture encourages textual discourse more than other platforms. The timeframe of this study is 1st January 2023 to 1st January 2024, taking into consideration the success these two parties had with their online-driven political campaign in

2022 and the European elections held in June 2024. The database consists of a total of 6,070 posts – 4,174 posts from Fidesz and 1,896 posts from Fratelli d'Italia. From each party account there have been extracted: (1) post description, (2) date of the post, (3) number of reactions (that have been extracted individually the number of *Like*, *Love*, *Wow*, *Haha*, *Sad* and *Angry* reactions), (5) number of comments. To perform the analysis, the captions were automatically translated from Hungarian and Italian to English.

3. 5. Advantages and limitations of the methodology

One advantage of the methodology is the amount of data gathered, facilitated by the automated data collection using open APIs from Facepager. Furthermore, the comparative analysis represents another advantage in building a better understanding of how right-wing parties from Europe use Facebook as a political tool in interacting with their public and gaining sympathy.

However, this study also has some limitations, specifically technical and language-related constraints. The technical limitations pertain to data collection; in this case, data could only be be gathered for the past year. At the same time, the open APIs provided by Facepager do not include details such as type of post (photo, status, video, link) and number of shares, which would complete the analysis of the social media activity of the chosen parties. Limitations of a linguistic nature arose at the stage of processing the textual messages – specifically, at the risk that some language-specific nuances of the original texts would be lost, the paper opted to translate the texts into English (1) to make the results accessible to a wider audience and (2) because KH Coder works better on English text.

4. Data analysis

4. 1. Hungary

In the period of January 1st, 2023, to January 1st, 2024, we collected 4174 Facebook posts from the page of Fidesz. Out of these, 447 (10.7 %) have not contained text, meaning that they either were photos or other media content. Looking at specific posts reveals that Fidesz often posts photos that either mainly feature texts or uses texts with images, similarly to campaign posters. Of the recorded posts, the average length of caption is 184 characters.

Table 1. Descriptive data on the engagement of Facebook posts by Fidesz between January 1st, 2023 and January 1st, 2024 (N = 4174)

	Comments	"Like" reactions	"Haha" reaction	"Love" reaction	"Angry" reaction	"Sad" reaction	"Wow" reaction
Mean	340.27	1403.73	29.68	11.33	13.86	7.24	2.55
Median	79	785	12	3	1	0	1
Mode	37	476	6	1	0	0	0

The analysis of the reactions and engagement with the posts shows the following: "Like" is the most common reaction, with a median of 785 likes per post, but it's is crucial to keep in mind that liking is the default reaction. Among other reactions, the "ha-ha" or laughing emoji is the next most frequent, with a median of 12 per post. Other reactions were less prevalent, with the sad emoji being the least used at a median of 0. On average posts generated about 340 comments per post, with a median of 79 comments per post. However, the engagement rate is relatively low compared to their follower count of approximately 374,000 (Facebook 2024). The different rate of reactions

would suggest that generally posts are mostly engaged by supporters, however a number of opponents may also be active in their reactions.

Figure 1. Co-Occurrence Network of Facebook posts by Fidesz in the period of 1 Jan 2023 - 1 Jan 2024 in their original language. (n=4174 posts)

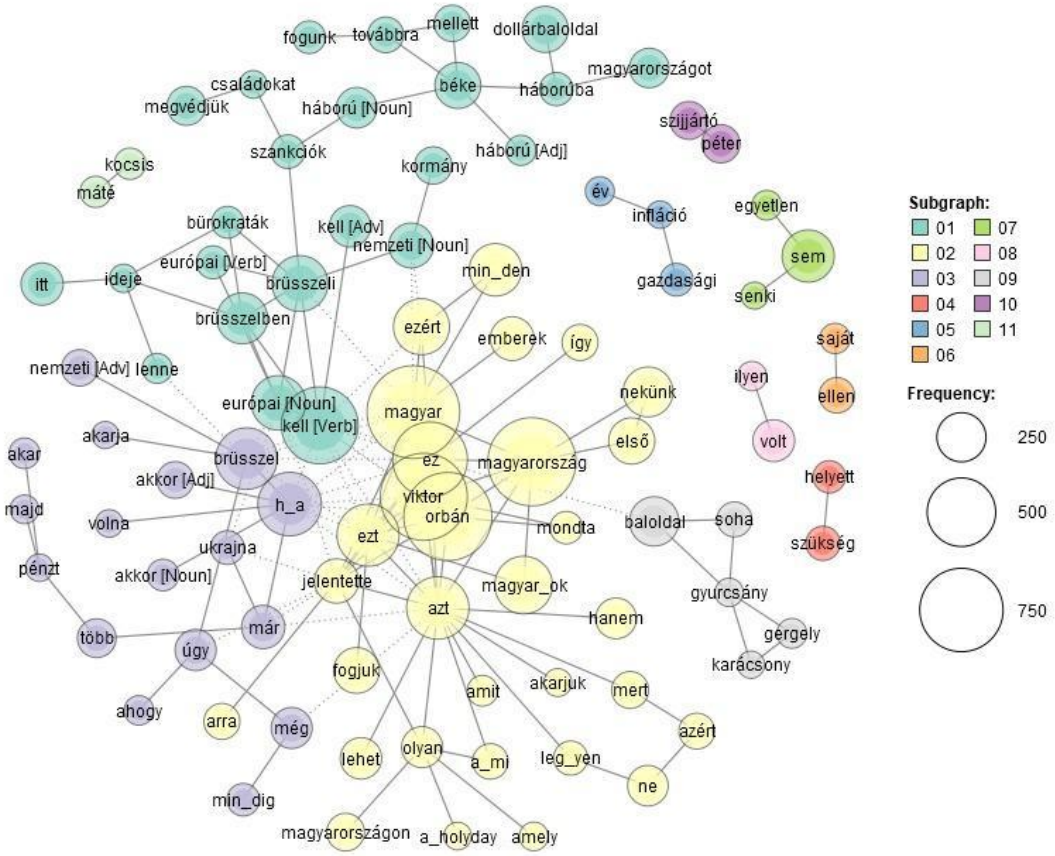


Figure 1 shows a number of distinct associations, which reveal the way in which the party frames certain actors and issues. Firstly, *Subgraph 02* contains some of the most commonly used words, such as *Hungary*, *Hungarian*, and *Viktor Orbán*. Furthermore, looking at this subgraph, we are able to ascertain the way in which the party frames their messaging as speaking for Hungarians and Hungary, while also reinforcing the narrative that Orbán speaks for and in support of Hungarians. It also contains words such as *we will*, *people*, *first*, *we want*, and *in Hungary*.

Subgraphs 01 and *03* contain largely related items. Common words and phrases are *Brussels*, *in Brussels*, "Brüsszeli" (referring to something or someone in/from Brussels), *European*. Subgraph 03 demonstrates the way in which Fidesz messaging associates Ukraine with the European Union and a sense of financial burden. In contrast, Subgraph 01 also relates to the EU but includes specific phrases such as *war*, *sanctions*. This is further emblematic of Fidesz's portrayal of the War in Ukraine as something that is encouraged by the EU. Whereas the word such as *peace* are linked to phrases such as *in part of*, *we will*, *yet*, which further emphasizes the "Pro-Peace" self-presentation of the party. Also, Subgroup 1 contains the word "dollárbaloldal" which is a compound phrase created from the combination of the words *dollar and left-wing.* It specifically is used as a negative label, suggesting that the left-wing opposition in the country is funded by outside interests.

Subgraph 09 is made up of references to the left-wing and names of left-wing politicians as well as the word *never*. Which alludes to a conflation of old left-wing parties, such as the MSZP, with

modern ones. Specifically, it is often used to bring up the scandalous past of the left-wing in the country. *Subgraph 05* contains words related to the economy and economic performance, while some other subgraphs contain words that are often used together, or names of other Fidesz politicians.

Figure 2. Co-Occurrence Network of Facebook posts by Fidesz in the period of 1 Jan 2023 - 1 Jan 2024 based on the translated captions. (n=4174 posts)

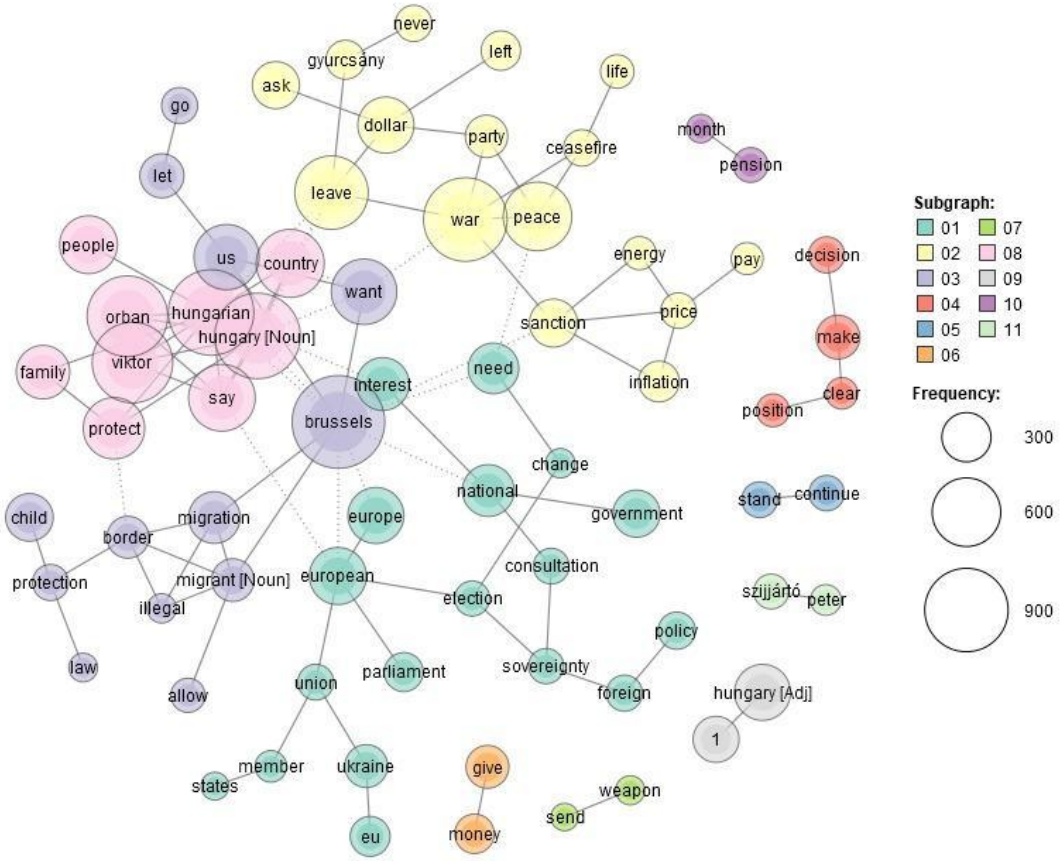


Figure 2 reveals a number of previous connections and topics, that are not as present in the untranslated figure. The association between Orbán, the party and the country itself is still strong, as shown in *Subgroup 08*. While the topic of the EU represented by Brussels gains a strong association with immigration and migrants. From the connection of *Subgraphs 3* and *8*, we can also observe the presentation of Fidesz as a force that protects the country from the threat of immigration and the EU. Subgraph 03 highlights the way in which Fidesz has been presenting the left-wing and opposition as being "Pro-War". *Subgraph 01* also shows some vague connection between the European Union and the discussion of popular sovereignty, however that is maybe more pronounced on the Hungarian language network.

Both networks indicate some discussion on the protection of families, although in both cases it represents a small part of the discussion. The idea of the protection of the family was often used in order to reframe the anti-LGBTQ+ position of Fidesz (Gera 2023, 1–26). This relatively low number of mentions could suggest that Fidesz has refocused its attention on other matters, at least in terms of their communication strategy.

Overall, the co-occurrence network is a useful tool in evaluating the communication and messaging of political organizations. In the case of Fidesz, the results reinforce our understanding of the populist tactics and messaging of the party. We can notice common tactics mentioned in the literature, such as the rhetoric by which populist parties claim to speak for the people/nation, using phrases and words that suggest an "us versus them" logic. Furthermore, we can notice that

one of the most common topics in the last year for Fidesz was the European Union. The rhetoric of the party presents the European Union as an outside agent that attempts to impose its will on the nation. The War in Ukraine is presented in the context of the EU, specifically we can observe how Fidesz positions Hungary as "Pro-Piece", putting them in opposition to Brussels. A closer look also reveals the techniques by which Fidesz discredits their opposition: they attempt to delegitimize the left-wing by portraying it as being funded by outside interests or threats. While at the same time reminiscing about the past controversies of left-wing parties, with the aim of delegitimizing current opposing parties and movements.

4. 2. Italy

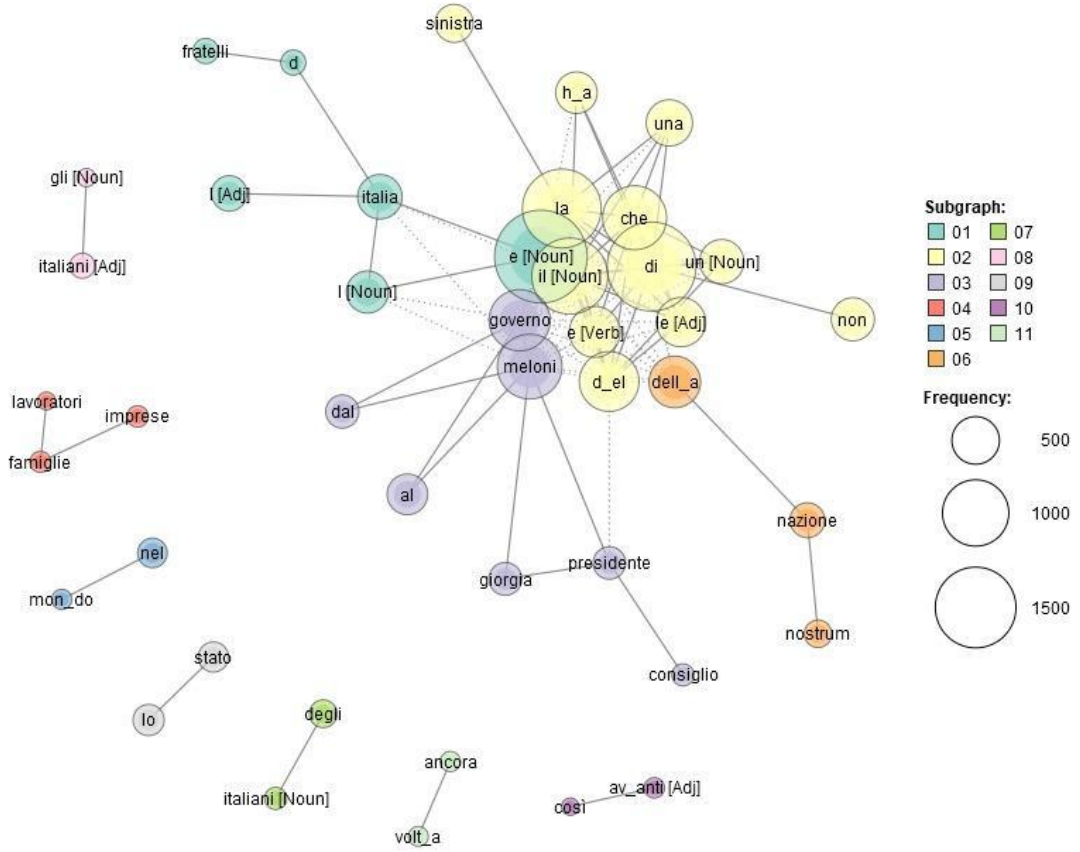
Table 2. Descriptive data on the engagement of Facebook posts by Fratelli d'Italia between January 1st, 2023 and January 1st, 2024 (N = 1930)

	Comments	"Like" reactions	"Haha" reaction	"Love" reaction	"Angry" reaction	"Sad" reaction	"Wow" reaction
Mean	345.3	1763.47	69.05	65.55	24.79	15.73	2.21
Median	190	1166	25	27	4	1	1
Mode	131	798	15	8	2	0	0

In the period of January 1st 2023 to January 1st 2024, Fratelli d'Italia has posted on Facebook a total of 1930 times, the average length of the posts being 203 characters.

Looking at the reactions, the most common is the basic "Like" with a median of 1166 per post, followed by the "Love" reaction, which has a median of 27 reactions per post. On average, each post received 345 comments. Taking all of these in consideration we can say that FdI is very active on Facebook and is met with strong engagement from other users.

Figure 3. Co-Occurrence Network of Facebook posts by 340 in the period of 1 Jan 2023 - 1 Jan 2024 in their original language. (n=1930 posts)

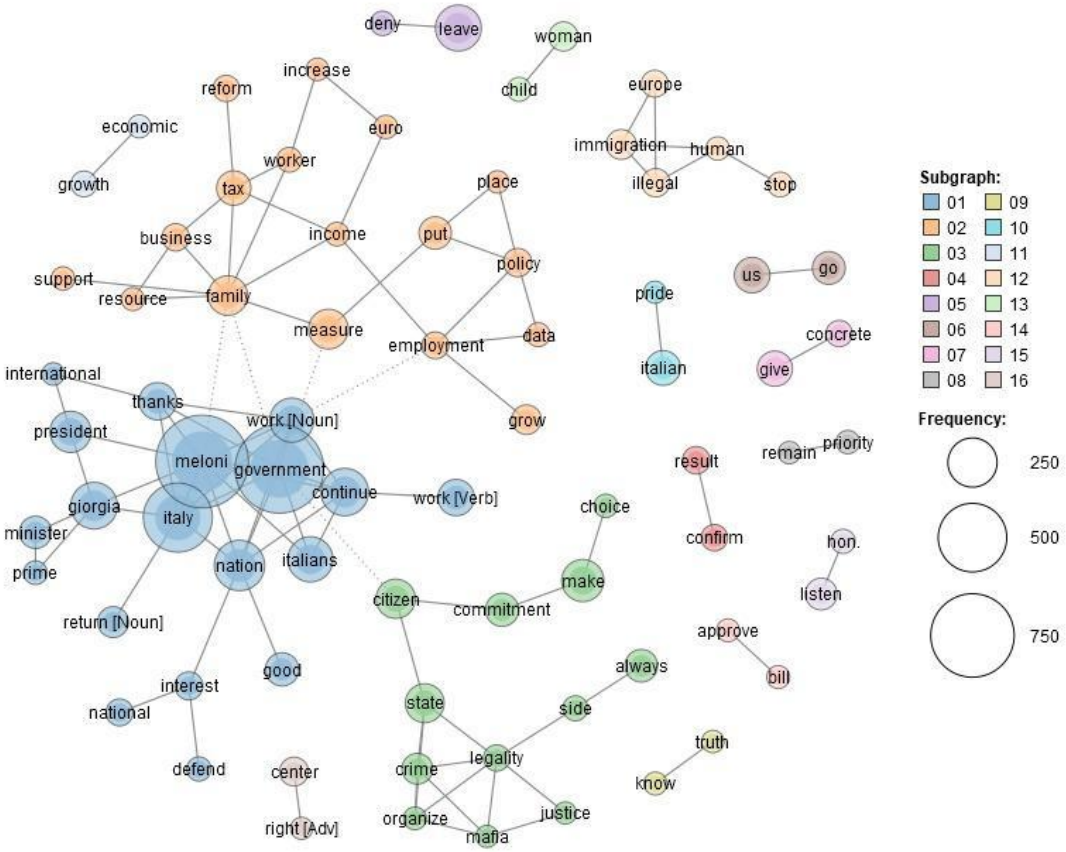


The untranslated co-occurrence network presents itself with some interesting subgraphs, of course some of them hold more significance than others. Before delving into their analysis, it is important to say that most of the words are articles or other parts of speech that are irrelevant for this paper.

Subgraph 01 simply mentions the name of the party, we can notice that the word *Fratelli* has a lower frequency than *Italia*, it is also interesting to see that the frequency of the latter word is lower than one might expect, but this is due to being overshadowed by the very high frequencies of the words that we deemed as irrelevant earlier. Subgraph 02 has a single word that is relevant and that is *left* which seems to be mentioned almost as much as Italy. The next subgraph contains the words *Giorgia*, *Meloni*, *government*, *president* and *council*, making it easy to make up that these words are used in a context where they talk about Meloni's position as Prime Minister. Subgraph 06 is formed by *nation* and *nostrum*, which are likely employed for populist and nationalist messaging. All four graphs contain terms that are mostly related to one another, meaning that they have been often used together.

Two particularly notable subgraphs are the ones numbered 04 and 10. Subgraph 04 features the words *workers*, *businesses* and *families*, indicating that FdI is focused on this topic. Subgraph 10 contains only two items *like this* and *ahead*, clearly representing a context in which the party encourages itself when events it considers positive occur.

Figure 4. Co-Occurrence Network of Facebook posts by Fidesz in the period of 1 Jan 2023 - 1 Jan 2024 based on the translated captions. (n=1930 posts)



The translated co-occurrence network is very different from what can be seen above, more subgraphs that are not as clustered and that contain items with lower frequencies can be immediately noticed.

Subgraph 01 consists of words that we have already seen such as *Giorgia*, *Meloni*, *Italy* and *president* but it adds more items that hold a lot of significance in political discourse, namely *defend*, *national* and *interest*, all of these together suggest that the Prime Minister Meloni defends Italy's national interest. Subgraph 02 has an economic theme that we met in the untranslated version of the network, we can see *family*, *business* and *worker* but, this time, we also come across words such as *reform*, *increase*, *income*, *measure*, *policy* and *support*, the subgraph right next to this one (number 11) is composed by *economic* and *growth* thus mirroring the economy inclined agenda of the party. Subgraph 03 incorporates expressions such as *organize*, *mafia*, *crime*, *justice*, *state* and *citizen*, essentially calling for righteousness.

Some of the most interesting subgraphs are the ones that do not contain many items but are still able to encompass Fratelli d'Italia's ideology better than the ones we first notice when we look at the graph as a whole. We have subgraph 09 with *know* and *truth*, subgraph 12 with *Europe*, *immigration*, *illegal* and *stop* and finally subgraph 13 with *woman* and *child*. Meloni is known for her discourses in which she describes herself as being truthful and not lying to Italian citizens who deserve to know the truth, and her most famous discourse where she describes herself as a woman and a mother. Subgraph 12 is very accurate in encasing the party's views on immigration, it is however surprising to not see the presence of FdI's anti-LGBTQ+ views.

The two networks present some differences which are not substantial, however the translated version is more comprehensive and it gives a better and more concrete idea about FdI's Facebook activity.

4. 3. Comparative analysis

To understand the activity on Facebook of these two political parties, this paper focused on analysing posting and engagement specificities. Posting specifications can be revealed by looking at the frequency of posting and the average length of captions. In the 366 days of monitoring the activity of the two political parties, Fidesz posted 4,174 times – equivalent to uploading 11 posts every day in an equal distribution of posts per day. In contrast, Fratelli d'Italia posted less than half that number, 1,896 times – equivalent to uploading 5 posts each day in an equal distribution of posts per day.

Figure 5. Posting trend of Fidesz and Fratelli d'Italia on their official Facebook pages (1 Jan 2023 - 31 Dec 2023; 1 Jan 2024 was excluded from the visualization, but each party has posted twice on this date)

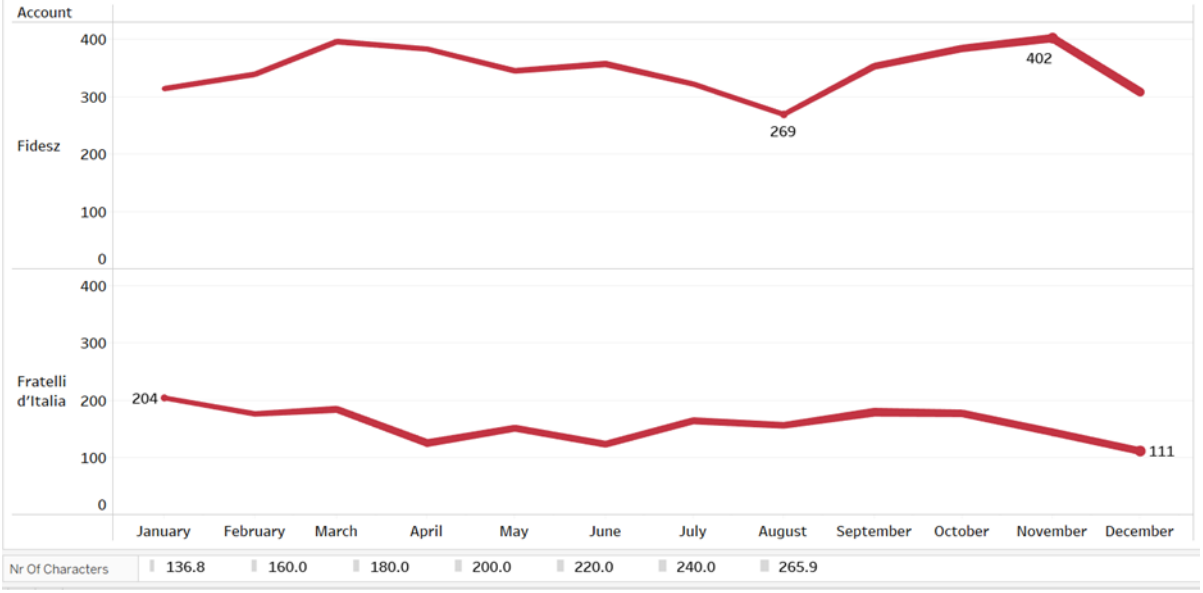
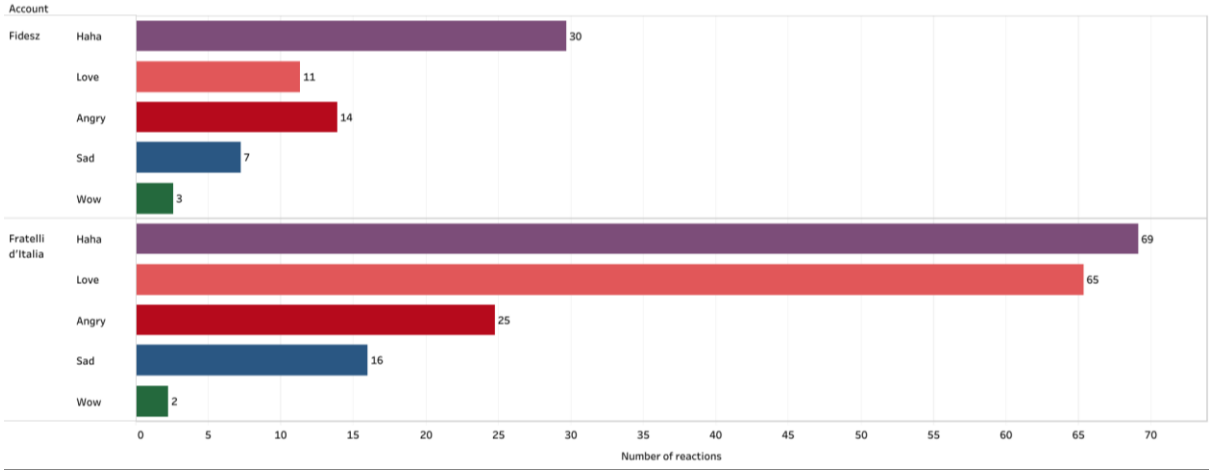


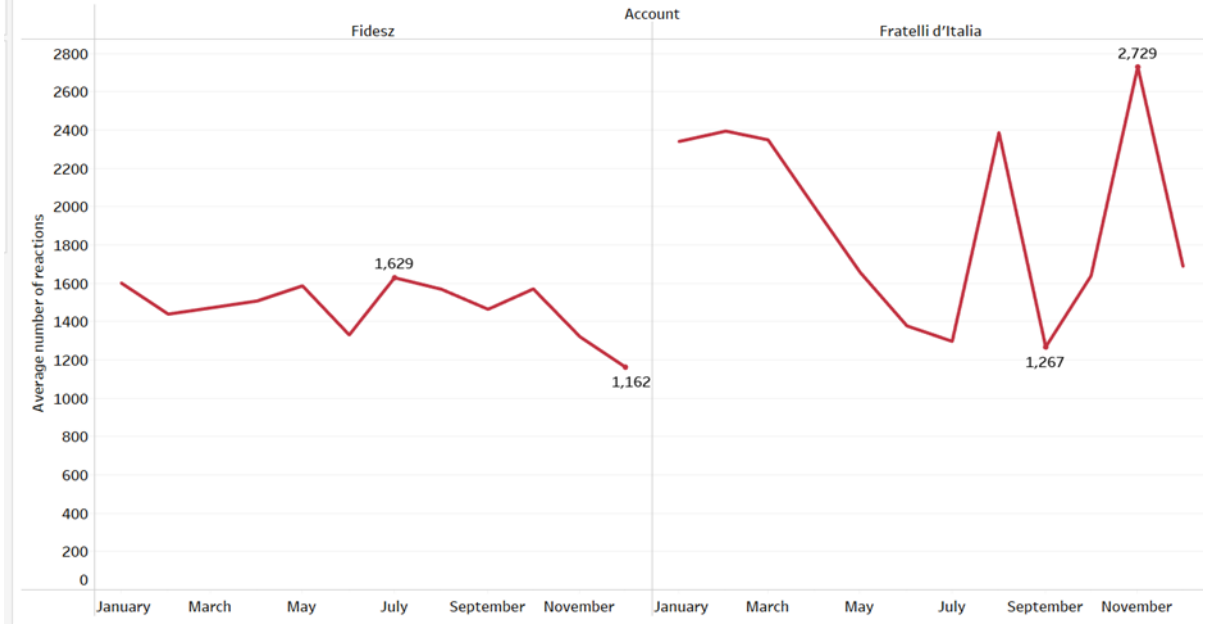
Figure 5 shows the evolution over time of the number of posts published by each of the two political parties, the line thickness indicating the average number of characters of a post. It is visible that the peak of posting for Fidesz was in November 2023 (n=402 posts), the month when the party held its 30th Congress for electing its president – as a sole candidate, Viktor Orban was re-elected as the party president. The number of posts per month dropped below 300 in August 2023 alone, with only 269 posts from this political party. Regarding the textual message, the visualization shows a constant number of characters in a caption. For Fratelli d'Italia, January 2023 appears to be the most active month (n=204 posts). Fratelli d'Italia is rather constant during the year in both the number of posting each month and the number of characters in the captions.

Figure 6. Type of public reactions to the parties' posts; For each reaction type, the average was calculated (n=6070 posts; 1 Jan 2023 - 1 Jan 2024)



The degree of public engagement is obtained by analysing public feedback in the form of reactions (*Like*, *Love*, *Haha*, *Wow*, *Sad* and *Angry*) and comments on posts published on the official accounts of political parties. The most common reaction for each party is 'Like' – on average, a post from Fidesz receives 1,403 likes whereas a post from Fratelli d'Italia receives slightly more likes (1,766). Overall, Figure 6 shows that Fratelli d'Italia obtains a higher degree of engagement from its public – a post from this party receives more attention in the sense of *Love*, *HaHa*, *Sad* and *Angry* reactions than Fidesz, which receives, on average, more *Wow* reactions from the public. For Fratelli d'Italia, the most common reactions besides *Like* are *Haha* and *Love*, both reactions being associated with positive feelings by the Facebook algorithm. For Fidesz, besides *Like*, *Haha* and *Angry* are the most received reactions. The most notable difference between engagement received by the two political parties is regarding the *Love* reactions, where Fratelli d'Italia gathers five times more such reactions than Fidesz.

Figure 7. The evolution of reactions over time (1 Jan 2023 - 31 Dec 2023; 1 Jan 2024 was excluded from the visualization, as each party has posted twice on this date)



The evolution of the average number of reactions posts received from both parties is portrayed in *Figure 7*. Overall, the most reactions were received by Fratelli d'Italia in November 2023, with 1,000 more reactions on average than in September. For five months, one post by the Italian political party registered, on average, over 2,200 reactions. For Fidesz, the number of reactions

seems constant in the monitored period, fluctuating with around 500 reactions. For this party, the peak for reactions per post (1,629) is reached in July 2023.

Figure 8. Number of comments for the parties' posts (Fidesz in green; Fratelli d'Italia in red; 1 Jan 2023 - 31 Dec 2023; 1 Jan 2024 was excluded from the visualization, as each party has posted twice on this date)

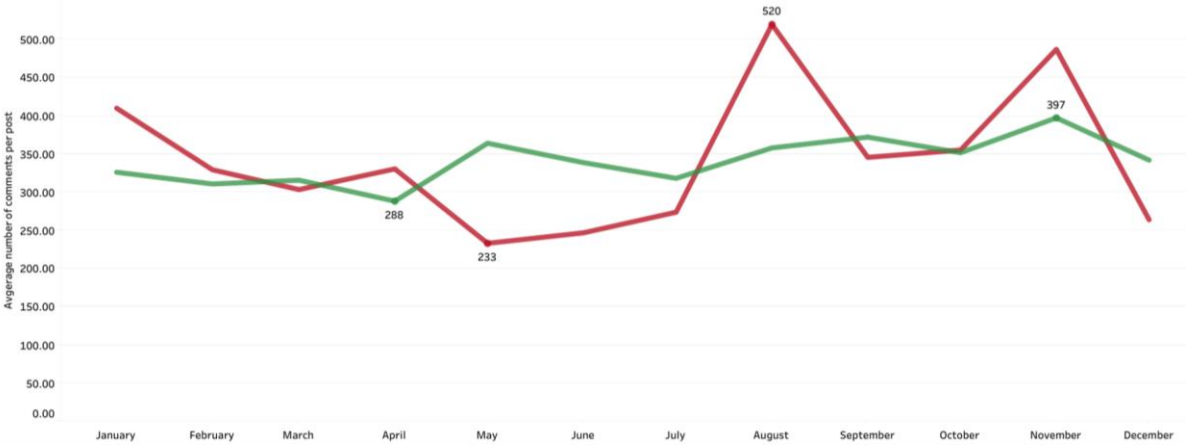


Figure 8 focuses on the evolution of the average number of comments posts received throughout the timeframe. Overall, a post from Fidesz receives on average 340 comments, whereas a post from Fratelli d'Italia receives on average 345 comments. However, looking at how the average number of comments changes over time, the peak is situated in August 2023 by Fratelli d'Italia, when one post from this party would receive on average 519.7 comments. On the opposite end, the lowest number of comments (233 comments on a post on average) was registered in May 2023 by the same party. Fidesz appears to receive a rather constant number of comments in the proposed time frame, between 250 and 400 on average.

Figure 9. Co-Occurrence Network based on the Facebook posts by both parties between January 1st, 2023, and January 1st, 2024. (N=6070)

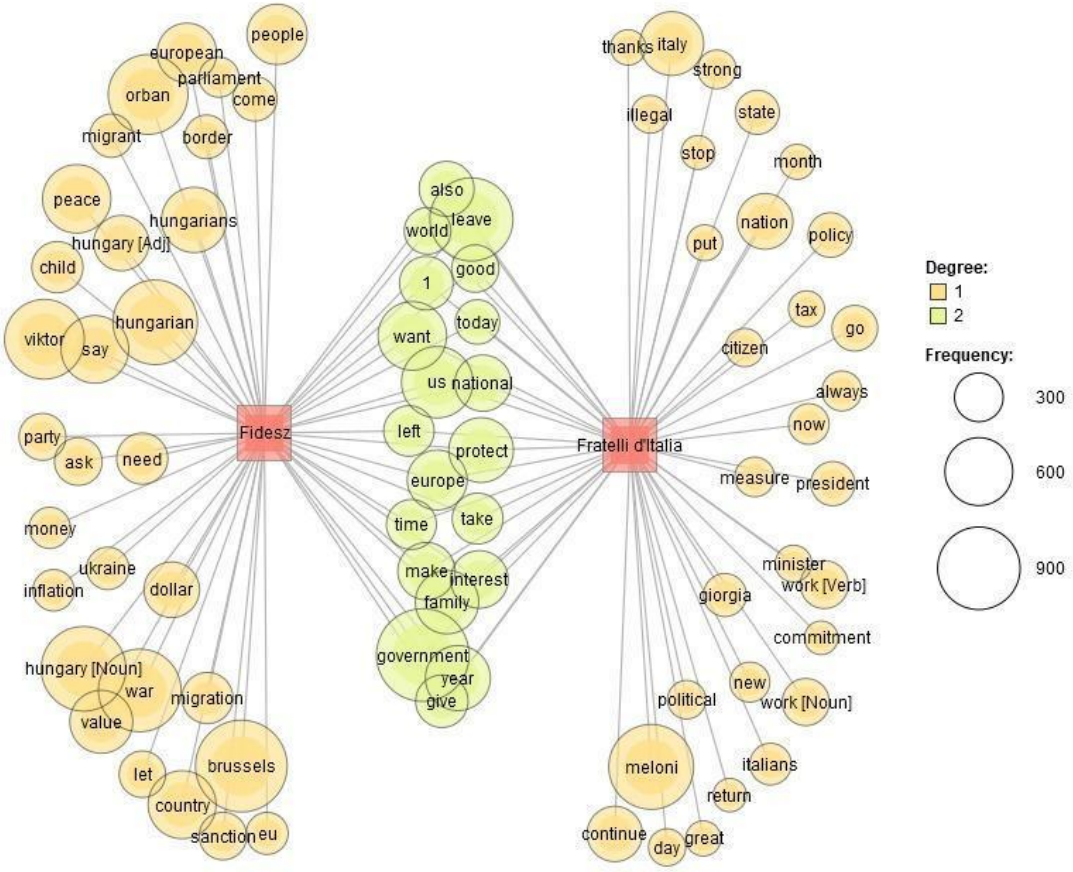


Figure 9 shows the common topics and words used by Fidesz and Fratelli d'Italia. Most of the commonalities stem from the fact that the words used are common words in political speeches and communication. There are some words that highlight some common topics and framings between the two parties. Both parties prominently present themselves as protecting the country from outside influences. The words *protect* and *leave* are very prominent on the co-occurrence network. Further, both parties tend to frame themselves as protecting families, as seen on the individual co-occurrence plots.

5. Conclusion

Regarding the engagement rate, this paper focused on analysing Facebook specific interactions revealed through reactions and comments. Due to a technical limitation, the number of shares could not be extracted with Facepager's API. The data analysis delved into the posting trend of each of the two parties, showing a more active presence in the chosen social networking site from Fidesz, which posted more than two more times than Fratelli d'Italia in the given timeframe. Looking at the reactions, the most common reaction was "Like", followed by "Haha" for both parties. The third most received reaction sparks more interest as it is "Love" for Fratelli d'Italia and "Angry" for Fidesz. The number of comments per post varied more in the case of the Italian party, whereas it was rather constant for the Hungarian party. In terms of message, both parties employ a lot of similar rhetoric that is commonly employed by other far- right populist parties, with some variation in the issues they focus on at the moment.

The number of reactions in comparison to social media activity reveals some interesting differences. While Fidesz has a much larger number of social media post, on average they generally generate similar rates of comments to FdI in terms of overall comments and reactions. Social media engagement on the posts of Fidesz is generally more constant, whereas it tends to fluctuate on the posts of FdI. FdI tends to generate a higher number of reactions per post, with the average post generating around double the amount of each reaction. This may imply that social media post from the two parties reach fundamentally different audiences within each country context.

The co-occurrence networks indicate the way in which political communication is very much context dependent. Although, both parties can be reliably characterised as right-wing populist, their message is heavily dependent on the individual country contexts, in which they operate in. They have somewhat similar rhetoric when it comes to immigration and LGBTQ+ rights, they increasingly differ on European Union integration and the war in Ukraine. Both parties emphasize the sovereignty of their nations, presenting themselves as being the defenders of their country's way of life. However, Fidesz exhibits more Eurosceptic attitudes as compared to their Italian counterpart. They portray the European Union as external force trying to compel Hungary to accept immigration and engage in their conflicts. In contrast, Fratelli d'Italia does not necessarily overtly embrace Euroscepticism. While it also opposes immigration, it tends to frame the issue in legal and economic terms. FdI appears to have rarely mentioned the Russo-Ukrainian War on its social media, instead focusing on domestic issues and the economy. The study's findings indicate that far-right parties effectively use social media in their campaign strategies, presenting themselves in a similar nationalist manner while tailoring their narratives to their specific national contexts.

The findings underscore the growing importance of digital platforms in shaping political discourse. As social media continues to evolve and spread, so too will the communication strategies employed by political actors. Future research should explore the long-term impact these methods have on public perception and electoral outcomes, as understanding how far-right parties leverage social media can provide a better understanding of the broader implications political engagement in the digital world has in contemporary democracies.

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