Politicization and domestication of European issues: Italian citizen engagement on social media during the 2024 European election campaign

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Abstract:

The second-order election (SOE) paradigm suggests that citizens generally perceive European elections as less important than national ones. However, recent research shows that European Union (EU) politicization has increased the salience of its institutions and policies in national political debates. This growing prominence is often accompanied by contentiousness, marked by critical and negative tones from political actors and the media. Moreover, progressive expansion of EU competencies has blurred the line between domestic and European politics, fostering the normalization and domestication of EU issues. This paper investigates how Italian citizens engaged with social media during the 2024 European Parliament election campaign. Specifically, it examines whether politicization and domestication influenced citizen engagement—measured through likes, shares, and comments. Analytically, the paper utilizes original data comprising the complete set of Facebook posts published by the leaders of the five principal Italian parties during 2024 EP elections. Our results suggest that Domestication may represent a driver for social media engagement compared to Europeanized contents. Negative sentiment is confirmed to be a factor eliciting users' interaction with social media contents, but when applied to EU related issues the interaction produces mixed results.

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Introduction

The theory of second-order elections posits (SOE) that citizens are used to interpret European Parliamentary (EP) electoral contests as less salient, with lower stakes than national political elections (Reif & Schmitt, 1980). This perception tends to reduce voter turnout and encourages voters to prioritize domestic concerns—even in EU-level elections (Boomgaarden et al., 2013). From the perspective of political communication research, scholars have examined the rhetoric and communication strategies employed by political actors, voter perceptions of key issues, and the nature of media coverage during European Parliament elections (i.e., Gattermann, 2013; De Vreese et al., 2006). This literature converges on the idea that issue and actor visibility strongly shapes perceived importance. Consequently, an increase in visibility and salience is associated with a heightened perception of importance at the individual level (De Vreese et al., 2006). This is especially relevant to the SOE framework, as the past decade has seen both deeper European integration and rising salience of EU political actors. The advancement of the European integration process has deepened the interaction between domestic and European levels of governance, leading to significant overlaps in the areas where national and European Union (EU) institutions exercise their competencies (Hooghe and Marks 2009; 2019). This has contributed to generating tensions and driving processes of politicization of the EU, fueling sovereignist and populist demands and rhetoric (Hänska & Bauchowitz, 2013; Kneuer 2019), as a result, quite frequently, the assimilation of the EU within domestic political routines is accompanied by a pronounced sense of contentiousness (Pirro et al., 2018). In addition, as confirmed by the COVID-19 health crisis and the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine (Mudde, 2024), global crises have underscored the central role of European institutions also in domestic political agenda (Braun and Grande, 2021). In this evolving context, political actors have increasingly prioritized EU-related issues in their communication and political strategies (Silva &

Proksch 2022; Lehmann 2023). This growing visibility has been enabled by fluid and transnational media environments—especially social media platforms, which amplify EU visibility and facilitate cross-border public debate among member states (Ruiz-Soler 2020; Hänska & Bauchowitz, 2019; de Zúñiga, 2015).

Building on this, the study explores whether—and to what extent—the online visibility and contentious framing of EU actors and issues shaped citizen engagement on social media during the 2024 European Parliament elections, focusing on the Italian case. Specifically, we analyze the Facebook communication strategies of Italian party leaders to assess how the salience of EU topics—operationalized as Domestication, Vertical Europeanization, and Horizontal Europeanization—affects user engagement, measured via likes, comments, and shares. The article is structured as follows: the next section presents the theoretical framework; the following outlines the research design, data, and coding procedures; and the third section reports the empirical findings. The conclusion discusses the main results and their implications.

Theoretical framework and hypotheses

Reif and Schmitt's (1980) Second-Order Election (SOE) model has long provided the dominant lens through which European Parliament (EP) elections are interpreted—portraying them as low-salience contests, often instrumentalized by voters to express approval or disapproval of their national governments. As a consequence, turnout tends to be lower, and electoral choices are primarily driven by domestic rather than European considerations. Yet, recent transformations in both the political and media landscapes have begun to challenge this paradigm.

Indeed, scholarly literature underscores that the EU has become significantly more prominent in domestic public spheres across member states (Risse, 2015), potentially elevating EP elections importance in the eyes of voters and altering typical electoral dynamics (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016). The broadening of policy domains shared between EU institutions and national governments—further

accelerated by transnational crises such as the financial downturn, migration waves, and the COVID-19 emergency—has intensified the interaction between domestic and supranational political systems (Crespy et al., 2024). This, in turn, has significantly amplified the visibility of the EU as a political actor (Meijers, 2013; Statham & Trenz, 2012; 2015; Nicoli et al., 2024). The increasing visibility of the EU in domestic political arenas is often seen as a necessary condition—or at least a facilitating factor—for legitimizing the Union and its policies, thus narrowing the gap between EU institutions and European citizens (Koopmans & Statham, 2002; Monza & Anduiza, 2016).

This trend is conceptualized in the literature as the Europeanization of public spheres, understood as the progressive integration of EU-related content into national political agendas (Koopmans & Erbe, 2004). Europeanization manifests in two distinct forms. Vertical Europeanization channels communication between national actors and supranational EU institutions, foregrounding Brussels-level bodies and their representatives. Horizontal Europeanization describes the transnational circulation of political messages and narratives among member states, whereby national public spheres intersect and confer joint visibility on the same issues—an effect that becomes especially pronounced during cross-border crises. Paradoxically, the more European issues are embedded within domestic debates, the more they become sites of political contestation. In this sense, Euroscepticism has actively contributed to the Europeanization of national public spheres (Dutceac Segesten & Bossetta, 2019a; 2019b). Eurosceptic parties frequently shape public debate by attributing blame to European institutions and critically addressing EU policies and procedures. By granting visibility to Eurosceptic voices, media attention—despite the negative framing—contributes indirectly to the Europeanization of public discourse (i.e., Caiani & Guerra, 2017; Boomgaarden et al., 2013). Moreover, media narratives often frame Euroscepticism both as a pan-European trend and a nationally rooted phenomenon, reinforcing the salience of such debates through mechanisms of Horizontal Europeanization—whereby EU-related concerns circulate and gain traction across member states (De Wilde et al., 2014; Gattermann & Vasilopoulou, 2016). The intersection of

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visibility and contention is encapsulated in the concept of politicization, which reflects how increased engagement with European matters transforms them into central issues of domestic political conflict (Hooghe & Marks, 2009; De Wilde & Zürn, 2012), reinforcing the idea of a subordinate role of EU politics. As a result, EU affairs are often reframed through a national lens that privileges domestic priorities, turning technocratic matters into politically charged topics—precisely as posited by the SOE paradigm (Alt et al., 2023).

The transnational nature of social media makes them particularly suited to fostering Europeanization, as they enable cross-border communication and the exchange of political ideas beyond the limits of traditional media (Hänska & Bauchowitz, 2019; Ruiz-Soler, 2020). By connecting diverse national publics, they allow citizens and political actors to engage with issues in other EU countries, fostering a sense of shared identity and mutual understanding and contributing to the emergence of a shared European public sphere (Risse, 2011). Furthermore, even when social media environments are conducive to populist and Eurosceptic anti-elite narratives against the EU, they contribute to enhance mechanisms of Vertical Europeanization (Dutceac Segesten & Bossetta, 2019a). Recent studies further indicate that the domestic dimension remains a key driver in shaping citizens' attention to European issues on social media platforms (Heidenreich et al., 2022). Likewise, Bene et al. (2022) show that posts centered on national topics consistently generate higher engagement levels than those focused solely on European content. Social media thus play a critical role in amplifying the visibility and salience of EU-related themes in the digital public sphere. Given that conflict and controversy drive virality (Trilling et al., 2016), social media platforms provide a fertile ground for politicization. Content framed in negative or confrontational terms tends to capture users' attention and elicit strong emotional reactions, thereby increasing engagement and circulation (Jost et al., 2020). Algorithmically curated environments prioritize reactive content, incentivizing emotionally charged or divisive posts that are more likely to trigger interaction and diffuse rapidly (Wollebæk et al., 2019). Aware of this logic, political actors strategically adapt their messaging to optimize user engagement

(Bossetta, 2018). The politicization of EU-related issues fits seamlessly within this logic, as emotionally charged narratives—particularly those emphasizing conflicts between national sovereignty and EU governance—tend to resonate with Eurosceptic audiences (Boomgaarden & De Vreese, 2016). Such dynamics are especially salient in Eurosceptic rhetoric, where leaders rely on negative framing and blame attribution to mobilize support and differentiate themselves from political competitors (De Wilde et al., 2014; Dutceac Segesten & Bossetta, 2019a; 2019b).However, although Vertical and Horizontal Europeanization structure the presence of European matters within national debates—through interactions with EU institutions and cross-border exchanges of political issues among member states, respectively—these dynamics alone do not determine how such issues are domestically perceived or contested (Petithomme 2010). This is where Domestication comes into play. Rather than presenting EU affairs as detached supranational concerns, domestication embeds them within national political narratives, often assigning direct responsibility to the EU for domestic developments (Hobolt & Tilley, 2014). Far from reducing the relevance of EU issues, this reframing enhances their resonance by aligning them with domestic agendas and rhetorical logics (Statham & Koopmans, 2009). Domestication typically unfolds through two complementary mechanisms: first, by linking EU policies to their concrete implications for national sovereignty, governance, and public policy; second, by embedding European topics within domestic political competition, where they are refracted through partisan agendas, media framing, and public opinion dynamic (Hutter & Kriesi, 2019). Through this mechanism, EU-related issues become more accessible and relatable for national audiences, yet simultaneously they become vulnerable to politicization (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014). In doing so, national actors may frame European matters either as strategic opportunities or as externally imposed constraints (De Wilde and Zürn, 2012). Although this process can enhance the domestic salience of European matters, it may paradoxically reinforce perceptions that EU affairs are subordinate or secondary to national political concerns. Social media platforms further intensify these dynamics: within these digital arenas, emotionally framed content—especially when anchored in

national contexts—tends to attract greater public attention (Heiss et al., 2019). Accordingly, when European issues are domesticated within social media narratives, they tend to resonate more strongly with national audiences. This interaction between national and European frames not only enhances the salience of EU-related content but also fosters higher levels of user engagement and participation. Building on this premise, we expect that social media posts blending national and European political elements will generate higher engagement than those exclusively centered on European content, as domestic framing tends to resonate more effectively with citizens. This expectation leads to our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Social media posts that combine elements of both national and European politics elicit greater engagement than those referencing only European politics

Distinguishing between Vertical and Horizontal Europeanization provides a valuable framework for understanding which types of EU-related content drive citizen engagement. As suggested by Hypothesis 1, EU topics framed through a domestic perspective are more likely to engage the public, given their clearer policy implications and greater emotional resonance. By the same logic, we expect Vertical Europeanization to generate higher engagement than its horizontal counterpart.

This expectation rests on the notion that EU institutions and leaders gain greater visibility and perceived relevance when situated within national political debates. Vertical Europeanization connects supranational governance directly to domestic contexts, thereby enhancing the salience of EU actors and increasing the likelihood of user engagement (Koopmans & Erbe, 2004; Bene et al., 2022; De Wilde et al. 2022). Citizens are more likely to engage with content that links EU institutions to national policymaking, as such connections are perceived as more immediate and personally consequential. Notably, vertical Europeanization aligns closely with dominant populist and Eurosceptic narratives, which often portray EU institutions as remote, bureaucratic, and intrusive (Bossetta, 2018; Trilling et al., 2016). Framing the EU as an external force limiting national

sovereignty evoke strong emotional reactions and fuels polarized debates. Since emotionally charged and contentious content is favored by social media algorithms (Jost et al., 2020), such narratives are more likely to gain visibility and stimulate online engagement. In contrast, Horizontal Europeanization tends to elicit lower engagement, as political events in other EU member states are often seen as less directly relevant to national audiences. Although transnational issues may attract attention during crises or when used as comparative references, they typically receive limited media coverage and trigger weaker emotional responses (Bene et al., 2022). Consequently, posts focused on Horizontal Europeanization are less likely to spark online debate or provoke strong user reactions. Accordingly, we formulate the following hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis 2 (H2): Social media posts emphasizing Vertical Europeanization will generate higher engagement than those focusing on Horizontal Europeanization.*

Data & Methods

Case study

This exploratory study examines Italy as a strategically relevant case for analyzing social media engagement during the 2024 European Parliament election campaign. The Italian context is particularly instructive, due to a recent reconfiguration in how European issues are framed in both political discourse and media coverage, whereas increased salience is coupled with greater contentiousness and domesticated narratives (Cremonesi et al., 2019; Bobba et al. 2025). From an electoral perspective, Italy has witnessed a marked surge in support for Eurosceptic and populist parties, signaling a clear break from the traditional model of permissive consensus (Conti et al., 2020). Concurrently, European issues have become increasingly prominent in both public debate and party agendas. Italy is also notable for its high levels of social media penetration and for the extensive use of these platforms by political actors as tools for direct, unmediated communication. Populist parties, in particular, make intensive use of social media to disseminate content and mobilize engagement—

often leveraging anti-elite narratives targeting EU institutions (Bobba, 2019). These dynamics render Italy a particularly compelling case for investigating how European issues are framed and received on social media platforms. Our empirical analyses draws on a dataset collecting Facebook direct communication by the leaders of the main Italian political parties during the 2024 European election campaign: Giorgia Meloni (Fratelli d'Italia – Brothers of Italy), Antonio Tajani (Forza Italia – Go Italy), Matteo Salvini (Lega Salvini Premier – Lega for Salvini Premier), Giuseppe Conte (Movimento 5 Stelle – Five Star Movement), and Elly Schlein (Partito Democratico – Democratic Party). The analysis covers the period from April 20 to June 9, 2024—spanning from the candidate list submission deadline to election day—comprising a total of 642 posts.

Our decision to focus on Facebook is motivated, first, by the availability of specialized analytical tools—such as CrowdTangle—that allow for precise and systematic data collection on content characteristics and engagement metrics[1]. Second, the choice is justified by Facebook's enduring prominence and broad penetration across the Italian social media landscape. Although the digital ecosystem is constantly evolving and new platforms are increasingly integrated into political communication strategies, Facebook continues to host the largest follower communities among Italian leaders and parties (Reuters Institute, 2024). Thus, it provides an optimal analytical environment for this study, enabling comprehensive examination of engagement dynamics arising from leaders' direct communications during electoral campaigns. Additionally, its digital architecture — marked by curated content and greater temporal persistence — renders it a reliable proxy for general public opinion compared to alternative platforms (Duteac Segesten & Bossetta, 2019b).

We employed quantitative text analysis to guide the content classification. Our strategy adopts an actor-centered approach that prioritizes the identification of institutional referents—whether national,

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[1] CrowdTangle was a platform owned by Meta that enabled the collection of social media data for research purposes, but it was discontinued by Meta on August 14, 2024. https://transparency.meta.com/it-it/researchtools/other-datasets/crowdtangle/

European, or transnational. This choice is grounded in a theoretical perspective that conceptualizes Europeanization as a shift in the locus of political authority and visibility, rather than a change in policy topics (Koopmans & Erbe, 2004; Statham & Trenz, 2015). Accordingly, we developed a comprehensive three-tiered dictionary designed to systematically capture relevant communicative markers in party leaders' Facebook posts. The first tier catalogues national-level references, including major domestic political actors and institutions: members of Parliament (Chamber and Senate), Italian MEPs, cabinet ministers, undersecretaries, and the President of the Republic; as well as official titles of ministries, executive agencies, and non-elective public bodies (e.g., INPS), and regional governors. The second tier encompasses European-level references, covering the main actors and institutions of EU politics. These include the names of sitting European Commissioners and the Presidents of the Commission, Council, and Parliament; formal titles of EU institutions (e.g., European Parliament, Council of the EU, Court of Justice, Committee of the Regions); and references to Directorates-General, EU agencies, and other supranational entities. The third tier captures cross-national references by including the names of prime ministers (or equivalent heads of government) from the other twenty-six EU member states, the five largest parties in each country—identified based on vote share in the most recent European elections—and the names of their current leaders. Drawing on this lexicon, we classified posts into three categories, identified by dichotomous variables: Vertical Europeanization, comprising references solely to EU-level institutions or actors; Horizontal Europeanization, encompassing mentions of political figures, parties, or issues from other member states; and Domestication, referring to posts that combine European references with national political dynamics. To assess sentiment, we employed SentITA—a dictionary-based classification tool that measures both the polarity and intensity of positive and negative sentiment. Unlike full-text assessments, SentITA operates at the sentence-segment level, enhancing accuracy by capturing nuanced sentiment variations. For each post, we computed the average positive and negative

sentiment scores (Pelosi 2015)[2]. Our dependent variables are the engagement metrics provided by CrowdTangle for each post: Likes, Comments, Shares, and Reactions. Each of these reflect a different degree of involvement and interaction with social media content (Bossetta et al, 2017), for each of them, we ran negative binomial regression models against the same set of independent variables. The independent variables include three dichotomous measures capturing Domestication, Vertical Europeanization, and Horizontal Europeanization. The models incorporate negative sentiment as a continuous variable. Given the substantial variation in posting frequency among the party leaders, we included a control variable accounting for the party leader's account posting the content[3]. (See Table 1 for descriptives).

Table 1 – Variables descriptives

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Likes count	642	5010.039	6490.607	73	66238
Comments count	642	1572.914	1999.675	19	15489
Shares count	642	686.569	1083.723	4	14401
Reactions count	642	951.218	1292.638	9	12107
Domestication	642	.107	.31	0	1
Vertical Europeanization	642	.226	.418	0	1
Horizontal Europeanization	642	.069	.253	0	1
Negative Sentiment	642	.135	.154	0	.919
FdI -Giorgia Meloni	642	.101	.302	0	1
FI -Antonio Tajani	642	.03	.17	0	1
Lega - Matteo Salvini	642	.494	.5	0	1
M5S - Giuseppe Conte	642	.202	.402	0	1
PD - Elly Schlein	642	.173	.378	0	1

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[2] To ensure the reliability of our empirical strategy, we validated the dictionary by applying it to a sample of Facebook posts published by Italian political leaders during the 2019 European Parliament election campaign. This subset of posts was manually coded by two independent coders, following criteria consistent with the theoretical framework of the three dimensions of Europeanization: Vertical Europeanization, Horizontal Europeanization, and Domestication. In addition to validating the classification of Europeanization categories, we also compared the negative sentiment orientation assigned by the coders with the results produced by the automated procedure. The high level of agreement observed across both dimensions—categorisation and sentiment—confirms the reliability of the proposed analytical tool, minimizing the risk of false positives. Further details on the validation procedure and reliability indicators are provided in Table 1A in Appendix.

[3] To further account for potential sender effects, we estimated alternative models incorporating interaction terms between individual party leaders and the variables capturing Vertical Europeanization, Horizontal Europeanization, Domestication, and Negative Sentiment. As illustrated in the plots reported in the Appendix, some variation across leaders is observable; however, none of the interaction effects reach statistical significance. Based on these findings, we retained more parsimonious model specifications excluding interaction terms.

Analyses

As shown in Table 2, *Vertical Europeanization* dominates the narrative, accounting for an average of 22.6% of posts, while *Domestication* (10.7%) and *Horizontal Europeanization* (6.9%) appear significantly less central. This suggests that most leaders framed the EU primarily in terms of top-down constraints or conflicts, rather than through national reinterpretation or cross-border references. Notably, communication styles and thematic focus vary across leaders. Matteo Salvini and Giuseppe Conte stand out for both the volume and intensity of their campaigns. Salvini, the most active with 317 posts, maintains a strong emphasis on Vertical Europeanization, while Conte pairs a similarly high focus on this theme with the highest share of Domestication—reflecting a strategy that blends EU critique with national reframing. Antonio Tajani, despite posting the least, concentrates more than 30% of his limited content on Vertical Europeanization. Giorgia Meloni and Elly Schlein adopt a more restrained approach. Meloni shows minimal interest in Domestication and only a moderate focus on Vertical Europeanization. Schlein, while engaging more with EU-level frames, notably excludes any reference to Horizontal Europeanization, underscoring a selective framing of Europe-related content.

Table 2 - 2024 EP Campaign: focus of European issues

|	Domestication (%)	Vertical Europeanization (%)	Horizontal Europeanization (%)	N
Meloni (FDI)	3.1	12.3	6.2	65
Tajani (FI)	10.5	31.6	5.3	19
Salvini (Lega)	7.9	22.1	7.9	317
Conte (M5S)	23.1	30.8	10.8	130
Schlein (PD)	9	18.9	0	111
Total	10.7	22.6	6.9	642

Patterns of engagement

Table 3 presents four negative binomial regression models estimating the effects of these frames on engagement, operationalized through likes, comments, shares, and reactions. These findings are further contextualized through Figure 1, which visualizes the average marginal effects and associated uncertainty for each type of framing across these four forms of interaction. A clear and consistent

pattern emerges. Posts that adopt a Domestication frame—blending EU issues with national political contexts—are more likely to stimulate user engagement. The coefficients for this frame are positive across all models and statistically significant for comments, shares, and reactions, indicating a robust association. While the coefficient for likes, despite positive, does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. These results support Hypothesis 1, confirming that users are more likely to engage with EU-related content when it is rendered contextually relevant and emotionally resonant through national framing. The marginal effects plotted in Figure 1 further reinforce this interpretation: although some confidence intervals overlap with zero, the point estimates for domesticated content remain consistently above the baseline, especially for comments and reactions—engagement forms typically associated with stronger expressive intent. In contrast, Vertical Europeanization—content referring directly to EU institutions or supranational actors—shows a clear negative association with engagement. The models indicate significantly lower expected counts for likes, comments, and reactions, while the effect on shares is not statistically significant. These results suggest that content centered on EU-level actors tends to dampen, rather than encourage, user interaction. Figure 1 corroborates this pattern, with marginal effects for vertically Europeanized posts trending clearly downward, particularly in the comments and reactions models. This contradicts Hypothesis 2, which anticipated higher engagement based on the growing visibility of EU institutions in national debates. Finally, Horizontal Europeanization—involving references to political actors or events in other member states—shows no statistically significant effects across any engagement metric. This suggests that, outside moments of heightened transnational salience, such content rarely triggers meaningful interaction among users.

Table 3 - 2024 EP election campaign - Negative Binomial Regression

	Likes			Comments			Shares			Reactions		
	Coef.	St.Err.	Sig	Coef.	St.Err.	Sig	Coef.	St.Err.	Sig	Coef.	St.Err.	Sig
Domestication	1.169	0.177		1.398	0.21	**	1.247	0.167	*	1.408	0.231	**
Vertical Europeanization	0.768	0.079	**	0.761	0.079	***	0.955	0.089		0.647	0.075	***
Horizontal Europeanization	1.122	0.164		0.98	0.147		1.079	0.141		0.79	0.129	
Negative Sentiment	0.857	0.196		3.559	0.853	***	2.773	0.586	***	2.539	0.678	***
Party Leaders (ref.cat. Meloni)	1	.		1	.		1	.		1	.	
Tajani (FI)	0.286	0.064	***	0.18	0.042	***	0.061	0.012	***	0.284	0.072	***
Salvini (Lega)	0.29	0.034	***	0.259	0.031	***	0.284	0.03	***	0.278	0.037	***
Conte (M5S)	0.751	0.101	**	0.385	0.053	***	1.852	0.223	***	0.437	0.066	***
Schlein (PD)	0.192	0.026	***	0.133	0.018	***	0.178	0.022	***	0.158	0.024	***
Constant	12055.23	1327.043	***	3995.107	454.946	***	877.188	87.052	***	2465.366	304.115	***
lnalpha	-0.31	0.05		-0.25	0.05		-0.515	0.052		-0.071	0.05	
Pseudo r-squared	0.021			0.024			0.068			0.019		
Akaike crit. (AIC)	11990.187			10497.363			8991.714			9908.826		
Number of obs	642			642			642			642		
Bayesian crit. (BIC)	12034.833			10542.009			9036.36			9953.472		

*** p<.01, ** p<.05, * p<.1

Marginal effects of EU topic
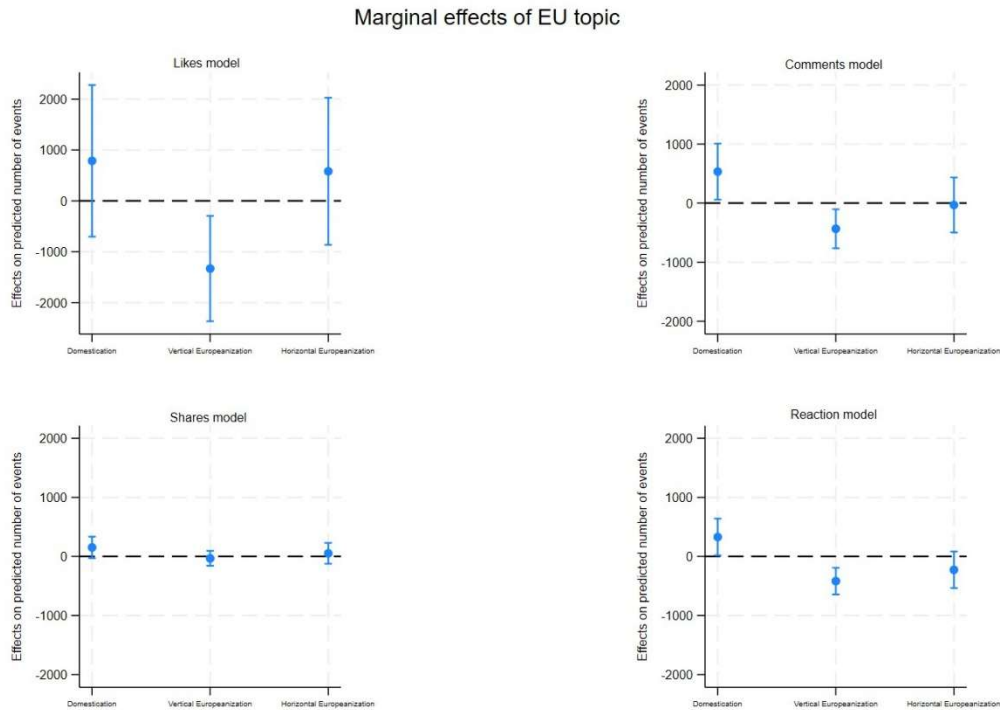
Discussion

The EU is increasingly embedded in domestic public and political discourse, leading to the incremental assimilation of European issues into national narratives, policy agendas, and political competition (Bellamy & Kröger, 2016; De Vries & Van de Wardt, 2011). As European integration deepens, a growing number of national policies fall under the influence of EU-level decisions, reinforcing interdependence between domestic and European agendas (Knill, 2001). However, this overlap generates tensions: while European issues gain relevance, they are often framed through nationalistic or adversarial lenses by domestic political actors, emphasizing conflicts over sovereignty and national interests (Hooghe & Marks, 2018).

This study examined how Italian political leaders' emphasis on European issues shaped social media engagement during the 2024 European Parliament election campaign, focusing on Facebook interactions. Relying on a quantitative text analysis based on a three-tiered actor-based dictionary and

sentiment detection, we categorized posts into Domestication, Vertical Europeanization, and Horizontal Europeanization, and assessed their effects on likes, comments, shares, and reactions.

The findings underscore the pivotal role of Domestication in driving engagement. Posts that integrated national and European political elements consistently generated higher interaction levels, especially in terms of comments, shares, and reactions. These results support Hypothesis 1 and reinforce the argument that citizens engage more with EU-related content when it is framed through a domestic lens that makes it affectively resonant and politically accessible (Koopmans & Erbe, 2004; Voltmer & Eilders, 2003).

By contrast, posts centered exclusively on Vertical Europeanization, which focus solely EU institutions, show a negative association with engagement across all metrics, and the coefficients are statistically significant in three of the four models. These results contradict Hypothesis 2 and suggest that a focus on EU-level actors alone may reduce engagement, possibly due to a perceived distance between EU institutions and citizens' daily concerns. This interpretation aligns with the second-order election thesis, which posits that European issues tend to be perceived as secondary unless domestically contextualized (Reif & Schmitt, 1980; Schmitt, 2005). The negligible impact of Horizontal Europeanization further highlights the dominance of national perspectives in social media discourse. The lack of significant engagement suggests that cross-national issues and interactions between EU member states do not strongly resonate with Italian social media users, potentially due to a weak shared European identity or the complexity of cross-national issues (Risse, 2011).

A particularly salient finding is the strong association between negative sentiment and heightened engagement. Posts with higher levels of negativity generated more comments, shares, and reactions, though they had no significant effect on likes. This indicates that critical or conflict-laden content triggers stronger cognitive and emotional responses, prompting users to interact more actively. These results align with existing research on the virality of negativity in digital discourse (Trilling et al.,

2016; Jost et al., 2020). The lack of impact on likes may suggest a reluctance to publicly endorse negative content, highlighting a more selective use of this specific engagement metric.

While this study provides insights into the interplay between European issue framing and social media engagement, several limitations warrant consideration. First, the classification strategy adopted in this study privileges precision over recall, especially in the case of more complex or hybrid categories such as Vertical Europeanization and Domestication. This conservative approach favors analytical robustness and minimizes false positives, yet it may also lead to an underestimation of the true incidence of these frames. As a result, some relevant content may be overlooked, potentially limiting the model's sensitivity to the full spectrum of framing strategies. In line with this consideration, the exclusive focus on Facebook may constrain the generalizability of the findings, as different social media platforms have varying user demographics and interaction patterns. Future research could extend the analysis to include platforms like Twitter, Instagram, or emerging networks to capture a more comprehensive picture of online engagement behaviors. Moreover, the study concentrates on Italian political leaders, which may limit the applicability of the results to other national contexts with different political cultures and attitudes toward the EU. Comparative studies involving multiple EU member states could enrich our understanding of how national contexts influence the effectiveness of Domestication and Europeanization strategies in social media communications. Additionally, the analysis relies on a dictionary approach to classify posts, focused on references to political actors and institutions rather than policy topics. While this strategy allows for systematic identification of Europeanization dimensions, it does not fully capture the substantive content or thematic framing of the messages. Examining topics and policy issues could provide deeper insights into how leaders construct and communicate European relevance. A more granular content analysis of the thematic frames adopted - beyond actor-based references - would allow researchers to explore the issue salience, rhetorical framing, and policy domains involved in the process of domestication and Europeanization. This remains a promising direction for future research. Furthermore, as the study is

limited to the election campaign period, it represents only a snapshot in time. Longitudinal research could examine whether these engagement patterns persist beyond elections and how they evolve in response to significant political events or shifts in European integration. Engagement metrics such as likes and shares, while useful as proxies for interaction, remain semantically ambiguous, they do not necessarily reflect user approval or support and may also indicate irony, dissent, or attention driven by controversy. This ambiguity introduces a layer of interpretive complexity that should caution against reading these metrics as straightforward indicators of alignment or endorsement. In future research, greater differentiation among forms of engagement—and integration of qualitative cues— may help disentangle the varied motivations underlying user interaction. A further limitation concerns the role of senders as key drivers of engagement. Beyond disparities in posting volume - which are addressed analytically - political leaders differ markedly in credibility, public visibility, and perceived polarization. These characteristics likely influence user interaction in ways that transcend content framing. High-profile or polarizing figures may systematically attract greater engagement, regardless of how Europeanization is articulated in their posts. Accounting for these dynamics more comprehensively - through ex-ante measures such as follower base or average visibility - would significantly enhance the interpretive clarity of future analyses.

Finally, while the present study adopts a theoretically grounded and systematically validated actor-based classification, it does not account for the thematic content or policy substance of the posts. This approach privileges visibility and referential structure over rhetorical or issue-based framing. As such, it captures only one dimension of political communication. Future research would benefit from complementing this perspective with topic-oriented or discourse analytical methods capable of uncovering how European issues are substantively framed, which topics prevail, and how these may vary across parties, countries, or time.

The study set out to explore how distinct modes of Europeanization condition patterns of citizen engagement within the digital arena of a European Parliament election campaign. By applying an

actor-centered classification and sentiment analysis to the Facebook posts of Italian party leaders, it offers novel empirical insights into the dynamics of EU visibility in digital environments. The results highlight the communicative effectiveness of Domestication, suggesting that EU-related content becomes more engaging when rooted in national contexts. In this regard, our findings contribute to the literature by reinforcing the explanatory power of the Second-Order Election framework and by underlining the importance of frame hybridization as a mechanism for enhancing resonance and visibility in the digital public sphere.

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