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# The refugee crisis and the delegitimisation of the EU: a critical discourse analysis of newspapers' and users' narratives in Italian Facebook pages

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This contribution intends to highlight how narratives of Europe are discursively constructed in online public arenas of Facebook pages of Italian newspapers. The main aim is to analyse newspaper posts and users' comments which foster narratives that exhibit the Eurosceptic discourse in the refugee crisis scenario between 2016 and 2018. The case study focuses on Italy as a core player in terms of anti-European sentiments which are increasingly present in public opinion. Critical Discourse Analysis has been applied to posts and comments, aiming at identifying the strategic discourses and the patterns of convergence or divergence that contribute to narratives of Europe. Firstly, findings show the discursive recontextualization of common patterns between newspapers and users. Secondly, results also highlight that users' comments diverge from newspapers showing anti-immigration positions and hostility towards the EU even when newspapers adopted a neutral narrative. Finally, the study underlines the importance of the hybridization of communicative practices that both enrich the media system and discursive construction of narratives of Europe.

**Keywords:** Refugee crisis, CDA, Social media narratives, Euroscepticism, Users' comments

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## 1. Introduction: the refugee crisis and social media narratives

The so-called refugee crisis represents a highly mediatised topic that has defined and, in fact, redefined the level of European integration. Indeed, refugees and asylum seekers are recognised as actors that exist at the centre of identity politics and social cohesion discourses in Europe (Krzyżanowski, 2010).

Therefore, the refugee crisis, specifically the issue of its representation and the debate surrounding it in the public sphere, is a topic in which a substantial amount of sociological literature has expressed interest in recent years. A large number of studies focused on the role of traditional media in the coverage of the issue, particularly the news-making process (see, e.g., Chouliaraki et al., 2017; Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017), the polarisation of the debate, the emergence of populist, and anti-democratic positions (Wodak, 2015; Krzyżanowski & Ledin, 2017), and the ongoing politicisation of the issue (van der Brug et al., 2015; Krzyżanowski et al., 2018).

However, less attention has been paid to the refugee crisis debate on social media as a public arena, where different actors play a role in the discursive constructions of narratives of Europe. The emergent, collaborative, and context-rich qualities of social media contrast with the structural facets of a prototypical story's narrativity while differencing to the canonical forms, and they offer significant opportunities for a contextualised approach to narrative analysis (Page, 2012).

Within the field of European Studies, the 'narrative turn' expresses the need for new contributions dedicated to the prospects of existing and future narratives concerning European integration. The term 'narrative' frequently emerged in broader discussions on European enlargement and integration, and it received much attention over the last two decades (see, e.g., Sassatelli, 2012; García, 2013; 2017). Within the narrative literature, stories as complex artefacts are characterised at least by three components: "selective series of past events and forces, a temporal sequence and, more importantly, an 'emplotment' that establishes causal links and communicates, possibly, moral lessons" (Sassatelli, 2012, 3). Moreover, García (2017) recognised that "Narratives are collective stories and representations, which are made of people's memories of the past, experience of the present, and above all imagination of the future" (García, 2017, 288), and they "can have diverse aims and goals, either to justify or to criticise European integration" (García, 2013, 52). Therefore, one of the major goals of the empirical investigations of narratives of Europe is to "explore the many different ways in which ordinary citizens, politicians, and public intellectuals have conceived and represented 'Europe' and the 'EU'" (Snelders, 2012, 2). For the purpose of this study, narratives are intended as a discourse genre, an important social and discursive resource that creates identities for their audiences in the social media context (Page, 2012). Following the approach introduced by De Fina and Johnstone (2015) specifically, which is situated in the discourse-analysis research tradition, we can capture the need to account for new forms of communication and extend the study of narratives to a variety of media.

Starting from this approach, the primary objective of this study is to conceptualise and identify the various strategies employed in the discursive construction of narratives of Europe in the context of the refugee crisis debate, taking into account a dynamic notion of discourse involving different actors. Specifically, we investigate the relationship that binds the discourse in Facebook pages of Italian newspapers, starting with the digitalised press and then focus on the discourse (re)produced by users, observing the general flow of narratives. Indeed, the analysis is carried out centring the attention on two different actors: newspapers and user' comments. On one hand, newspapers represent a professional journalistic elite characterised by a traditional model of news production and communication intended as a top-down dimension (Graham, 2012); users' comments, on the other hand, represent a characteristic of the participatory web (Unger et al., 2016) and a form of citizen engagement (Ruiz et al., 2011) that gives voice to users who do not belong to the professional journalistic elite.

Within this research framework, and due to spatial restrictions, we focus on Facebook narratives intended as a discourse genre that can redefine the EU integrity. In fact, in contrast with the main approach which characterised the literature of EU narratives, this study does not focus on EU institutions and political actors in building a plurality of narratives aimed to European integration. We pose the attention on discourse that shows the increase of distrust towards the EU, highlighting the importance of digital spaces and practices in shaping and disseminating Euroscepticism narratives. For this reason, the study intends to adopt the tools of the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a field that proves a solid tradition on the analysis of European discourse (see e.g.: Krzyzanowski, 2010; Wodak & Boukala, 2015; Wodak, 2018; Zappettini, 2019b), anti-migration and right-wing populist rhetoric (see e.g.: Wodak, 2015; 2017; 2019). Starting from these assumptions, the final aim of the study is

to highlight convergences and divergences in the narrative patterns used by the Italian press and users' comments through a comparison between the representations of the EU made by the main national newspapers, with discursive reactions told by the users in the comment sections. However, given the small dimension of the data corpus, the purpose of this study is not to provide definitive answers but to open up and enrich discussion on the relation between different actors performed by social media.

We focused on the Italian context because of its specificities concerning migration flows, political dynamics, and the media coverage of the refugee crisis which has occupied Italian public opinion since 2015. Since 2013, for geographical reasons and as a result of the effects of the Dublin Treaty, a large part of the migratory flows of refugees and asylum seekers directed toward Europe follows the Mediterranean route with its main destination on the Italian coasts. Italy has, therefore, assumed a primary political role in the process of "securitisation" and "externalisation" of European borders (Mitsilegas, 2016). In Italy, the peak of landings was in 2016 (181,436 people landed), while the phenomenon reduced in size during 2017 (119,369 people) and further in 2018 (23,370 people) and 2019 (11,471 people). Moreover, in recent years Italian migration policies registered a progressive shift from humanitarian intervention to the fight against illegal migration. Between 2018 and 2019, the Italian government implemented a series of measures openly contrary to international law and human rights. Nevertheless, Eurobarometer surveys place Italy among the most hostile European countries towards refugees (Eurobarometer 2017; 2018). Moreover, between 2018 and 2019, the EU was considered by Italian public opinion the main actor responsible for the refugee crisis, and the level of trust in the EU by the Italian public is still very low. The European election in May 2019, consolidated this trend: the first Eurosceptic, nationalist-populist party *Lega* has redoubled its consensus concerning the 2018 national elections.

## **2. The discursive construction of European identities: a brief state of the art descriptions of top-down and bottom-up narratives in the polarised debate**

Literature in social science recognises that narrative is central to the formation of projects of political identity construction (García, 2017). Specifically, for this work, we refer to the vast amount of literature on the discursive construction of European identity that proves useful in introducing the theoretical approach of this work. A major part of these studies adopts a constructivist approach for which 'Europeanness' is socially constructed through discourse as the core of the constructed or contested legitimacy of the EU (Crespy, 2015). For example, in the field of CDA, 'Mythopoesis' is recognised as a discursive legitimisation strategy achieved through storytelling: small stories or fragments of narrative structures (Wodak, 2015) able to discursively (de)legitimise the construction of European identity that is thus characterised by discursive projections of the future, constructing the "imagined" (Krzyżanowski, 2019). Therefore, 'Europeanness' is narrated in different dimensions that are national, international, and European. The cultivation of these identities depends on the discursive forms of inclusion and exclusion which contribute to create an 'imagined community' of 'Us' which excludes the 'Others' (Wodak, 2007). This idea shows who is perceived as belonging to the "same community" (Wodak & Boukala, 2015): the 'Others' can be defined by ethnicity, religion, language, or may constitute by elites or other EU member states (Triandafyllidou, 1998).

Moreover, within the field of CDA, European identities are framed from two opponents' perspectives. The first, common one is focused on a top-down and institutionalised discourse, such as the official European Union policy documents (Johansson, 2007), collective identities in the European Parliament (Wodak, 2009), and consulting groups of high-level experts reporting directly to the European Council (Wodak, 2007). These studies have in common the idea that European identities are constructed through reifying, figurative

discourses continually launched by politicians, intellectuals, and institutional media (De Cillia et al., 1999). The second perspective regards the narratives produced by civic actors from a bottom-up point of view which are contributing to existing work on the discursive construction of European and national identities in the public sphere (Zappettini, 2019b). Indeed we highlight the citizen's initiative rather than only top-down discourses of European identities produced by institutional or governmental sectors (Zappettini, 2019b).

Literature about discursive construction of European identities is also useful for interpreting the refugee crisis as a highly politicised issue (van der Brug et al., 2015). Certainly, the contemporary migration phenomenon is influencing the debate about the European project and reinforcing opposing political views in a polarised framework of discussion. More in detail, the ideological polarisation oscillates between a conservative stance, which endorses national sovereignty and uniqueness, and a liberal and pro-EU position, which supports transnational identities (Krzyżanowski, 2019). The conservative view opts to redefine the EU as a primarily economic, nationalistic federation of states, calling for a "normalization of (symbolic) borders and the relegitimation of national identities" (Zappettini, 2019a, 28). On the other hand, the liberal and openly pro-EU view fosters a "transnational project of solidarity and social justice" (Zappettini, 2019a, 28) based on a supranational dimension "remaining a bulwark of liberal democracy and human rights, and fighting for solidarity, diversity, and more equality" (Wodak, 2019, 65).

According to the main aim of this study, we decided to focus only on one side of the polarised debate of the refugee crisis. This approach serves and intends to highlight discursive dynamics that allow spreading anti-migration and Euroscepticism narratives between different actors identifying the patterns of reproduction which how the EU is constructed during crises.

In the next paragraph, we explain and describe the different media actors' roles and how they can contribute to shaping the EU narratives within the contemporary media system.

### **3. The hybrid media system and the relationship between discourse and power**

It is broadly recognised that media employ an interpretational lens in their reporting by emphasising certain aspects of an issue while omitting others, thus influencing how people think about social phenomena (Entman, 1993). Specifically, media provide audiences the semantic tools for interpreting and discussing events that are packed and presented by journalists within frames that influence individuals' responses (de Vreese, 2012). However, ever since the tradition of Cultural Studies, the role and practices of audience reception in different 'moments' of the media content production process have been recognised (Hall, 2005). Inspired by the seminal field of audience research, social media context emphasises the active role of users in a model defined "many-to-many" with a flow of texts more interactive, participatory, and horizontal than the traditional broadcast media which is characterised by the linear and unilateral data flow defined "one-to-many" (Khosravinik & Unger, 2015). Online public spaces, such as social network sites, changed the basic rules for discourse (Wodak, 2007), reconfiguring the relationship between discourse and the power of traditional mass media and establishing new challenges in the understanding of the role of different discursive practices (Unger et al., 2016).

Indeed, the digital fruition of media content is not limited to the experience of reading news, but it represents the encounter of voices, reactions, and opinions that contribute to the negotiation of meanings and formation of public opinion.

Also, within the field of narrative analysis, it has been noted that "internet forums of all kinds have strong disruptive potential in undermining established forms of discussion and the hegemonic narratives transmitted by more traditional media" (Kaiser, 2017, 16). Professional media organisations, such as traditional newspapers, tap into the participatory online media culture, involved in a process of convergence and hybridisation. The resulting

outcome often is a competition of what can become more important or attract more attention between traditional news-media organisations and user-generated content. In other words, both the role of the press and its effect on public opinion must be contextualised within the contemporary hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013) in which makes the dynamics of information production and consumption more complex, allowing to look at the general flow of narratives between different actors.

In this context, Facebook users' comments analysed by this study are considered a people-centric practice (Engesser et al., 2017) that allows those who do not belong to the narrow circle of journalistic elites to challenge and overturn, in real time, the framing proposed by traditional media, re-articulating the relationship between democracy, public sphere and communication flows. In relation to narratives of Europe, Kaiser (2017) has analysed citizens' comments concerning the *New Narrative* project website developed by the EU Commission. The study reveals that the narrative of the EU integrity was challenged by citizens through web comments in which they held more radical views, blaming the EU to focus more on Europe's own socio-economic problems than its global role in spreading norms and values (Kaiser, 2017). However, if online comment sections can be understood as a central space for the digital public sphere in a journalism context (Graham, 2012), it must also be recognised that there has been little scholarly attention paid towards the nature of these contents and their implications for the public sphere (Ruiz et al., 2011; Graham, 2012).

#### 4. The case study and data collection

Starting from the political and social scenario introduced in the first paragraph, the case study focuses on Facebook pages of Italian newspapers, taking into account the different threads of posts from newspapers and user comments concerning the refugee crisis news concerning the EU between 2016 and 2018. The first step in the construction of the data corpus has been to individualise nine pieces of news about the refugee crisis that explicitly concern the EU (tab. 1). These items of news were selected based on the reports of the Italian press carried out by the *Associazione Carta di Roma* (2016, 2017, 2018), and they include news items about summits and agreements, measures to regulate and limit the free movement of people and plans for repatriations.

For each of these nine news items, we then selected related posts published on the Facebook pages of three Italian newspapers possessing the highest engagement numbers and representing best the current political scenario in Italy: *la Repubblica* (left-wing newspaper), *Il Giornale* (right-wing newspaper), *Il Fatto Quotidiano* (reference newspaper for the *Movimento 5 Stelle*, a populist party currently participating in the Italian Government). From the 27 individual posts, the analysis was limited to titles and texts, while images were generally not included. Then we extracted 10 comments produced by Facebook users that collected the most number of reactions for a total of 270 comments.

*Table 1: list of 9 news items concerning the refugee crisis selected for the case study between 2016 and 2018.*

2016	2017	2018
European discussion about Schengen Treaty	Tallin Meeting	Italy refused Migration Compact
UE-Turkey Pact / Deal / Settlement	EU Commission on repatriations	Brussell Meeting
Barrier between Austria and Italy	UE Court on asylum status	France Police trespasses Italian border

Source: own elaboration



## 5. Methodology

The methodology adopted matches different tools from the field of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to distinguish major narratives shown in systematically different grammatical ways within the Facebook pages both in posts and comments. Within the tradition of CDA, discourses (re)produced by media are interpreted as a social practice that constructs meaning assuming the power to shape socio-political orientations (Fairclough, et al., 2011). CDA is characterised by the common interests in demystifying ideologies that can help reproduce unequal power relations through a systematic investigation of linguistic categories. Specifically, the analysis is conducted following an argumentation-oriented approach (Krzyżanowski, 2019), and it is deployed in order to discover the key arguments that are used to construct narratives of Europe.

In conducting the analysis, we first refer to the general framework elaborated by Wodak and Weiss (2005) concerning the Europe-discourses and constituting the specific form of the speculative talk on European identities. This scheme consisted of the interplay of three dimensions:

- a) 'Making meaning of Europe' (ideational dimension): refers to the idea of Europe, the essence, substance or meaning.
- b) 'Organising Europe' (organisational dimension): reflects the question of how Europe shall be organised, which institutional forms of decision-making and political frameworks are appropriate for the future.
- (c) 'Drawing borders' (geographical dimension): concerns the question of border-construction: who is inside, who stays outside?

These three discursive dimensions are related to legitimation strategies and several standard 'topoi' concerning refugees and asylum seekers figured especially prominently in the construction of narratives of the EU. Previous studies in the field of Discourse Analysis matched these forms of debating the EU to different discursive legitimation strategies and relative 'topoi' (see, e.g., Wodak & Weiss, 2005; Wodak, 2007; 2018). Specifically, 'topoi' refer to rhetorical schemes employed by tellers to persuade their audience of the validity of their opinions and they offer an opportunity for a systematic in-depth analysis of the strategies which guarantee the transition from argument to conclusion (Wodak, 2015). The scheme of discursive legitimation strategies (van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999) focuses on the typical linguistic logico-rhetorical module used by text-producers to overcome text-consumers' operations (Hart, 2010), and they can give reasons as to why comments could be accepted as plausible assertions. According to van Leeuwen and Wodak, these strategies are composed of four major categories of legitimation:

1. 'Authorisation': legitimation by reference to the authority of tradition, custom, law, and/or persons in whom institutional authority of some kind is vested.
2. 'Moral evaluation': legitimation by reference to value systems often using adjectives without further justification.
3. 'Rationalisation': legitimation by reference to the goals and uses of institutionalized social action and to the knowledge that society has constructed to endow them with cognitive validity. There are two main types of rationality: instrumental rationality and theoretical rationality.
4. 'Mythopoesis': legitimation achieved through narratives and the telling of stories.

Supported by and using the software Atlas.ti, we analysed as follows: the first step was to identify different 'topoi' and legitimation strategies both in posts and users' comments. Then, any text was catalogued and filed in a heuristic unit and subjected to a process of progressive coding, inspired by the methodological principles of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). The second step consisted of the understanding of how 'topoi' and legitimation strategies served for and/or contributed to shaping the framework of Europe-discourses and each specific form of discussion (Wodak & Weiss, 2005). Finally, we

conducted a quantitative frequency that focused on the numerical distribution of the three forms of debating the EU, both in newspaper posts and users' comments. In the next paragraph, we first introduce the quantitative data, and then we offer significant examples of the connection between posts and comments in the discursive construction of EU narratives for each of nine news selected for the case study.

## 6. The results

From a general overview, the first evidence of this study shows that the three Facebook pages of Italian newspapers connected large audiences with the issues of the refugee crisis as a topic able to (re)produce and spread a spectrum of narratives of Europe told by newspapers and users. Interestingly, posts and comments were largely characterised by discursive content that generally constructed 'meaning and essence of the EU', followed by 'organising Europe' and 'drawing borders' (see tab. 2).

Looking at the posts, and due to the few news items selected, the analysis did not reveal significant differences between the newspapers.

*Table 2: Number of comments refers to different forms of 'debating Europe' in the newspaper posts and users' comments. (2016-2018).*

Newspapers posts (N= 27)	Il Fatto Quotidiano	Il Giornale	la Repubblica	Total
Making meaning of Europe	3	6	5	14
Organising Europe	4	2	3	9
Drawing borders	2	1	1	4
Users' comments (N=270)	Il Fatto Quotidiano	Il Giornale	la Repubblica	Total
Making meaning of Europe	59	55	63	177
Organising Europe	26	19	19	64
Drawing borders	5	16	8	29

Source: own elaboration

A more interesting comparison can be made if we look at the specific narrative style adopted by each newspaper in the construction of its posts. Indeed, the three forms debating Europe offer interesting hints for the analysis of the language adopted by the newspapers. The 27 posts analysed were mainly comprised of short titles with a few words of introduction and an image. The general style adopted by the three newspapers was partly informative-descriptive and partly connotative in ideological terms by using effective phrases or sensationalistic titles that fit into a rhetorical-persuasive style. While comparing the three different newspapers, *Il Fatto Quotidiano* (supporter of the populist movement) and *Il Giornale* (right-wing newspaper) often shared similar strategies in their post construction, including fostering a conflictual relation with the EU, applying a nation-centric stance, and using alarmist tones and an emotional register to their narratives. The left-wing newspaper *la Repubblica*, instead, adopted a less conflictual narrative concerning the EU giving space to a more informal and neutral communication concerning the crisis. Therefore, the first result that emerged from the analysis confirmed that posts selected showed a coherent narrative about the EU in line with the general political outlook of each newspaper.

Looking at the 270 comments selected, analyses reveal a similar pattern in the frequency of the three forms of debating the EU (see tab.2). Users mainly constructed the 'meaning and essence of the EU' (177 comments), followed by 'organising Europe' (64 comments) and 'drawing borders' (29 comments). From this point of view, we noted a general continuity between posts and comments in the discursive construction of the narrative of Europe. However, the most interesting insight emerged from the comparison between the

newspaper and users' comments regarding 'topoi' and legitimization strategies that highlight the ideological positions assumed by different media actors in the construction of narratives. CDA led to noticing both elements of consistency and differences between the newspapers and comments. Specifically, the analysis showed that we cannot assert a clear ideological alignment occurring between users from the three different newspapers. We noted in detail that the initial form of discussion given by the newspapers has been confirmed, evolved, and enriched by users who often took it to extremes through comments clearly filled with Euroscepticism sentiment, frequently using harsh language and racial discrimination. Although this tendency was present in each newspaper comment sections, users from *Il Giornale* showed a strong homogeneity with the narratives given by posts. Generally, this continuity did not only discourage the debate and fostered extremist content but also created an echo chamber effect that was capable of influencing the general discourse within the comment sections. In contrast, the left-wing newspaper, *la Repubblica*, hosts in its comment section a more inclusive and transnational discourse concerning the EU which delegitimised sovereignty politics of exclusion. There emerged on this page the pattern of the polarised debate that shows the opposite ideological positions and thus a less homogeneity between users' interactions.

Finally, we point out that during the selected period of time, the main Eurosceptic narrative analysed tends to be stable and recurring. Specifically, political 'topoi' played a central role in shaping users' narratives: comments included the attribution of blame and opposition to the left-wing Italian government during 2016-2017 and supported the sovereignty measures adopted by the new government in 2018. These elements pervade the users' comments narrative over the three years and reinforcing the politicisation of European narratives analysed by this study.

In the following pages, we report significant examples of the main 'topoi' and legitimization strategies used by newspaper posts and users' comments highlighting the interplay of recurring anti-immigration rhetoric that have significant importance for the cultivation of narratives of the EU. Any text translated from Italian to English is a direct translation reporting original grammatical errors made by users themselves in their comments.

In relation to the first news theme selected concerning the UE-Turkey Pact signed in March 2016, we point out the discontinuity between newspaper titles and users' comments that shows a change from an impartial narrative to the ideological one. The three newspapers adopted a similar approach in their posts' construction choosing short titles containing basic information: "Migrants, the EU signs the pact with Turkey" (*Il Fatto Quotidiano*); "There is the settlement between EU and Turkey for migrants" (*Il Giornale*); "Migrants, signed the settlement EU-Turkey" (*la Repubblica*). The narrative register was factual, the representation tends to be impartial and the style is narrative-descriptive with a denotative use of words without explicit references to more complex categories of meaning. In the comment sections, the narratives are matched with content that discursively expresses the substance of the EU. However, due to the impartial titles presented by the newspapers, the majority of users that comment on these news items contributes to establishing a narrative characterised by evaluative categories of meaning strongly connoted in ideological terms:

*"We cannot even say that we were sold, because actually we lose. It sucks, this EU is with no future" (la Repubblica, 18/03/2016, 4 reactions)*

*"Since Junker is the president and Schulz is the vice the EU is a joke, we are submissive to the CIA, Mossad and Zionist backers and now also submissive to the Turks" (la Repubblica, 18/03/2016, 2 reactions)*

The expressions "this EU is with no future" and the EU is a joke" define the negative essence of the EU definition. Although these are short and simple texts, these comments



construct a meaning of the EU through the ‘topos of EU Political and Identity Crisis’ (Krzyżanowski, 2019). The pact with Turkey is largely considered by users in terms of losing European and national interests (“we are submissive”), establishing a negative representation of the essence of the EU institutional role.

The news concerning the (re)discussion of the Schengen Agreement in 2016, newspapers focused their titles on ‘drawing borders’, evoking the risk of their closure within the so-called Fortress Europe, such as “EU countries request for borders closures for two years” (*Il Fatto Quotidiano*). Users, shifting the form of discussion given by newspapers, discuss the EU primarily to ‘make meaning of it’. Indeed, users reacted to this news in terms of which actors are responsible and who are, or should be, accountable for solving the crisis, both at the national and European level (‘topos of political responsibility’), focusing on the political world as a field where they can express a systemic distrust of national and European politician actors:

*“European political class is made up of overpaid bureaucrats who just seek to maintain their positions, they don’t care about the future of Europe .... otherwise they would have avoided the barbarian invasion .. and the Italian political class is even worse!” (Il Giornale, 25.01.2016, 5 reactions)*

This comment is a clear example of what Wodak called Anti-elitism as the anti-intellectual attitude shared by populist parties who support a strong Euroscepticism based on “arrogance of ignorance” (Wodak, 2015). The EU as an institution is seen as a Dictatorship-elite project in which politicians are blamed for intentionally provoking the “invasion” and using it as a common metaphor to depersonalise migrants as a dangerous mass of people. The invasion is marked by the dehumanising term ‘barbarian’ which frames migrants as a ‘dangerous other’, evoking both the ‘topos of number’ and ‘topos of threat’ (Khosravinik, 2010) thus emphasising the negative perception of migrants and constructing the traditional division of ‘Us’-‘Them’. Finally, users contributed in the discursive construction of the meaning of Europe also by the ‘topos of transnational Economic Crisis’ (Krzyżanowski, 2019) through the evocation of economic elements and the evaluation of the EU based on a cost-benefit analysis:

*“I only observe that this Union is born in a bad way and it will end in a worse way. It has miserably failed all challenges, it’s united only by a fixed rate change that chokes mediterranean countries, it doesn’t have any political ideal, and it is governed by a bank (BCE) that does not work as a bank” (Il Fatto Quotidiano, 25.01.2016, 1 reaction)*

The latter comment supports the idea that European integration remains anchored only by economic agreements, highlighting the problems arising from what has been called a closeness deficit between the EU and its citizens (Wodak, 2007) which underlines the fact that the EU can no longer derive its legitimacy solely from the economic dimension currently perceived as the only ‘essence’ of Europe.

The news concerning the building of a barrier between Austria and Italy in April 2016 was presented by three newspapers using different strategies anchored to the frame of ‘Drawing borders’. While *Il Fatto Quotidiano* and *la Repubblica* opted for a short, informative, and neutral title: “It has begun the construction of the barrier at the Brennero” (*la Repubblica*), the right-wing newspaper, *Il Giornale*, emphasised the conflictual element between the two countries: “Now Austria is challenging Italy”. From the users’ point of view, also when the newspapers give an informative title, the common form of discussion coincides with ‘Drawing borders’, but it was marked by a discursive strategy of legitimation called ‘instrumental rationalization’ (van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999). The latter evokes the usefulness of the barrier by resorting to similarities with other States and can justify arguments based on expected or presumed benefits:

*"Austria wants to protect their borders. And the discourse that walls do not work is a joke. In Hungary they work, as well as in the balkans and they worked also in Israel etc." (la Repubblica, 11.04.2016, 55 reactions)*

Users present the 'people' in a semantically vague way that permits representing themselves as authentic and trustworthy (Zappettini, 2018). In this way, the so-called will of people is used by users as a pseudo-democratic source of legitimacy for the drawing of spatial borders and the meta-distinction of inclusion/exclusion. According to these comments, democracy should essentially be reduced to the majoritarian principle: the rule of (arbitrarily defined) people without the need for experts (Zappettini, 2018). Thus, users support the subtype of Euroscepticism defined as sovereignty-based, which reacts to the transfer of political power from the national state to the supranational centre. Follow this pattern, comments tend to discursively construct the meaning of the EU with a critical approach: its political system function is accused of a democratic deficit that presents non-transparent forms of decision making (Rydgren, 2005).

The news items selected for 2017 are characterised by a narrative which oscillates between 'making meaning' and 'organising Europe'. Regarding the news of the EU Court and the request for asylum, the three newspapers share a conflictual narrative concerning national and European interests. Specifically, using the notion of 'scolding', the posts seem to highlight the superior legitimacy hierarchy role of the EU Court with respect to Italy creating a conflictual relation between national and EU interests: "Scolding from EU Court" (*Il Fatto Quotidiano*). In this case, although comments generally refer to the form of discussion given by newspapers, users added the identification of different policies deemed necessary to regulate and solve the migration phenomenon. The following comments share a sense of urgency for intervention on a European political level to reacquire the national sovereignty perceived as lost:

*"Immediate closing and Immediate repatriation of all asylum seekers... from first to last." (la Repubblica 26.7.2017, 7 reactions)*

*"The first ground that migrants touch is the one of the boats that save them and, if I am not wrong, on each boat flaps the flag of an european country .... so, each boat has to bring home the refugees that it saved." (Il Giornale, 26.07.2017, 16 reactions)*

In these comments, we find different forms of discursive legitimization through rationalisation. Interpreting these discursive tools, users tend to define the migration as a (trans)national crisis that requires the intervention through concrete, solid, and strong policies that operate first on a national sovereignty-based level. The 'topos of the burden' of giving hospitality to refugees is now considered by commentators as a natural sign of the political weakness of the Italian elite while stopping migrants and suspending any adherence to international law is intended as a method used to regain national sovereignty against other competing national entities. A mechanism useful in reinforcing these narratives concerns its repetition. Looking at users' interactions in the comment section of *Il Giornale* specifically, users shared and amplified similar content showing a substantial absence of the contrary views:

*"You are right!; Rightly so! Who goes to take them has to keep them, It is seems logic; It's true, indeed we must not land them; Just don't let them get there" (users' interaction from Il Giornale, 26.07.2017)*

These recurring comments prove an echo chamber effect for which people are inclined to discuss topics in a certain direction and make arguments tending in that same direction with the risk of increasing a more extreme position (Sunstein, 2007).

For the news concerning the Tallinn meeting in June 2017, both *Il Giornale* and *Il Fatto Quotidiano* shared a similar style in their Facebook posts: "Migrants, Tallinn meeting has a

bad start for Italy. From Germany to Spain every country is against opening their ports" (*Il Fatto Quotidiano*); "Landing, the EU sinks us" (*Il Giornale*). These titles make explicit the conflictual frame between Italy and other EU countries, thus judging and referring to the essence of the Union. Starting from this frame, we found it notable that users tended to reinforce this EU meaning concentrating the most of their Eurosceptic sentiments: they proposed or requested to leave the EU, and they also expressed clear opposition to the process of European integration:

*"Europe Union .. wouldn't it be better to stop this joke and finally go back to the full sovereignty starting with the monetary one?...."* (*la Repubblica*, 06.07.2017, 13 reactions)

Also related to this news item, we found interesting insights looking at users' interactions. In responding to the latter comment, it is possible to note a common dynamic in *la Repubblica* users' interactions. On the contrary to *Il Giornale*, and as mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph, the left-wing newspaper frequently hosts a more presence of the contrary views in its comment section. In this case, a user directly expressed an opposite position about the role of the EU:

*"Sovereignty? It has nothing to do with it. Italy has trying to save people in the middle of the sea involving other countries. We are free to close our ports but Europe and the Euro are not involved. What bothers me is to mix up the topics and saying that we would stay better without the Euro currency"* (*la Repubblica*, 06.07.2017, 0 reactions)

The news concerning repatriations planned by the EU in March 2017 was presented by newspapers reporting the citation of the EU Commissioner for Migrations Dimitris Avramopoulos: "More than one million of migrants to repatriate" (*Il Fatto Quotidiano*), "Illegal immigrants are one million" (*Il Giornale*). If reporting the citations of political actors serves as a communicative device of objectification, the newspapers adopted the 'topos of burden and numbers' creating titles with alarmist content. Moreover, the term 'illegal' suggests the criminalisation of refugees and asylum seekers by creating an improper association between their condition and that of 'bogus' refugees and also acts to distinguish migrants who deserve humanitarian protection from those who have no rights. This narrative is frequently reproduced in the comment sections highlighting the relation of continuity between newspapers and users narratives:

*"Before throwing money away ..it was better to stop landings.. we knew that they were not asylum seekers...but vulgar clandestine..."* (*Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 02.03.2017, 3 reactions)

An interesting element concerns the terminology used by the newspapers compared to the one used by users. While newspapers talk about 'Illegal immigrants' or 'migrants' citing the EU Commissioner, comments often use 'clandestines'. The latter was defined as a term legally wrong and characterised by a negative a priori judgment suggesting the idea that migrants act as evildoers. However, the general distinction is realised by a discursive strategy of legitimisation that appeals to the impersonal authority. This strategy provides a call for laws and serves to legitimise the illegality of migrants and thus, the securitarian politics such as repatriations planned by the EU. Generally, this 'topos of law' is characterised by a narrative of deservingness by following the principle that "some people do not deserve to be treated equally or in the way we (the 'host' society) treat human beings" (Vollmer, 2016, 4).

With the government formed in June 2018, users showed different forms of support for the measures adopted such as with to the news items concerning the EU Meeting in Brussels in June and one concerning the Global Migration Compact in November. In the

changing Italian political scenario at the time, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and the leader of the far-right party *Lega* Matteo Salvini introduced the basic principles of Italian politics regarding the regulation of migration flows. The newspapers reported these news items as a moment of changing and political reorganisation for previous governments setting up new conflictual relations with EU institutions. In relation to the EU Meeting in Brussels, newspapers titled articles: "Global Migration Compact: Salvini says no" (*Il Fatto Quotidiano*), "Salvini, Italy will not sign the UE Global Compact" (*la Repubblica*), emphasising the politicians' words. The major discursive reactions posted in comment sections show the appreciation towards the new Italian political agenda on the European level, confirming the conflictual relation with the EU. These reactions were expressed by users through a comparison between the former subordinate role of Italy in the EU provoked by left-wing governments and the new securitisation politics which allowed a 'taking back of control' (Zappettini, 2019a):

*"Before there was a party that has reduced Italy to the dump of Europe, staying on its knees in front of France and Germany. Now there is someone who is not afraid to lay claim to Italian sovereignty and the respect that we deserve because we are not second to anyone" (Il Giornale, 15.10.2018, 3 reactions)*

The last news piece selected for this case study concerns the episode when French Police trespassed across the Italian border in October 2018. Also, in this case, *Il Giornale* and *Il Fatto Quotidiano* emphasised the conflictual element between France and Italy: "FRANCE INVADES US AGAIN" (*Il Fatto Quotidiano*). Both newspapers adopted stylistic choices which enhanced the spectacularisation of events through the use of provocative language and an emotional tone of denunciation, scandal, and moral condemnation with the explicit purpose of persuading the audience. Thus, the narrative given by newspapers echoed in the comments sections where users shared vulgar content aimed at discursively constructing an external enemy through the 'Us'-'Them' distinction:

*"Its not possible that a nation like ours is fooled by 4 dickheads like the French people ?? this is thanks to the past governments" (Il Giornale, 16.10.2018, 16 reactions)*

By using the expression 'nation like ours', this user revealed the positive self-presentation and the negative other-presentation used to construct a collective identity that reinforces nationalist sentiments. This rhetoric strategy emphasises the clear distinction from Italy and other nations based on the presumed superiority of one's own nation to the other one (Wodak, 2015). Thus, the weak role of 'our nation' in the EU composition is legitimised by the perception of a state of disintegration of the EU that would cause imbalances and harmful effects on 'our' country.

## 7. Conclusions

This chapter gave new insights into the discursive construction of Eurosceptic narratives of the EU. Adopting a qualitative approach based on Critical Discourse Analysis, the study explored the process in which Eurosceptic narratives were (re)produced and circulated within the Facebook pages of three Italian newspapers in the context of the so-called refugee crisis. Specifically, we investigated the relation of continuity-discontinuity between posts and users' comments. Both present challenges for narrative analysis because they are embedded in the level of discursive texts where narratives represent a way of constructing events and identities giving them meaning (De Fina & Johnstone, 2015).

Analyses have focused on 'topoi' and discursive strategies which allowed us to describe the interplay of three forms of 'debating Europe', determining the specific (re)production and circulation of narratives of the EU. By making a comparison between newspapers and users' narratives, both common patterns and discrepancies emerge from the analysis. Although the study has been based on a small set of data, examples reported in the results

proved that both newspapers and comments shared a general narrative marked by a conflictual relation between national and EU interests and also between Italy and other countries. In other words, although these media actors are characterised by different linguistic features and textual functions, they are linked with each other and they resulted in a general coherent narrative of the EU. This general uniformity can be interpreted as a recontextualisation of discourses (van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999). It shows the process which incorporates the discursive dynamics and modification of arguments, themes, and *topoi* that are exchanged and altered to adapt them to new interlocutors (Wodak, 2007).

Although we observed general coherence between newspapers and users, data analysed do not allow us to assume that the newspapers directly affect the users' reactions, providing a systematic correlation between the two levels. Rather, analysis proved that comments were characterised by discourses that promoted anti-immigration positions and a strong hostility towards the EU even when newspaper posts adopted a neutral narrative. These results lend support in substantiating previous findings in the literature: the main *topoi* used by both newspapers and users are related to anti-immigration rhetoric which includes the 'topos of numbers, danger, and law' intersected with different 'political topoi' (such as political identity crisis and political responsibility). The use of strong, emotionally-charged and often vulgar expressions by users aimed to communicate political danger and present enemies as dangerous (Fuchs, 2018). Based on the concept of 'imagined community' (Anderson, 2016), users reified Italy's 'imagined enemies' both externally (immigrants, other countries, the EU), and internally (the national corrupt elite) (Zappettini, 2018).

Thus, findings suggest that we are not facing new ways of perceiving and interpreting the refugee crisis and its impact on the EU, but rather we noted a national and transnational recontextualisation of historical models (Krzyżanowski et al., 2018). In other words, Euro-sceptic narratives of the EU are based on the proliferation of available discourse converted into symbolic resources. Thus, this work has demonstrated that narratives result from a process built by the hybridisation of different media actors and their communicative practices which enrich the media system and discursive representations. However, if it is possible to recognise a pluralism of 'topoi' and forms of debating Europe, this study provided further evidence that we are faced with a substantial absence of sophisticated or theory-based argumentation in the comments analysed which do not introduce linguistic tools capable of enabling discussions of alternative solutions within the UE (Zappettini, 2018). This lack of sophisticated arguments in the comment sections can be seen as a result of the basic function of social media platforms which prioritise relevance over significance (Khosravinik, 2018), supporting the spread of this discursive regime. Indeed, Facebook pages of newspapers seem to be designed to follow the logic of visibility and popularity of contents, rather than promote a serious political debate based on meaningful argumentation (Khosravinik, 2019). In fact, newspapers discursively construct their posts following what they predict will be liked by their audience, thus encouraging like-minded users to aggregate in the same echo chamber which intensifies their belief systems (Sunstein, 2007). Through the repetitive campaign, users can contribute in real time to confirm Euro-sceptic narratives and emphasise ideological discourse to increase its level of importance and gain more exposure.



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#### **Appendix: list of the 9 Facebook newspapers' post links**

1. European discussion about Schengen Treaty – 28.01.2016

<https://www.facebook.com/ilFattoQuotidiano/posts/%201292789024068674>

<https://www.facebook.com/ilGiornale/posts/%2010153838609112459>

<https://www.facebook.com/Repubblica/posts/%2010153879929581151>

2. UE-Turkey Pact – 18.03.2016

<https://www.facebook.com/%20ilFattoQuotidiano/posts/1333670796647163>

<https://www.facebook.com/ilGiornale/posts/%2010153975577387459>

<https://www.facebook.com/Repubblica/posts/%2010154057159976151>

3. Barrier between Austria and Italy – 11.04.2016

<https://www.facebook.com/%20ilFattoQuotidiano/posts/1359281984086044>

<https://www.facebook.com/ilGiornale/posts/%2010154067991532459>

<https://www.facebook.com/%20Repubblica/posts/10154133161506151>

4. Taillin Meeting – 06.07.2017

<https://www.facebook.com/%20ilFattoQuotidiano/posts/1901654913182079>

<https://www.facebook.com/ilGiornale/posts/%2010155514372262459>

<https://www.facebook.com/Repubblica/posts/10155002133081151>

5. UE Commission on repatriations – 02.03.2017

<https://www.facebook.com/%20ilFattoQuotidiano/posts/1714914551856117>

<https://www.facebook.com/ilGiornale/posts/%2010155072245582459>

<https://www.facebook.com/Repubblica/posts/%2010155192620466151>

6. UE Court on asylum status – 26.07.2017

<https://www.facebook.com/%20ilFattoQuotidiano/posts/1933444570003113>

<https://www.facebook.com/ilGiornale/posts/%2010155584424242459>

<https://www.facebook.com/Repubblica/posts/%2010155887111176151>

7. Italy refused Migration Compact – 28.11.2018

[https://www.facebook.com/Repubblica/posts/10158415053286151?\\_\\_tn\\_\\_=-R](https://www.facebook.com/Repubblica/posts/10158415053286151?__tn__=-R)

[https://www.facebook.com/ilGiornale/posts/10156941433017459?\\_\\_tn\\_\\_=-R](https://www.facebook.com/ilGiornale/posts/10156941433017459?__tn__=-R)

[https://www.facebook.com/ilFattoQuotidiano/posts/2726646337349595?\\_\\_tn\\_\\_=-R](https://www.facebook.com/ilFattoQuotidiano/posts/2726646337349595?__tn__=-R)

8. Brussell Meeting – 29.06.2018

<https://www.facebook.com/ilGiornale/posts/10156560342977459>

<https://www.facebook.com/ilFattoQuotidiano/posts/2438431186171113>

<https://www.facebook.com/Repubblica/posts/10157960883006151>

9. France Police trespasses Italian border – 16.10.2018

[https://www.facebook.com/ilFattoQuotidiano/posts/2645652692115627?\\_\\_tn\\_\\_=-R](https://www.facebook.com/ilFattoQuotidiano/posts/2645652692115627?__tn__=-R)

[https://www.facebook.com/ilGiornale/posts/10156835846482459?\\_\\_tn\\_\\_=-R](https://www.facebook.com/ilGiornale/posts/10156835846482459?__tn__=-R)

[https://www.facebook.com/Repubblica/posts/10158284337316151?\\_\\_tn\\_\\_=-R](https://www.facebook.com/Repubblica/posts/10158284337316151?__tn__=-R)