



## Building extreme right discourses on Twitter for non-campaign periods: insights from populist leaders across Europe

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### Abstract

The growing success of extreme right-wing populist parties changed the political state of play in Europe, which has been widely studied by the literature. Populist parties apply a particular communication style, based on simple and non-mediated messages on social media that promote distrust in public institutions. However, the ways in which these strategies are applied for non-campaign weeks remain little addressed by academia, as well as its development in small countries. This study examines how far-right leaders from European countries with different sizes and historical extremist backgrounds used Twitter during a non-campaign period (29 September 2020 to 28 February 2021). Specifically, we analyze the issues (issue frame), strategies (game frame), and propaganda mechanisms employed through a mixture of quantitative and qualitative approaches. The sample includes the messages posted on Twitter (n=1346) by the leaders of the main far-right parties in France (Rassemblement National), Austria (FPÖ), Germany (AfD), Spain (Vox), and Portugal (Chega!). A manual content analysis was applied, allowing comparison of countries with different traditions regarding the Extreme Right. The results show a common pattern of anti-migration messages as the main topic for their communication style, but some differences are found in terms of agenda and propaganda. The most recent parties (AfD, Vox, and Chega!) rarely use Twitter tools, which means leaving behind the interactive capacity of social media; meanwhile, the agenda is less thematic in the Austrian and Portuguese cases. Our research contributes to discussions about the communication practices of far-right populist parties in Europe, identifying trends by country as the binary opposition between the people and the elite is not expressed through the same type of propaganda

Keywords: Populism, Far right, Political leaders, Propaganda, Europe, Twitter.

### Introduction

The consolidation of populist political parties in Europe has altered the democratic landscape across the continent. Recent research describes the communicative style of the populist phenomenon (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007) as well as its influence on Euroscepticism (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Vasilopoulou, 2018). Specifically, the rise of extreme right-wing leaders could mean a challenge to democracy, since they foster a distrust in public institutions (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Wodak, 2015). Although populism has largely been defined as a thin-centered ideology (Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2007), the massive political use of digital platforms has transformed it into a particular communication style (Block & Negrine, 2017). The electoral success of populism is connected to a strategy based on simple and spectacular messages on social media (de Vreese et al., 2018), which present these parties as close to the interests of

citizens. Populism is then understood as the utilization of style features, putting communication at the cornerstone of the debate.

Populist far-right leaders have in common a negative perception of globalization and the establishment (Ignazi, 2006), which explains their long-standing opposition to an open-border migration policy in Europe (Mols & Jetten, 2020) and supranational institutions such as the European Union (Mammone, 2009). However, the shaping of populism occurs differently among countries due to national factors (Caiani & Graziano, 2016).

Prior scholarship has widely addressed the communication style of Trump (Fuchs, 2017) or the practices of other well-known populist leaders worldwide (Waisbord & Amado, 2017). Nevertheless, the action of politicians belonging to small and sometimes pioneering far-right parties in Europe remains little explored. Countries are part of a world system (Wallerstein, 2004) in which nations and global regions assume divergent roles that can affect the workings of democracy. Moreover, there is another gap in the literature since most research has analyzed populism in a single country (Casero-Ripollés, Sintés-Olivella & Franch, 2017). The scant studies in a cross-national dimension make it necessary comparative approaches.

Considering that the international aspect of extreme right-wing populism coexists with the fact that national political cultures still matter, the objective of this study is to identify the main communicative practices in traditional and new European far-right leaders' discourse. The research analyzes the issues, strategies, and mechanisms of their messages on Twitter, assessed as a key channel for populist political communication (Crilley & Gillespie, 2019; Gerbaudo, 2018). Our study contributes to current debates on populism in Europe by combining quantitative methods with a qualitative discourse analysis, applied to far-right parties with different historical backgrounds.

The article is structured as follows. Firstly, we provide a contextual background of the framing of far-right populism as a particular communication style that prioritizes the use of propaganda on digital platforms. Research questions are derived from this review. Secondly, the study empirically outlines how the discourses of extreme right leaders are built. Data on issues and strategies gives us an overview of the agenda on Twitter, which is further developed through the analysis of propaganda and discursive strategies. Finally, we discuss the implications of our conclusions and how they engage with previous works.

## **Theoretical background**

### *Framing European far-right populism as a political communication style*

In recent decades, there has been a rise a populism in the USA, Europe, and Latin America that overlaps with a crisis of liberalism (Mudde, 2004; Nye, 2017). The reasons are diverse, but the uncertainty introduced by a globalized context facilitates the acceptance of rhetoric against the establishment (Gerbaudo, 2018). In this sense, populism divides society into two groups, the people and the elite, considering traditional politicians to be members of that elite.

Populism is a broad concept that ranges from ideology (Laclau, 1977) to a communication style in which a direct approach and the presence of a leader are key (Alonso-Muñoz, 2021; Block & Negrine, 2017). The populist communication strategies are manifested in a fragmented form that is more usual in the extremes

of the political spectrum and opposition parties (Ernst et al., 2017). Populism is identified as one of the problems for the legitimacy and working of democracies (Rodríguez Sáez, 2018, Ungureanu & Serrano, 2018), since the voters may question its principles.

Although populist strategies can be found in both left- and right-wing parties in Europe, it is in the Extreme Right where higher electoral support is observed (Sandrin, 2021). On this matter, the literature connects the success of these parties with a particular communicative style and the great use of digital technologies such as Twitter (Baldwin-Philippi, 2019; de Vreese et al., 2018).

The current far right-wing populist parties in Europe are not only different to the traditional ones regarding technology but also by having a "post-industrial" agenda that leaves behind a fascist ideology (Ignazi, 2006). Criticism of traditional elites or the promotion of nationalist values and popular sovereignty are some of their characteristics (Hameleers, 2018). Aside from this, some authors underline that populism appeals to emotions (Arias Maldonado, 2018), which is useful when building a pop-politics image through personalized and spectacular messages on social media.

Emotions are here understood as non-rational elements that move or even anger people, which impact on political decisions (Grüning & Schubert, 2022). This emotional communication is a current trend of politics and mass media (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019), shaping the behavior of those actors. For right-wing populist parties, the perceptions sparked by the media were traditionally as essential as for other parties (Bos, van der Brug & de Vreese, 2011).

A model of communication centered on the power of image and provocative slogans was already present with Berlusconi in the 1990s (Donofrio & Rubio Moraga, 2019), being later developed by leaders such as Trump or Bolsonaro with a visual self-representation (Mendonça & Caetano, 2021). Today, the populist radical right parties are part of this catch-all party trend because they adapt to the needs of the people and aim to provide simple solutions to solve their problems (Mols & Jetten, 2020).

The communicative use of social media by populism illustrates how Twitter became a tool for disseminating conspiracy theories connected with electoral contests (Pérez Curiel & Domínguez-García, 2021), but the impact of populism on political and media systems differs among countries and is scant addressed beyond elections. In this sense, the history of the far-right movements in each country is also relevant. In Europe, there are both long-standing extreme right-wing parties and other relatively recent parties, especially in countries that had a fascist dictatorship in the past (Germany, Spain, or Portugal). This may explain some differences in the current communication strategies applied. According to the previous literature, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1. What topics and populist strategies are present in the messages of European far-right leaders on Twitter during a non-campaign period?

RQ2. What are differences in the communication style used by national parties?

### *Populism and propaganda on social media*

Social media have generated huge social transformations that affect political communication. There is an emergence of a network logic (Klinger & Svensson, 2016), which triggers virality and self-production. Furthermore, the relationship between media and the public has changed towards a platformization of journalism (Micó, Casero-Ripollés & García-Orosa, 2022). In this context, political leaders take advantage of the direct communication allowed by social media to spread their messages.

Social media are powerful tools not only employed by populists but also by presidents as a type of pop-politics that appeals to grassroots supporters (Manfredi-Sánchez, Amado-Suárez & Waisbord, 2021). However, populism is characterized by a particularly high use of these platforms for strategies and personal features instead of political proposals (Engesser et al., 2017). In fact, these digital practices reshape populism, according to some authors (Barberá González & Martín del Fresno, 2019).

Specifically, Twitter remains a crucial channel because it provides a quick and non-mediated communication that adapts well to the logic of journalism and politics (Bracciale & Martella, 2017). Populist leaders employ Twitter as a tool of opposition to the establishment (van Kessel & Castelein, 2016), which is mostly reduced to a unidirectional approach full of propaganda messages. The purpose is to catch the attention of the voters rather than to present a political agenda.

People who hold populist attitudes are usually consumers of social media (González-González et al., 2022.). Hence, some authors consider that the electoral success of leaders such as Trump has been due to the extremely high use of Twitter (Rodríguez-Andrés, 2018). Despite the fact that scholars evaluate the Extreme Right's populist content on social media platforms as contentious (Sobieraj et al., 2020), it seems this propaganda connects with the interests of a broad audience.

Another characteristic of the populist wave is the personalization of leaders, which explains our sample choice on politicians. The personalization of political news leads to a situation in which aspects of the lives of the candidates are more central than organizations (Van Aelst, Sheafer & Stanyer 2012). Nevertheless, personalization has entered a new dimension with social media (Barberá González & Martín del Fresno, 2019), since leaders can build their own discourse with a huge presence of propaganda, avoiding the filter of the media.

In recent years, Twitter has become a space for political conversation in which larger audiences are reached by messages based on personalized propaganda mechanisms (Hameleers, 2018). These messages on social media also seek to manipulate the media, a process in which other entities are involved but following a coordinated strategy set by the candidate (Giglietto et al., 2020). The critical bias to traditional politicians or the spread of hoaxes are some of its features (Pérez-Curiel, Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo, 2021). Taking the aforementioned information into account, we formulate a third research question as follows:

RQ3. How are the populist messages on Twitter built in terms of the use of propaganda?

## Methodology

This study aims to explore the issues, strategies, and propaganda mechanisms used by leaders of different far-right populist parties across Europe. The methodology is based on a mixed quantitative and qualitative discourse analysis, using categories to analyze the contents of the tweets posted by European far-right leaders.

### *Sampling procedure*

The sample included the Twitter accounts of the leaders of the main far-right parties in France (Rassemblement National), Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs-FPÖ), Germany (AfD-Alternative für Deutschland), Spain (Vox), and Portugal (Chega!) at the time of the study. We compared countries from several political cultures that have different relationships with extreme right-wing populism. For instance, parties such as Rassemblement National (previously called Front National) or FPÖ have more long-standing traditions in Europe than the other parties considered, which were founded in 2013 (AfD and Vox) and 2019 (Chega!).

Additionally, the sample covered countries from Southern Europe (Spain and Portugal) with a more recent democratic history. We only focus on nationalist parties for the whole country, excluding regional oriented cases such as Lega Nord in Italy. The list of accounts follows in Table 1.

Table 1: Leaders and Twitter accounts with the specific public information available in each of them (checked on March 2022).

	<b>Twitter account</b>	<b>Political party / country</b>	<b>Joined date</b>	<b>Twitter bio</b>	<b>Number of followers</b>
Marine Le Pen	@MLP_officiel	Rassemblement National, France	November 2010	Candidate à la Présidence de la République   Député du Pas-de-Calais   #MLaFrance	2.6M
Norbert Hofer	@norbertghofer	FPÖ, Austria	July 2011	Vater, bald Großvater, Pilot aus Leidenschaft, Dritter Präsident des Nationalrates.	30.4K
Jörg Meuthen	@Joerg_Meuthen	AfD, Germany	March 2016	Politiker, Mitglied des Europäischen Parlaments   <a href="http://instagram.com/joerg.meuthen">http://instagram.com/joerg.meuthen</a>   <a href="http://facebook.com/Prof.Dr.Joerg...">http://facebook.com/Prof.Dr.Joerg...</a>	76.3K
Santiago Abascal	@Santi_ABASCAL	Vox, Spain	March 2011	Presidente de VOX. Diputado nacional	669K
André Ventura	@AndreCVentura	Chega!, Portugal	February 2019	Incansável no propósito de mudar Portugal.	24.8K

The sample was composed of all the tweets posted by each leader between 29 September 2020 and 28 February 2021. This five-month period was a time frame in which far-right populism had a high visibility worldwide, due to events in the USA (elections and the assault on the Capitol) and the management of the pandemic from a sometimes negationist approach. It was also a time not marked by elections in the countries chosen, linking to our goal of measuring populist communication outside electoral periods. We included tweets and replies but no retweets, as they were less useful to assess the discourse of the leaders.

In total, 1346 messages were analyzed. By each political leader, the number of messages was: Le Pen 371 (27.5% of the total), Hofer 200 (14.9%), Meuthen 124 (9.2%), Abascal 180 (13.4%), and Ventura 471 (35%).

Data from this study were captured through Twitonomy, whose premium version tool allows collecting all the information on an account's activity. A manual content analysis was carried out. We calculated the intercoder agreement with Scott's Pi formula, reaching an acceptable error level of 0.94. Two pretests of coding training were conducted on 5% of the sample, adding new information to the codebook. All quantitative data were processed with IBM SPSS Statistics, Version 28.

### *Variables*

First, this study employed a quantitative content analysis, a method that counts the occurrence of specified items (Hansen & Machin 2013). An analysis template was developed, drawing upon the issue/game frame theory, according to Aalberg and de Vreese (2017). Following these authors, we created seven categories as issue frames that referred to public policy proposals. The thematic categories came from an observance of the most frequent topics during the research period. Moreover, the four game frame categories were the classic ones, as defined by the literature.

Issue frames are operationalized as general topics of interest on which politicians make proposals. For its part, game frames have to do with the framing of politics as a strategic competition (Aalberg, Strömbäck & de Vreese, 2012). In this framework, journalists and political actors pay attention to potential winners and losers, ignoring the substance of public debates.

Table 2 describes the application of the analysis; meanwhile, Figure 1 provides examples of how tweets were distributed. The number of retweets is also presented in the results to evaluate how the public reactions were distributed by items.

Table 2: Categories used for the quantitative study on Twitter.

	<b>Items</b>	<b>Description</b>
Issue frame	Conspiracy theories	Possible conspiratorial explanations for political and social problems.
	Immigration/security	References to migration and/or citizen security.
	Corruption	Malpractices of the ruling elite.
	COVID-19	COVID-19 pandemic as a topic of interest.
	Foreign affairs	International affairs, including trade and the management of foreign policy.
	Economy	Economic issues, ranging from inflation to employment and industry.
	Social policy	Social issues such as education or public health.
	Horse race and governing frame	Strategy and government pacts, including opposing positions and post-electoral agreements.

Game frame	Politicians as individuals frame Political strategy frame News management frame	Personal topics of the leaders. Political events, such as TV debates, public meetings, etc. Relationship with the media in terms of appearance of the politician.
Other	Tweets unclassified in the previous categories.	

Figure 1: Examples of issue frame (immigration/security) and game frame (political strategy frame).



Sources: @AndreCVentura and @Santi\_ABASCAL.

A critical discourse analysis was also applied. We content-analyzed the political language of the tweets through the use of propaganda mechanisms, as the type of discourse is key in the construction of political knowledge (Schmidt & Wiegand, 2017). The following classification was employed, based on the previous literature (van Dijk, 2006): appeal to emotion, ad hominem fallacy, appeal to force, attributions, tendentious claims, emphasis, false analogy, speaking through other sources, opinions as facts, selective use of information, stereotyping, and not present. The names of the fallacies and propaganda resources of van Dijk contain their meanings, but it may be noted that they move from appeals (regarding emotion, force, and person in the case of ad hominem fallacy) to specific uses of information that could be tendentious or even false.

Beyond the analysis of frequency, the data collected were statistically tested to evaluate the degree of statistical significance. We operated through bilateral tests for the proportion of columns based on the Bonferroni correction, being the specific test carried out a z test for the pairwise comparison of column proportions. The null hypothesis was that the columns (leaders) were equal, with the aim of finding differences in their communication style on issues, strategies, and propaganda resources.

Finally, the analysis of the propaganda mechanisms was complemented by a qualitative study that identified their hashtags and strategies presented on the Twitter accounts. We aimed to better identify the purposes and trends of each specific extreme right-wing leader on this digital platform, putting the presence of propaganda into context. To this aim, we developed an analysis of keywords based on previous research (Pérez-Curiel & Domínguez-García, 2021; Sánchez-Saus Laserna, 2018). From the corpus of tweets, we did not only discuss the leaders individually, but also put them in relation to search for common elements.

A thematic analysis was applied for the qualitative study of hashtags and strategies. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), the data analysis was structured in different phases (processing the data, generation of

codes, searching for themes, review and drafting the findings), on which the authors worked together. Besides that, this qualitative information about Twitter was processed using Atlas.ti software version 9. The program allows us to set a stop-list in order to exclude from the analysis frequent words such as prepositions, conjunctions or auxiliary verbs. We created a single hermeneutic unit in Atlas.ti to delimit common codes and find news perspectives, based on the patterns of thematic analysis. The objective was to observe the thematic and discursive trends that characterize extreme right-wing leaders' storytelling on Twitter.

## Results

### *The agenda built on Twitter: from issues to strategies*

We analyze the distribution of issues and strategies as well as the interaction through retweets to those items. The use of issues and strategies provides interesting similarities and differences between the extreme right-wing leaders, as seen in Table 3. Le Pen, Abascal, and Ventura displayed fragmented agendas, since they highlight the four categories of game frames and most of the items of issue frames. Furthermore, they had in common a high presence of migration and security in their tweets, which was statistically significant compared to the other two leaders. By contrast, corruption (15.5%) and COVID-19 (30%) were the most relevant topics for Hofer in Austria; meanwhile, the mentions of COVID-19 (23.2%) and the economy were significant for Meuthen (26.4%).

Table 3: Issues and strategies in the tweets of the populist leaders (%).

	Marine Le Pen FR	Norbert Hofer AT	Jörg Meuthen DE	Santiago Abascal ES	André Ventura PT
	a	b	c	d	e
Issue frame					
Conspiracy theories	-	-	-	10.8	-
Immigration/security	43.5 b c e	5.0	9.6	33.6 b c	25.2 e
Corruption	-	15.5 d e	-	3.2	1.6
COVID-19	11.5	30.0 a d e	23.2 e	9.6	4.2
Foreign affairs	13.3	3.0	13.6	10.0	9.4
Economy	10.1	-	26.4 d e	0.8	3.2
Social policy	1.7	-	-	1.6	2.8
Game frame					
Horse race and governing frame	3.2	45.5 a d	18.4 a	11.2	22.0 a
Politicians as individuals frame	9.9	-	-	5.6	9.6
Political strategy frame	2.9	-	-	5.2	10.4
News management frame	3.7	0.5	8.8	2.4	11.4 b d
Other	0.3	0.5	-	6.0	0.4

Notes: Data with a significance level of 0.05 (\*), based on two-tailed tests for the column proportion (Bonferroni correction).

According to the data, the agenda of the Austrian and German leaders was highly concentrated on a few topics. Both countries have a shared political culture that may explain the importance of COVID-19 or the limited references to immigration and security, which was the main frame in the French (43.5%), Spanish (33.6%), and Portuguese (25.2%) cases. This reveals how promoting a fear of immigration plays a key role



in the communication practices of far-right leaders in Southern Europe. Oppositely, the traditional issue of the economy was only relevant (26.4%) in the most industrialized country (Germany).

Additional divergences appeared when examining the game frames. Hofer and Ventura were the two who most employed this sort of approach within the sample. The different levels of use were striking, but all the leaders except Le Pen prioritized the horse race and governing frame. For Hofer (45.5%), Meuthen (18.4%), and Ventura (22%), the appearance of this item was also statistically significant. The horse race strategy is common to electoral contests, showing to what extent they develop a permanent campaign.

Once again, the profiles of Le Pen, Abascal, and Ventura had some similarities by referring to every category in the game frame. For their part, Hofer and Meuthen only used the horse race and governing frame and the news management frame. Nevertheless, the leader who devoted the most tweets significantly to the relationship with the media was Ventura in Portugal (11.4%).

The findings obtained mean a predominance role of immigration and security as topics to shape the populist agenda in the South of Europe. By contrast, leaders from Central Europe give more attention to public administration issues such as COVID-19. Thus, the emotional and negative features of the populist communicative style in Germany and Austria do not imply to deal with conflictive topics, at least in a non-campaign period.

Regarding game frames, these are key to thrive antagonistic relationships. In our sample, they are more common for Hofer and Ventura, who belong to the oldest (FPÖ in Austria) and the most recent (Chega! in Portugal) parties considered. Neither the geographical nor the historical background can work as explanatory factors. The great presence of the horse race and governing frame confirm again the dichotomous perspective of far-right populism (Wodak, 2015), but what seems more notorious is the allusion to the news management frame in Germany and Portugal. These two countries maintain the importance of printed newspapers (Newman et al., 2021).

For its part, the distribution of retweets for each issue and strategy can offer an overview of how the user's attention is shaped. Table 4 shows that conspiracy theories and immigration/security were the topics that promoted higher interaction. As conspiracy theories were only used by Abascal, the importance of immigration and security should be assessed as a key trend in the sample. In this issue, there was an equivalence between the high use of three of the leaders and the interest of the people.

Table 4: Retweets by tweet topics/strategies (%).

		0	1–49	50–99	100–299	Over 299
Issue frame	Conspiracy theories	-	-	-	-	100.0
	Immigration/security	-	7.1	10.7	10.7	<b>71.4</b>
	Corruption	-	<b>86.8</b>	13.2	-	-
	COVID-19	-	<b>63.6</b>	9.1	27.3	-
	Foreign affairs	-	-	22.0	54.0	24.0
	Economy	-	-	14.3	57.1	28.6
	Social policy	-	40	24	36	-
Game frame	Horse race and governing frame	-	<b>54.5</b>	4.5	18.2	22.7
	Politicians as individuals frame	-	42.8	20.2	37.4	-
	Political strategy frame	-	<b>63.7</b>	-	-	36.3
	News management frame	19.3	-	62.1	9.4	9.2
	Other	-	-	37.5	50.0	12.5

Notes: In bold are the most outstanding findings for this research.

The rest of the topics showed diverse levels of retweets. Most of them had between 50–99 and 100–299 interactions, but the issues of corruption and COVID-19 triggered fewer retweets. In total, 86.8% of the messages about corruption generated between 1 and 49 retweets, whilst 63.6% of tweets about the pandemic belonged to this category. Therefore, these two topics, which were relevant for the Austrian leader and to a lesser extent for the German leader in terms of COVID-19, did not promote a remarkable degree of interaction.

Regarding game frames, some mismatch between the strategies preferred by the audience and those disseminated by the populist was found. The horse race and governing frame was very frequent in the tweets, but 54.5% of these messages only generated 1-49 retweets. The same problem occurred for news management, where 19.3% of the messages had 0 retweets, even though this category was mentioned by all the leaders in the sample.

In addition, more posts with issue frames rather than game frames received over 299 retweets. It is noteworthy that the political strategy item, which was barely present in the populist tweets, had an important percentage of messages over 299 retweets (36.3%). Hence, the interests of the audience on Twitter do not always coincide with the most shared topics and strategies in the leaders' agenda. As an exception, the issue frame of immigration and security worked as a central topic for both the extreme right-wing leaders and the users on Twitter.

Delving into the interpretation of the data, the results confirm that the audience prefer to interact with thematic issues rather than with strategic elements (Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo, 2020). This could also link to the idea that a great number of messages cause a less impact on the public (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2018). On this matter, the relevance of the political strategy among the audience reveals an interest for the political events that the extreme-right populist leaders do not accomplish.

#### *Propaganda and discursive strategies of far-right populism*

To further investigate the communicative action of far-right politicians, we included an analysis of the propaganda mechanisms applied on Twitter. These resources are widely used on social media to increase the impact of the messages (Lee & Xenos, 2019). As the development of the issues and strategies takes places rhetorically, Table 5 informs us about the discourse of the leaders in terms of propaganda. The application of these resources was extremely high, with multiple mechanisms used by the accounts.

Table 5: Propaganda mechanisms on Twitter by populist leaders (%).

	Marine Le Pen FR	Norbert Hofer AT	Jörg Meuthen DE	Santiago Abascal ES	André Ventura PT
	a	b	c	d	e
Appeal to emotion	47.6 c d e	-	11.2	12.4	20.3
Ad hominem fallacy	-	11.4	33.6 b d	9.6	19.2
Appeal to force	3.7	-	-	18.5 a e	5.3
Attributions	1.1	-	-	10.8 a	10.1 a
Tendentious claims	-	32.8 c d	13.6	3.6	26.2 d
Emphasis	16.4	-	6.4	7.6	5.9
False analogy	-	30.3 d	-	4.4	-

Speaking through other sources	-	-	4.8	-	-
Opinions as facts	1.6	20.9 a c e	7.2	12.8	4.4
Selective use of information	29.0 b d	4.5	16.8	10.0	-
Stereotyping	-	-	6.4	6.8	-
Not present	0.5	-	-	3.5	8.5

Notes: Data with a significance level of 0.05 (\*), based on two-tailed tests for the column proportion (Bonferroni correction).

Opinions as facts was the only category present in all the leaders' accounts, but there were others mentioned by four of the five accounts: appeal to emotion, ad hominem fallacy, tendentious claims, emphasis, and selective use of information. This finding shows that the far-right politicians carried out an emotional communication, based on opinions, fallacies, and a selection of data that could be beneficial for their purposes. Nevertheless, differences also appeared between them.

For Le Pen, appeal to emotion (47.6%) and selective use of information (29%) were essential and statistically significant compared to the other leaders. By contrast, Hofer did not employ the emotional approach, focusing on opinion as facts (20.9%), tendentious claims (32.8%), and false analogy (30.3%). In fact, he was almost the only one that used the latter.

Regarding the German leader, Meuthen resorted to ad hominem fallacy in a significant way (33.6%), followed by selective use of information (16.8%), and tendentious claims (13.6%).

The aforementioned mechanisms were not so common in Abascal, who prioritized appeal to force (18.5%) and opinions as facts (12.8%). The discourse of the Spanish populist leader was aggressive, with appeals to force, and multiple, since he used many propaganda resources. In the same vein, Ventura in Portugal presented a fragmented use, with somewhat more attention to tendentious claims (26.2%) and appeal to emotion (20.3%).

As expected, the sample of tweets showed that the spectacularizing messages of populist are mostly reinforced by propaganda mechanisms. Opinion as facts and other variables on fallacies work as the basis of their discourses. Notwithstanding this common pattern, national contexts are insightful to the understanding of adaptations of the populist political communication style. The significant use of false analogy in Austria (Hofer) or the ad hominem fallacy in Germany (Meuthen) may point that their voters need to receive messages framed from a comparative logic or that contain a reference to an individualized enemy, respectively.

In the French context, the emotional selection of information is even more important, which reveals a public that require emotions to be persuaded. Conversely, the aggressiveness detected with Abascal in Spain probably has to do with the high political parallelism of that country, fostering a long-standing polarization (Fletcher, Cornia & Nielsen, 2020). Although Portugal also has political parallelism, the communicative model of Ventura is plural and fragmented by employing many different types of propaganda mechanisms. The popularity of the far-right in Portugal had just started to grow; thus, the practices of his candidate could still be in a stage of adaptation to the public.

Regardless of national peculiarities, the massive preference for opinions instead of facts harms the value of a well-informed society democracy. As the use of discursive strategies goes beyond propaganda mechanisms, we provide here a qualitative analysis that furthers our understanding on the hashtags and strategies used on Twitter. Comparing the information collected, migrants (62 mentions) and items related

to justice (45) for the pure people against a corrupt elite are the main keywords. These words were not necessarily in hashtags, since this formula was hardly ever used by Meuthen (AfD), Abascal (Vox) and Ventura (Chega!).

Opposing to the rest of leaders, Le Pen (Rassemblement National) applied hashtags in almost all her tweets. This tool was used to identify enemies (#Macron) or problems (#migrants), as well as to mention cities or neighborhoods (#Reims, #Bron, #Essone, #Trappes). These places were usually referred to because of security problems, with the tweets signed by Le Pen herself (Figure 2). As stated in the research on issues and strategies, immigration and security are the topics that define her communicative style. In addition, Le Pen employed the hashtag #PJLPrincipesRépublicains to claim her defense of the values of the French republic, identifying those values as a nationalism that confronts immigration.

Figure 2. Tweet of Le Pen on immigration/security.



Source: @MLP\_officiel.

Hashtags were used in a more general way by Hofer, ranging from references to Austria, justice, and national politics (#österreich, #justiz, #parlament, #koalition) to surveys (#Umfrage) or the management of COVID-19 (#corona, #lockdownverlaengerung). Thus, the strategy of the Austrian leader was not connected with the issue and game frames that he prioritized. This finding did not happen with Meuthen (AfD). The tweets of the German leader worked as a summary of the current issues of the day, which usually referred to his most cited issue frames.

Likewise, Meuthen starts the day with a tweet to promoting a daily relationship with the public. The words "Guten Morgen" always begin the message (Figure 3). Only one hashtag was detected (#AfD), corresponding to his own party. Meuthen tried to highlight the actions of his political organization, posting links to political contents.

Figure 3. Tweet of Meuthen on the economy.



Source: @Joerg\_Meuthen.

In the case of Abascal, hashtags were applied to specific political meetings and electoral contests (#Tarragona, #RecuperemosCataluña, #RecuperemEspanya). Many of his messages were merely retweets of other accounts, especially legacy media in order to share information that was similar to the issue and game frames posted and, therefore, was relevant to Vox. Despite of the less frequency of the news management frame for the far-right Spanish leader, the qualitative analysis offers evidence on how traditional media play a role in his communication strategy.

The previous finding is in line with what was found with Ventura in Portugal. News items from the media were shared in a likely attempt to obtain public legitimacy. The journalistic pieces selected overlapped with his preferred issue frames (immigration, foreign affairs). It should be noted that his account was blocked several times due to promoting hate and was permanently suspended in February 2022. Instead of hashtags, he employed emojis to make the contents more visual maybe because his party was unknown at some point, as it was founded in 2019.

Taken together, our results show major differences in how the far-right leaders shaped their discourses on Twitter. The practices of Le Pen connected with her anti-migration agenda, using hashtags for that purpose. Hofer in Austria carried out a modest approach; meanwhile, the action of Meuthen was unique, as he implemented a daily routine of posting a summarizing tweet in the mornings. For their part, Abascal and Ventura had in common the trend of using external content to legitimize their own proposals.

Although the specific performance of each of these Twitter accounts revealed divergences between each leader, the analysis of the propaganda mechanisms showed a shared pattern of emotional messages that mainly selectively used information. The findings were aligned with the possibility of a global extreme right-wing discourse, implying pernicious effects for the health of democracy in Europe, but divergences per country and leader still mattered.

## Conclusions and discussion

In a time of consolidation of extreme right-wing populism, this study described how several far-right leaders in Europe used Twitter during a non-campaign period, proven by data that immigration and security mostly define the populist agenda in parties from Southern Europe. Conversely, leaders from the cases in Central Europe prioritize public administration issues such as COVID-19, which mean activating different problems

and responsibilities according to framing theory (Entman, 1993). The remarkable divergences in terms of propaganda mechanisms, for instance in the utilitarian use of legacy media, also connects with the concept of unlikely polarized audiences in Europe (Fletcher, Cornia & Nielsen, 2020).

In a more formal way, our research contributes to the increasing literature on the topic, providing four interrelated conclusions that also respond to the research questions posed. First, our study furthered our understanding of which topics and populist strategies were present in the messages of European far-right leaders on Twitter (RQ1). There were continuities and divergences between the leaders. Le Pen, Abascal, and Ventura had fragmented agendas, dealing with many topics. Apart from this, they agreed on an anti-migration discourse.

The aforementioned was opposed to the preference for other topics such as corruption, COVID-19, and the economy for the Austrian or German leaders. Regarding game frames, the main similarity was the high use of the horse race and governing frame. However, different levels were detected, with Hofer (Austria) and Ventura (Portugal) prioritizing the game frames over the issue frames in the sample.

Our second contribution was also linked to RQ1 and offers insightful evidence on the distribution of the number of retweets. Conspiracy theories and immigration/security were the issues that fostered more interaction, being aligned with other recent works on social media (Bene et al., 2022). Both can be identified as traditional topics of extreme right-wing populism. In the case of the references to migration and security, the high presence of tweets of the leaders corresponded to the interest of the audience. However, the levels of retweets for the rest of the topics were diverse, including a mismatch for game frames regarding the preferences of the leaders and the public. In this sense, the most used item in the sample (horse race and governing frame) did not generate many retweets.

Each leader presented some nuances in their agenda (RQ2). Nevertheless, at least three of them agreed on the important role given to immigration/security and the horse and governing frame. It seems questionable to what extent the differences could be explained through national reasons rather than personal ones; however, we found that there were divergences between leaders belonging to different countries.

Some of the places analyzed have a similar political culture, for instance the late democratization of Spain and Portugal or the historical relationship between Germany and Austria (Mudde, 2007). The latter two countries agreed on the importance of COVID-19 and a lower relevance of migration; these were the only findings that could be explained by national factors. It should be noted that Rassemblement National in France and FPÖ are parties with a long tradition in comparison to their counterparts.

Lastly, our research provided evidence on how the populist messages on Twitter were built as propaganda (RQ3). Opinion as facts was a mechanism used by all the leaders; however, other mechanisms such as appeal to emotion or ad hominem fallacy were also remarkable. Hence, the politicians developed a classic emotional style of communication (Bracciale & Martella, 2017), while showing some differences. Le Pen resorted mostly to appeal to emotion; meanwhile, Abascal preferred appeal to force. Both Abascal and Ventura in Portugal resorted to legacy media contents according with the qualitative analysis, boosting a debate on the role of the media in the success of the populist political communication.

Our findings are in line with previous studies that point out the propagandistic dimension of populist communication (Rodríguez-Andrés, 2018; Waisbord & Amado, 2017). However, the existence of a global wave of illiberal populism with similar characteristics did not avoid there were specific practices on Twitter. According to the literature, game frames are frequent in modern political communication (Aalberg & de

Vreese, 2017). Despite this trend, additional studies on right and left populism in Europe reveal how these parties prioritize the launch of proposals over game frames (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2018). In our research, this trend was followed by the French, German, and Spanish leaders but not by the Austrian and Portuguese leaders. The latter two presented a less thematic agenda, disseminating more tweets than could be identified as a strategy to obtain voters.

The limitations of the article are acknowledged. Our sampling method allowed analyzing a non-campaign period, but the number of tweets was limited. As a consequence, there could have been an overrepresentation of the messages of some leaders, who were more active. Beyond that, we covered only five countries. The sample choice was based on the interest of comparing extreme right-wing parties with different histories (Mammone, 2009), which meant a multiple-case study. Future research should expand the scope by analyzing the performance of more far-right parties across the European continent and throughout time.

Finally, our empirical findings contribute to better understanding how a common thin-centered ideology was applied in different ways, being propaganda an attribute of all the leaders. Further exploring the factors that shape the action on social media of far-right populism would be relevant in order to examine the reasons for its success.

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